

Trade Union Education and the White Paper: true lifelong learning

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I am incredibly fortunate to have both a lay union officer's and a practitioner's perspective on the potential impact of the Government's FE White Paper *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth* on the future of Trade Union Education (TU ed.).

Having had time to absorb the content (without glazing over), I can now see that there is potential for both negative and positive impacts on TU Ed.

The main theme of the 77-page White Paper is jobs and employment, and TU Ed. offers opportunities in this area that the Tories will not have considered. The courses, ranging from TUC core courses, such as Certificate in Employment Law, to short courses on Domestic Abuse and Mental Health Awareness, could be hugely beneficial to both workplaces and wider society if prioritised.

As an eternal optimist, I will start with the potential advantages for TU Ed.:

- **1. Re-introduction of free, fully-funded Level 3 courses for any adult without an existing L3 through the 'Lifetime Skills Guarantee':** This would hugely benefit us; as things stand, we are only able to teach some courses at Level 3 and then accredit at Level 2, which is simply not fair on the students. The re-introduction of this funding would allow a path for a return of public-funded diploma courses such as Employment Law and Occupational Health and Safety (surely benefiting everyone, especially in the midst of a pandemic).
- **2. Expansion of apprenticeship and traineeship provision:** Some unions have been trialling the first trade union apprenticeships for those with aspirations of becoming a full-time TU official. Even the UCAS website and the National Careers Service now explain the career path ('related jobs: HR manager' gave me a wry smile).
- **3. Focus on the importance of English, maths and digital training:** TU Ed. departments have been delivering these provisions for decades, and since 1998 through the Union Learning Fund. We need to use the arguments in the White Paper to save the ULF before it has gone forever. I recently taught a union rep in their sixties who had gone their entire life struggling to write and mixing up words without being

assessed for dyslexia, and attending the course allowed them to get the support they should have had their whole life. Furthermore, as we inevitably move into the sphere of online provision, lots of our reps are missing the digital skills (or equipment) to be able to successfully engage in the courses.

- **4. Proposed simplification of funding processes:** In Trade Union Education, we live and breathe funding streams in order to constantly diversify to survive. This proposed 'streamlining' would be most welcome.

- **5. Commitment to improving the diversity of FE lecturers:** TU Ed. is an educational area staffed largely by white, male practitioners 'of a certain age', many of whom may be heading for retirement in the next 10-15 years. Any measures towards positive recruitment action are applauded by me.

There are inevitably points where the White Paper and TU Ed. part ways:

- a) For a Conservative government, the **main measure of success and impact is salary**. Union reps are often in low-paid, frontline and sometimes precarious employment.
- b) The introduction of **loans in FE** would not be an option for most trade unionists. More debt, anyone? Reintroduction of the Education Maintenance Allowance (still present in Wales and Northern Ireland), and specific support with childcare costs would be much more welcome.
- c) **New powers for the Secretary of State for Education**. Eek.

And so, despite the sector-wide disappointment over the long-awaited White Paper, there is an unexpected opportunity here. As trade unionists, we can exploit the constant references to 'employers' and 'businesses' to benefit our own trade unions by using the funding, intended inevitably for elsewhere, to improve the scope and quality of TU Ed.

If the Right Honourable Gavin Williamson MP (CBE) wants to see outstanding teaching and good employer relations in practice, he should drop by his local Trade Union Education unit.