

Written evidence submitted by Greg Coyne

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 checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I am responding as an individual
What is your name, job title, address, email and telephone number? Greg Coyne, Director for Curriculum and Quality Workers' Educational Association Suite 405, The Cotton Exchange, Liverpool L3 9JR Email: gcoyne@wea.org.uk	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am responding as an organisation
What is your name, job title, address, email and telephone number?	

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 checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Specialist designated institution
<input type="checkbox"/>	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

I am an adult educator with 30 years' experience, predominantly in the WEA, but with previous experience working in FE Colleges on the TUC Education Programme and in the voluntary sector working on personal development and social enterprise training for long term unemployed people, including an Access to HE programme aimed at entry to a Social Enterprise focused Business Studies Degree, which at that time was available from Liverpool John Moores University.

In the WEA I have held the positions of Director for the North West Region, Director for the North East Region and my current role. I have been a member of the WEA Senior Management Team for the last 18 years.

Executive summary

- There are significant issues in the system of adult education that fundamentally undermine its success
 - Funding
 - Shrinking provision
 - Vocationalism
 - Restricted curriculum
 - Lack of realistic opportunity to progress to Higher Education for mature adults of modest means.
- Collectively these issues restrict social mobility and undermine democracy, particularly for the most disadvantaged.
- Disadvantaged communities are best supported by a wide and vibrant curriculum that provides challenging adult learning in their locality.

- A systematic framework for adult education would drive improvement and development.
 - This is particularly needed in relation to using networked tools and resources.
- Over emphasis on demand led approaches would not be helpful.
- There are relatively straightforward changes to policy that could have a profound effect and need not be prohibitively expensive.

Written submissions are invited addressing the following points:

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

Adult education is not working well in England. Although it serves significant numbers of people, it receives disproportionately low levels of funding, compared to schools, FE funding focused on 16-19 ages and Universities. It has not received any increases in funding for approximately a decade. This was a point made excellently by the Niace Enquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning some years ago so I will not repeat it here. Suffice to say that even a modest increase in adult education funding could transform what the sector could do and help rebalance our offer to help deal with the demographics of today, particularly a population that is aging and living longer.

The main funding body for adult education, the Skills Funding Agency, has reduced its proportion for funding from 75% of the cost of provision to 50% with the difference being met by student fees for all but the most disadvantaged in receipt of specific benefits.

Many providers have withdrawn from the market. Local authorities have cut provision, many university extra-mural departments have closed or significantly reduced provision, FE has narrowed its offer towards a diet of employment focused skills courses, usually offering a low level promise of entry to low paid, low status jobs, often in the service sector, with little security and often exploitative contracts. Other traditional niche providers in the market, such as political parties, trade unions, cooperatives, church organisations and voluntary groups have in the main either ceased or considerably reduced providing adult classes.

Mature entry to universities has plummeted as the fees for study have rocketed. Access to HE as a qualification in its own right now costs approximately over £2000.

The types of courses on offer in adult education has narrowed considerably with a concentration on basic skills, ESOL, art and craft and leisure interests. It is more or less impossible to find a serious offer of A level provision aimed at adults of an evening in most cities. A level history for example has declined to a few hundred adults per year.

When this is combined with the reduction in University Entry for mature adults it means that in areas of modest means or disadvantage that there is little opportunity to develop high level understanding and knowledge to challenge current norms and practice. To say the least it is very convenient for the powerful and the elites that those communities whose desire for a different approach to the organisation of society might be most pressing are the least likely to be able to find education that will support them in developing different approaches and ideas.

In many senses this problem poses a democratic and equalities deficit for these communities.

Venues have reduced as voluntary and community organisations have closed or become so starved of cash that they do not have staff or adequate facilities to host adult classes. Schools, moving out of local authority control reduces their availability for classes and libraries are closing.

All in all the infrastructure for adult education is in a parlous state and overall numbers are reducing. When I was young, on a fairly ordinary council estate in the West Midlands there were 4 different schools offering adult education most nights of the week. Now there are none.

The only growth has been in voluntary adult education through organisations like U3A, Networked education using online tools as either delivery or organisation mechanisms such as MOOCs, the Khan Academy or Meet Up. Often, although not always, these latter approaches will involve individual study rather than group based study.

Many of the traditional models of adult education, where they are available, continue to work well. Locally based classes providing a broad offer of liberal adult education, leisure, academic and skills classes supported by community focused staff that enthuse, encourage and recruit reluctant students endures because it works. There are significant opportunities now to enhance this with increased use of networked and online tools and resources but the traditional class with humans physically meeting together remains a powerful, sensible model for learning, confidence building and practical support.

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

1. Ensuring a very wide range of provision to speak to the many and varied interests of individuals, groups and demographics so that a broad range of people are attracted to the offer.
 - a. Whilst vocational learning is a crucial part of adult learning, it has been allowed to warp the offer in education so that it has become the main focus of FE colleges for example. This is short-sighted and undermines the complex ways that broad

based education supports a wide range of human interactions crucial to a civilised society, including better vocational skills. The offer needs to include academic, leisure, vocational, cultural, civic, citizenship, practical politics and community engagement education in order to really engage people.

- b. At the moment it is crucial that this provision stretches to level 3 and level 4 given the collapse in mature adult entry to university. This is particularly the case in disadvantaged communities where university fees can be viewed as methods of exclusion rather than just barriers.
2. Ensuring that provision is very local and convenient for people to access.
3. Ensuring that there are support staff from providers and other agencies that create interest, enthuse, motivate and recruit students.
4. Effective marketing both from providers and the state and other stakeholders to ensure that the notion of adult learning features in people's lives. Eg through storylines in popular television etc.
5. Supporting voluntary community champions of learning in geographical and thematic communities to model, encourage, mentor and support.
6. Supporting voluntary education in communities to enable both first step and advanced learning with smaller groups that are not affordable in funded provision. Study circles work well in some parts of the world but they need support and frameworks to make them effective.
7. Ensuring adequate training of adult tutors that recognises the need for an approach to adult education that values and builds on the often considerable experiences of adults, involving them actively in the learning process as co-creators of effective learning. This is significant because it draws a sharp distinction between adult learning and many peoples experience of school. This feeling of a very different approach draws in and retains adult learners.
8. Promoting the creation of an infrastructure for a national archive of learning resources and activities to support professional and voluntary adult learning where the content is crowd sourced from the adult teachers and activists themselves.

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

Demand led education is a principle that comes out of the vocational learning market where colleges would offer courses that were not linked to the local employment market. The government introduced policies that sensibly sought to give more say to employers to demand what they wanted. It is after all reasonable to assume that an employer would be well placed to explain what development or training they need for their business.

In general adult education and community learning this works less well because adults and particularly disadvantaged adults are often unaware of what options exist. Even in vocational learning employers may be unaware of new developments that could support their business which would benefit them if staff were aware of it.

Even where there are effective IAG services for adults they tend to work by channelling users to a fairly limited offer of provision, usually vocational facing provision, rather than working with the individuals or groups broad interests to create demand.

So it should of course be a principle that adult education seeks the views of students, communities, employers, trade unions, government, Cultural institutions and no doubt many others in planning the offer. Networking technologies could even allow the adult learning sector to aggregate demand to help inform provision decisions. But it is key that we avoid the offer becoming limited as ultimately this undermines the success of the sector and ultimately leads to a restriction of demand.

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

There is considerable evidence of the value added impact of adult education that supports a strong case for its effectiveness. My organisation the WEA conducts annual impact surveys which demonstrate the major benefits that students gain in terms of confidence, engagement in communities, undermining loneliness, promoting their feeling of wellbeing, improving health, supporting employment, challenging inequality and discrimination, understanding and appreciating different cultures, engaging with cultural institutions and many, many more. These surveys are available to your enquiry if you would like to see the evidence.

There have been a range of benefits demonstrated over the years, so there was considerable research into the Wider benefits of Adult Learning through a unit at the IoE in London as well as many studies by other universities, Niace and the European Union.

There are thousands of ad-hoc stories from adult students who provide testimony to their teachers, their providers, their employers, their organisations, their family and to award organisations etc of the substantial individual and collective benefits they have accrued as a result of their course. Many students identify life changing experiences as a result of adult study.

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

1. A commitment to a stable, effective funding framework which provides regular modest increases and ensures a greater proportion of total education spending on adults than currently. (This was a key recommendation of the NIACE enquiry in the Future of Life Long Learning a few years ago which identified how it could be done to support the various life stages of our population)
2. The ending of the over emphasis of the adult education system on employability and vocational learning and a return to a broader curriculum offer up to level 4. (Counter intuitively I believe this is

actually likely to support the development of better employability skills than currently, particularly for disadvantaged communities.)

3. The re-establishment of grants to support adult access to higher education and the reversal of the catastrophic collapse in mature entry to university.

	If your submission is confidential and you do not want it published please tick the box.
X	Please confirm that have read the Terms of Reference and Guidelines on written submissions at: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/wea/call_for_evidence/