

# Adult and community education

## Policy briefing

January 2016

### Background: what is adult and community education?

Adult and community education (ACE) covers a wide range of learning designed to help people gain a new skill, get back into learning, develop their interest in a subject and prepare for higher level study. Designed to be accessible to people of all backgrounds and abilities, this type of learning is often non-accredited which means that learners are not working towards a formal qualification.

Also referred to as community learning, it is primarily delivered by further education colleges, local authority education services, and voluntary and community organisations, and is funded through the adult skills budget.

### Why is community learning important?

Learning is an important vehicle for social mobility, and is beneficial both for individuals and for society as a whole. It is particularly important in the current context of rapid technological change, longer working lives and an ageing population.

Numerous studies<sup>1</sup> have demonstrated that learning as an adult (including non-accredited learning) brings many benefits including better health and wellbeing, greater social engagement, increased employability and greater capacity for parents to help their children to learn.

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<sup>1</sup> This 2014 paper by Aggett & Neild, *The Benefits of Adult Learning*, for Learning Southwest provides a good summary of findings from various studies in this area: <http://www.learning-southwest.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/20141208-Learning-South-West-Soundbites.pdf>

A 2012 report<sup>2</sup> using HM Treasury Green book methodology estimated that these benefits were worth up to £1,160 to an adult engaged in part time learning. A recent research paper<sup>3</sup> from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) also showed that learning below level 2 returned £10 to the economy for every £1 of government investment.

For a variety of reasons, though, many people lack the confidence or motivation to get involved in learning. Some adults have had a poor experience of education in the past; others may face cultural or practical barriers to engaging with formal education. Some simply feel that they are 'too old to learn'.

Community learning provides accessible and inclusive learning opportunities for people from all backgrounds and abilities, and is often delivered in a familiar environment (e.g children's school or community centre) where people feel more confident to engage.

By providing a route back into learning and bringing people from different walks of life together in their local area, community learning plays an important part in supporting wider government policies on localism, social justice, stronger families, digital inclusion and social mobility<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Fujiwara, D. *Valuing the Impact of Adult Learning*, NIACE, June 2012:

<http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/content/valuing-impact-adult-learning>

<sup>3</sup> BIS Research paper 228, June 2015:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/435166/bis\\_15\\_323\\_Measuring\\_the\\_Net\\_Present\\_Value\\_of\\_Further\\_Education\\_in\\_England.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/435166/bis_15_323_Measuring_the_Net_Present_Value_of_Further_Education_in_England.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Skills Funding Agency, June 2014: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/sfa-funding-rules-2014-to-2015-v2-section-3-part-2-programmes-community-learning>

## Challenges facing adult and community education

### Funding

Adult and community education is funded through the Skills Funding Agency. In recognition of the unique and valuable role which it plays, funding for community learning was ring-fenced and maintained at around £210m during the years of the coalition government.

In December 2015 it was announced that the ring fence would be removed and that community learning would be funded from the main adult skills budget (ASB). This budget is already under severe pressure having fallen by almost 40% since 2009<sup>5</sup>. Due to the government's focus on apprenticeships, the cut to the ASB has had a disproportionately negative effect on other types of adult learning, with the budget for non-apprenticeship learning falling 24% between 2014-15 and 2015-16.<sup>6</sup>

It is therefore likely that the total amount spent on community learning will fall in 2016-17 as colleges choose to spend more on vocationally-focused provision in line with government priorities.

Adult and community learning services based in local authorities are under pressure from cuts to local authority funding. As outlined in the Local Government Association response to the 2015 Spending Review in November<sup>7</sup>, there are real concerns about the impact which falling local government spending will have on the ability to maintain libraries, childrens' centres, museums and other community locations where adult learning is offered.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on figures from the Association of Colleges' July 2015 Budget submission (para 58): <https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/AoC%20submission%20to%20the%20Budget%205%20June%202015.pdf>; and the Skills Funding Agency letter in July 2015: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/446922/Funding\\_Allocations\\_2015\\_to\\_2016.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/446922/Funding_Allocations_2015_to_2016.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Skills Funding Agency to providers, February 2015: [http://feweek.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Allocations\\_for\\_the\\_Funding\\_Year\\_2015\\_to\\_2016.pdf](http://feweek.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Allocations_for_the_Funding_Year_2015_to_2016.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.local.gov.uk/spending-review/-journal\\_content/56/10180/7586753/NEWS](http://www.local.gov.uk/spending-review/-journal_content/56/10180/7586753/NEWS)

Changes to funding eligibility for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) within the ASB have also had an impact on community learning providers, and contributed to a sharp drop in the number of ESOL learners in recent years.<sup>8</sup> In July 2015, it was announced that £45m of additional ESOL funding for jobseekers was being withdrawn for 2015-16, just weeks before some courses were due to begin. Although David Cameron has since pledged an additional £20m for ESOL targeted at Muslim women<sup>9</sup>, the net reduction in available ESOL funding has had a serious impact on community learning providers, with several course closures as a result.

### **Policy change: apprenticeships and area reviews**

The government has set out an ambition for rapid apprenticeship expansion, with a target of 3 million apprenticeships during this parliament. This fits within a broader agenda of aligning further education to employer need and local economic priorities.

Further education colleges are being asked to undertake area reviews of their provision to find further efficiency savings, identify potential institutional mergers and increase specialisation. There is no mention of community learning within the review guidance, so with a strong focus on apprenticeships and vocational learning there is a danger that adult and community learning will be seen as lower priority by colleges reviewing their provision.

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<sup>8</sup> NATECLA, May 2014: <http://www.natecla.org.uk/news/779/ESOL-waiting-lists>

<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister's Office, January 2016: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/passive-tolerance-of-separate-communities-must-end-says-pm>

## Summary of key concerns

The current direction of travel in terms of further education funding and policy is concerning to adult and community education for a number of reasons:

- **Reduction in learning opportunities:** providers are being forced to take difficult decisions about what courses they can continue to fund- course closures will reduce access.
- **Drop in learner numbers:** 1.3 million learners have already been lost from further education since 2010<sup>10</sup>, and more adults will miss out on opportunities if adult and community learning is further diminished.
- **Cutting off pathways to higher learning:** community learning acts as a springboard into further learning for many adults who might otherwise not be confident to take on a formal qualification.
- **Loss of specialist facilities:** many courses are run using specialist facilities (e.g. for crafts and creative arts) which cost more to establish than standard classrooms. If these are lost it may be difficult to reintroduce them in future.
- **Increased distance to learn:** college mergers and local authority funding reductions may result in fewer locations for learning. This will have a particularly negative effect on isolated rural communities and those who can't travel to learn.
- **Impact on those with specific needs:** community learning offers specialist learning opportunities for people with distinct needs, disabilities and challenging conditions. Cuts will impact on the range and availability of such provision.
- **Loss of jobs and expertise:** course closures as a result of cuts and/or restructuring will lead to jobs and expertise being lost from the sector.
- **Over-reliance on technology:** in our digital age there is an assumption that more services can be accessed online, but many people struggle to use the internet- community learning helps to improve people's skills in this area.
- **Narrow focus on vocational learning:** learning for work is certainly important, but it's not the only benefit from education. Building confidence and independence, reducing isolation, encouraging healthier lifestyles, and helping people to access services are harder outcomes to measure in monetary terms, but are all valuable outcomes of community learning.

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<sup>10</sup> Times Educational Supplement, November 2015: <https://www.tes.com/news/further-education/breaking-news/fe-learners-down-13m-shocking-new-figures-reveal>

## Adult and community education at the heart of FE

Adult and community education plays a crucial role in opening up education to those who otherwise might not benefit. It has a distinct place within a broad and inclusive further education curriculum, and offers both economic and social benefits to local areas.

In line with the University and College Union's (UCU) FE Charter<sup>11</sup>, to ensure that adults can continue to benefit from community learning in the future government should:

- **Recognise the value of wider learning outcomes** like increased confidence and social engagement, looking beyond employability as a measure of learning success.
- **Ensure stable and sustainable funding** for further education, increasing investment in the full range of learning for adults in order to reverse the impact of damaging cuts to the adult skills budget and ESOL.
- **Support increased learner participation** by working to reduce financial and practical barriers (e.g. fees, travel costs) to accessing adult and community education, particularly for those in the hardest-to-reach groups and those with specific needs who require greater support to learn.

### *ABOUT US*

*The University and College Union is the UK's largest trade union and professional association for academics, lecturers, trainers, researchers and academic-related staff working in further and higher education. For more information about any of the points in this document, please contact [publicaffairs@ucu.org.uk](mailto:publicaffairs@ucu.org.uk).*

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6900/A-ten-point-charter-for-the-future-of-further-and-adult-education/pdf/ucu\\_fe10pointcharter\\_apr15.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6900/A-ten-point-charter-for-the-future-of-further-and-adult-education/pdf/ucu_fe10pointcharter_apr15.pdf)