

In the run-up to the general election NIACE came up with a list of six questions which voters could usefully put to prospective parliamentary candidates. We put the questions to new Prime Minister **David Cameron**

How far do you believe that public investment in adult education should be directed solely towards labour market needs or should it also promote wider public benefits such as citizenship, community cohesion and cultural appreciation?

Learning isn't just about consuming chunks of knowledge in order to be able to do a job. It's about broadening the mind, giving people self-belief, strengthening the bonds of community. Labour didn't seem to get that. Over the past 13 years so many learning places have been lost because they haven't been deemed useful. And simply focusing on workplace training, as the Labour government did through Train to Gain, often means funding something that employers would be willing to pay for anyway. The National Audit Office has said that Train to Gain represents poor value for money, so we will refocus it, committing an extra £100 million to learning chosen by people themselves.

If politicians are to succeed in engaging voters to understand choices around the big political issues like the economy and demographic and climate change, does adult education have a role in promoting informed debate and encouraging active citizenship?

Adult learning has a really important role to play in encouraging active citizenship. I'm not just talking about what people learn about specifically, but how that learning makes them feel. Going along to college means meeting people, discussing what's going on in the world, boosting your belief in what you can do. It's that self-belief that leads people to get involved in their communities and become more active citizens. Given that my vision for this country is for all of us to get involved and play our part in national renewal, I believe adult learning and the way it inspires people is crucially important.

How will you take account of the significant savings that can be made across a range of public services (such as health) as a result of investment in adult learning when deciding which budgets to protect from cuts?

We know that adult learning doesn't just help people find work – it can also have benefits for people's health and even for reducing crime. That's why we're committed to increased investment through our Adult Community Learning Fund.

What will you do to end discrimination against part-time students?

We've got to recognise that people's lives are messy and varied. Many don't fit neatly into the shape of traditional university or college education. That's why part-time courses, modular and distance learning are so important. The big issue is loans for part-time students – we've criticised the fact that part-timers don't get anywhere near as much support as full-time students. I welcome the review of student finance that's going on now and hope it comes up with a constructive way forward on this so that more people can get the help they need.

What rationale is there for treating further and higher education differently in policy debates about fees and maintenance?

It's about time we treated those involved in further education as grown-ups. For years FE colleges were subjected to the bureaucratic nightmare of the Learning and Skills Council – and the bodies that succeeded it aren't likely to make things much better. Colleges face endless audits and inspections, and teaching staff spend too much time in the office rather than in the classroom. We're going to streamline FE funding to bring it much closer to the HEFCE model, pulling down the barriers between higher and further education so that more people get more choice about what they study and where.

Do some groups of adults matter more than others when it comes to access to publicly-supported opportunities to learn?

Of course, some people need more help than others. It's a tragedy that so many disadvantaged people lost out on the opportunity to learn new skills under Labour. The Labour government's obsession with accreditation meant that some courses for people with learning disabilities were cut simply because they didn't lead to formal qualifications. We say that colleges and teachers are the best judges of which courses have the most value to local people. Instead of pressuring them to meet arbitrary government targets we'll give them much more freedom about how they use their budgets and which courses they lay on to help the people who need it most.