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CLÉS Bulletin is a topical summary of articles which have appeared in the professional press. Its aim is to provide a pithy précis of a subject area, drawing out the specific and common issues raised in the individual articles.

**CLÉS Bulletin No. 16
October 2003**

The Skills Strategy White Paper

Introduction

The Skills Strategy White Paper, *21st Century Skills: Realising our Potential* was published on 9 July 2003 by the Department of Education and Skills. Its aim was to ensure employers have the right skills to support the success of their businesses and individuals have the skills they need to be both employable and personally fulfilled¹. The paper has been scrutinised in the press since its release, highlighting its achievements, but also there has been no shortage of coverage pointing out where the paper falls short of the mark.

*New Start*² magazine identifies the Strategy's main focus as giving young adults with few or no qualifications a second chance at education and training while giving the further education sector a clearer role. Moves include free GCSE courses, £30 a week maintenance grants and new opportunities to re-skill.

It reports that although the strategy has been welcomed, the consensus in the business and education worlds is that it doesn't go far enough and *New Start* goes on to identify examples of this.

The Strategy proposes free, level 2 tuition, that is GCSE or equivalent. This entitlement is open to anyone without a 'good foundation of employability skills': those 'in the workforce or of working age' who left school without qualifications. However, it only applies to those willing to sign up full-time, and some believe this will be a barrier to those considering going back into education.

New Start goes on to report that the Government intends to use the Jobcentre Plus to encourage the unemployed to take up these new opportunities. However the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and other organisations do not believe this will be enough to attract people, and they have called for union learning representatives to play a leading role in spreading the word.

New Start also looks at the White Paper's proposal to extend maintenance grants to encourage students to stay in the education system. This will be available to all adults studying full-time for their first full level three qualification. However, the vast majority of adults study part-time, so there are questions over how many will actually benefit from this support, and NIACE wants incentives introduced for part-timers.

*Inside Housing*³ looks at what the White Paper means for the housing sector. It tells us that skills issues are all too evident in the social housing sector, where lack of awareness of career options is a major barrier to recruitment. It suggests that the challenges facing the social housing sector are considerable, and that it needs to be able to manage the supply of training skills and qualifications so that it responds directly to the sector's requirements.

Inside Housing says the White Paper points the way by highlighting the role of the new sector skills councils (SSCs) as a 'major new voice for employers and employees in each major sector of the economy'. The Government aims to create 23 SSC's by summer 2004 to replace the 74 former national training organisations.

Inside Housing informs us that a campaign is already underway to create an SSC spanning housing, property services, facilities management and cleaning. SSC status presents the opportunity to make a real impact on the big skills issues that impact on the future success of the housing sector. The council will develop a long-term skills agenda for the sector to raise productivity and increase competitiveness. It will drive the agenda forward through a sector skills agreement against which progress can be measured. The move is being supported by more than 25 professional and industry bodies including the Chartered Institute of Housing and the National Housing Federation.

¹ Holyfield, James and Somerville, Will *The Skills Strategy: a white paper tiger?* Working Brief Aug/Sept 2003 pp.10-15

² Macauley, Austin *Take an educated guess* *New Start* 25 July 2003 p.15

³ Foxwell, Richard *Filling in the gaps* *Inside Housing* 15 Aug 2003 p.20

The White Paper points to the strong regional dimension to the skills problem. SSCs will mean the housing sector will be able to work more closely with the RDAs in determining regional skills priorities for the sector and the measures needed to address them.

Working Brief⁴ highlights what it sees as a number of positive steps in the Strategy:

- * The desire to place vocational education on a par with academia
- * The acknowledgement that basic skills needs to be improved and a wider range of people need to be brought into the learning and training circle
- * The intention to bring in an entitlement to level two and an adult learning grant
- * The removal of the age gap on Modern Apprenticeships.

Working Brief suggests that the positive overtones in the White Paper are there but the commensurate action is not. It identifies the major problem as not what's in the White Paper, but what is not included:

- * The strategy lacks the big idea that could have been used to gel all the proposals together;
- * A great deal has been left out of the strategy and a number of issues have been glibly omitted from the agenda.

Working Brief suggests that the strategy is full of promising initiatives, mainstreaming of successful practice and joined up working. Therefore, the Skills Strategy does not need a radical rewrite but it does, nevertheless need a change of emphasis so that everybody understands that all the different activities and initiatives described in the documents will be used to improve the reputation of vocational qualifications so that more people will be persuaded to take part. It argues, however, that the Skills Strategy is unlikely to work until we improve the reputation of vocational qualifications and if we don't then people will not take part and all the ideas and suggestions will be a waste of time.

Working Brief concludes that the Skills Strategy White Paper has not gone far enough to fulfil the economic and social goals it has set for itself.

Adults Learning⁵ believes there has been little radical criticism of the thinking underlying the new Skills Strategy. It identifies three problems:

1. The Strategy is predicated on an unquestioned faith in economic growth. It argues that this alone precludes it from being a meaningful '21st century' strategy, because the various ecological

imperatives that have already been established themselves as the defining features of the new century have been ignored.

2. The Strategy is backward looking and possibly mendacious about Britain's historic 'skills gap'. In recent years, many British employers have done very well out of having very large numbers of low-skill jobs and workers.
3. The Strategy is based on a usage of the term, 'skill' that extends beyond its traditional meaning. A strategy that aims at 'realising our potential' is by definition educational, and all the difficult, controversial educational issues connected with vocational preparation and life long learning will not simply disappear just because the more neutral vocabulary of skills is used.

Conclusion

The general message across the board seems to indicate that the Strategy is somewhat of a disappointment. Although it has flagged up a number of important issues and has devised approaches aimed at tackling them, there appear to be too many significant gaps. Organisations such as NIACE are now calling for further improvements and the Government's response and subsequent actions will be of interest to CLES in forthcoming months.

For more information on this topic please contact:

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⁴ Holyfield, James and Somerville, Will *The Skills Strategy: a white paper tiger?* Working Brief Aug/Sept 2003 pp.10-15

⁵ Parrott, Allen *Wrong strategy, wrong century* Adults Learning Oct 2003 pp.24-25