

2020

Adult Community Education Manifesto



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Introduction

Adult education enables adults to actively change themselves through learning and critically reflect on the world we live in. It is a vital part of our civic society and is essential to the levelling up and skills agenda.

Community-based adult education supports people to return to work and gain new skills. But it also is part of our health and wellbeing, supports the needs of special educational needs and disabled (SEND) students, provides mental health learning with charities such as MIND, offers valuable family learning, language learning for asylum seekers, refugees (ESOL), and ICT too.

Essential courses in Maths, English and broad vocational courses, both formal and informal, are in huge demand and support our social inclusion agendas.

All communities need to be able to have equal access to learning.

In short, adult education offers hope and champions second chance education and the joy in learning.

At the moment the government and others are driving a purely economic outcomes and employer led agenda. We believe Adult education should not be reduced to economic outcomes only.

The University and College Union (UCU) supports and campaigns for progressive principles of adult education in the broader context of lifelong learning. We want Adult education to be properly funded and to employ its staff on fair terms and conditions.

We want to campaign with this Manifesto with organisations and sister unions to reverse the dismantling of adult education and its funding.

We hope you will join us!



Theme 1

Adult and Community Education as a public good

1. Adult and Community Education as we know it today can trace its roots to a Commission in 1919 after the First World War when returning combatants and their families looked for a better future. The provision grew slowly but its value was recognised. During the relatively affluent 1960s and 1970s there was significant expansion of adult education. The offer was a broad range of provision including training in practical skills, reading and writing, arts and crafts. Welfare, employment advice and counselling have long been an integral part of the service. However, since 2010 the service has been decimated. Funding has been cut by over 50%. Services have been cut and skilled teachers made redundant.
2. Despite these cutbacks Adult Community Education (ACE) provision continues to engage adults from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, connecting them with education, training and employment. The benefits for all users in terms of physical and mental health, employment and general personal and social well-being have been clearly documented, but regularly overlooked by those holding the purse strings. Equality and social justice lie at the core of adult education.
3. A report from the Education Select Committee (2021) on lifelong learning¹ acknowledged the benefits, but successive governments since 2010 have failed to provide the necessary funding for robust lifelong learning provision. The need for additional funding has been recognised not only by UCU but by employers, the Education Select Committee, the LGA, sister trade unions such as UNISON and the TUC.
4. Now is the time for the government to demonstrate that it means what it says. Those working in the service together with present and potential recipients of its benefits need to make their voices heard in demanding that, in the first instance, funding is provided for free Adult Education classes, and that there is genuine consultation with those working in Adult and Community Education to draw up and implement a proper road map for the expansion of the service, with funds to recruit and retain teaching and support staff on as good as those for staff in further education colleges.
5. Despite the under-funding of the service over many years, the dedication of those working in the service has not faltered. The social benefits of the provision are clearly recognised.
6. In its handbook for Councillors on ACE,² the Local Government Association (LGA) states: "Council run or commissioned adult and community education (ACE) plays a vital role in supporting residents on their journey to learn skills

¹<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/278/27802.htm>

²<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities>



Theme 1

to enter, return or progress in work. Alongside the economic benefits, it reduces loneliness and makes people happier, healthier, more confident, capable and resilient – making places smarter and more inclusive. Put simply, ACE transforms people's lives."



Theme 2

What is Adult Community Education (ACE)?

1. Adult and community education is a diverse area of education, encompassing a wide range of providers of education and training for adults aged 19 and above. These courses take place in further education colleges, local government venues, prisons, and a very wide range of community settings, as well as universities. Structural inequality, whether that is shaped by class, ethnicity, disability and gender and their intersections, defines life chances. Adult education provides vital hope for adults to reshape their lives and aspire to further or higher education and access to secure well-paid employment. Adult education is part of a progressive lifelong learning agenda, providing learning in smaller groups than in other educational settings. ACE is a more personalised environment for students, whether they learn formal qualifications or engage in informal learning. In this process, adults are encouraged to be a part of curriculum planning.
2. ACE is about empowering people to take charge of their lives, which encourages active agency. An individualised approach is adopted. Creativity is promoted in community-based programmes, and this is particularly important in SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) provision. The range of courses provided is broad, ranging from literacy, numeracy and IT skills through to professional development courses such as First Aid, teacher training, construction, art, learning a language, leisure and personal development, and many others.
3. ACE also embraces family learning that connects multiple generations in communities, developing a sense of personal confidence, social cohesion and community understanding, and is an important part of the provision. Courses for students with disabilities, migrants and refugees are also a key part of the provision. Meeting mental health and wellbeing needs is a vital part of that curriculum. ACE is about far more than training students to achieve qualifications for work.

WHAT IS ADULT COMMUNITY EDUCATION FOR?

1. Adult Education's vision is to make a sustainable impact in our local communities, in particular serving those most marginalised from education and training, helping them to gain life skills and skills for work. Teaching staff come from a wide range of vocational experience, for instance, in running their own businesses, working in industrial, public sector or voluntary sector organisations.
2. This combination of experience provides a powerful basis on which to collaborate, to understand and meet the needs of diverse communities from the grassroots. We are rooted in our local communities, and as such, are in a position to understand changing local needs.
3. We aspire to provide an education where learners use their own experiences to inform others, promoting empathy, equality, respect and tolerance in society.



Theme 2

4. We provide our students with the tools to become critical thinkers and to have the confidence to be able to apply their learning in a wide range of social contexts. We are also well connected with partner organisations in our communities, sharing our expertise and encouraging mutual collaboration.

OUR PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH FOR INNOVATIVE, AND CREATIVE ADULT EDUCATION

1. Our pedagogical approaches are finely tailored to the specific needs of our students. They are often devised in consultation with students and are flexible to take account of the changing interests and aspirations of students. To achieve this, we have a very good understanding of our students and a high degree of teaching expertise to meet individual learning needs, often with diverse groups of students. Students are encouraged to share their own experiences, providing an opportunity for a rich learning environment. The focus on collaborative learning enables people to overcome isolation and loneliness and fosters a common sense of purpose.
2. Courses to improve people's quality of life, including their mental health are very important, as are stepping stones to higher level courses. There needs to be more recognition of the progress students make in 'soft skills' such as increased self-confidence or the enormous health and well-being benefits for students.
3. Education is a journey, and both students and tutors are part of that journey. Adult students need to be in charge of their journey, with the flexibility to explore new opportunities, to pause on the way and enjoy the process as much as the outcome. Classes are about community and social interaction and people otherwise isolated can access learning online. This adds a lot to well-being in students' lives. The community centres and other local buildings such as libraries, children's centres and community halls enhance connections in the community.
4. The provision of adult and community education plays a significant role in supporting those with special educational needs and disabilities. students with additional needs are also encouraged to take up opportunities for progression in other curriculum areas. This is about providing a richness in the quality of life.



Theme 3

Social cohesion, equality, and democracy

1. Adult Community Education (ACE) supports the social fabric of the community by providing a wide range of learning opportunities, both practical and intellectual in nature. Designed to promote personal development and community engagement, it offers a greater depth of understanding of equality, and citizenship. Adult education promotes equality by offering second and third chance education to those who missed out on education at school. ACE is not simply about teaching people to achieve formal qualifications.
2. In functional skills teaching, community, local and social issues are embedded. This is shown by the promotion of citizenship e.g. recycling, fasting times for Ramadan, and creative arts. Curriculum planning and pedagogical approaches that are inclusive for everyone including women, disabled students, Black* students, and mature students are central parts of the delivery.
3. Without essential skills, people are excluded from democracy, including engaging with sources of news and understanding local and national politics. Students are encouraged to read and understand government agendas, for example, on the recent Covid-19 pandemic and how to stay safe. By participating and contributing to shaping their own learning experiences, students participate actively in democracy, and enhance their understanding of people from a wide range of backgrounds. Attendance at classes provided by local government provides a unique opportunity to learn about local politics and contributes to the evaluation of local government services.



*UCU uses the term 'Black' in a political sense to refer to people who are descended, through one or both parents, from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia (the middle-East to China) and Latin America. It refers to those from a visible minority who have a shared experience of oppression.

Theme 4

Adult learning and digital skills

1. Tackling digital poverty is an important part of government policy reflected in the basic IT learning entitlement for adults. Adult education in local government venues, local colleges, and community organisations, prisons and universities, is well placed to do this.
2. Further investment in equipment and training for both staff and students in order to facilitate comprehensive provision is urgently needed. Our Covid pandemic showed that teachers were able to switch to online learning but did not have enough computing technical equipment, resources or staff training.
3. Courses are provided for students at a wide range of levels, including those for beginners. These provide students with the employability and personal skills crucial for people who need to seek new employment due to the impact of a changing work environment.
4. Students enhance their sense of belonging in their community by participating in online classes, where it is difficult or impossible to attend in-person. Students with limited access to public transport and / or health issues find these classes a lifeline. The need for a standard level of digital skills was highlighted by the pandemic with many families needing to order food or health care on-line and to support their children's home working during school closures.
5. Good examples of practice include enabling elderly students to attend courses such as yoga online as a result of tutors teaching them to use Zoom. Students of all ages need to be able to access free computing classes including using new apps and packages such as Google classroom and Zoom.
6. Covid-19 highlighted the importance of digital literacy. The lack of computers has had a detrimental impact on adults and their families, particularly for lower income families with limited access to broadband. Digital access is an equality issue and the lack of it contributes to lowering adult access to decent life skills and work.



Theme 5

Adult education responding to the needs of migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers

1. Adult community education (ACE) in further education colleges, local government and community organisations plays a key role in providing access to education for refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers. ACE provision can reach those who are furthest away from formal education.
2. By enabling access to education and training, all refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers can fully access the wider community and their family's needs. Learning is a human right for all, and learning a language is a part of those rights. We call on the government to fully fund free English as a second language for speakers of other languages (ESOL) as a statutory right. Language learning needs a national strategy and not be subject to unsustainable funding streams.
3. Whilst learning ESOL, the existing skills, education and work experiences of refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers needs to be acknowledged. This prior education and training can support students to gain higher skilled work. Students can gain vital information about how to access wider services, such as health and mental wellbeing services, family and nursery support.
4. Clear career guidance that is aspirational and not just driven solely by a quick fix employment agenda is more relevant now than ever before. With good pastoral support and careers guidance, full and equal access to jobs and further education, better options can be an achievable. Many migrant and refugee workers are often stuck in low paid employment which can lead to inter-generational poverty. ACE promotes anti-racist educational access, which allows students to be fully active citizens and reduces isolation and loneliness in an inclusive environment. The delivery of skills for life is essential in bridging the gaps for many in society.



Theme 6

Funding of Adult Community Education

1. Adult community education has been cut severely by 50% since 2010, which has seen a decline of more than one million students and teaching job losses. If the government believes that their skills agenda is critical to economic recovery, then funding adult education must be central.
2. The Education Select Committee report in 2020 called on the department to focus on Adult Education and make the case for an ambitious, long-term funding settlement. The Social Market Foundation's recent report called for a "substantial increase in adult education funding of at least £1.3 billion per annum" to offset the decline in funding. In their 2021 report, FETL recommended an injection of £5.2 billion into the system and provision of a 10-year budget that breaks the cycle of low skills. The Education Select Committee urged that the adult education budget be properly costed to determine the increase required to meet the urgent and overdue reforms they set out in their 2020 report. This recommendation remains unmet but we join the call for a substantial injection of funds into the system and stand by the figures calculated by FETL in their recent report.
3. What is also clear, and recognised by all those involved, is that the proper delivery of adult education requires a national strategy.
4. We call on the government to reverse the funding cuts to adult community education wherever it is provided, including further education colleges, community sector, prisons, and independent training providers.
5. Defending and enabling adult education voices to be heard means we need to connect widely with all who provide adult education, including further education colleagues, students, adult professional organisations, prison educators, community and voluntary sectors and sister trade unions.
6. We need to set up a national campaign for adult community education that is led by teaching staff and students and raise our collective voice.



Theme 7

ACE and the climate and ecological emergency

1. Climate as a mainstream issue – We are facing a climate and ecological emergency. Education must be transformed to respond to this global climate and environmental crisis, which is already transforming the social, economic and funding landscape. Responsibility for delivering this change cannot fall to an isolated 'champion' but must be distributed across all staff, including leadership roles. Doing so recognises that sustainability touches on all aspects of the institution, including mission and purpose, curriculum, careers advice, staff development, estate management, and procurement policies.
2. Embedding in the curriculum – The climate and ecological emergency must be embedded in all course provision, assessments, and governance. Current actions are well short of what is needed. Self-assessment reports and Ofsted inspection reports should include observation and comment on success in this area. Support mechanisms, such as the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), should have examples of good practice. Governance documents should include a scrutiny and advocacy role for governors in green matters.
3. Staff support – Educators need resources, training, and allocated time to green their subject area. Increased demand for curriculum addressing sustainability must be backed up by paid time, CPD sessions and other arrangements for keeping up to date with subject and policy developments.
4. Zero-carbon institutions – The ACE sector needs to have their own zero-carbon policy which sets out clear actions and targets consistent with the UK's international climate agreements. Each centre, service and college must have their own policy, negotiated through collective bargaining with recognised unions, which reflects the national one and is tailored for local need.
5. Green jobs and skills – The biggest growth in employment is set to be in low carbon jobs. Much of the skills development required will be in upskilling existing workers to transition into new job opportunities. The skills system is unable to meet current demands, and has no plan for how it will meet the larger scale of future needs. The ACE sector must agree on a framework for how it can ensure that there is alignment between new jobs and skills.
6. Community engagement – ACE is uniquely placed to engage with local authorities and other stakeholders. Institutions need to ensure that ACE is reflected in the climate and strategic development plans of local, regional and devolved authorities. Together, they need to lobby national governments to advocate for funding streams that reflect the crucial role of the sector in nationally determined contributions to the UN climate goals and to reducing inequality by 'levelling up'.



Theme 7

7. Union support – UCU has a long record of climate action across the education sector and calls for the appointment of environmental reps in every institution. The knowledge and professional dedication of Union members is an irreplaceable resource for a successful transition to net-zero carbon in Adult and Community Education providers. Facility time to enable the branch to conduct bargaining with employers and implement their agreements is an essential requirement of a just transition. UCU will be fighting nationally for a strengthened trade union movement, with environmental reps recognised and funded by every employer.



Theme 8

Professional identity of ACE teaching and support staff

1. ACE education teaching staff are highly qualified and bring with them many years of experience, working with marginalised and diverse students.
2. Our pay, contracts and working conditions do not properly reflect our professional qualifications and the endemic casualisation of the workforce do a disservice to us and our students. This impacts women, disabled and Black tutors disproportionately. According to our own FOI report, the majority of ACE tutors (66%) are employed on zero-hours. Excessive workloads are also a feature of provision – increasingly so given the cuts to staff numbers over the last decade. We need national collective terms and conditions that reflect our professionalism, provide secure employment, provide a framework to manage workloads and are, as a minimum, aligned with those provided to teachers working in further education colleges
3. A secure, well-funded workforce with permanent contracts, manageable workloads and decent pay, leads to better staff retention which impacts positively on the students' learning experience and on the wellbeing of staff. The FETL report stated the average pay for an ACE lecturer, at £17118 full-time equivalent is too low. This needs to change. Teaching staff need to be on pay that aligns with their skills and qualifications. Teachers in schools and those working in further education colleges, all command significantly higher average pay than those working in ACE. Local councils and all employers need to recognise that teachers in ACE need a level of pay that means that they can afford to work in this sector!
4. Alongside teaching staff, our careers and pastoral staff are also part of the critical support and guidance needed for adults, whether that's immigration advice, welfare benefits, job search or mental health. They are very much part of our work community and need to be valued and need pay increases that reflect their skills.



Key principles and demands

1. Adult Community Education (ACE) is a public good. As such, it should be a universal right for everyone in society, particularly those who are most disadvantaged. There needs to be a national strategy that recognises its role and how participants can be encouraged and supported. This was also recognised and called for by the Education Select Committee who recommended in their December 2020 report: "The Department must set out an ambitious, long-term strategy for adult skills and lifelong learning."
2. ACE needs to be properly funded. The level of funding in 2010 was not sufficient to achieve the objectives of those working in this field. Cuts imposed since then have made a mockery of any claims that successive governments have made in terms of recognizing and supporting the service
3. Adult education in all sectors; in FE, ACE, prisons and universities should be free at the point of delivery. Students and teaching, not finance and competition between providers, needs to be at the heart of this provision.
4. ACE should be at the forefront of the fight against the climate emergency including ensuring that students are able to develop skills for existing and emerging green jobs and promoting sustainability in their communities.
5. Participation has fallen to its lowest rate in 23 years (Learning and Work Institute, Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2019, December 2019), and 38% of adults have not participated in any learning since leaving full time education. This is not due to a lack of interest but owes a great deal to the current cost and availability of appropriate provision.

You cannot demand that people get on the ladder whilst removing access to the bottom rungs.

6. ACE should be available in every community. The Education Select Committee report stated "the Department must ensure there is a community learning centre in every town to ensure the first rung of the ladder is there for adults furthest from qualifications and employment." We stand by and endorse that recommendation.
7. ACE should continue to offer a broad-based curriculum that meets the needs of diverse groups of adult students. ACE should provide accredited and non-accredited learning in the community. The broad curriculum of both formal and informal learning in ACE is a key aspect of community education. The narrative that 'accredited' learning is essential, and 'non-accredited' learning is not, needs to be challenged. We do not accept the notion that the value of study is solely measured by achievement in exams.
8. ACE's pedagogical approaches are student centred. Delivery is developed with students and communities. ACE considers the students' broader needs in life, rather than being exclusively employment driven. Not all participants are seeking employment. For example, a significant number of retirees attend classes. The benefits to their mental and physical well-being should not need explanation. In their handbook, the LGA recognise that the outcomes of ACE



cover six distinct but overlapping categories: employment, skills and qualifications, health and wellbeing, integration and inclusion, culture and creativity, attitudes, aptitudes and characteristics, life transitions. A narrative that solely focuses on the employment outcomes of students benefiting from ACE needs to be challenged.

9. Creative, collaborative, and non-competitive sharing between ACE providers leads to a better ability to change, adapt and develop provision sharing best practice to meet students' needs. We call for any strategy to recognise this and not to pit providers against each other in bids for piecemeal funding streams.
10. An ACE strategy also needs to recognise that education is a journey, with students and tutors a part of that journey. Students need to be in charge of their journey, with the flexibility to explore new opportunities, to pause on the way and enjoy the process as much as the outcome.
11. We call on the government to fully fund free English for speakers of other languages, (ESOL) as a statutory right. Cuts in ESOL need to be addressed urgently; there is a clear need for increased funding for language provision.
12. ACE is part of enabling adults to participate in the joy of learning, to have a second or third chance in education, for life, social reasons, health, and well-being as well as for employment. Mental health, wellbeing, and health courses are an integral part of meeting the needs of adults. Adults with special needs or with disabilities can access learning equitably within this forum. This commitment to equality and access must be enshrined and embedded into any new ACE strategy.
13. Funding should support progression. There needs to be funding for Level 2 functional skills for both English and maths, for bridging courses from entry 3 to level 1, and from level 1 to level 2. Current funding arrangements are not flexible enough to enable tailored provision for individual student needs. Some students are disadvantaged because the current system pushes them towards GCSE courses which may not be the most suitable option for them.
14. Level 3 functional skills could be offered, and the level 3 entitlement should be expanded to cover all publicly funded qualifications in all subjects and courses regardless of previous qualification level. In addition to formal qualifications, stepping stone courses also need to be appropriately funded so that progression can be supported. The soft skills that students acquire in the process need to be recognised as having personal worth and social value.
15. The provision of this valuable service requires decent pay and jobs. We have substantial expertise. According to the FETL report 67% of ACE teachers are educated to level 5 or above, 78% have worked in education or training for more than 10 years, 37% of teachers have experience outside education and 20% have more than 10 years industry experience.

We have also increased our skill levels to be able to provide education and training using ICT during the pandemic. In-service training needs to be real and valuable, not simply directed at servicing the increasing levels of bureaucracy.



16. The majority of teaching staff in ACE work on sessional / casual contracts with no security of employment or income. We know the impact of endemic levels of casualisation; on income, the ability to plan and on physical and mental health (see our report 'Counting the Cost of Casualisation in FE'⁴).
17. There is a blatant lack of parity with other sectors such as schools and further education colleges regarding our pay, terms and conditions, security of employment, workloads and progression opportunities. Tutors feel "overlooked and undervalued". Local government employers need to adhere to their own policies supporting non precarious contracts for ACE teaching staff and learning support.
18. Adult Community Education (ACE) meets all the necessary educational standards, providing a quality curriculum on the same level as our colleagues in Further Education (FE). Our teachers have the same level of training qualifications as in FE. Our pay ought to reflect these skills and expertise. But delivery is currently at the cost of those working in this service. We need secure, well-remunerated jobs, with reasonable workloads, progression opportunities and proper rights as employees.
19. The quality of venues in which classes are taught needs to be improved, including accessibility for people with disabilities, access to IT and Wi-Fi and training for those in the community who need it. The needs and the benefits of this have been made clear during the pandemic. This would facilitate the delivery of a mixture of direct and blended learning.

UCU will continue to campaign for ACE and its members. We will use this manifesto to lobby for ACE to be properly recognized for the transformative work it undertakes and for our members to be recognised for the professionals they are. We want to see a wider recognition and understanding of the important role ACE has in society on many levels, learning for work and wider life. We will use the manifesto to argue for an expansion of ACE and for a service that is genuinely responsive to the needs of its communities.

This manifesto was prepared in 2023 by UCU members working in ACE as teaching and pastoral staff. It was updated in February 2025.

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www.ucu.org.uk/adulteducation



⁴https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10335/Counting-the-costs-of-casualisation-in-further-education-Jun-19/pdf/ucu_casualisation_in_FE_survey_report_Jun19.pdf



UCU members, Coventry