

# Response



## ***Informal Adult Learning - Shaping the Way Ahead***

**Consultation Paper from the Department for  
Innovation, Universities and Skills**

**Consultation response  
from**

**TAEN - The Age and Employment Network**

## Summary of TAEN's comments

Learning, probably *any* learning, is good for the mind, conducive to the formation of a happier, healthier human-being who will remain *work-able* in later life. Therefore, there are latent work benefits in any learning and this includes learning which we categorise as IAL.

If we want people to work later in life, we need to do everything possible to engender cultures in which people learn. A healthy attitude to learning (and the existence of learning opportunities) would seem essential to support cultures in which people are likely to be able and willing to work into their 60s and beyond.

*Good work* is work where there is respect for the individual to learn and where opportunities are available to do so. Someone who has followed work-related training and has also acquired a liking of learning on their own behalf will be more likely to find an employer to appreciate their value and will want to hire them.

There are tangible benefits to the employer in recruiting and retaining workers who acquire knowledge, challenge their artistic senses, follow their curiosities and interests etc. Credit is not always given but forward-looking employers tend to look for evidence of lively minds no matter how this is expressed. Sometimes there are unexpected practical benefits that spin off informal learning too.

The 50-year-old jobseeker who has few formally accredited skills may have a negative orientation to formal learning, but learning *per se* is important for the reasons outlined above. In the same way as we now understand that the *work, any work*, approach may be a good way of getting someone to make the important step from unemployment to work, the *learning, any learning* approach may be worth considering for the person who was put off learning in a school environment many years before. Encouraging someone with an evident skills gap to take a learning interest in something connected with a hobby or sport may improve their fitness for work in a general sense.

The workplace should be a key locus for engagement in learning. The Union Learning Representative concept has proved to be an effective way of engaging people from diverse backgrounds with learning. Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) have encouraged many workers to embark on educational programmes of different kinds and have expanded learning capacity and improved receptiveness to the idea of learning.

The idea of using workplaces as recruitment conduits, or venues for courses in languages, literature, politics or the arts seems to be little valued. However, examples of programmes come to mind, where organisations have fostered broad non-vocational approaches to learning to broaden minds. The government should examine such avenues as part of the new ground that needs populating with IAL opportunities. Employee Development Schemes have a key role to play - fiscal incentives could play an important part and should therefore be considered.

Cultural activities and societies such as works bands, music groups or other forms of artistic expression are now relatively rare in workplaces. This may be a function of the changing nature of work organisations, particularly the growth of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs). Language classes or conversation groups sometimes crop up informally; and are an example of the kind of activity which could become more frequent if encouraged by government. TAEN believes that in the same way as 'extended schools,' have become a key concept for the expansion of cultural and community-related activity in relation to the school population, the notion of the 'extended work place' as a place where people have opportunities to develop their learning, creative pursuits and wider potential, is worthy of consideration.

Traditionally in life, we go through phases of life in which education, then employment and lastly leisure characteristically dominate. Each of these phases could be more evenly spread through life. Arguably, with increased longevity and economic necessity, a *life course* concept is likely to become more relevant as organisations and individuals consider the need to 'pace' themselves so that they can continue in paid employment longer.

The government's concept of an Adult Advancement and Careers Service is very timely. Such a service should embrace the *life course* concept in the forms of guidance it offers individuals. We believe it is important that the Advancement and Careers Service is able to encourage individuals to develop and advance through a variety of avenues and building on their personal interests and IAL activities will be a valuable approach.

It is vital that we learn to *age successfully*. Successful ageing involves maintaining one's health and well being, investing in relevant knowledge and skills - including 'soft' communication skills which tend to improve as we get older anyway. Maintaining a positive attitude to work and life is also very important. Successful ageing, including understanding of health and well being issues and aspects of personally managing one's own ageing processes, can be taught.

TAEN believes that approaches to spread learning and leisure into employees' lives more evenly should be encouraged as part of the wider approach to managing age diversity and the use of 'age management' interventions addressed at the ageing workforce. European examples of age management practice show how encouragement of learning has helped change decisions about retirement and led to employees working later. Courses on retirement and health delivered at strategically chosen points in a worker's working life and combined with workplace support and personal development programmes, are examples that illustrate the point.

There is increasing interest in the value of cross generational mentoring, in particular in relation to the retention of knowledge in organisations and creatively extending the working lives of older workers. TAEN believes such schemes have much to offer companies and organisations. A recent Scandinavian fact-finding visit by TAEN produced anecdotal experience that *any* education of older workers can be helpful in their acquisition of skills to be successful mentors.

TAEN believes that effectively banning students from taking second degrees or diplomas is removing a means and incentive to learn and smacks of a puzzling philistinism. We believe they should be seen as part of a continuum of learning opportunities and those

who study subjects out of interest and enthusiasm should not be told that they cannot go this far because doing so leads to a degree level qualification.

There has been a steady decline in the numbers of Adult Safeguarded Learning (ASL) participants, including those in older age groups. We are not aware of any evidence-based assessment of why this has taken place and believe the decline in learner numbers merits investigation by an independent body.

## **TAEN's Response to the DIUS Consultative Document *Informal Adult Learning; Shaping the Way Ahead***

### **1. Introduction**

The purpose of the 2008 Informal Adult Learning Consultation is to assess responses to Government thinking and foster new ideas around informal adult learning (IAL). IAL encompasses a very broad range of learning. It is essentially non-vocational, not generally recognised by the award of formal qualifications and not related to the government's core strategic goals on skills development.

The Government wishes to engage in this 'first principles review' on how a learning service might be provided that is relevant to all adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, complementing its skills priorities. This, it hopes will entail an examination of how resources might be spent differently, what infrastructures might be introduced to encourage IAL and support it, how existing resources might be used more imaginatively, how a range of stakeholders might play their parts in facilitating or delivering IAL and various other themes.

### **2. Scope of focus for the review**

The consultative paper recognises that the long traditions of learning informally in a wide range of contexts make a real difference to the lives of people (a viewpoint which TAEN shares.) The issue is therefore not about whether IAL is *a good thing* (clearly, no-one is saying this is not the case) but how can it be built on, fostered, supported, made more useful, etc? Further, what should be the roles of government and the innumerable other stakeholders in striving for better, flourishing forms of adult learning given the rapid changes in our society, our cultures, values, means of communication, technology, disposable incomes and so on?

Fundamental to this is the question of how to develop opportunities for learning activities. Are there ways of delivering learning that we have not so far considered, or ways of learning that have been tried and tested but not widely disseminated? The introduction and Chapters 1 to 3 examine the value of learning and the extent of existing provision in some detail, Chapter 2 dealing with other government departments and Chapter 3 focusing on provision supported by DIUS.

Chapter 4 deals with equality of access to learning including reaching out to disadvantaged groups, Chapter 5 deals with the contribution of technology and broadcasting and Chapter 6 raises a number of discussion points.

### **3. The mission and role of TAEN**

The mission of TAEN is to promote an effective job market that serves the needs of people in mid and later life, employers and the economy. We inform and advocate for effective age management policies to be adopted at all levels – in employing organisations, by individuals and across the labour market.

Whilst the totality of human learning cannot be assessed in relation to its work implications, our principal concerns and expertise are precisely confined to the issue of work for older people and we will therefore restrict our observations to this point

### **4. Vocational and non-vocational learning**

Learning, probably *any* learning, is good for the mind, conducive to the formation of a happier, healthier human being and one who will remain *work-able* in later life. Therefore, though learning related to hobbies or the pursuit of personal interests may not have immediately obvious work implications, there are latent work benefits in any learning and this includes learning which we categorise as IAL.

### **5. Good work and learning**

People face many challenges in continuing in work or obtaining new work in mid and later life. Work roles may make physical or mental demands which are not conducive to remaining in the job when there is an opportunity to 'get out'. If the older person can secure a job offering what we may call *good work* their chances, of remaining in employment will be greater.

*Good work* generally provides its own incentives including a measure of flexibility, reasonable and supportive conditions, a working environment which is safe and where the work itself is interesting, human relations good and so on. One would expect *good work* to stimulate, motivate and challenge the individual to *remain* in work.

If we want people to work later in life, we need to do everything possible to engender cultures in which people learn. A healthy attitude to learning (and the existence of learning opportunities) would seem essential to support cultures in which people are likely to be able and willing to work into their 60s and beyond.

*Good work* is work where there is respect for the individual to learn and where opportunities are available to do so. Someone who has followed work-related training and has also acquired a liking of learning on their own behalf will be more likely to find an employer to appreciate their value and will want to hire them.

## **6. Informal learning can be work useful**

People who learn in the personal sphere may find it easier to learn in the work sphere when the need arises. There are tangible benefits to the employer therefore in recruiting and retaining workers who acquire knowledge, challenge their artistic senses, follow their curiosities and interests, etc. Credit is not always given but forward-looking employers tend to look for evidence of lively minds no matter how this is expressed. Sometimes there are unexpected practical benefits that spin off informal learning too.

Communications and information technology is a specific case in point. Millions of British people now have computers in their own homes. They use the internet for a variety of purposes and personal interests. In the process they hone skills in their own homes which become directly relevant to the work context. The worker who, through personal curiosity and a desire to learn has dabbled with computers and acquired the necessary skills to fill a job, can suddenly become a valuable asset.

## **7. Stepping stones back to work**

When someone is out of work in mid-life and has not been especially active in formal learning for many years, the need to learn can be strongly highlighted. The 50- year-old jobseeker who has few formally accredited skills may have a negative orientation to formal learning, but learning *per se* is important for the reasons outlined above. In the same way as we now understand that the *work, any work* approach may be a good way of getting someone to make the important step from unemployment to work, the *learning, any learning* approach may be worth considering for the person who was put off learning in a school environment many years before. Encouraging someone with an evident skills gap to take a learning interest in something connected with a hobby or sport may improve their fitness for work in a general sense. While Jobcentre Plus personal advisers meeting out-of-work clients will rightly focus on addressing skills deficiencies, the value of informal learning as part of a strategy to activate learning could and should be acknowledged.

## **8. The workplace as a learning environment**

The workplace should be a key locus for engagement in learning. The TUC's unionlearn, which the Government has supported with The Union Learning Fund, has been a success story. The Union Learning Representative concept has proved to be an effective way of engaging people from diverse backgrounds with learning. The campaigning zeal and enthusiasm of Union Learning Representatives has encouraged many workers to embark on educational programmes of different kinds and has, in a sense, expanded learning capacity and improved receptiveness to the idea of learning.

## 9. Employee Development Schemes

Employers have encouraged the acquisition of basic skills in numeracy, literacy and ICT via Train to Gain. Yet the idea of using workplaces as recruitment conduits, or even venues for courses in languages, literature, politics or the arts seems to be considered less appropriate. However, examples of programmes come to mind, where organisations have fostered broad non-vocational approaches to learning as ways of broadening minds. We believe the government should consider such avenues as part of the new ground that needs populating with IAL opportunities.

An Employee Development Scheme (EDS) is a fund that pays for employees to take part in learning that is not directly job-related. The schemes can cover a wide range of personal, academic and leisure interests ranging from a hobby or sport, to the chance to improve basic skills, or to academic qualifications including degrees. The aim is to help employees develop their careers or personal interests, broaden their transferable skills and more generally to encourage staff to return to learning.

One of the first Employee Development Schemes in the UK was set up by Ford Motor Company and the unions in Ford in 1987. This scheme, known as the Ford Employee Development and Assistance Programme (Ford EDAP) offers employees a range of personal training and development opportunities outside working hours. Most activities are offered onsite and include car maintenance, languages and keyboard skills. Since the creation of Ford EDAP a number of other companies have devised their own Employee Development Schemes.

The schemes, though often quite different, fall broadly into three different types:

- Single scheme: where one organisation develops its own scheme for its own employees, sometimes similar to the Ford EDAP model. Some Learning and Skills Councils and national training organizations have taken a similar approach and have created schemes which cover one area or industrial sector.
- Co-ordinated scheme: where several companies work together to set up scheme, under common management, to cover all their employees.
- Multi-scheme: where one body - usually the Learning and Skills Council helps organisations to design their own schemes, and provides ongoing support through advice and network meetings.

TAEN believes that employee development schemes along the lines of the Ford EDAP scheme provide good opportunities for workers to engage in IAL, partly because they link directly to the workplace and overcome some of the barriers experienced by those who do not normally attend evening classes, etc, and partly because they can help overcome the problem of time shortages and combining work and learning when one has a busy job. The Government should consider taking active steps to encourage employers to develop such schemes including by fiscal incentives.

## **10. Broader learning and cultural activity through work**

In the same way that universities and schools often have a range of clubs and societies to engage with students over issues incidental to their formal studies, some companies have societies that foster outside-work interests. In general, these tend to be focused around social (as opposed to learning) activities, though sometimes social events have learning angles too – the pub quiz being a not entirely frivolous example in point.

Our impression is that cultural provision such as works bands, music groups or other forms of artistic expression are now relatively rare. This may be a function of the changing nature of work organisations, particularly the growth of SMEs. Language classes or conversation groups sometimes crop up informally; with encouragement they could become more frequent. In general, even large and well resourced employers do little to expand the minds of workers beyond what is needed for work itself, taking the view that broader cultural, non-vocational learning is not really their concern, much less their responsibility. It is uncommon to find a literature society, an art circle, a drama group or a politics or debating society located in a workplace, yet if such things are valuable, as we believe they are, why should the workplace not be a good venue for them and might there not be additional hidden benefits to employing organisations in encouraging the sorts of interesting and illuminating exchanges they might imply? Such activities, however, are considered the province of community education away from work and yet workplaces could introduce people to areas of learning they might otherwise never discover.

TAEN believes that in the same way as ‘extended schools’, have become a key concept for the expansion of cultural and community-related activity in relation to the school population, the notion of the ‘extended workplace’ as a place where people have opportunities to develop their learning, creative pursuits and wider potential is worthy of consideration.

## **11. Work, career and learning as life course concepts**

Traditionally in life we go through an education phase, then an employment or work phase and lastly in retirement, a leisure phase of life. Each of these phases could be more evenly spread through life. The abundance of leisure in retirement might be better enjoyed if some were redistributed and experienced earlier. Learning should continue through life and if it were, it would probably facilitate the better enjoyment of leisure and the rewards of work. This redistribution may already be happening with the increasing interest in flexible working for many categories of people, not simply parents for whom flexible working was first conceived as important as they combined children with careers. Arguably, with increased longevity and economic necessity, a *life course* concept is likely to become more relevant as organisations and individuals consider the need to ‘pace’ themselves so that they can continue in paid employment longer.

## **12. Careers guidance and advancement**

TAEN believes we have to get away from the idea that individuals have a 'dollop of careers guidance' once or twice in a life time and then 'play it by ear'. The truth is that everyone can benefit from good careers guidance no matter how old they may be. The government's concept of an Adult Advancement and Careers Service is therefore very timely. Such a service could and should emphatically embrace the *life course* concept in the forms of guidance it offers individuals. There are specific issues that need to be addressed if the service is to be fit for purpose for people in mid and later life and these issues are covered extensively in a separate TAEN document.<sup>1</sup> We believe it is important that the Advancement and Careers Service is able to encourage individuals to develop and advance through a variety of avenues and building on their personal interests and IAL activities will be a valuable approach. Awareness of what is available, as well as a range of opportunities actually being available, will be important.

## **13. Successful ageing**

As society ages and economies come to depend more on the older workers to fill jobs, it is vital that we learn to *age successfully*. Successful ageing involves maintaining one's health and well being, investing in relevant knowledge and skills - including 'soft' communication skills which tend to improve as we get older anyway. Maintaining a positive attitude to work and life is also very important. Successful ageing, including understanding of health and well being issues and aspects of personally managing one's own ageing processes, can be taught. At the moment in the UK, there are people who take an interest in the above range of issues and there are many who do not. IAL is an important conduit through which knowledge in this important area is conveyed.

## **14. Age management interventions to support learning and later working**

TAEN believes that approaches to spread learning and leisure into employees' lives more evenly should be encouraged. An example from the Swedish Vattenfall company is of interest. It offers tangible incentives to employees, helps to address practical problems (such as health, skill deficiency, domestic issues, etc) they may be experiencing and which may contribute to an early departure from work. The company allows employees over 57 to work 80 per cent of their contractual hours, on 90 per cent of pay with 100 per cent pension entitlement. Older workers can take time out to learn, care for someone or do any one of a number of things that simply require time.

After a period of six months managers may choose to extend the 80:90:100 programme in individual cases. The company reports that sickness leave has declined substantially and that employees are continuing in work until later in life. Many older workers use the extra time to engage in learning of one sort or another. Schemes of this kind can be introduced for a range of practical reasons but they also create valuable learning opportunities and should be seen as part of a continuum of opportunities which work may provide to facilitate learning and in the process make extension of careers and working lives possible.

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<sup>1</sup> *Career Guidance and Advancement: a policy charter to make the new Adult Advancement and Careers Service work for people in mid and later life* - TAEN 2008

## **15. Employer promotion of learning aimed at older and mid life people**

European examples of age management practice include examples where encouragement of learning has helped change decisions about retirement and encouraged working later. Courses on retirement and health delivered at strategically chosen points in a worker's working life, and combined with workplace support and personal development programmes, are examples that illustrate the point.

An interesting example in the UK is Agewell Sandwell, an organisation set up and funded by Sandwell NHS Primary Care Trust to involve older people in decision-making about matters that affect their lives. The aim is to challenge ageist stereotypes and promote a positive role in the community for older people. Agewell has designed a programme *Midlife Future Planning* which covers health, finance, leisure and relationships. It enables people to make lifestyle and work choices earlier to promote a better quality of life whether they choose to continue working or retire. *Midlife Future Planning* was piloted amongst healthcare professionals and is now offered to all Sandwell PCT staff over 50 as well as to companies in the area employing workers aged 50+.

One problem in discussing this kind of initiative in the UK is that many employers wrongly believe that as such measures are age specific, they would not be allowed under current legislation. We believe that this is a misunderstanding of the law. However it is so widespread a view that consideration should be given to this issue. If these misconceptions are widespread, as we believe they are, they may be blocking the introduction of measures aimed at extending working lives, contrary to the government's strategic priority.

## **16. Workplace mentoring**

Awareness of the value of mentoring has been growing in recent years. One dimension of this is that mentors may be used to ensure that the knowledge possessed by older employees is passed on to other workers. Courses to stimulate interest in mentoring among older employees and equip them with the skills to do so were a feature of several of the European Social Fund projects in the EQUAL funding round that ended in December 2007. In several European countries using older workers as mentors has become an important tool in knowledge management and retention.

Older employees who are going to be mentors need training. A recent TAEN investigative visit to Finland and Sweden to examine age management approaches in these countries, gave rise to the interesting finding that any form of education, including courses of degree or equivalent standard outside the subject area of the business, were all strongly correlated with the worker's ability to develop mentoring skills. The significance of this in making a case for economic benefits of IAL is obvious.

## **17. Equivalent and Lower Qualifications funding**

Many individuals will be affected by the Higher Education Funding Council's decision to withdraw support from students studying for equivalent or lower qualifications. Many of those who decide to study for such courses, follow them on part time basis. In some cases they are people who want to change career or seek advancement in some way. In other cases, they have decided on their chosen course because their informal studies led them there. Effectively banning students from taking second degrees or diplomas is removing a means and incentive to learn and smacks of a puzzling philistinism.

It might be said that such courses do not fall within the definition of Informal Adult Learning. However, we believe they should be seen as part of a continuum of learning opportunities and those who study subjects out of interest and enthusiasm should not be told that they cannot go this far because doing so leads to a degree level qualification or whatever.

There is also a direct work implication of such proscription. Older and mid life people who wish to remain in work may need a *recent* qualification or a different one from the qualification they achieved many years ago. If the qualification is deemed nominally 'equivalent' or 'lower' than one they already possess, even though it may be in an entirely different subject area, they will be prohibited from following the course. This may thus prevent them advancing their careers and remaining in employment later in life. As such it seems perverse.

## **18. Decline in Adult Safeguarded Learning numbers**

There has been a steady decline in the numbers of ASL participants, including those in older age groups. We are not aware of any evidence-based assessment of why this has taken place and believe the decline in learner numbers merits investigation by an independent body.

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