

Written evidence submitted by The Open University

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? Dr Liz Marr, Director, Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships. Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA	

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)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Authority/ Combined Authority
<input type="checkbox"/>	Local authority provider of adult and community learning
<input type="checkbox"/>	Specialist designated institution
<input type="checkbox"/>	FE College

	FE sector representative organisation/trade body
	FE independent learning provider
X	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 Open University (OU) is the UK's only university dedicated to open and distance learning and is unique in operating across the whole of the UK. Uniquely, The Open University seeks to remove barriers to Higher Education by operating an open access admissions system with a supportive infrastructure designed to enable non-traditional learners to succeed. The majority of our learners are adults (average age 27), almost all studying part time and many in employment. We work closely with other adult learning providers (such as WEA, Unionlearn, NEC) to create pathways into higher level learning for adults.

Executive summary

- There are some areas of good practice in provision for adult learners but financial support is increasingly moving towards loan funding for all forms of adult learning which acts as a deterrent to those most in need.
- There are significant public as well as private benefits from increasing engagement of adults in learning at all levels.
- Barriers to access include funding, lack of adequate information advice and guidance for adults returning to learn, inflexibility of routes into and through adult learning.
- Community partnerships with tailored learner provision, appropriate curriculum and pedagogy and the use of role models and mentors could encourage greater participation and success in adult learning.

- Current provision is provider led and driven by policy rather than driven by learner needs
- There is insufficient data for evaluating adult learning.
- Policy developments should address personalised learning accounts, community focused learning initiatives with suitable information, advice and guidance and a revised nationwide system of flexible and portable credit.

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

We feel the following areas are working well within England:

- Technology-enhanced learning is opening up opportunities to reach adults in new ways which don't require full-time attendance
- Open access programmes of short courses, accredited and non-accredited, are providing more opportunities for adult learners
- Preparatory and foundation level programmes to develop skills and capabilities for progression to degree level study are effective in supporting adult returners
- Funding is available for part-time study for some adults, in the form of student loans (although we still have significant concerns about many aspects of the funding regime)
- Community provision for adult learning, such as U3A, is filling gaps in other provision and other providers (FECs, SDIs etc) are also making significant contributions
- The idea of inter-generational learning is starting to grow, involving parents and grand-parents learning alongside children
- The number of students declaring a disability, allowing them to access specialist support in their studies, is increasing.
- There is a change of expectation in some parts of society, with learning and other opportunities starting to become more normalised beyond the age of 65.
- The expansion of entry to higher education for younger people has led some adults to seek out a 'second-chance' at education, through institutions like the Open University.
- In other parts of the UK, the Celtic nations are providing a model of a system with more generous funding and a greater commitment to adult learning, which England can learn from.

However, there are a number of areas which are not working well, including:

- Policy and practices aimed at 18 year old school-leavers, which do not take into account the need of adult learners. This has led to institutions withdrawing their offers which suit adult learners, for example part-time provision
- The side-lining of part-time students even where courses are available, (for example by teaching them as in-fill or without offering specific provision)

- Curricula which focus on the needs of 18 year old school-leavers and do not draw on the life experiences of adult learners.
- Weak information, advice and guidance for adult learners, especially on the subject of funding. This leads to adult learners perceiving study as risky, a major barrier for the debt-averse.
- Funding is inflexible in terms of meeting the needs of adult learners (e.g. the restriction of loans to those registered on a qualification, which puts off students who may wish to study in smaller chunks).
- An over-focus on employability and economic gains and an insufficient consideration of social and individual benefits
- Less willingness among employers to fund study because of the economic situation
- Provision is spread out across many types of provider, without a clear pathway through or system of progression for adult learners
- A social under-valuing of learning for adults (especially if not overtly linked to employment – can be caricatured as ‘leisure learning’).
- An overall lack of a single ‘voice’ or leadership for adult education – no minister.
- A slowness to realise that as people work longer, they are less likely to stay in the same career for their whole working life and therefore need access to funding to re-train, at both undergraduate and post-graduate level. No UG loans available to most of those who already have an ELQ.

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

Our experience is that removal of the barriers to participation is the best way to motivate disadvantaged adults to engage. These include:

- Removing entry barriers, for example the requirement for A-levels or other qualifications which disadvantaged adults may be less likely to have on average, recognising that students with low PEQs still have great potential to succeed in adult education.
- Offering financial support and making sure that particular groups are aware of it, recognising that less well-off learners may be particularly debt- and risk-averse when it comes to loans,
- A flexible offer, which allows learning to happen in manageable ‘chunks’ with credit available along the way, which is more approachable for those who may initially be daunted by the prospect of degree
- Making sure that the learning experience is very different to school, so that those adults who have had a very negative experience in compulsory education are not put off their second chance. This means a personalised or student-centred approach, focused on independent learning with extensive tutor support.
- Mixed settings with older and younger learners from a variety of backgrounds can enrich the experience for all by valuing the life experience of both.

- Tailoring courses to the learning needs of adult learners, including vocational work and career-related needs but also personal circumstances such as the need to fit around paid work and family responsibilities.
- A curriculum which builds on the adult learner's life experience,
- Institutions which give disadvantaged adult learners a strong voice in shaping the offer.
- Initiatives such as peer mentors and talking about role models from the same background as learners may increase the relevance of study and make it feel like it is 'for people like me'.
- Going to where learners are, for example partnerships and using community settings, can help minimise the barriers and normalise the idea of adult education within communities.

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

- We believe that the current provision is mainly provider-led, and in turn this follows the funding. Therefore the provision is largely determined by government policy.
- Although there are new providers in the wider market, outside of traditional university provision they will often go for the 'low-hanging fruit' and this can leave gaps for other types of courses.
- Provision is being led by employers' needs to some extent, for example provision which is clearly linked to occupational progression or particular careers. While this is positive in some ways, we feel it should not be the only factor and the needs and views of individuals should also be considered.
- Learners' needs can best be captured as part of a much more effective information, advice and guidance offer. This needs to be hitting adults at key points and must be highly visible and easily accessible, as there is no automatic 'decision point' for adults and many will have been considering study for years before they actually take the plunge.
- A model of flexible, personalised learning accounts (outlined in section 5 of this response) would enable much more direct control by learners, encouraging institutions to become more responsive and flexible in their offer.
- For example, there is a demand from parents and grandparents in relation to learning as role models or to be able to support children with their own study, we feel more could be done to meet this need by providers.

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

Our view is that the current data evaluated for adult education is too narrow, focusing as it does on A-level entry and attainment of 'good' degrees. We feel the sector would benefit from more of a focus on the 'distance travelled' from entry.

In a similar fashion, there is too much focus on the economic contribution of adult learners through employment, with international comparisons focusing on competitiveness and skills gaps. Although important, we feel this should be supplemented with broader measures, such as the social costs of low participation (e.g. in poorer health outcomes, intergenerational influences, an absence of social cohesion) and the positive impact on people's lives in terms of wellbeing and happiness.

5 Name three major policy developments necessary to secure the future of adult learning in 2016 and over the next 5 -10 years?

We suggest that the following policies would transform adult learning in a positive way:

1. Personalised learning accounts, providing flexible funding to be used at any point in an individual's lifetime to fund any kind of education at the point of need. We believe this will drive learner behaviour and providers will follow by developing an offer which genuinely meets the needs of learners.
2. Community-focused learning initiatives, which would prioritise local areas and learners' needs, rather than being based around the needs and status of institutions. This would involve taking learning into work and social spaces, where people are. This would galvanise the language of adult education, challenging elite hierarchies and creating new routes through the system. These should be supplemented with a clear, simple and accessible IAG service to support adults in navigating through the complexities of the current adult learning landscape.
3. A revised nationwide system of flexible credit across all types of learning, including the awarding of credit for completion of MOOCs, CPD and other forms of learning which are currently not recognised formally in HE.

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