

Written evidence submitted by the Association of Colleges

Closing the Learning Gap – Opening Up Opportunities for Adults

The purpose of this call for evidence is to gather the views of key stakeholders, partners and providers on their top priorities for adult learning in 2016 and over the next 5-10 years.

The deadline for written evidence is 20 May 2016.

When responding please state whether you are responding as an individual or representing the views of an organisation.

Please tick the appropriate boxes below

<input type="checkbox"/>	I am responding as an individual
What is your name, job title, address, email and telephone number?	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I am responding as an organisation
What is your name, job title, address, email and telephone number? Catherine Sezen Senior Policy Manager 14-19 and curriculum Association of Colleges 2-5 Stedham Place London WC1A 1HU Email: catherine_sezen@aoc.co.uk	

Please tick a box from the list of options below that best describes you as a respondent.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Business representative organisation/trade body
<input type="checkbox"/>	Business
<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)

	Local Authority/ Combined Authority
	Local authority provider of adult and community learning
	Specialist designated institution
	FE College
√	FE sector representative organisation/trade body
	FE independent learning provider
	Higher Education Institution
	FE charitable or not-for-profit learning provider
	Other education (please describe)
	Trade union or staff association
	Charity or social enterprise
	Student representative body
	Individual
	Policy adviser (please specify area of interest)
	Other (please describe)

Introduce yourself

The Association of Colleges (AoC) represents and promotes 335 colleges in England, including 242 further education colleges (FE) and 93 sixth form colleges incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

Further education colleges provide high-quality technical and professional education and training for young people, adults and employers. Two million adults study or train in colleges and gain valuable employability skills, helping to develop their career opportunities.

Executive summary

- Colleges have a key role to play in all aspects of adult education.
- Adult education takes many forms including basic skills, skills enhancement, adult and community learning, access courses and apprenticeships.
- Adult education has a positive impact on the individual, employers and the wider community, both in economic terms and in health and well-being.
- Work with disadvantaged adults needs to be tailored to meet individual needs.
- Financial and time constraints are a barrier to all types of adult education.
- Planned changes to funding, planning and control could have both positive and negative implications for adult education.

Written submissions are invited addressing the following points:

What is working well and/or not working well with regards to adult education in England?

1. Adult education within the college sector provides excellent achievement and destination outcomes; 78% of students progress to positive learning or employment destinations and 82% do so on level three qualifications.
2. Adult education also contributes to an individual's well-being. In a survey of adult and community learners (ACL) undertaken by an adult education college in 2014/15, 66% of respondents reported that they felt more self-confident, fulfilled, valued and motivated as a result of their course.¹
3. However, adult students whose learning is mandated, do not achieve as well as their peers.
4. Apprenticeships are one example of adult education, but one that is focused on a career or trade and where learning takes place in the work-place. The majority of apprentices are adults. Research by Fuller

¹ Local data from Richmond Adult Community College (RACC)

et al², 'Does apprenticeship work for adults?', suggests that there are considerable variations in the quality of training in different sectors. There are problems with extending a programme long associated with young people to adults, but nevertheless this is an important area of adult learning and training. The Government's target of 3 million apprentices over a 5 year period is mobilising money via the levy and effort via public sector targets towards apprenticeships.

5. Another perspective is the consequences of plans for devolved budgets. These plans aim to align adult education arrangements to local economic priorities³. However in doing so, there is a danger that individual skills interests and priorities will be overlooked which could lead to greater disengagement from education.
6. Devolved budgets also run the risk of distancing locally funded provision, aimed at preparing adults for employment and apprenticeships, from the nationally funded, sectorally divided apprenticeship offer. The local offer may not reflect national priorities.

What policies and/or practices best motivate disadvantaged adults to engage in adult learning?

7. Disadvantaged adults are not a homogenous group. Any policy or practical interventions need to reflect this and provide flexibility. For example, work for the hardest-to-reach within this group would benefit from providers being able to deliver non-qualification provision and/or bite sized units as a bridge or stepping stone to regulated provision.
8. Flexible delivery models are also helpful. A range of starting points throughout the year (if numbers make this viable), rather than academic year courses, meet the needs of individuals. Providing resources and notes on the college virtual learning environment (VLE) and remaining in contact via email and other social media also help to ensure student retention.
9. Accountability and Ofsted requirements of attendance and punctuality can often have a detrimental impact on work with individuals who are hardest-to reach. For many students within this cohort, their circumstances mean that they cannot always attend college as regularly as is desirable. To insist on prioritising attendance over caring and other responsibilities can be unrealistic, off-putting and result in an individual being more distanced from accessing education or training.

² <http://www.llakes.ac.uk/sites/llakes.ac.uk/files/Adult%20Apprenticeship.pdf>

³ [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/496195/Adult Education Budget changing context and arrangements for 2016 to 2017.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/496195/Adult_Education_Budget_changing_context_and_arrangements_for_2016_to_2017.pdf)

10. Fees and loans can also act as a disincentive to adults undertaking education or training. The introduction of income-contingent loans in 2013 for Level 3 and 4 courses for those aged 24 and over resulted in a reduction in enrolments because there was a simultaneous removal of teaching grants. There are nevertheless 700,000 learners a year taking courses via this funding route and there will be a significant extension in the programme to cover 19 to 24-year-olds in 2016. Data suggests that most students taking out loans are doing so either to gain work-related skills so that they can change career path or to enter higher education via access courses. Bursaries and concessions need to be in place to support this type of delivery.
11. Effective education for this profile of student needs qualified teachers, appropriate facilities, quality assurance, and support services to help those with additional needs. There is value in having strong institutions which have the economies of scale to provide stable employment for staff and which can adjust courses in response to demand in a way that ensures viable class sizes. Colleges have been involved in this work for decades and should be seen as an essential part in future activity.
12. Partnership work is key to successfully working with disadvantaged adults. Work with external organisations such as children's centres enables access to the most hard-to-reach in an environment in which they feel comfortable. Providing a range of taster activities – both long and short, qualification and non-qualification courses in such venues provides a useful starting point for those who are most disengaged from education.

Do we have a sufficient demand-led approach to adult education? If not, what more needs to be done?

13. The changes to adult education funding will impact on demand.. Currently, advanced level and ACL fee-paying courses respond to individual demand. Courses where students can anticipate financial gain once having completed them, e.g. diplomas in gas engineering are popular. Lower level courses tend to cater for mandated learning which meet national Government requirements. Devolved budgets will mean greater flexibility to meet local economic need, but individual or national needs should not be overlooked as local priorities can change and individuals can move.

What evidence is there on the impact, added-value and/or cost-effectiveness of adult education?

14. The BIS report paper, 'Mapping investment in adult skills'⁴ notes that employers, adult skills budget (ASB) and European funding, account for the majority of post 19 spending with a focus on both in-work and classroom-based learning. The returns to this investment are: entry to work; in-work progression; wage premiums; progression in learning; skills gains; wider individual benefits such as confidence; employer benefits such as retention of staff and wider family benefits such as tackling disadvantage.
15. These benefits are supported by European studies. A European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) report⁵, 'Adult Education in Europe in 2015', notes the impact of adult education on both the individual and society in terms of productivity and financial independence, health and well-being, improved parenting, engagement in civil society e.g. voting and a reduction in crime. The Cedefop policy handbook: 'Access to and participation in continuous vocational education and training in Europe'⁶ additionally notes the protective effect against risk of unemployment of adult vocational training as 10% for men and 7% for women.
16. However, all three reports note that lack of time and financial constraints are key barriers to adults not engaging in education.

Name three major policy developments necessary to secure the future of adult learning in 2016 and over the next five to ten years?

17. Three policy developments that will impact on adult education over the next five to ten years are:
 - Localism and devolution. New flexibilities within the AEB may help the direction of delivery to meet local needs. This needs to be balanced against the ability to respond to national/global trends. However, there needs to be greater clarity in what devolution will look like in the future.
 - Area reviews. These need to comprehensively address the role of adult learning needs and patterns.
 - Inspection criteria. Ofsted needs to focus on the distinctive features of adult education.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-skills-mapping-investment>

⁵ http://www.eaea.org/media/policy-advocacy/adult-education-policy-in-europe-country-reports/country-reports_2015.pdf

⁶ Cedefop (2014). Policy handbook: Access to and participation in continuous vocational education and training in Europe. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop working paper; No 25

	If your submission is confidential and you do not want it published please tick the box.
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