



Know your place

While the virtues of lifelong learning continue to trip from the tongues of ministers, modern-day Jude Fawleys are no less likely to find the only forms of publicly supported adult learning available to be those that make them do their current jobs better, writes **ALISON WOLF**

A little over a century ago, Thomas Hardy published *Jude the Obscure*. Jude Fawley, a young stonemason, is utterly determined to become a student at 'Christminster', Hardy's fictional proxy for Oxford; not because he wants to be a lawyer, or a vicar with a comfortable living, but because he longs to study, to learn. He studies Latin and Greek with dedication, and applies to the university's colleges for admission.

The letter from the Master of 'Biblioll' College, which puts paid to Jude's hopes, is one of the best-known passages Hardy ever penned. He wrote it as satire and social

criticism; at school, I was taught to read it as such. And yet it actually represents, faithfully and accurately, the current adult education policies of England's twenty-first century government. Here it is:

BIBLIOLL COLLEGE

SIR, - I have read your letter with interest; and judging from your description of yourself as a working-man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That,

therefore, is what I advise you to do.

Yours faithfully,

T. TETUPHENAY

The bad old days? If only that were the case. The mind-set and assumptions that drive today's policy, under a long-standing Labour government, are to an extraordinary degree identical to those in Hardy's fictional letter. The virtues of 'lifelong learning' may trip off every minister's tongue, and launch countless speeches, but the only sorts of adult learning which actually have legitimacy, or are seen as deserving of support, are those which make people do their current jobs better. 'Skills'



One of a series of illustrations produced by William Hatherell for the magazine serialisation of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*

© Mary Evans Picture Library/Alamy

rule, and the skills in question are narrowly defined, and vocational in the most short-term and immediate fashion.

In the last few years, there has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of the adult education and training budget dedicated to 'employer-based' expenditure. Current government expenditure plans mean that between 2006 and 2010, and excluding apprenticeships, the proportion of the adult budget directed through employers is set to more than double. In practice, this means more money for Train to Gain – a programme for workplace-based training, leading to formal qualifications, which does

not involve much learning at all. As a number of the leading private providers explained to a House of Commons select committee last year, funding levels cover the costs of certifying people for skills they already hold, but not much else.

The Government's mind-set is very clear. Top priority must go to 'workplace skills', the skills that people are practising and using now, in their current workplace – because, otherwise, they will not meet employers' immediate needs. So it is through the employer, rather than as an individual, that people gain access to Train to Gain funding: it is the employer who contacts, or is

contacted, by providers, the employer who negotiates, the employer who is the intended beneficiary. The recent launch of the 'Skills Funding Agency' (not, note, the education or, even, the learning agency) confirms the approach. According to the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills' (DIUS) launch documents, the reorganisation is designed to provide '*more* young people and adults with the skills *employers* need'.

As most readers of this journal will know, one result of recent funding patterns has been a very sharp drop in the number of adult learners, and the closing of large swathes of adult education provision. Many

A young man with short brown hair, wearing clear safety glasses and a dark blue shirt, is focused on his work in a factory. He is looking down at a workbench. In the background, there is a large, complex piece of industrial machinery, possibly a lathe or mill, with various metal parts and a lamp. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a professional and industrial atmosphere.

**“The message could not be clearer:
the Government wants to see you
‘remaining in your own sphere and
sticking to your trade’ rather than
‘adopting any other course’”**

will also know that Train to Gain is underspent: employers' enthusiasm for free training tends to evaporate once they learn that 'demand-led' provision actually means that you can have anything you like for your workforce as long as it is a full Level 2 qualification. What has been less remarked is the extent to which the more recent 'equivalent or lower qualifications' (ELQs) rules reflect the same determination to keep workers in the estate to which their employers have called them.

The ELQ rules state that you cannot be funded to do a qualification at the 'same' or a 'lower' level as one you have already obtained. The whole idea of 'levels' is itself a bizarre one, given the diversity of what people learn: what does it actually mean to claim, as did a recent DIUS press release on DHL's signing of the 'Skills Pledge', that a Level 2 NVQ in carrying and delivering goods is the 'equivalent' of five good GCSEs? However, the levels label need not matter much as long as people are able to take whatever qualifications they want or need for what they want to do – not just now, but in the future.

That is now precluded, at least where any public funding is concerned, by the ELQ rules. Swapping vocational fields becomes near-impossible, because you would have to enrol, right at the start of your training, for a level higher than anything you hold already in a totally different field. So forget obtaining a Level 2 in delivering goods and then deciding to retrain for a career in catering. Or, for that matter, doing or re-doing your GCSEs as a precursor to taking A-levels. The message could not be clearer: what the Government wants is to see you 'remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade' rather than 'adopting any other course'. The Master of Biblioll would be proud of them.

How did we arrive in this bizarre situation? Part of it is, to me, inexplicable; namely why and how modern English governments have come to believe that the only legitimate purpose for publicly funded education is to promote economic growth. The explicable part is why, given this as an objective, they have repeatedly embraced narrow policies which actually do rather little for economic growth itself.

It is perfectly reasonable to see the development of economically valuable skills as one of the major purposes of education. Students and their families certainly do; many adult learners are similarly, and very reasonably, keen to acquire skills with labour market value. However, individuals tend to have a rather longer-term and more sophisticated view of what such skills might be than have recent UK policy-makers. They also, as we know from myriad studies, have objectives over and above increasing their future earnings.

Successive governments – first, the pre-1997 Conservatives but then, even more fervently, New Labour – have convinced themselves that more education automatically guarantees more growth, and that this is especially true for formal qualifications. Back in 2002, Estelle Morris, then Secretary of

State for Education, informed the world, through the pages of *The Guardian*, that '[a] one percentage point increase in the number of workers with higher education qualifications raises GDP by 0.5 per cent'. It would seem to follow that if the Government had succeeded in meeting its target of 50 per cent enrolment in higher education, we would now be happily avoiding recession – and that the only thing saving us from full-blown 1930s-style poverty levels is all the degrees which have been awarded over the last decades.

Estelle Morris – or her speechwriter – reached that conclusion about university graduates by an inappropriate use of earnings statistics which has been common to government for decades (and not only in the UK). Basically, you look at what graduates currently earn on average, compared to non-graduates; *assume that all additional graduates will automatically enjoy the same rewards* – irrespective of the subject they take, the standard of achievement reached, the nature of the world economy, or any other complications – and compute the additional GDP accordingly. And although few ministers make speeches which provide quite such a unadorned statement of underlying policy beliefs, Morris's argument is essentially exactly the same as the one which justifies Train to Gain today. Qualified workers have traditionally earned more than unqualified ones; therefore, if more people get qualifications, they will earn the same as the people who currently have qualifications at this level. And we will all be commensurately richer.

Seductive belief

This is a very seductive belief for politicians who are expected by their voters to deliver prosperity; because qualifications are something politicians can produce quite easily, especially in a publicly funded education system. English education policy of the last 20 years is best understood as a result of, first, this belief, and, second, the progressive refining of a system which, from the Treasury downwards, is organised around 'targets' and ties performance, funding and rewards to meeting ('delivering') these. The idea of qualification 'levels' also lends itself admirably to this system, since targets can be expressed in terms of the numbers of qualifications that are gained at a given level.

So long as the econometric analyses which 'prove' that qualifications pay also lump all qualifications at a given level together, you can also avoid any awkward doubts about whether it might matter in the least what sort of a Level 2, or 3, people have, and encourage colleges and providers to go for the most easily obtained. As for analyses which show that some qualifications (notably low-level NVQs) bring no financial rewards to their holders, you can always go into denial, as successive groups of senior civil servants and ministers have demonstrated.

It is, of course, nonsense. The fact that people with qualifications earn more on average does not show either that this is

entirely because of their qualifications, or that rewards will stay the same in future. Subject matter is important; so is whether or not you actually learn something substantive in the course of acquiring a qualification (that is almost certainly one major reason for the NVQ results). But when governments buy into this seductive and simplistic message, what you get is the sort of policy that we have now – an obsession with award-bearing courses, and with their supposed contribution to economic prosperity, and a determination to put all available funding into programmes which deliver these in bulk.

Or at least, you do if they also believe that securing economic prosperity is not one but rather the only legitimate reason for subsidising education. Our current Government appears to believe just that. We get educated and trained, apparently, in order to get richer. This means we can afford to pay more and more people to get educated and trained for longer, with higher-level qualifications. That means we can be richer still. And having got richer still, we can pay for yet more education and training. Why? Well, to get richer still, of course, pay for more education and training, get richer, pay for more, and so on – and on and on?

This is surely an extraordinary as well as an impoverished position to hold. It is not one shared by most, or perhaps any other, developed countries. It was certainly not what our Victorian ancestors believed, in far less prosperous times; or motivated someone like Andrew Carnegie to endow libraries the length and breadth of the country; or underlay the growth of the working men's institutes, or of adult education generally.

It is, in fact, not something that any previous generation seems to have believed, at least not in this country. When Pope Alexander VI, in 1495, granted Bishop Elphinstone permission to create Aberdeen University, and when King James IV of Scotland then endowed it, it was in order to bring the 'priceless pearl of knowledge' to a cut-off corner of the north that was in consequence 'rude and ignorant'. None of those concerned had it in mind to improve the productivity of the local fishing industry. In a near-subsistence society, the growth they wanted to stimulate was in the demand for learning. We are richer than they could have imagined possible; and yet our Government's actions (and many of their words) indicate that, to them, learners' future earnings are the only criterion to use in organising and funding education.

If we want to stop, and reverse, the destruction of adult education perhaps we have to start here; with the mysterious fact that our concept of education is more narrow and impoverished than any previous generation. Change that, and the rest will follow.

Alison Wolf is Sir Roy Griffiths Professor of Public Sector Management, Department of Management, King's College London.

Her article is based on a paper given at Morley College last year.