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Vulnerable workers and the demise of adult education in England

Abstract

Purpose – This paper reviews changing government policy on adult education in England over the past 20 years and the funding regimes affecting adult and community learning and union led learning, which play a major role in learning opportunities for socially excluded adults.

Design/methodology/approach – A review and analysis of extant literature.

Findings – Two decades ago, adult education in England provided a variety of learning opportunities for people who either had limited qualifications or who needed to reskill for whatever reason. Access to those opportunities has been reduced just when it is most needed.

Research limitations/implications – This is a review and viewpoint paper based on experience in England, the limitations of which are discussed.

Practical implications – Economic recovery post-COVID and Brexit will require more access to adult education so people can prepare for labour market re-integration.

Originality/value – Takes a holistic view of adult education, with particular attention to adult and community learning and union led learning.

Keywords Adult and community learning, Union led learning, Vulnerable workers

Paper type Viewpoint paper

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the memory of our late friend and mentor Professor Bob Fryer, CBE (1944-2021) who was a key architect of much of the infrastructure of Adult and Community Education in England that has been systematically demolished by successive governments of the past decade. Working with trade unions, university continuing education departments and residential adult education colleges like Northern College, Bob actively promoted educational opportunities for the most vulnerable in society. His vision of a fairer society with a strong sense of community is carried forward by individuals who continue to organise learning opportunities for vulnerable workers without public financial support and in defiance of a hostile state.

Introduction

This review of adult education in England was undertaken in the context of an ongoing study of educational initiatives supporting the labour market integration of vulnerable workers including refugees, survivors of human trafficking and individuals liberated from ‘modern’ slavery. The empirical work has been paused during the pandemic but will resume as soon as it is safe to organise more interviews and focus groups. In the meantime, we take stock and reflect on the adult learning infrastructure created around the start of the millennium and what has happened since then.

The European White Paper on Teaching and Learning, *Towards the Learning Society* (CEC, 1995) probably stimulated the British Conservative Government to publish a consultation document on *Lifetime Learning* (DfEE, 1995), while organisations like the OECD (1996) were also emphasising lifelong learning in their policy agenda, reiterating earlier strategy (OECD, 1973). Adult education bodies in the UK had been campaigning along similar lines for some years (e.g. NIACE, 1993) and Jakobi (2009, p. 478) noted that “from the mid-1990s to 2004” countries increasingly referred to lifelong learning in their education policies. By the time the Labour Government led by Tony Blair won the election in May 1997, the lifelong learning movement was already underway and its role in protecting those vulnerable to exclusion explicitly recognised (CEC, 1995). The value of non-vocational learning for employees was also shown by companies introducing initiatives like the Ford EDAP (Employee Development and Assistance Programme) (Lee, 1999; Mortimer, 1990).

Shortly after the 1997 election, Secretary of State for Education and Employment David Blunkett appointed Bob Fryer to chair the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (NAGCELL). Their first report advocated establishing a strategic framework to promote lifelong learning, building commitment to widen and deepen participation and achievement in learning (Fryer, 1997). Their second, recommended a new

framework to increase home, community and workplace learning, with a focus on upgrading skills, especially among groups with low levels of participation (Fryer, 1999). A review of Adult and Community Learning (ACL) in England at that time showed clear economic returns for individuals and employers, highlighting wider benefits such as improved health and active ageing (Hillage *et al.*, 2000). Blunkett also established the National Skills Task Force in 1997 to advise on developing a national skills agenda; their final report noted the need to widen access to learning for disadvantaged groups like low-skilled adults and established qualification targets for 2010 (STF, 2000a, p. 62). The accompanying research report noted that older workers were “vulnerable to changing labour market circumstances affecting their existing jobs and unable to make the transition to new jobs.” (STF, 2000b, p. 142).

The NAGCELL led to the White Paper, *Learning to Succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning* (DfEE, 1999), which argued that too many people were excluded from learning and proposed reform of post-16 education to increase participation and raise skills levels. The Labour Government’s institutional reforms included replacing the Further Education Development Agency with the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in November 2000 and replacing the Training and Enterprise Councils and the Further Education Funding Council with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in April 2001, making the LSC responsible for all post-compulsory education excluding higher education. Widening participation among those with low skills and at risk of social exclusion was a key objective. Research reaffirmed wider benefits of learning (Schuller *et al.*, 2001) and the key role played by adult residential provision (Winterton and Winterton, 2002) and ACL (Callaghan *et al.*, 2001; Winterton and Winterton, 2003).

Critics of the Lifelong Learning agenda pointed to its “political expediency” (Coffield, 1999, p. 486) where the “radical restructuring of the welfare state and the hitching up of social and educational policy to the imperatives of economic policy” (Martin, 2003, p. 567) also

served to obscure “crucial asymmetries of power” (*ibid.*, p. 576). This colonisation of adult education by an economic agenda emphasising individual responsibility and leaving operational matters to the market resulted in “large inequalities in participation in adult education and training.” (Rubenson, 2006, p. 330). There is a strong relationship between income inequality, literacy inequality and participation inequality, the Anglo-Saxon countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK and USA) showing the highest inequalities on all counts and the Nordic countries the lowest, and 14 percentage points difference in participation rates (*ibid.*)

ACL is difficult to define because much of it occurs outside mainstream educational institutions, in sites such as community centres, museums and locations used by organisations like the Workers’ Educational Association (Callaghan *et al.*, 2001). The boundary is fuzzy because Further Education colleges and university departments of Adult and Continuing Education are also involved. Another characteristic is its concern with target groups that are unlikely to access learning without special provision, such as refugees, members of minority ethnic groups, individuals without qualifications and others at risk of social exclusion. The purpose of ACL provision is usually not vocational, even if it offers pathways, and is often not formally recognised by qualifications. While there are clear economic benefits, these derive largely from social benefits of increased self-confidence and acquiring basic skills like language, literacy and numeracy, key to accessing training with more direct economic benefits. The wider benefits of learning include measurable health improvements (Aldridge and Lavender, 2000) and less tangible outcomes like active citizenship, community cohesion and social inclusion (Schuller *et al.*, 2001). Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2018) developed a conceptual framework for assessing the extent to which adult education is conceptualised as a common good, finding Northern European countries score consistently higher, with Romania the lowest.

In parallel with establishing NAGCELL, the Blair Government also provided financial support through the Union Learning Fund (ULF) to promote initiatives associated with the new lay official role of union learning representative (ULR) introduced by the Trades Union Congress (TUC). In the 1990s, the TUC developed a strategy of increasing union engagement with workplace learning, seeking alternative avenues of influence over training because Conservative governments of 1979-97 removed unions from involvement in training policy (Rainbird, 1990). The focus was on negotiating training agreements and there was early evidence of their effectiveness in supporting work reorganisation (Winterton and Winterton, 1994), establishing workplace learning infrastructure (Green *et al.*, 1999) and promoting uptake of learning at work (Heyes and Stuart, 1998), particularly among those traditionally less likely to receive training (McCracken and Winterton, 2006). The ULF provided an opportunity to consolidate and develop union-led learning (ULL).

This paper charts the trajectory of adult learning in England over the past two decades and examines the implications for socially excluded adults, for whom it provides some opportunity for social mobility. The section below reports upon the development of ACL and ULL in England during the first decade of the millennium, when there was optimism that Lifelong Learning would play a major role in combatting inequality and exclusion. The following section plots the trajectory of adult learning during the second decade and outlines the current state of activity. This is followed by a retrospective assessment of the changes since 2000 and conclusions concerning the role of adult learning for vulnerable workers and the socially excluded.

ACL and ULL during the first decade of the millennium

A baseline study of ACL in England commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills in 2003 revealed a complex landscape of rich and diverse provision serving a multitude of target groups (Winterton and Winterton, 2003). That study showed ACL was associated with

a wide range of benefits, and contributed to employability, particularly for less advantaged groups. At that time, 150 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) coordinated ACL provision and produced annual Adult Learning Plans (ALPs) outlining future activities. Three different approaches were found in ACL delivery, with 50 per cent of LEAs delivering ACL entirely through direct provision, 27 per cent entirely through contracting out, and 23 per cent through a combination of the two. Irrespective of the balance between direct and contracted provision, all LEAs worked in partnership to deliver ACL, although the range of partners was less extensive in LEAs whose provision was wholly contracted out, with a few providers delivering most courses. Partner organisations were mainly from public and community/voluntary sectors, rather than private sector training providers operating for profit.

Social inclusion was a key plank of the Labour Government's agenda for ACL (Callaghan *et al.*, 2001), forming the rationale for widening, rather than deepening, participation in learning, so LEAs identified target groups for engagement (Winterton and Winterton, 2002). All sought to increase participation of individuals with learning difficulties, but more than half also targeted older adults, those with basic skills needs, and ethnic minority communities, with more than a third describing target groups in general terms as "socially excluded." In tandem with targeting specific groups, many LEAs also adopted a geographical focus, directing ACL to the most deprived wards within the authority. Pedagogical and pastoral strategies for engaging target groups included innovative approaches to curriculum design and course delivery, flexibility regarding location and involving the community and voluntary sector to engage "hard to reach" groups. The intention of building capacity in this sector was supported by pastoral approaches to engagement, such as concessionary fees, and help with travel costs and childcare.

ACL offered a wide range of curricula areas and almost 30 per cent of adult learners were studying visual and performing arts and media studies, including traditional arts and crafts

activities, while more than 25 per cent were engaged in learning opportunities focussing on hospitality, sports, leisure or travel. Information Communications Technology (ICT) courses and foundation programmes together accounted for a further 20 per cent of adult learners. Other areas, including English language and communication, hairdressing and beauty therapy, science and mathematics, attracted fewer learners, many LEAs noting progression routes for adult learners were under-developed.

The Skills Task Force reported that around 20 per cent of British adults were functionally illiterate, and a higher proportion had significant deficits of numeracy skills (STF, 2000a, p. 22), prompting Government to emphasise basic skills provision. The baseline study found most new areas of ACL provision addressed basic skills, often incorporated into other learning, notably ICT. This approach was used to improve take-up by reducing the stigma around basic skills, a strategy also adopted in ULL workplace initiatives (Wallis, 2002).

ACL in England had traditionally been accessed by more affluent individuals, who were already well educated (McGivney, 2001). In 2002, Adult Education Enrolments (DfES, 2002) showed 1.026 million individuals were engaged in some form of ACL, while the English Local Labour Force Survey revealed significant regional variation in participation levels, these being highest in the affluent London suburbs, and lowest in the poorer inner cities of the post-industrial north (ONS, 2002). The 2001 and 2002 NIACE surveys found little evidence that the “learning divide” between social classes had narrowed (Aldridge and Sargant, 2002; Aldridge and Tuckett, 2001). The 2001 National Adult Learning Survey also reported that previous learning remained a strong predictor of future learning (Blake and La Valle, 2001). While many LEAs had made “enormous progress with ACL”, the baseline study concluded it should be given higher priority and more resources to deliver the necessary volume and quality (Winterton and Winterton, 2003, p.122). Fieldwork for the baseline study was conducted during the 1997-2010 Labour government’s first term of office and by 2008-09, when funding

was close to its peak, 3.75 million people aged 19 and over were registered as adult non-HE learners (Wolf, 2015, p. 12).

The Employment Act 2002 provided statutory support for ULRs with effect from April 2003 (Wallis *et al.*, 2005), encouraging employer recognition and negotiation of training agreements, key to establishing workplace learning infrastructure and culture (Stuart *et al.*, 2013). Union Health and Safety Representatives were accorded wider powers under the 1977 regulations which were underpinned by the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, but there was no such statutory right to learning at work. Lloyd and Payne (2007) suggested that ULRs are only effective where unions are strong, and Saundry *et al.* (2017, p. 276) acknowledged that the impact of ULRs “is closely associated with workplace learning institutions and collective bargaining.” Arguing that ULR effectiveness was contingent upon learning centres, management support and negotiation over training, Hoque and Bacon (2011, p.230) concluded “a statutory right to bargaining over training would have the potential to enhance significantly the ability of ULRs to influence training levels positively”.

Controversy over the ULF and ULRs focused on the extent to which ULL led to increased training or substituted for training that employers ought to have provided, and whether such initiatives supported wider trade union aims or were a distraction. Despite a relatively stable participation rate in training, the volume of training in the UK roughly halved between 1997 and 2009 (Green *et al.*, 2016, p. 440), which could reflect the substitution effect of learning opportunities provided under Labour. Reduced expenditure on training by employers in the wake of the financial crisis may have reduced quality as well as passing more of the costs on to workers (Felstead *et al.*, 2012, p. 983). Market led training systems like the UK have always been susceptible to lower quality, task-centred training (Winterton, 2000) compared with Continental Europe (Winterton, 2006). Forrester (2004, p. 418) argued that the “dominant employability perspective currently legitimating much workplace union learning activity ...

results in trade unions accepting educational burdens that properly might be seen as the responsibilities of the state or the employer.” Clearly there is a risk of substitution effects but developing employability through workplace learning could insulate workers from the effects of restructuring. A more fundamental problem is that employability was conceived as a “hollowed out” individualised concept (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2002, p. 205) and policy focussed on supply-side measures (Winterton and Haworth, 2013) driven by employer perceptions (Winterton and Turner, 2019).

Debate was equally polarised over the relationship between ULL and union organisation. Munro and Rainbird (2000, p. 237) argued that UNISON’s Return to Learn programme had “consequences for new forms of activism within branches ... [and provides] ... a potential route to the renewal of workplace organization.” Wallis *et al.* (2005, p. 298) found evidence that “ULRs are embedding themselves into extant trade union structures and creating a platform for the emergence of new union activists (and potentially new members).” The limits of union power to mount an adequate challenge to corporate restructuring and mass redundancies was all too apparent in steel (Stroud and Fairbrother, 2012), but learning partnerships provided opportunities for displaced workers to develop new skills (Wallis and Stuart, 2004). Union involvement in training enabled workers to adapt and helped build union capacity and renewal (Stroud, 2012). Similarly, ULL was successfully used as a tool for organising migrant workers, addressing their fundamental needs for language training and awareness of employment rights (Heyes, 2009; Mustchin, 2012). Sceptics argued that the limited types of learning promoted by unionlearn were not conducive to union revitalisation (McIlroy, 2008). From this perspective, learning was a diversion “from adversarial organising” (McIlroy and Croucher, 2013, p. 265).

Under Labour, new structures aligned with the objectives of increasing learning and widening participation were created. After establishing the LSC in 2001 to fund adult education, the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) was created in 2002 to fund the

Sector Skills Councils. The LSDA was split into two bodies in March 2006 creating the Quality Improvement Agency (for Lifelong Learning) and the Learning and Skills Network. The Leitch Review (2006) highlighted poor performance in basic skills, with the UK ranking 12th out of 18 OECD countries, and recommended establishing the UK Commission for Education and Skills (UKCES). The Brown Government did so, with the UKCES superseding the SSDA on 1 April 2008 after announcing that the LSC would close on 31 March 2010, to be replaced by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the Young Peoples Learning Agency (YPLA). (The UKCES itself was closed seven years later as described below). Local Education Authorities, established by the Education Act 1902 and crucial for coordinating ACL, were abolished under The Local Education Authorities and Children's Services Authorities (Integration of Functions) Order 2010, the day before the General Election.

Trajectories of adult learning since 2010

The General Election of May 2010 gave no overall majority and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition prioritised deficit reduction, mostly to be achieved through cuts to public spending rather than tax increases. Protecting spending on Health meant cuts fell on areas like the SFA, which had its budget reduced from £4.5 billion in 2010-11, to £2.7 billion in 2015-16 (Gravatt, 2015, p. 15). Cuts to post-19 learning included a reduction of 57 per cent of the budget for adult skills excluding apprenticeships between 2010 and 2015. The ending of grant funding for Sector Skills Councils in 2012 resulted in closures, mergers, and takeover by commercial interests (unionlearn, 2016).

Courses run by voluntary and community groups were influenced by the concept of "Big Society" (BS to its detractors) the ideology launched by Cameron in 2010 to shake off the legacy of Thatcherism (Scott, 2011). Informal and unaccredited learning in community settings, like financial inclusion and debt management courses aimed at unemployed and low

paid adults, supported austerity measures by developing resilience and teaching people how to manage poverty rather than eliminate it (LWI, 2017). The Coalition diverted £150 million of the Train to Gain programme budget, aimed at the over 25s, into apprenticeships for those aged 19 to 24 years, with an additional £180 million for apprenticeships in 2011. Around 40 per cent of new apprentices were aged 25 or over between 2010 and 2016 (Powell, 2018, p. 11), with significant numbers already employed when they began (Wolf, 2015, p. 50).

Commitment to apprenticeships was re-affirmed in 2015, with a target of 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020, although the National Audit Office raised questions about programme quality and the effect on productivity (NAO, 2016). An OECD report noted English apprenticeships had become much shorter than other countries and concentrated in low skills service sectors, rather than construction and engineering where they were mostly found in the 1990s (Kuczera and Field, 2018, pp. 12-15).

Reduced spending on other forms of non-apprenticeship workplace learning was of the order of 89 per cent in 2014-15 compared with 2010-11 (Foster, 2018, p. 14). Local Authority spending on ACL also fell by 20 per cent between 2009 and 2012 (Lupton, 2015, p. 11), reflecting the lack of protection afforded to the Department for Communities and Local Government budget. Employers also reduced training expenditure after the global financial crisis, which had a cumulative effect of reducing participation in adult learning (Felstead *et al.*, 2013).

Notwithstanding institutional reforms in the term of the previous Government, the Coalition initiated an unprecedented number of reviews of different elements of the learning and skills apparatus. The *Wolf Review of Vocational Education* found “serious problems in current provision” (2011, p. 44). The *Richard Review of Apprenticeships* found they had mostly become “a government-led training programme, shaped by training professionals not employers” (2012, p. 4). The *(Whitehead) Review of Adult Vocational Qualifications in*

England found “weak accountabilities in the vocational qualifications system” (2013, p. 17), “overly narrow occupational standards” (*ibid.*, p. 18), a “proliferation of vocational qualifications” (*ibid.*, p. 19) and limited “employer ownership” (*ibid.*, p.20).

The YPLA was replaced by the Education Funding Agency (EFA) on 1 April 2012 and measures were taken to improve the quality of adult vocational qualifications. The SFA removed public funding from 2,800 qualifications experiencing low take up in 2013, and a further 5,000 in 2014-15 (Lupton, 2015, p. 11). Different components of adult education were renamed and allocated to different budget lines, resulting in changes in the share per funding stream (Wolf, 2015) and government documents used different measures to express changes in spend. It is impossible to make consistent comparisons over time with increased opacity over funding, but the cuts to adult learning are evident. From the peak of spending in 2009-10, the total adult skills budget had fallen below 2002 levels in real terms by 2012. Adult skills spending per head of the 20 to 60 years old population was 22 per cent below the 2001-02 level by 2015-16 (Wolf, 2015).

Noting the central importance of workplaces for adult learning, Aldridge and Tuckett (2011) highlighted the widening gap between learning rich and learning poor in the UK, which they attributed to public funding cuts and reduced learning opportunities at work. Lindsay *et al.* (2013) confirmed continued inequalities in access to training, warning that without “urgent policy action, processes of polarization – which risk denying training and progression to those outside a core of more skilled, stable jobs – will continue to trap the disadvantaged at the bottom end of the labour market.” (*ibid.*, p. 222). In 2013-14, UK employers funded 82 per cent of training, individuals 9 per cent, government 7 per cent and the EU 2 per cent (Luchinskaya and Dickinson, 2019, pp. 15-16), but employer expenditure was below the EU average.

The UKCES(2014) forecast the creation of 1.8 million additional jobs between 2014 and 2024, many in higher skilled sectors (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). While 77 per cent of employers

anticipated creating additional higher skilled roles, 69 per cent doubted they would find appropriately skilled candidates to fill these vacancies (CBI, 2016). The UK continues to lag major competitors, having both a smaller proportion of workers with intermediate skills and a greater proportion with low-level qualifications (Bosworth, 2014). England also lags competitors in terms of post-compulsory vocational provision (Musset and Field, 2013).

The May 2015 General Election returned an overall Conservative majority with attention focussed on the election promise of a referendum on whether the UK should remain part of the EU, an issue that polarised factions within the Conservative Party. Cameron had declared support for remaining in the EU, so when the June 2016 referendum produced a majority in favour of leaving, he resigned and was succeeded by Theresa May. Inward migration from the EU began falling after the referendum (Dolton *et al.*, 2018) and skills shortages were expected in sectors like food manufacture, hospitality, health and social care, where migrants from the EU were most heavily concentrated. The CIPD (2017) argued that employers would need to recruit older workers, women returners and ex-offenders. Individuals in those categories need to update their skills, yet they have historically been under-represented in adult learning (McGivney, 1990). Work with long-term unemployed in Edinburgh found substantial training and social support needed to reintegrate ex-offenders into the labour market (Hollywood *et al.*, 2000).

The Conservative Government continued to channel funding through non-college private training organisations and by 2015 approximately one third of the adult skills budget was routed via many “providers” and smaller sub-contractors funded on a payment by results basis, often for profit. Wolf (2015, p. 38) expressed concern that there was little effective oversight of providers, whose “existence and role is barely known outside the skills sector itself.” A review of ACL in London (*London Adult Community Learning Review Report*, 2017)

highlighted the lack of coherence and coordination among the 40 or so providers of adult learning as well as funding uncertainties.

In November 2015, the Government announced there would be no further major cuts to the adult skills budgets over the course of the current parliament, although inflation would deliver a cut in real terms. Apprenticeships took priority for government funding, while adult education in 2015 was one of the few remaining unprotected budgets, leading Gravatt (2015, p. 17) to suggest “the possibility of the total elimination of adult learning funding by 2020.” The Flexible Learning fund, announced in March 2018, committed under £12 million to fund 32 projects targeting non-traditional learners. Budget cuts were accompanied by further changes to the architecture of adult learning, notably the “bonfire of the quangos” in March 2017. The UKCES was disbanded and the SFA and EFA merged into the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). Further changes involved control of non-apprenticeship Adult Education Budgets passing to some regions by devolution agreements, with the Greater London Authority and Mayoral Combined Authorities assuming responsibility for adult skills in 2018-19 (Foster, 2018, p. 18). It was unclear whether devolved governments would have authority over skills priorities beyond those implicit within the adult education budget, or where ACL sat within these arrangements (Chowen, 2015, p. 14). The *Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2019* found the “lowest participation rate in 23 years” with 38 per cent of adults surveyed saying “they have not done any learning since leaving full time education” (LWI, 2019, p. 5).

Arrangements for “Brexit” continued to dog the Government and the June 2017 General Election left the Conservatives without an overall majority. May resigned in July 2019 and was succeeded by Boris Johnson, who called an election in December of that year with the slogan “Get Brexit done”. The result was a landslide victory for the Conservatives, overturning traditional Labour constituencies that had voted Leave in the referendum. The UK

consequently left the EU on 31 January 2020 with transition arrangements in place until 1 January 2021.

Professor Alison Wolf had criticised target-led adult learning policy and the fragmentation of budgets, calling for lifetime learning allowances in September 2019. By February 2020 she was on part-time secondment to the Prime Minister's office advising on FE policy (*FE Week*, 14 February 2020). In September 2020 Johnson announced a Lifetime Skills Guarantee with a £2.5 billion National Skills Fund, administered by ESFA, to enable adults (over 24 years and without a level 3 qualification) to gain a level 3 qualification in targeted areas, defined by labour market needs. The Lifetime Skills Guarantee was apparently recommended in the Augar Review, but the Interim Conclusion was only published in January (DfE, 2021).

Surprisingly, Coalition and Conservative governments from 2010 continued to fund the ULF, but in October 2020 the Department for Education gave notice that the £12 million annual funding would not be continued beyond the financial year, effectively terminating the ULF on 31 March 2021. The decision was justified by the much larger investment in the National Skills Fund, which misses the point about the value of ULF in providing access to learning for those with few learning opportunities. Dean *et al.* (2020, p.71) reported that during the 2017/18 round, “between 46% and 66% of learning accessed by union learners is additional – that is it would not have happened without unionlearn.” Excluding ULR training, included in the upper figure, the range is 46-57 per cent, suggesting just over half was additional learning.

The Education Committee, a cross-party Commons Select Committee that scrutinises the work of the Department for Education, launched an inquiry into Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning (ASALL) in March 2020 and reported in December of that year (House of Commons Education Committee, 2020). In evidence to the Committee (cited *ibid.*, p.9), Professor John Holford claimed “It is only 40 or 50 years since we had an adult education system that was ... world leading. We have thrown that away collectively.” Noting a 45 per cent decline in funding

had been accompanied by reduced participation in adult learning, the Committee called for ambition on a scale comparable with the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction, whose final report in 1919 described adult education as “a permanent national necessity ... both universal and lifelong” (ibid., p. 11).

Retrospective assessment and conclusion

The 1997-2010 Labour governments’ objective of widening access to, and participation in, adult learning lost momentum, with participation peaking before the change of government. The 2010 National Adult Learning Survey showed participation between 2005 and 2010 declined by 11 per cent overall, with the most significant declines in non-formal and informal learning (BIS, 2012). Reduced employer spending on training after the financial crisis and cuts in funding for short courses following the 2006 Leitch Review each affected individuals’ ability to pay for learning, with 58 per cent of respondents citing cost as a barrier to learning in 2010, compared to 21 per cent in 2005 (BIS, 2012).

That trend was exacerbated by successive Coalition and Conservative governments, who systematically deconstructed much of the architecture of adult learning and institutions that played a major coordinating role. Non-formal and non-accredited learning was downgraded, emphasising learning that supported younger adults into employment. Budgets for adult education were continuously reduced and the costs shifted to learners, causing participation in adult learning to decline by 20 per cent between 2009 and 2014 (Wolf, 2015, p. 12). The House of Commons Education Committee (2020) appears to have been the first official acknowledgement of a need to reconstruct adult education.

This last report reveals a new generation has discovered adult education and the importance of vocational education. The report is replete with a sense of *déjà-vu* involving the rediscovery of lack of parity of esteem between vocational and higher education, noted by Raffae *et al.*

(2001), and of the relationship between existing qualifications and further learning, the so-called “Matthias Principle”, noted by McCracken and Winterton (2006). There is also evidence of failure to learn from previous experience, with proposals to resurrect individual learning accounts, halted in 2002 because of widespread fraud involving private training providers (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2002), and for a skills tax credit to revitalise employer-led training, reminiscent of grant-levy arrangements ended by the Thatcher Government, accused at the time of setting out “to demolish a large section of our training arrangements” (*Hansard*, 16 November 1981). Moreover, after four decades of governments of all complexions repeating the mantra of “giving training back to employers” it is worth recalling that it was a Conservative Government that introduced the Industrial Training Act 1964, having concluded skill shortages were the result of “leaving training to the discretion of individual employers” (Winterton and Winterton, 1994, p. 3).

The Lifetime Skills Guarantee and the National Skills Fund are welcome developments and the final recognition of the value of adult learning must now be translated into action to protect and develop this sector to meet post-pandemic challenges. In addition to the tragic loss of life, COVID-19 caused a fall in GDP in the UK estimated to be six times worse than the 2008 crises and the 1930s Depression, which each had roughly the same effect on UK GDP (the UK was far less affected than the US by the Depression). Although the pandemic has masked the effects of Brexit, together they have prompted significant restructuring and job losses in exposed sectors. Several major retailers have gone into administration or cut staff as the pandemic accelerated Internet shopping. Aircraft were grounded worldwide, and many airlines cut their workforces. The pandemic facilitated changes that would have been contested in any other context, but the impact on airlines was quite immediate because aeroplanes only generate revenue when they are flying passengers. Despite the long lead times between order and delivery of aircraft, aerospace firms also announced tens of thousands of redundancies, an

indication that there is no expectation that recovery will entail business as usual. There is evidence in the UK and US that the economic impact of COVID-19 (including lockdown and social distancing measures) disproportionately affected women, minorities, the less educated and youth, partly because of industry-occupation effects (Lee *et al.*, 2021). On top of the pandemic, Brexit contributed to the fall in trade in 2021 (De Lyon and Dhingra, 2021, p. 12) so “investment in both physical and human capital will be crucial to the long-term adjustment to Covid-19 and Brexit” (ibid, p. 7).

For those most vulnerable to social exclusion the need to access learning has become acute. Education is a key engine of social mobility, and this is particularly true for adult education offering a second chance for individuals who, for whatever reason, did not achieve their full potential through compulsory schooling. Social mobility in the UK has stalled and gone into reverse, with those born in the 1980s being the first cohort since WW2 not to commence their working lives with higher incomes than the previous generation (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). Before the pandemic, 22 per cent of the UK population was already living in poverty in 2018 (JRF Analysis Unit, 2018) and more than 1.5 million people were destitute at some point during 2017 (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2018).

Lifelong learning is also associated with higher levels of civic and political engagement (WEA, 2016, p. 15), and in all countries, lower levels of literacy are associated with disenchantment with, and disengagement from, political processes (OECD, 2013). It is difficult to imagine the motives for governments not seeking to promote learning among the most deprived sections of society, unless one recalls the comment of Paine (1791, p. 58) in *The Rights of Man* that “though man may be kept ignorant, he cannot be made ignorant.” There was a strong association between low levels of post compulsory education and voting leave in the 2016 EU referendum, with areas most dependent on European financial support voting for

Brexit and for the Conservatives, likened by social media commentators to “turkeys voting for Christmas”.

Like many developed economies, the UK has an ageing population, and increases in the state pension age, as well as loss of pension value, will extend the working life of older employees who may need to update their skills. Informal and unaccredited adult learning also has an important role in promoting active ageing. More than 50 per cent of people participating in community-based learning in the previous decade were over the age of 60 (WEA, 2016, p. 9) yet older people also feature disproportionately among the 15 per cent of respondents who were categorised as “Too Old to Learn” or “Learning Avoidant” by NALS 2010 (BIS, 2012). Despite Brexit, the UK remains a diverse, multi-cultural nation, and adult education is often a critical part of the integration process for migrants. Learning a new language is an essential step for migrants and refugees as they build a new life and become part of a new community. Refugees face enormous challenges of integration into work and society because they need to establish their personal and vocational identities as well as coping with the trauma of their experiences in the home country and obstacles such as stigmatisation in the host country (Wehrle *et al.*, 2018, p. 84). Equally, adult education in community settings promotes greater understanding of, and tolerance towards, different cultures (WEA, 2016, pp. 14-15) and can contribute to community cohesion. The complex mosaic of ACL institutions 20 years ago played an essential role in developing and delivering specialist provision for such vulnerable groups and fortunately some survived and continue this vital work, but current conditions require an expansion in learning support for disadvantaged groups. One of the limitations of this study is its focus on experience in England, but the same need for adult education is even more apparent in middle-income countries, where COVID-19 has had a high negative impact on the informal sector and those in precarious employment (Enfield, 2021). England has had a major influence on education and training in other countries (Tütlys *et al.*, 2016) but such

policy learning has often not been seen as helpful and it is to be hoped that the deconstruction of ACL and ULL in England does not become another “dysfunctional export”(Allais, 2016). The Nordic countries still offer the best model for adult learning (Kuusipalo *et al.*, 2021) and England would do well to emulate those aspects of the Nordic model that are amenable to transfer rather than export its own broken model.

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