

Informal Adult Learning - DIUS response to the consultation

In publishing *Informal Adult Learning – Shaping the Way Ahead* we wanted to kick start a discussion that would lay the foundations for a new informal adult learning strategy for the 21st century.

It's clear from your responses to the consultation that individuals and organisations from every facet of society are passionate about informal learning. We warmly welcome every one of the 5,500 responses. We are encouraged by the contribution of so many new stakeholders to the discussion, and by the widely shared enthusiasm for working together to bring to life a new vision for informal learning.

The consultation generated a wealth of ideas. Although the consultation has now ended we want to continue to work closely with partners over the coming months and beyond. Together we can develop a vibrant and diverse informal learning offer to meet the needs of all parts of society. I hope that all those with an interest in informal learning will continue to support us in achieving that aim.

We acknowledge that some learners are concerned about the expense or decline of some courses in their local areas. Some stakeholders question the Government's commitment to informal learning given our emphasis on adult vocational skills. Let us be clear that informal learning is valued by Government. We recognise the enormous contribution it makes to the quality of life, health and well-being of individuals, neighbourhoods and wider society. We launched the consultation because we want to raise the profile and take-up of informal learning wherever it happens, just as you do. But the informal learning picture has always been bigger than just publicly funded learning delivered through traditional adult education services. Our vision for informal learning for the 21st century is much wider than traditional classes, important as they are within the mix.

Your responses endorsed our suggestion that decision-making about the mix of available learning opportunities needs to be placed more firmly in the hands of local people and communities. We see many benefits in strong local partnerships shaping the local offer and ensuring join-up with other strategies such as community participation, cohesion and well-being. We are also encouraged by the enthusiasm shown for working in local partnerships to better connect public, private, voluntary and self organised activity and to consider innovative ways of using public investment to support this diverse landscape. We want to continue to work with partners to support connectivity between different kinds of learning so that learners are able move easily from one learning experience to another. A museum visit or a TV programme might signpost adults to supplementary online material. This initial spark of interest could then be fuelled by enabling people to connect with like-minded others in a local discussion group or taught course.

We want to make sure that our strategy reaches out to potential learners, as well as those currently participating. We agree with many of you that we must uphold the principle that public funding should prioritise adults who have had the least access in the past and are least able to fund their own learning. We will look to

develop ways to widen access to learning as we develop our strategy over the coming months.

We see a place for a very broad range of learning opportunities, styles and delivery methods under the informal learning umbrella. We are very encouraged by the many responses from people who are self-organising their learning. We want to enable that kind of learning to flourish wherever people want it. Some people and communities would like to take this approach but need help to get started. Your responses suggest that Government could facilitate and stimulate self-organised learning by securing better access to public and private spaces so that groups of learners can pursue their interests and passions. We will be working with employers, unions and other Government Departments over the coming months to encourage this.

There was some concern about the intention behind the technology questions in the consultation. It is absolutely not the case that we want online learning to be the only option. But we do want to make sure that informal learning is not left behind in the technology stakes. The world is changing and technology is playing an increasingly significant role in our lives - we want informal adult learning to be leading the way rather than playing catch-up later. And technology can open the doors for the many adults who do not want, or are unable, to attend traditional venues. To widen participation we need to be more innovative in what we offer. There are many ways, as your responses suggest, that technology can support learning – through blending technology with taught learning to enhance the learning experience; as a first step into learning through a website; as a channel for sharing information and by offering opportunities for two-way communication via TV and mobile phone technology.

Finally, we are not wedded to the ‘informal adult learning’ label. The name is not as important as developing a wide framework of principles to underpin all kinds of informal learning, whether delivered by public, voluntary, self-organised or private sector organisations. Your continued engagement will help us develop a strategy that can secure thriving and joined-up informal learning for the 21st century.