

2015/13

26 March 2015

Pocket Watch – Which way for adult voc ed?

Introduction

What's the future for adult education and training? Sir Andrew Foster's unloved middle child, the subject of a major report ten years ago calling for a new vibrant skills system, finds itself a decade on, facing a major funding crisis leading to questions about its very future. '*Adult education could disappear by 2020, colleges warn,*' just one of the striking headlines this week. Yet at the same time the government has launched a major new **review** of adult vocational learning built around a vision that sees this country as a leading international player in this area, Ofqual has launched a **consultation** on a new more flexible qualification framework following the QCF and two of the prime products in adult vocational learning, namely **Functional Skills** and **HNs**, have been given the thumbs up to continue as they are albeit with developments. Is this therefore one of those cathartic moments that the adult vocational sector often has to go through as it prepares itself for a changing set of conditions or is it something more? The developments this week offer what could be seen as some hopeful pointers.

Four latest pointers

1. Vision. Essentially a drawing breath exercise after a period of change and economic upheaval, the consultation exercise launched by BIS this week aims to bring clarity and purpose around what it calls the '*dual mandate*' of adult voc learning, namely providing for the skill needs of employers and individuals and secondly, providing second chance opportunities where needed. Arguably this remit hasn't changed but the operating conditions have, where three factors have gained prominence. First, the requirement to ensure all young people reach minimum standards in English and maths by age 18, second the growing importance of high-level technical skills and of a recognised learning route for these and third, a shift away from central to local planning and funding. Each of these feature in some shape or form in policy priorities for all of the major Parties in the coming election and point to where the vision is heading
2. Qualifications or more precisely qualification frameworks. Securing a balance between a secure quality assured system and one which offers flexibility for employers and learners has been a source of debate for some time and the current trend, evident in recent reviews from UKCES and the Commission on Adult Vocational Learning let alone Ofqual itself, has been to try and simplify by focusing on general principles, defined outcomes and employer engagement. Ofqual's consultation on a new regulated framework post the QCF, builds on this trend: "*what will matter in future will be whether qualifications can be shown to be good, not whether they are designed to tick boxes.*" The key drive here is market responsiveness, not new in itself but given new urgency by the demand for skilled talent and concerns about social mobility. The new framework aims to help both facets
3. Functional Skills. The quest for credible alternatives to GCSE English and maths has been a long one but according to the latest report published this week, Functional Skills which have been around now for over five years and are widely used, could fit the bill. There are issues about how they are viewed, (as stepping stones or as alternatives,) about how employers view them (87% of those familiar with them value them but only 47% admit actually to being familiar with them) and about some content and assessment but the hope is that a new government will cement their support
4. HNs. Finally a quick word about Higher Nationals, where the government confirmed this week that they would remain under HE funding rules thereby continuing to provide an important vocational route as higher level vocational progression becomes more important

Steve Besley
Head of Policy



Pocket Watches are intended to provide quick, informal updates on national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.

Whither adult learning. March 2015