

UCU briefing on 24% cuts to adult further education budget in England

What has been announced?

On Thursday 26 February 2015, the government announced funding cuts in adult further education of 24% for 2015-16. UCU estimates that the cuts could lead to a loss of more than 400,000 college students in 2015/16 alone.

UCU is deeply concerned that these cuts will decimate further education provision and leave many adults without affordable access to any opportunity to improve their education.

Full details of the cuts can be found in [the Skills Funding Letter from BIS](#) and a [letter from the Skills Funding Agency \(SFA\) to providers](#).

What are the details?

The SFA adult skills budget, which funds both apprenticeships and other kinds of adult learning courses, stands at just over £2billion in 2015/16; this is an 11% reduction in funding from 2014/15, and a 35% reduction since 2009.

However, in reality the cuts for adult learning will be much more than 11% next year. The Skills Funding Agency has estimated that colleges will need to reduce their adult skills budgets by around 17% in 2015/16.

Indeed, because the government has chosen to protect the apprenticeships budget (£770m), **actual funding for non-apprenticeship adult learning in 2015/16 will fall by around 24%.**

Who will suffer?

These cuts are a further blow to colleges which have already sustained significant funding reductions since 2009. Around 1 million adult learners have been lost since 2010 and these changes will remove opportunities for many more.

Many of the courses which will be most at risk from the changes cater for those who missed out on qualifications at school, or for those who need short bursts of learning to get back into employment. There have already been reductions in the number of students

aged 19 to 24 taking courses such as construction, engineering and in the creative arts as a result of recent cuts. These areas are crucial for economic growth, and it is vital that these courses are not lost.

The government has consulted on a possible extension of 24+ advanced learning loans to help make up some of the shortfall, but take up of these to date has been lower than expected, and the amount which government has set aside to expand these loans in 2015/16 (£100m) is less than half the amount which is being cut from the overall adult skills budget (£250m).

In 2013/14 around 2.93m adults participated in government funded further education. UCU estimates that the 24% cut in funding could mean the loss of at least 400,000 students in 2015/16.

What the cuts will mean for colleges and their staff

The average FE College has an income of £27 million, £5 million of which comes from SFA for adult further education. However many colleges who specialise in providing adult education are substantially more financial exposed to the impact of this cut.

This 24% cut in 2015-16 will create a new large gap in college budgets and compounds problems caused by the historical underfunding of the sector, in particular since 2010.

UCU's concerns

UCU is deeply concerned that these changes will:

- reduce the number of adults returning to learn or to retrain at a time when most people agree that education, skills and retraining should be a priority
- place colleges under severe financial pressure, leading to course or possibly institutional closures and redundancies
- affect vulnerable learners most severely, as shorter and more flexible courses are axed in favour of apprenticeships
- affect higher level courses as fewer students will be able to access learning which acts as a 'stepping stone'.

The response from the sector

UCU has described the proposed cuts as 'an act of wilful vandalism that will decimate further education'. The National Union of Students called them 'incredibly damaging' and other sector organisations have also responded with serious concerns:

Association of Colleges

'The government cannot continue to reduce this provision and at the same time expect adults to have sufficient opportunity to retrain for new or future job opportunities. By 2020, if the next government continue to cut at this rate, adult further education will be effectively a thing of the past.

'This situation is now urgent. This could be the end of this essential education in every city, town and community in England and the consequences will be felt by individuals and the economy for years to come.'

Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP)

'This is the wrong focus whilst we are trying to give vocational learning the status it deserves. The apprenticeship budget is protected but we need to see growth during the year if we are to meet employer demand.'

National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)

'These cuts mean people's ability to get on in life and work continue to be hampered despite the obvious return on investment to the tax-payer. It's not fair for people, it's not right for businesses and it doesn't support the inclusive growth that politicians say they are seeking.'

What UCU is doing

UCU is determined to fight the cuts. We are working with other sector and representative bodies to coordinate a joint campaign of opposition.

You can help us by:

- Signing the joint petition here: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/feffunding>
- Highlighting the devastating impact of the proposed cuts to your MP and other parliamentary candidates in your constituency using:
<http://ge2015.web.ucu.org.uk/>

Look out for details of other ways to get involved in the coming weeks. If you have any questions, please contact campaigns@ucu.org.uk.