

Adult Learning in Southwark

A report of a meeting between Vince Brown, Southwark Save Adult Learning, and Southwark council officers: Adrian Whittle, Dolly Naeem, Harriet Duncan, and Deon Kritzinger, 29/3/11, and a recommendation for action

The meeting was very friendly and productive and I came away much clearer as to the reasons why Southwark have increased adult learning fees by so much and all the more convinced that Southwark are wrong to have done this. What was most apparent is that this is a decision that was taken by council officers and not by councillors. The justification given by officers for the fee rise was not what campaign supporters were told when they met with Veronica Ward, nor was expressed by any of the councillors at the full council meeting that discussed the issue last January.

Two reasons for introducing the new fee structure were given by officers at the meeting: students are expected to learn all they need to know in one term so why would they want to repeat a course by coming back for a second term, and secondly, that Southwark is now a provider of introductory 'taster' courses and students are expected to move on to other providers for further study and to acquire further skills there rather than remain with Southwark.

This provides a clear explanation of why the fees for a second term or a second course are so high: because the student is being encouraged not to come back for a second term (or to try a second course until the next year), but to go on to some other provider such as Morley College of City Lit or one of the other more specialist providers in Southwark. Thus, the reason why a course which would cost someone on a low income £88 at City Lit but would cost £165 at the Calton Centre is that the student is expected to go on to somewhere like City Lit in their second term, not repeat the same 'taster' course with Southwark.

This idea of Southwark becoming just a provider of arts, crafts and leisure *taster courses* may or may not be a good idea, but this is an important and fundamental policy change that should have been debated widely and thoroughly. It should not have been imposed without consultation. There are many controversial issues, for instance:

- Who are these other providers of adult learning in Southwark and are they able to adequately substitute for the service currently provided by Southwark?
- What about the community of learners that has grown up around the Calton Centre, this is highly valued by students so why has it been given up so readily?
- And what about those least able to travel to other providers or those that have child care or other caring responsibilities, were their needs considered?
- What about those on low incomes? Aren't they most likely not to go on to new providers but simply drop out of adult learning altogether?

- And how is the effect of this major policy change to be monitored and evaluated? It seems that Southwark are just hoping that things work out OK and students move on to new providers, but haven't anything in place to check this is so.

All these questions should have been the subject of discussion between councillors, learners, tutors and the wider community about the type of adult learning we want and how to make it financially secure. Most importantly there should have been an informed look at all the alternative ways forward. What we have had instead is a policy imposed without discussion and one that looks increasingly unjustified and unsustainable. It is hardly surprising that it has caused so much rancour.

As a justification for this rush to change policy we have been told by officers that Southwark had no choice in this and they had to act urgently. First we told this was because the Skills Funding Agency insisted on the changes, but the representative of the SFA at the scrutiny meeting last month couldn't have been clearer that the fee structure is a decision for Southwark council, not the SFA. We were told that future funding was vulnerable and action had to be taken urgently, but the SFA representative told us that there would be no cuts in funding for the next three years (though no inflation increase). Lastly we were told that Southwark were losing too much money and had to put up fees to cover costs. I'll tackle this point below.

It is true that Southwark have not covered their costs in the past, but it has become increasingly apparent that this was not because fees were too low but because there were too few students in classes. The recent meeting with officers did provide some new figures that made this quite clear, though we still have nowhere near the full picture. Deon Kritzinger (accountant) gave me his estimate of the 'marginal cost' of classes, £50 per hour. This was explained as the cost of running a class given that the building and general administration is already up and running. Deon readily agreed that the marginal cost of students: the cost of adding extra students to a class once it is running, is effectively zero. This allows us to make an estimate of the cost of running a class that should at least not be disputed by officers as this is based on Southwark's own figures. I provide an example below just to get an idea of what sort of costs are involved and what sort of fees need to be charged in order to cover costs. The main point is to show that there is a quite viable alternative to a high fees policy, that is, a low fees/high student numbers policy

For arguments sake, and keeping the figures simple, suppose the Calton Centre runs a three term class, 10 weeks per term, 2 hours per class. That is a total of 60 hours at a total cost of $60 \times 50 = £3,000$, this is the complete cost for **all three terms**. How are the running costs covered? Suppose eight students turn up on day one of the first term. Each one of these students attracts a grant from the SFA of £375. Eight times £375 comes to £3,000. So the running cost of the class for all three terms (60 hours), that is, for the whole academic year, is completely covered by the grant provided by the SFA for eight students. Even better, each additional student attracts a further £375,

for instance, a class of 16 students would provide a further £3,000 over and above running costs. And of course, Southwark also gets the money that each student is charged in fees.

All the costs of running the class have been taken into account so all the extra money goes to support the fixed building and other costs. There is thus no reason to charge high fees in the second and third term, on the contrary, a moderate fee aimed at attracting in more students is quite clearly called for and would more likely provide optimal income for Southwark. The more classes run the more money raised and the easier it is to cover fixed costs, the fewer the number of classes the more difficult it is to cover fixed costs – and, of course, higher fees mean fewer students and fewer classes.

Moreover, there is no problem for students who are taking other classes to attend the class. It has now been fully conceded by officers that additional students add no (or at least negligible) extra costs to already running classes and so their attendance is pure financial gain for Southwark. Of course, it makes sense to give first priority to those who are not taking other courses if the alternative is they take no course at all and Southwark would then lose the SFA grant they would attract. However, this is only likely to be the case, if at all, on the most popular courses, and there is always the option of running additional classes if demand is very high.

There is clearly a viable alternative policy to the high fees route imposed by Southwark officers. A low fees/high numbers policy that doesn't penalise those on low incomes, allows local people to continue their study with Southwark, and maintains the close community formed by students at the Calton Centre and other Southwark adult learning sites. Moreover, there was no urgency that justified a high fees policy being rushed in (the shortfall in income could have been alleviated by a drive to attract more students) and so the alternative ways forward should have been widely debated before a decision was taken.

What should happen now? We ask that the public consultation that should have happened before any changes were imposed should happen now. Meantime, the old fee structure should be put back in place to safeguard against further class closures and to start to get back students that have been forced out of adult learning. We can then jointly: councillors, council officers, tutors and students work out how we can ensure Southwark adult learning attracts the number of students it needs to guarantee its future. The good will engendered by all this would be great boost to the Save Southwark Adult Learning Campaign's offer of setting up a 'friends group' to go out and promote Southwark Adult Learning and bring in new communities of learners. For, as we have argued all along, it is not high fees, but high numbers of adult learners that will safeguard adult learning in Southwark.

VB 2/4/11