



DIUS Informal Adult Learning Consultation.

Mary Ward Centre response - June 2008

The Mary Ward Centre is a Specially Designated Institution (SDI) for adult education – one of four colleges in London, four residential colleges and the WEA. SDIs were designated in the 1992 Education Act, which commits government not to damage their distinctiveness. At present SDIs have one year of flat-lined but protected funding for 08/09 from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), for which we are all grateful.

Mary Ward was the first adult education centre to be awarded Beacon status and was graded outstanding for leadership and management at its last inspection. The SDIs all enjoy excellent inspection results, most notable recent outstanding inspections have been at Northern and Working Men's Colleges. Mary Ward supports 6000 students, a large arts programme, a dedicated Over 60s programme and extensive outreach provision in the local community. 80% of our provision is, by design and intention, non-accredited. We celebrate Mary Ward's vision of liberal arts adult education not being restricted to the privileged few, but being available to those from all backgrounds, studying together, (a concept described as "equalisation" by Mary Ward). We have an LSC income of £2m, project income of £200k and raise £700k from fees from students. We have an active Board of Trustees and Management Committee and have recently campaigned against the negative effects of ESOL charging on local low paid hotel workers.

See www.marywardcentre.ac.uk for more details of courses and information on the history of Mary Ward Settlement, which was founded in 1896 to promote "public education and social service for the benefit of the community". The Mary Ward Legal Centre is part of the Settlement. Social justice is at the heart of our mission. We hugely welcome the current renewed interest in adult learning as exemplified by this IAL consultation. Thank you.

The official DIUS questions are written in black text. Our replies and comments are in blue

Preamble – Suggestions for the definitions of adult learning including "informal".

Much of the non-accredited adult education provision currently funded by DIUS in SDIs and other similar providers, is organised and structured, uses the RARPA staged process, is regularly inspected and has high expectations of regular attendance and participation of learners. We do not believe this is accurately described as 'informal' learning. The European Union in 2001 defined three categories of non vocational education:

1. **formal** leading to qualifications, where learning is intentional from the learner's perspective

2. **non-formal**, not leading to qualifications, but structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time and learning support. Learning also intentional
3. **informal**, resulting from daily life related to work, family or leisure. Not structured. Learning may or may not be intentional

According to the definitions above, 80% of funded provision at Mary Ward Centre is non-formal and 20% formal. None is informal. However, for the purposes of our responses below, we will interpret the term “informal” as used in the consultation document to include the term “non-formal”.

1. Understanding and improving on current provision

The points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

- a. How can we understand more about the factors that are driving this diversity of activity?

We believe that it is not only the desire to improve career progression that drives the diversity of learning activities by adults. It is driven by people’s need to understand, to participate in and to enhance their lives and those of their families and communities. There is also the drive, particularly amongst older learners, to keep mentally and physically active and healthy. In order to understand more we recommend further questioning of students and institutions, and the funding and implementation of further research. The Institute for the Study of the Wider Benefits of Learning at the Institute of Education, amongst others, is engaged in research on this issue.

This consultation should only be step one of a wide ranging debate and campaign to encourage participation.

- b. What are the conditions that make it easier for learners to learn?

From our experience in over 100 years of providing public adult education focused on the inclusion of students from all backgrounds, the best conditions are variable for every learner but there are some constants. Easy access to a wide range of affordable courses in every locality is one. At Mary Ward we also persist in providing a crèche and a well publicised bursary fund for those on low incomes who do not qualify for concessionary fees. But above all, well qualified, well trained, well supported and well motivated tutors will make it easier for everyone to learn and not just the privileged few. There is nothing more important for equality of opportunity than quality of teaching.

- b. How can we support people to be more instrumental in their own learning?

Encouraging and developing learner autonomy is a prime aim of adult learning theory and process. The mutual support and friendly mutual challenging of others in the learning process are also key transforming factors for many learners

Raymond Williams said that the purpose of adult learning was “to critique prevailing common sense”. Developing this ability is at the heart of becoming instrumental in one’s own learning.

c. How can we support and develop models of self-organised adult education, learning from (for example) the U3A model?

Though important, this is only one form of adult learning. At Mary Ward we support some self-organised classes, but consider that in general there is a danger of lack of social diversity in this form of adult learning. Knowledge tends to be limited by that of its random participants. U3A is doing fine within its own aims. But it is not a model for the majority of the sector.

The government has just introduced a demanding Level 4 minimum teacher training standard for tutors teaching in adult education and set up the Institute for Learning to regulate the sector. This does not seem to be consistent with a move back to a volunteer teaching force.

d. How can we improve the connectivity between different kinds of learning episodes, for example by helping people move from watching a TV programme to using the web, to joining a group and then to pro-actively teaching or sharing information with others?

We deliver a range of courses that offer people the opportunity to move from an interest stimulated by TV, the local library or the internet to active participation in learning more, or indeed to teaching or sharing that interest. Our outreach programmes also aim to stimulate this kind of motivation. For example, this year Mary Ward outreach student Momotaz Begum, won an Adult Learners Week regional award in recognition of her progression from a craft class in a local primary school to employment as an arts assistant at the Bangladeshi Mela, working with others to share her skills.

e. How can we further develop the culture of volunteering to support informal adult learning?

Volunteering is already a key priority of government and the accreditation of volunteers is developing in many key sectors. In Mary Ward we are engaged closely with our local CVS in developing bespoke training for volunteers and voluntary sector staff. We recommend continuing investment and support for developing a flexible credit system so that these courses can be customised to local needs.

Huge strides have been made in raising the quality of teaching in adult learning in the past ten years (see answer to point c above). To return entirely to a culture of untrained volunteers teaching adults would be a retrograde step that would not enhance and improve what is being offered to adult learners. Those who wish to share in this way can and do choose to do so through organisations like U3A. That's fine, but it's not a model for opening up learning with potential for universal application.

Volunteers will often be found where there is a radical social purpose connected to adult learning. In adult education many are very active as governors and in student voice organisations, eg Student Councils and the new Learners Voice network. Informally many offer mutual support way beyond the confines of the classroom, having met and enjoyed the company in class of people whom they would never have met other than through their shared interest in a subject.

f. What are the conditions most likely to foster innovative approaches to adult learning?

Innovation is fostered when teachers are well trained and qualified, and organisations have enough funding stability to countenance risk. At Mary Ward Centre, due to our special designation, our funding protection and effective management, we have been extremely lucky in being able to support innovation and we are grateful for this. However, with funding capped with no inflationary increase for the third year running, this will be soon become increasingly hard. A healthy organisation needs to return at least 1% surplus each year in order to fund new developments in the coming year. In recent years this has not been possible for many FE Colleges. Therefore in addition to having to cut almost all their non-formal provision, FE Colleges have had little chance to fund innovation in it. The results of these sudden curriculum cuts to “developmental” learning in FE will only start to show in coming years. This is why the work of the SDIs such as Mary Ward is so important at the moment. In the words of the Principal of one of our neighbouring large FE Colleges - “We need Mary Ward and the SDIs to act as the seed bank and gene pool for the sector during this period of total cuts to non-formal learning in FE”.

Government support in the past for development and innovation (eg LIDF) has been welcome. Nearly all this money has now also been cut. Alan Tuckett wrote recently in the TES that he has three suggestions: invest an additional £50m in safeguarded adult learning, bring back funding for short courses and bring back innovation funding. We entirely concur. We would only add: invest in the further development of the QCF credit framework.

2. The Government contribution

The points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

- a. Whether, and if so how, Government support for informal adult learning can be improved?

See preamble for European definition of formal, non-formal and informal as used below.

The introduction of a funded national lifelong learning strategy for formal and non-formal learning is now needed, to form the next stage from David Blunkett’s “The Learning Age”. (Informal learning will always happen and is unlikely to respond to any amount of government strategy or intervention). Funding and policy stability is key. Encouragement and public support, as with the current consultation, also helps – the recognition that encouraging citizens to value, understand and participate in democratic institutions and cultural activities is a public service.

Non-formal learning is often a prerequisite for progression to formal learning. Funding support for both forms of learning is needed. The current PSA qualification targets, and the shift of funding towards them, including the massive move of funding away from adult learning to Train to Gain, (which, in our experience, is often only accrediting existing skills), has caused negative consequences which now need attention and investment over several years in order to be rectified. The implicit recognition of this in the current safeguard for PCDL and SDIs is welcome.

- b. Whether you agree that, given the diversity of demand, need and type of provision that is made, it would be inappropriate to aim for a common funding system across Government, or a centralised strategy?

A proper national strategy does not mean a common pattern of provision nor does it involve centralisation. "The Learning Age" made a first step towards a national strategy. Chapter 2 of the Learning Age is now required. Local authorities have a role to play but they are unequal in their resources and commitment to adult learning, so purely local funding is not a solution. Indeed, the local authorities themselves have recently come out against a purely local planning role. However, we advocate the slimmest possible national bureaucracy be set up between the department and the delivery of provision. In many years of work in this sector, we have not found any deeper knowledge about or disinterested commitment to the needs of learners than that held by experienced practitioners in adult education centres and colleges. It simply does not reside in committees of people such as LAA partnerships. See answer to 3d for more on this.

DIUS needs to succeed across government in making the case for non-formal learning to be recognised as a funding priority and a distinct section with DIUS/SFA. We believe that this consultation has stimulated the beginnings of a debate and an acknowledgement that the single minded pursuit of qualification targets has had negative consequences. We are even beginning to find an acknowledgement in government and employer circles that some of the current priorities for spending may not be achieving their intended aims and that there is a need to find a way to rectify this. This is, in our view, very healthy and, even more importantly, is giving many practitioners and adult learners who have traditionally been supporters of the current government, the beginnings of hope instead of despair about recent government skills policy. Of course Train to Gain or similar programmes have a part to play, but from our direct experience we consider that the very design of the TTG programme does not make it suitable for effecting long term changes to skills in the working population. We believe that extreme efforts has had to be utilised to try to find enough delivery to fund via TTG in order to meet over ambitious targets at the same time that valuable and valued provision supporting good progression routes has been cut.

How can we ensure there is proper recognition and understanding of the wide variety of ways in which Government is supporting informal adult learning?

This is tricky in current circumstances, where, according to LSC figures, we have 1.4m fewer adult learners than previously. However, where investment is still being made (for example in libraries, museums, the arts and in the funding protection for SDIs such as ours), there is already public recognition and approbation. This can and should be built on by a programme of public information. If the government can reverse the trend of declining funding for adult learning, recognition will follow.

- c. How can we make better use of Government resources, for example better use of premises?

Mary Ward Centre already has extensive partnership arrangements with local schools, community organisations, facilities such as Conway Hall, and hospitals eg Great Ormond St, to share rooms and premises. These are part of the warp and weave of a

well run college within its local community, able to invest in a level of staffing to adequately look after this outreach and partnership function.

A key problem for many adult learners, (though not currently with our neighbour schools in Holborn), is that, due to PFI income targets, many schools are no longer able to offer adult learning organisations after-school access to premises. They now need to charge rents which adult learning providers can't afford. This is in direct contradiction to the requirements on schools that they offer after-school learning to children and their parents. This has led in some cases to schools reinventing the wheel locally and mounting one-off classes taught by unqualified tutors, quite outside any network of local planning and progression.

Another key problem for many colleges has been the VAT rules on new building, prohibiting community hire.

- d. Are there areas where Government should be actively removing barriers or creating new flexibilities in order to improve the use of resources?

Yes. Institute 3 year funding, bring back funding for short 1 day courses, loosen up the rigidity of the current qualification targets, especially full level 2, halt the current fee assumption hike to 50% in 2010, (it should remain at 45% maximum).

In London the Government approach to ESOL funding needs to be revised. (See recommendations from Demos/AoC ESOL report.)

Train to Gain as a separate funding stream should be reintegrated within the core FE funding system, and subject to the same requirements for quality and accountability. It is in our experience flawed in design, and cannot, however "tweaked", provide a model for universal application.

3. DIUS-funded informal adult education

The points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

- a. Is the adult education service basically a 1970s model, now overtaken by the developments summarised in Chapter 1? Or is it a successful service that has the potential, with the reforms currently in train, to develop and thrive in the 21st century?

This question implies two potentially misleading notions – one that overstates the role of technology and one that understates the distance travelled by adult education since the 1970s. We can supply inspiring concrete evidence of successful social justice activities in Mary Ward Centre from the 1970s, 80s and 90s, (not to mention the 1890s), which mirror current government aspirations for raising aspiration, ending worklessness, tackling literacy and creating community cohesion.

The current outcome-funded model of non-formal adult education, using RARPA throughout its provision, offering blended learning which integrates technology throughout, subject to rigorous inspection and consumer led demand, is in our view, able to be modern, commercially sensitive and capable of making a huge contribution to our

future society. Where it has survived the cuts of the past few years it often contributes hugely to key social cohesion objectives. Cut it any further, and you will only have eventually to reinvent it. Until a few years ago it was a successful service with the potential to grow further in its range and social purpose. It is not too late to repair the damage.

We do not advocate a return to pre 1970s block infrastructure funding grants. Outcome funding is fairer and more transparent.

Where adult education has continued to receive funding, for example in SDIs like the Mary Ward Centre, you will find modern, responsive organisations eager and able to support a serious social justice agenda and the delivery of very high quality education.

b. How are Local Authorities now organising their adult education services? What are their visions for the future and what are their experiences of different models of delivery today?

Though it may be the best and simplest model elsewhere, in London a purely local authority model is not appropriate, because so many learners, employees and providers cross borough boundaries. Regional Partnerships have also not been entirely successful. They certainly would need extensive infrastructure resourcing with secretariat support, which would have to be taken away from funding for provision. Without extensive secretariat support, groups of people who come together in a meeting once a month (eg Local Area Agreement partnerships), cannot actually plan adult education across a region. We do not advocate such secretariat investment. It would just take money away from delivery. In London we also have the LSEB chaired by the mayor, although non-formal learning is not within this body's current remit.

During the past few years such expertise as there was in local authorities for commissioning or planning adult learning has been radically cut. Given the huge demands on them to start to play a role again now with 16 – 19 planning, it is possibly not the right time to ask them to take on an adult education planning role beyond their own borders.

The demise of the LSC will involve the removal of the very place where some expertise in this area of planning still remains. It has been lost to local authorities, and would need some resourcing to recover.

One suggested solution for local and regional planning is for regional adult education scrutiny committees to be set up to oversee local plans, as with the current plans for regional "Young people committees", set up under the new machinery of government changes.

Though this IAL consultation has invited answers to the question of how to organise the funding of PCDL/ACL under the new SFA, the questions and options are not sufficiently developed to achieve the proper level of debate and consideration that is now needed. At the recent NIACE/DIUS workshop on 11th June it became clear to many of us that this particular element of the IAL consultation, interacting as it does with the Machinery of Government consultation and implementation, will need further urgent attention now. We feel that we are not in the position at the moment of contributing to an informed debate

about how adult education should be planned, commissioned and monitored. It is urgently needed for clear options to be developed which then benefit from serious and sophisticated consultation with those experienced in the field and committed to the social justice agenda. We would like to offer to help contribute to these discussions over the coming months.

In the short to medium term of the next three years, during the period whilst whatever national infrastructure changes are introduced, the interim arrangements that would best preserve the unique qualities of the SDIs in London would be a continuation of the safeguarded PCDL allocation to local authorities alongside the SDI protection. Both the SDIs and local authorities would benefit from a modest cost of living increase because a third year of a flatlined budget would cause some attrition that would be hard to recover from.

c. Have we taken partnership working as far as we can? The scale of the support from other Government departments is important for each partnership to grasp and take advantage of.

Partnerships are local and organic. They don't always work well on set models. To be successful, they need contributions from all partners. As stated in 2d above, Mary Ward Centre is a very active contributor to local partnership activity, working in local primary schools and in local regeneration networks and committees. We also run the Mary Ward Legal Centre, which is currently struggling with the new Legal Services Commission contract which has reduced its funding and ability to support clients, some of whom are in desperate need.

We are aware that part of the current large reduction in adult learning participation has been caused not just by the cuts in funding from DIUS, but also by the ending of previous good sources of funding for outreach provision including SRB, NDC, ESF and NRF. All these sources have dried up very recently. This is impacting on FE colleges which used to deliver non-formal outreach provision via these funds, on providers protected within the flat-lined PCDL budget and, most painfully of all, on voluntary sector providers.

Informal adult learning is certainly delivered by several government departments, but none of them currently have additional funds to fund us. To use health as an example - we know that we perform a key role in supporting learners' mental and physical health - a role that is becoming increasingly important as social service mental health day centres have been closed in several neighbouring boroughs. However, we cannot find any local health budget that is able to fund us for this. But if our service is taken away from the many individuals who currently use us, there will be further calls on the health service. A GP is not usually interested in one-off project funding for a class at her surgery. She wants to be able to tell patients to go to their local adult education centre and choose from a range of courses offered there. This is not an argument against PCT-funded health awareness courses, or expert patient training. The danger is that in concentrating scant resources into "tidying up" diversity of provision across silos, energy and attention is diverted from more fundamental issues.

PCDL partnerships work in some areas but guidelines for them are scant and funding patchy. The LAA partnerships in some areas are working well too, but do not generally

include adult education in their remit. An example of how the LAA partnerships have moved away from funding outreach/informal adult learning is the way in which the new neighbourhood and LAA partnerships, which used to fund this type of work under NRF, have uniformly across England ceased to do so, and are now only funding worklessness outputs.

d) In terms of using the DIUS safeguarded budget, would it be better in future to focus spend on infrastructure and on the organisation of an effective service, rather than through direct subsidies to providers for putting on courses?

We believe that the formulation of this question has confused respondents and we are concerned that you will find answers to it to be skewed as a result. Some believe that you mean funding an adult guidance service by the reference above to infrastructure funding, others believe that you mean a return to block grant funding.

If the latter is meant, our view is that the current formula funding which is measured by our ability to attract, retain and help students achieve, seems fairer, more efficient and effective than one which would pay us regardless of our success. Given that 70% of the budget of an institution like ours is spent on payroll, we cannot see that infrastructure funding would lead us either to saving money or improving quality.

e) Do we need the service to become more learner-led? Would a way of doing that be to explore the possible use of real or virtual vouchers, taking advantage of new technologies? These might build on the Skills Accounts mechanism being phased in, starting in 2010.

Yes, we believe that the service needs to become even more learner led. Many adult education services are already highly learner led, sensitive to market demand, and responsive to learners, but we can always improve.

We do not see any urgent demand for skills accounts from learners, employers or non learners. At the moment, given the cuts in provision, giving someone an adult skills/education voucher would rather be like giving them a dollar from a free falling currency. We ask where is the evidence that leads to a belief in vouchers working. Given the sector's direct experience of the pressure to show that the Train to Gain pilots were successful, government will need to understand that there is some justified scepticism in the sector about evidence from "pilots".

Skills accounts can surely also only follow the successful implementation of the Unique Learner Number (ULN). This is some way off in adult education and unlikely to be a priority. The risk of this massive IT project running into trouble must be considered to be high. To invest in skills accounts without ULN seems to us to be putting the cart before the horse.

4. Equality of access

The points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

- a. How can we do better in ensuring that no one is excluded from the benefits of learning? Or from the same opportunities that others enjoy?

This is an important issue. As a sector we still need to do so much more. Complying with the new Single Equality Scheme requirements is pushing those of us in the regulated and funded adult learning sector in the right direction.

Mary Ward Centre plays a particular role in supporting the inclusion of adults with mental health issues. This is remarked upon by a great number of our students, who enjoy the sense of studying in a high values institution with high expectations for the tolerance and support that will be shown to these fellow students. In partnership with mental health charity Rethink we are developing and modelling strategies to support tutors in the four London SDIs in dealing with this challenge.

In order to avoid the current post code lottery for adult education, there needs to be more investment and a better geographical spread of provision.

At present, there is a danger that the current funding policy for formal FE and Adult learning discriminates against those with fewer existing skills. Without being offered the choice of a second chance to education, they are increasingly being funnelled into just one type of skills training. Creating a culture which celebrates learning is the only enduring solution to skills gaps. The London skills market requires educated and critical individuals.

There is a missing element in the IAL consultation document in that it does not cover this area of “second chance” and Access provision that has been such an important part of the transformation of adult education in the past 30 years. The flexible Open College Credits that underpin this provision are not currently funding priorities, and as a result a key part of the jigsaw of local progression is being damaged in some parts of the country where the only progression route for adults who missed out first time round is to a very narrow range of full level 2 or 3 vocational qualifications which are neither popular with local employers nor accessible to individuals needing to pursue a part time credit system of learning due to pressures of work or family. The second half of the question 4a above refers to “the same opportunities that others enjoy”. By restricting second chance educational opportunities for adults to a purely skills and vocational based route, progression and Access to higher education is severely restricted. A full level 2 in Lottery Skills for example simply does not provide the academic progression route to an Access to HE qualification at Level 3.

The recent (April 08) NIACE research showing the reduction in participation of particular social groups must surely give pause for thought for those wedded to the current funding priorities. It seems that these priorities, motivated by a laudable commitment to increasing access for disadvantaged social groups, may have achieved the direct opposite. The “prevailing common sense” of current priorities and PSA targets surely need a serious rethink.

- b. How well do we understand the barriers to learning as they exist at present, and how they affect particular parts of society? To what extent are the barriers financial? What action would address each of the barriers?

There is deep knowledge and understanding within the sector about barriers to learning. There are also whole departments in universities studying this. The study of

barriers to learning is now embedded into the teacher training curriculum in adult education and in our CPD programmes.

Fees are a very big barrier, but not the only one. However, more research into the impact of fee increases is now needed. At Mary Ward we surveyed 1000 students in one week and can share that data with you. We found that the largest grouping of our students receive means tested benefits (47%). However, the next largest grouping is of low paid London workers. They are currently suffering the most from the recent fee increases. A review of the experiences of these students, and of the Train to Gain route which is meant to provide solutions for them, is required in order to redress the barriers to learning that these learners face.

- c. What further actions could Government most usefully take to ensure more equal access to informal learning?

Please promote policies which match government statements of aspiration. Please stop promoting policies that have led to FE Colleges cutting all their non accredited learning. Many colleges have also been forced to cut nearly all their key outreach developmental work with community partners. The impact of this has yet to be fully felt.

The role of adult learning, especially the via the provision of ESOL, in contributing to social cohesion was not fully realised in the introduction of charging for ESOL last year. This still needs proper further attention. See Demos/AoC London ESOL report recommendations.

- d. What further actions could others most usefully take?
- e. What more can Government do to overcome the 'digital divide' where the people who could most benefit from new ways of participating in adult learning are the least equipped to take advantage of them?

Organisations like Mary Ward have been active in this field for the past twenty years. Many people aged over 60 did not have easy access to learn about new technologies. They are or were tax payers, but many are now on low incomes. They now expect and need access to government supported classes after a lifetime of work. That is why there needs to be continuing funding for ICT classes at least for the next 10 - 20 years, and subsidies for over 60s. The role played by local libraries in offering free or low cost internet access will continue in importance, although many learners still need experienced tutors, with teaching skills beyond those usually held by library staff. Both library and adult education services are needed. They complement each other.

5. Broadcasting and technology

The points we especially wish to explore and debate include:

- a. What are the barriers to making the most of technology for learners? How can these be overcome?

Mary Ward Centre was an early adopter of new technology and a pioneer in the sector in its delivery of industry standard one day courses. We are now involved in a range of interesting technology initiatives and developments. A return of LSC funding for one day courses would help us in meeting local employer and employee need.

- b. What do we know about the learning opportunities that will become available utilising new technology over the next 10 to 15 years? What is the best way of identifying these opportunities?

The internet is a useful tool for learning, but for most people it is additional to, not a substitute for, learning as part of a class or group. As yet we can barely imagine the future when the current generation of social network site using teenagers come of age. Some early evidence is leading us to believe that many of them are turning off their computers and going out with their friends or coming to evening classes once they reach their twenties! We certainly have many young Londoners, from all over the world, who attend our evening classes and claim that they relish the break from spending the day at a PC screen. Any adult education provider which attracts employed people to evening classes, (and without those in work paying the fees to subsidise those who can't pay, providers will find it hard to survive), needs to cater to this preference.

- c. What opportunities, if any, are there to make learning a more central consideration in the future of broadband and the digital switchover? And in the development of mobile phone applications?

Mary Ward values its access to the Janet academic IT infrastructure with its new improved features and capacity and to Moodle and access to texting features which enable instant communication with students.

- d. How can we make greater use of interactive television?
- e. How can the connectivity between broadcast, physical and virtual resources and informal learning be further enhanced?

One useful connection between the factors above is the presence of or access to a skilled and experienced teacher.

- f. How can we bring new Information and Communications Technology together with more established teaching and learning models so that there are integrated opportunities to learn?

Few of the agencies involved in promoting the use of technology in learning would claim that online learning is a replacement for classes and groups: it is a tool to be used in addition to, or blended with, opportunities for structured learning in groups. Mary Ward is committed to remaining entirely up to date in its use of technology and blended learning. However, as we point out in 5a above, many of our evening students, from all social backgrounds, come to us after a day at a computer screen, and are adamant that they do not wish to spend their evening class doing the same thing.

A wide ranging discussion

These discussion points are intended to prompt debate. They are not intended to limit or constrain what needs to be a challenging and innovative consultation. So if you feel that there are other equally important issues which should be addressed, please feel free to do so.

A coherent approach to charging or not charging employers for training

Recent announcements about free level 3 provision for adults in work aged 19 – 24 have even further confused our local employers. The ability of organisations such as Mary Ward to continue in their hard won ability to attract custom from employers is sometimes damaged by these announcements. We commissioned some market research in April 08 on how our provision is seen by local employers in Holborn. We found that employers have developed a suspicion and wariness of any training provided by organisations using government money. Many quoted a very negative experience of contact with brokers and others trying to sell them Train to Gain. Their response to us was more positive when they were assured that we had no connection with these outfits or Train to Gain. However this distrust is now so widespread amongst London employers that we consider our ability to develop these connections may have been damaged, we hope only temporarily.

Family learning and parent education

We believe that the machinery of government changes which set up DIUS and the Dept of Children and Families has not yet solved the conundrum of where to put the leadership and curriculum development of parent education and family learning. This area of work predominantly involves adult learning, and needs those skilled in adult learning to lead and deliver it. That experience is not exclusively held in DCSF, (although the word family is in its title). In our response above we have advocated the setting up of a unit within DIUS/SFA to lead on non-formal and informal learning. Family learning and parent education could fit naturally within this unit.

Institute for Learning

After the huge expense over the past 10 years of professionalising adult learning, bringing it into the Ofsted orbit and the establishing of the Institute for Learning, it can surely not be justified, even if only in audit terms, for adult education to become a purely volunteer and learner-organised sector. The solution for extending awareness of adult learning issues across government departments and activities must be to bring the learning and quality practices from our sector into the other areas like Health, Culture and Digital Media. We have a great resource in our sector, and the time has come to share it.

Adult Career Service – important, but not a priority right now

The consultation does not address the proposal for setting up an adult career service. Though important and much needed, (the current Learndirect service does not have a reputation for accuracy), we are worried that this could be another distraction from

actually funding adult learning. One can have all the advice in the world, but if all the provision has been cut, what is there to signpost?

Skills for life, second chance provision and accreditation, foundation learning tier

The consultation does not include consideration of these two elements of adult education. However, on the ground they are inextricably linked with non-formal provision. At Mary Ward Centre for example we run an extensive modular non accredited arts programme for adults, within which adults needing accreditation for progression can choose to complete OCN credits at Levels 2 and 3. The foundation learning tier (FLT), once fully developed, may also be an important stepping stone to this provision. However, the FLT is not yet ready, and there needs to be some bridge funding over the coming year so that by the time it is ready, there are still some high quality providers ready to deliver it.

The need for a debate about the proper home within government for the planning and funding of non-formal adult learning

As stated above, we urge DIUS to initiate a conversation now with those experienced in this field so that the Machinery of Government Changes process, currently so well advanced, does not plump for any decision about adult learning planning and funding that is not fully thought through. In the short term, we consider that the continuation of the £210m safeguard and the SDI funding protection will be necessary at least for the two coming years, during this period of change, so that by the time the new arrangements are in place, there are still enough experienced and well-managed providers and tutors ready to take up the challenge of delivering a 21st century service. We look forward to being part of the continuing debate about how we can contribute to a future civilised, rational, imaginative, fair and forward thinking society. Thank you for inviting us to contribute to this consultation.

Ceri Williams, Principal, and trustees of
The Mary Ward Centre
42 Queen Square
London WC1N 3AQ
0207 269 6061
Ceri.williams@marywardcentre.ac.uk
www.marywardcentre.ac.uk