

The Workers' Educational Associations Tandrusti project in the Dudley area uses a community education approach to explore and promote the benefits of physical activity and health amongst members of black and minority ethnic communities



Adult and community learning providers are targeting an increasingly diverse range of learners

Strengthening communities through education and improving employment prospects

Adult and community learning is becoming increasingly focused on those communities with people most in need of learning opportunities to improve their lives. These include people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, those with mental health issues, and migrant workers, for example.

The overall volume of provision has declined this year. Although teaching and learning are satisfactory overall, with considerable variations in quality, the most effective classes are those in arts and information and communication technology. In the better provision, providers work effectively to ensure programmes match national and local priorities, and the needs and aspirations of specific learner groups.

The least effective teaching was found in preparation for life and work, particularly classes for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Tutors do not use assessment sufficiently well to plan learning, and the planning and monitoring of progress on non-accredited courses is still poor.

Providers have identified cuts in funding for adult provision at further education colleges as a significant barrier to planning progression routes, particularly for those

who wish to progress to an accredited course. Definitions of success and achievement on non-accredited courses are unclear and evidence of progression tends to be anecdotal rather than based on reliable data.

To promote progression, providers receive separate funding for family learning, Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities and provision below level 2. With leadership and management generally good, major restructuring to ensure financial viability is helping to improve the relevance of the curriculum to priority groups in the face of funding reductions and changing government priorities. Enabling under-represented groups to access learning remains a strength in most provision. Providers are refocusing their provision to develop individuals, support families, strengthen communities and enhance employment prospects. Providers work closely with external agencies to improve community cohesion, and carry out extensive, effective networking to promote learning. Partnerships to expand the range of informal adult learning are being created effectively with libraries, the museum service and neighbourhood and community and voluntary sector organisations. ■



Some strengths identified in the Annual Report:

- learners enjoy their courses and attendance is good
- programmes meet learners' aspirations and potential and national and local priorities
- learners are prepared well for further learning and/or employment
- relevant provision is located well for priority groups
- learner guidance and support is generally good or better
- the curriculum is increasingly relevant to priority learner groups
- leadership and management are generally good
- self-assessment processes and development planning are improving
- learners make good progress in developing skills relevant to their everyday lives.

Some weaknesses identified in the Annual Report:

- evidence of progression is usually not based on reliable data
- insufficient progression options for learners
- unclear definitions of success and achievement on non-accredited courses
- insufficient use of assessment to plan learning
- poor monitoring of learners' progress on non-accredited courses
- insufficient formal consultation with employers to identify requirements and development workers for some provision
- targets for staff are insufficiently challenging
- some skills for life strategies not well established
- insufficiently robust quality assurance arrangements
- insufficient focus of observation on the teaching and learning to implement improvements.

The inspector's view

'In adult and community learning provision it is pleasing to see learning opportunities provided in communities where it is most needed, however more needs to be done to ensure the quality of this provision continues to improve.'

Lorna Fitzjohn HMI, Ofsted

A national provider with the local touch



Ofsted has judged the overall effectiveness of the Workers' Educational Association as good. And it was graded outstanding in the subject areas of health, public services and care. Peter Templeton, Director of Education and Strategy, Workers' Educational Association, explains the organisation's work

The Workers' Educational Association is Britain's largest voluntary sector provider of adult learning, reaching 70,000 individual learners in England each year, plus a further 10,000 or more in Scotland. We organise courses in local venues in hundreds of communities through the shared values of our volunteers and staff. Much of our funding comes from a single contract across England with the Learning and Skills Council, which we manage through allocating targets amongst our nine regions (which have the same boundaries as the Government regions) and monitoring performance.

OUR PROVISION

The simplest way to describe our provision, which includes a vast range of course subjects across the country, is through our three educational strands. Every Workers' Educational Association course in England fits into one of these three strands, through which we plan to meet the intentions of learners and the different contexts within which they make their choices about joining courses.

THE THREE STRANDS

Second chance to learn (8% of provision)

This is about adults with 'few if any educational qualifications' and helping them gain nationally recognised qualifications. Thus it will range from 'first steps' to – potentially – an Access to Higher Education Certificate.

Community involvement (46% of provision)

This is about helping adults achieve a wider range of outcomes through purposeful education. These include improved health and well-being, better communication skills in situations like signing and lip reading, extending volunteering in schools, activism in unions and other roles, and the capacity to take part in community activity. Again there is an emphasis on disadvantaged students, but using a wider definition that includes health, social, economic and other factors.

Cultural Studies (36% of provision)

This strand is designed to attract all adults with a 'love of learning' who want to develop an understanding of a subject for 'its own sake' and wish to be involved in the planning and delivery of the provision.

SELF-ASSESSMENT, INSPECTION AND IMPROVEMENT

The Workers' Educational Association in England is inspected as one provider – leading to large inspection teams. Over the last four years we have developed a peer network of educational managers who work together to lead self-assessment and improvement. This arose from our preparation for inspection, but soon developed to be of continuing value to the Workers' Educational Association. Self-assessment and inspection can be costly and complex, compared to single-site or single-city providers. We use teleconferencing extensively

to manage the communications involved and the Ofsted team used our teleconference system for end of day 'meetings', with inspectors calling in from up to six locations.

As we have improved our work over the years, we have come to value this networked management approach. We supplement this with standard data and performance measures and have improved our work by focusing on key strategic or systemic improvement objectives. We have found that identifying the right big improvement issue, and then working as a team on actions needed, is more effective than creating very detailed, centralised plans. This is particularly important given capacity issues created by increasing regulatory demands, often relating to young learners taking full-time qualifications.

The Workers' Educational Association is a highly responsive provider of adult learning. Our partnership working is extensive and almost second nature. We are a committed mission-based organisation, but we want to be judged by external standards too. We are proud that the impetus of external inspection combined with the fantastic commitment of staff, tutors and volunteers means we continue to improve our provision and remain a distinctive provider and non-conformist voice for adult education in a period of great turbulence and uncertainty. ■

To read Ofsted's report visit www.ofsted.gov.uk and search '55436'.

For further information on the Worker's Educational Association visit www.wea.org.uk



YIP 08 – a 43ft sculpture of the Jaguar logo made from pressed steel panels. Part of the Workers' Educational Association's North West Region's 'Art DIY' project in 2004