
Lucia Quintero and Alan Tuckett

DIFFERENT BATTLEGROUND, NEW ADVOCACY TACTICS: A DECADE OF ADULT LEARNING IN ENGLAND

Abstract

In anticipation of CONFINTEA VI, this article critically reflects on the last decade of English adult education policy. The United Kingdom played an important role in 1997's Hamburg conference by putting forward International Adult Learners' Week, and inspiring delegates by its enthusiasm for adult education. However the trajectory of the past ten years has seen excessive amounts of initiatives come and go, a fall of adult learning participation and a more restricted view of adult education. Some of the policies discussed are: Individual Learning Accounts, the Union Learning Fund, Train to Gain, the Learning and Skills Council and the Adult and Community Learning Fund. By combining first-hand commentary with a chronological analysis of policy initiatives this article sets the scene for the new advocacy battles facing England.

PUNTO DE DEBATE DIFERENTE, NUEVAS TÁCTICAS DE ADVOCACY: UNA DÉCADA DE APRENDIZAJE DE PERSONAS ADULTAS EN INGLATERRA

Resumen

Anticipándose a la CONFINTEA VI, este artículo refleja de forma crítica las últimas décadas de la política inglesa de educación de personas adultas. El Reino Unido jugó un importante papel en la conferencia de Hamburgo de 1997 al proponer la Semana Internacional del Aprendizaje de las Personas Adultas y al animar a los delegados mediante su entusiasmo por la educación de personas adultas. Sin embargo, durante los diez últimos años se ha visto ir y venir una cantidad excesiva de iniciativas, una caída de la participación del aprendizaje y una visión más limitada de la educación de personas adultas. Algunas de las políticas debatidas son: Cuentas de Aprendizaje Individual, el Fondo de Aprendizaje Sindical, Formar para Ganar, el Consejo de Aprendizaje y Aptitudes y el Fondo de Aprendizaje de Personas Adultas y Comunitario. Al combinar comentarios de primera mano con un análisis cronológico de iniciativas políticas, este artículo plantea el escenario para las nuevas batallas de advocacy que enfrenta Inglaterra.

LES MUTATIONS DANS L'ÉDUCATION DES ADULTES CES DIX DERNIÈRES ANNÉES EN ANGLETERRE

Résumé

Allant au devant de la CONFINTEA VI, cet article pose un œil critique sur la politique menée cette dernière décennie en Angleterre au sujet de l'éducation des adultes. Le Royaume-Uni a joué un rôle important en 1997 à la conférence Hambourg en présentant la Semaine internationale des apprenants adultes et en inspirant les délégués par son enthousiasme à l'égard de l'éducation des adultes. Toutefois, ces dix dernières années ont été marquées par l'apparition et la disparition d'un nombre excessivement élevé de projets, par une baisse de la participation des adultes au circuit éducatif et par une conception de l'éducation des adultes devenue plus étroite. Les politiques passées ici en revue sont, entre autres, les suivantes : les Individual Learning Accounts (comptes individuels de formation), l'Union Learning Fund (fonds syndical pour la formation), le programme Train to Gain (former pour gagner), le Learning and Skills Council (conseil pour l'apprentissage et les compétences) et l'Adult and Community Learning Fund (fonds pour l'éducation des adultes et les projets éducatifs de proximité). Associant des commentaires de première main avec une analyse chronologique des initiatives politiques, cet article plante le décor des nouvelles luttes qui devront être livrées en Angleterre pour promouvoir et défendre les intérêts de l'éducation des adultes.

As the sixth CONFINTEA conference approaches, many adult educators will be reflecting on the extent of the progress achieved. To contribute to this meditative frame of mind this article illustrates the UK's journey in adult education since CONFINTEA V: from its initial burst of enthusiasm and desire for change, to its more practical and current struggles.

With a decade's hindsight there is no doubt that CONFINTEA V set an ambitious and challenging agenda for the national governments that signed up to it. In the UK, it came at a propitious time for the new Labour Government, which was elected on May Day 1997. In a clear break from the policies of the Conservative years, the Government rejoined UNESCO in June 1997, just ahead of the Hamburg conference. Already, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett had signalled his enthusiasm for the education of adults by making his first speech on taking office at the launch of Adult Learners' Week, and by announcing there the creation of a *National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning* chaired by Bob Fryer. Without delay, he requested this group, known as the Fryer Committee, to prepare a report on policy options for a lifelong learning government agenda.

To CONFINTEA, he sent the junior Minister for Lifelong Learning, Kim Howells, who proposed in his address that UNESCO should adopt an International Adult Learners' Week. After a great deal of work at the event, notably by delegates from South Africa, Jamaica, Slovenia, and in particular from Talvi Marja of Estonia, who was on the declaration's drafting committee, and Paul Belanger of UIL, the measure was adopted at the conference and, subsequently, by the UNESCO General Assembly. As a result, an emblematic trait of the British government's support for the CONFINTEA agenda has been the active endorsement and encouragement of learning festivals that, by celebrating existing adult learners, encourage others to join in.

One contextual issue that must be noted before further describing British adult education policies is that the political landscape of the United Kingdom is marked by the Labour Government's decision to pursue devolution of power to Scotland, Wales, and since the cessation of armed struggle in Northern Ireland to that province, too. Education is one of the main devolved powers, and there have been significant differences in the approaches adopted by the four administrations. For constraints of time and space this article focuses primarily on English adult education policies.

In England the report produced by the Fryer committee led to a government Green Paper,ⁱ *The Learning Age: A renaissance for a new Britain* (DfEE 1998). The document is most notable for its inspiring preface about the importance of adult learning for an enlightened democracy. In it, David Blunkett argued for a wide range of measures to stimulate participation, particularly for groups that

had previously benefited least from education, and envisioned a good deal of continuity in policies designed to stimulate learning for economic competitiveness. He stated:

As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings (DfEE 1998, 2).

Blunkett's views were consistent with the inclusive lifewide as well as lifelong perspective that infused the Hamburg event. The main measures outlined in *The Learning Age* touched on a number of the key recommendations of the CONFINTEA report. Chief among them were to:

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- ***expand further and higher education*** to provide for an extra 500,000 people by 2020;
 - ***make it easier for firms and individuals to learn by creating the University for Industry*** and launch it in late 1999;
 - ***set up individual learning accounts*** to encourage people to save to learn, and begin by allocating £150 million to support investment in learning accounts by one million people;
 - ***invest in young people*** so that more continue to study beyond age 16;
 - ***double help for basic literacy and numeracy*** skills amongst adults to involve over 500,000 adults a year by 2002;
 - ***widen participation in and access to learning*** both in further, higher, adult and community education (including residential provision), and through the University for Industry;
 - ***raise standards across teaching and learning*** after the age of 16 through our new Training Standards Council by ensuring implementation of the Dearing committee's standards proposals, and by inspection in further and adult education;
 - ***set and publish clear targets*** for the skills and qualifications we want to achieve as a nation;
 - ***work with business, employees and their trade unions*** to support and develop skills in the workplace;
 - ***build a qualification system which is easily understood***, gives equal value to both academic and vocational learning, meets employers' and individuals' needs and promotes the highest standards.
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DfEE 1998, 15)

The aspiration of *The Learning Age*, to create a society where people could enter and re-enter education at any stage of their lives, received wide public support with over 3,000 responses submitted, a great majority of which were positive.

However not all of the document's initiatives survived intact. For example, *individual learning accounts* offered, for the first million adults to sign up, £150 of government money to match just £25 of individual investment. It generated great enthusiasm and demand, but like a number of other measures it had been introduced in a hurry, and without good enough safeguards against fraud. A small number of fraudulent agencies established operations to gain individuals' money without offering services. Once this became clear, the initiative in England was halted, though it continued in Wales, and for workers in the health service. Nonetheless it showed that individual demand could be stimulated, and that especially where there were trusted peer group intermediaries, like trade union colleagues or learning champions in communities, it was possible to engage communities previously sceptical about the value of learning to their lives.

Another initiative was the *University for Industry* (Ufi), which was designed as a parallel institution to the enormously successful *Open University*. It was planned to provide online learning to people at work or seeking to study at levels below university. The Ufi has survived, though it has gone through several different remits in the years since its inception. A third success stemming from the Green Paper has been the work begun with the *Union Learning Fund*, to promote trade unions' support in the creation of a learning society. In the decade since the work started more than 20,000 trade unionists have become union learning representatives, encouraging colleagues back into learning. Furthermore the academy for trade union learning, *UnionLearn*, has helped to re-define modern trade unionism, and to ensure that not all the initiatives of a business-friendly government are focused solely on employer interests.

One key recommendation of Hamburg's *Agenda for the Future* was that governments should ensure the universal right to literacy and basic education. The *International Adult Literacy Survey* had highlighted the fact that seven million adults in England lacked functional skills in reading and writing and that one in five adults had very low numeracy abilities. The Government responded to this challenge with the launch of the document, *Skills for Life: The national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills* in 2001. The strategy aimed to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adults by 2004 by means of a promotional campaign and an entitlement to free training in basic skills. It also predetermined which priority groups had to be targeted in order to achieve the maximum impact. These were: unemployed and benefit claimants, prisoners, public sector employees and low-skilled workers in employment. It built on earlier commitments to create a national basic skills

curriculum based on new standards, design new teaching qualifications, and extend the reach of the strategy to take account of the needs of adults with learning difficulties. Significantly for the period that followed, provision for people for whom English was a second or additional language was also included.

The CONFINTEA commitment to fostering learning for democracy was also pursued through a number of routes. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) jointly managed an Adult and Community Learning Fund on behalf of the Government. Its purpose was to support local initiatives designed to engage and empower marginalised groups, and to spread the experience of active democratic action through learning. Another way learning for democracy was pursued was through the *Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy*, which sought to work with the poorest communities in England to build social capital and routes towards employment, especially for communities with strong concentrations of worklessness.

At the same time the Government's active labour market policies sought to improve the routes into work for unemployed people. However, different departmental policies inhibited the development of strategies that effectively secured sustainable and skilled work – the focus of job centres was to put work first, while the focus of the education departments was to secure qualifications for learners. Getting the two departments to harmonise their services to the same people has taken the full decade. However, some inter-departmental cooperation has begun to be successful. The heart of the new approach is to identify the barriers to sustainable employment and progression, and to organise both welfare and skills systems around tackling them. The Government is now committed to ensuring that all customers, regardless of the benefit they receive are able to attend part-time or full-time training if their personal adviser believes it is necessary to secure sustainable employment. This has led to the development of Skills Health Checks for claimants and the removal of the '16-hour rule' for specific benefit groups.ⁱⁱ

The four years of David Blunkett's leadership of the Department for Education and Employment saw a major rise in investment for adult learning, and something of a spirit of adventure. It also saw a blizzard of initiatives. The largest of these was the creation of a new government agency responsible for planning and funding further education. The remit given to the new body, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), re-asserted the vision for adult learning from *The Learning Age*. However, new bodies take on a life of their own, and the LSC began firmly committed to prioritise the task of meeting the skill needs of the British economy. The shift from learning to skills, reveals the increasing centralisation of departmental priorities by the Prime Minister's office. More direct control resulted from the establishment in 2001 of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, which is meant to monitor key priorities around education,

health, crime and transport. The Unit focused departments' attention on headline Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets, agreed between the Treasury and departments.

For adult learning these PSAs were a *Skills for Life* target, new goals for Level 3 (university entrance and skilled technician level) qualifications, and for higher education a determination to secure progress towards a 50% participation target by the age of 30. This had the perhaps unintended consequence of creating a new social disease of being 31 or over. Over time, the effect of the targets has been to displace focus from the complexity of the learning for which they are proxies onto the achievement of the narrow set of pre-established outcomes: box ticking, at worst. They have certainly had a negative effect on the breadth of adult learning opportunities.

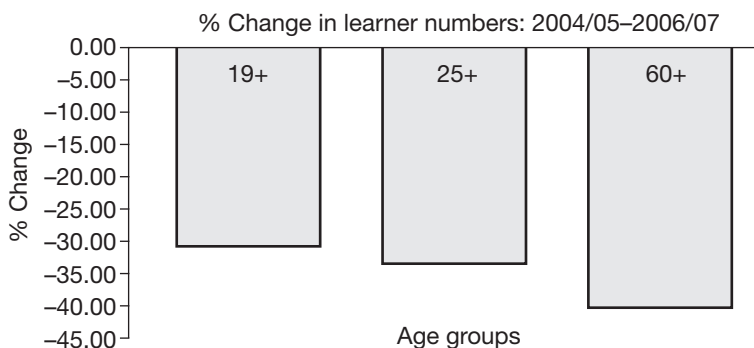
David Blunkett's successor as Secretary of State brought Estelle Morris, an education professional, to the leadership of the department, and whilst her priorities were overwhelmingly focused on school-aged education, she did bring a fresh dynamic to improving curriculum and the quality of learner experience to post-school education. However, her period in office was short, and the publication of the first skills strategy in 2003, *21st Century Skills: Realising our potential*, marked a sea shift in Government priorities for lifelong learning. The first period, with David Blunkett, had seen twin priorities for lifelong learning: economic modernisation, certainly, but also widening participation in pursuit of a fair and inclusive society. From 2003 onward the policy was to pursue equality and fairness through economic modernisation. 'Work,' the argument went, 'is the most effective route out of poverty'.

The main aim of the White Paper, *21st Century Skills: Realising our potential* (DfEE 2003) was to strengthen the UK's position as one of the world's leading economies. Adult learning was given a major role to play, for this would be achieved by ensuring individuals had the necessary skills to make themselves employable and that employers had the right skills to support their business. The document strongly focused on the right skills for economic productivity. It also announced the creation of 23 Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) to represent a new voice for employers and employees. SSCs are independent employer-led organisations that identify solutions to the skills needs of different economic sectors. For individual learners the document announced a new guarantee of free tuition to achieve a Level 2 (ISCED 3c, >2yrs upper secondary education) qualification and the recognition of ICT proficiency as a third basic skill in the *Skills for Life* programme. To develop a more responsive adult education system the White Paper proposed to reform the qualifications framework through strengthening Modern Apprenticeships, which offer labour market entrants work-based qualifications and (not for the first time!) introducing credit frameworks for adults.

To be fair, and largely because of the intervention of successive junior ministers, the skills strategy White Papers did recognise that adult learning serves purposes other than the narrowly economic ones. As the first paper, *21st Century Skills*, has it:

Economic and social objectives are necessarily intertwined. But skills serve wider purposes. For many people learning enriches their lives. They may enjoy learning for its own sake. Or it may make them better placed to give something back to their community, to help family or friends, to manage the family finances better, or help their children achieve more throughout their school careers (DfEE 2003, 60).

Whilst a modest budget was safeguarded for adult learning for personal and community development, large swathes of publicly funded work for adults in colleges of further education were cut as the Government focused on the development of work-based learning on employers' premises. The result of this has been a startling decline in the number of adults engaged in publicly funded provision, with 1.4 million adults lost in just two years, with a heavy weighting towards the loss of older learners:



Additionally within this fall of 1.4 million adult learning places, there has been a fall of 184,600 adult learners in programmes for personal fulfilment, civic participation and community development funded by the aforementioned adult learning safeguard. Apart from the lack of inflationary increases these changes are not the result of Government cuts. Although the loss of learners could be the result of providers concentrating on more expensive work for disabled and more disadvantaged learners such a dramatic decline points out the need to find the right balance between targeted provision and more general adult education.

Nevertheless some of the focus on labour market developments has been exciting – not least in the Army's successful literacy programmes, or the work

of the national Health Service University in focusing on the needs of the least qualified half of the NHS workforce. There are also inspiring employer engagement examples – in the transport sector alone the work of MerseyTravel allowed all its workers to access learning on a 24-hour basis through learning centres, and the British Aerospace created its own virtual corporate university. However, the one-third of British employers unwilling or unable to release staff for learning remained stubbornly untouched by these first initiatives.

A second skills strategy paper was published in 2005. *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work* (DfES 2005) built on the 2003 White Paper and sought to put employers' needs at the centre stage of the design and delivery of training. It announced the implementation of a National Employer Training Programme as the strategy to give employers rather than providers the power to determine how public funds were best to be spent to meet business priorities. In return for free and flexibly-funded training, employers were expected to allow employees enough time at work to undertake their studies. For individual learners a new entitlement for any low-skilled adult to get free training to achieve a first full Level 2 qualification is announced and the *Skills for Life* programme is given the new target of 2.25 million adults achieving recognised literacy and numeracy skills by 2010.

Not satisfied with these initiatives the Government announced a Treasury review of the skills needs of the UK economy for the year 2020, to be led by Lord Leitch. The Leitch Report, *Prosperity for all in the global economy: World Class Skills*, provided an account of the UK's current skills landscape as well as an estimate of the optimal skills mix necessary to maximise economic growth and social justice. It recommended the following skills targets for 2020, to ensure that the UK was in the top quartile of OECD countries by each of the indicators used in international comparison. Although it argued that central planning could not be successful in predicting skills needs, it went on to announce new skills targets for the country:

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- 95 per cent of adults to achieve the basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy, an increase from levels of 85 per cent literacy and 79 per cent numeracy in 2005;
 - exceeding 90 per cent of adults qualified to at least Level 2, an increase from 69 per cent in 2005. A commitment to go further and achieve 95 per cent as soon as possible;
 - shifting the balance of intermediate skills from Level 2 to Level 3. Improving the esteem, quantity and quality of intermediate skills. This means 1.9 million additional Level 3 attainments over the period and boosting the number of apprentices to 500,000 a year;
 - exceeding 40 per cent of adults qualified to Level 4 and above, up from 29 per cent in 2005, with a commitment to continue progression.
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The review foresaw that responsibility for achieving targets would be shared between government, employers and individuals. The three stakeholders would need to increase action and investment and focus their efforts on economically valuable skills. Leitch recommended that the way forward was to build on existing structures while at the same time modifying the system to make it more demand-led and responsive to future market needs.

The net effect of these changes has been the massive expansion of a programme to support workplace learning with public funds. The Train to Gain programme has been slow to secure the levels of participation and achievement that the Government would like to see, although it is gradually building a head of steam. However, the resources to fund this programme have come directly from open courses that learners freely choose on their own terms. Future plans make clear that by 2015 the only public funding for adult learning, apart from the modest safeguarded budget NIACE helped to negotiate in 2003, will be employer-based Train to Gain, or a newly re-introduced learning account, *Skills for Jobs*, where funding will be available as long as you learn what the government wants you to learn.

Language courses have been major casualties of these changes. So have community-based initiatives to engage disadvantaged communities. Provision for retired people has dropped by more than half. Of course, state funding is not the only source of opportunity for learning. Reading groups are booming; there is a thriving industry in study-based tourism for those who can afford it. Britain's museums and galleries offer a wide range of activities for learners, and whilst explicit provision for adults' cultural development is cut back, schools are extending their brief to serve the communities in which their pupils live. The Government is currently trying to map the range of this activity, through a consultation paper, *Informal Adult Learning – Shaping the way ahead*, so that it can better target what money it has for community learning.

Internationally, much of UK government aid has been focused on universal primary education at the expense of those millennium development goals that directly benefit adult learning, though there are now signs that this focus is shifting.

Overall, warm aspirations of the early years of a Labour Government have given way to a more narrow utilitarianism – which is of course of benefit to those people whose needs are met by Government programmes. However, the spirit of CONFINTEA V, so warmly embraced by the Government's early programmes, now seems a lifetime away. This of course leads to a new challenge for non-government agencies and adult educators: to advocate for adult and lifelong learning in the context of changing priorities for public funding. We are confident CONFINTEA VI will give us new tools, strategies and momentum for the next decade.

Lucia Quintero is a Policy Officer at NIACE where she analyses and informs UK public policy on adult education. She previously worked in the Regional Committee for Cooperation with UNESCO in her home country, Mexico. In 2007, she graduated from a MA in Public Policy of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, with a specialism in widening participation and higher education. She also has a bachelor in Philosophy from the University of Leuven in Belgium and a bachelor in Humanities and Social Sciences from the University of Monterrey, Mexico. She has collaborated in several research projects and conducted fieldwork about the identity of Sephardic Jews in the Balkans, indigenous poverty in the Tarahumara region of Mexico and the on the higher education system of Monterrey, Mexico. She has recently co-authored the UK's National Report for CONFINTEA VI.

Alan Tuckett OBE is Director of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, having worked previously as an adult education organiser in Brighton and as a Principal in inner London. He started Adult Learners' Week in the UK in 1992, and supported its adoption by UNESCO, and its spread to more than 50 countries. He is a Special Professor in Continuing Education at the University of Nottingham and an Honorary Professor at the Institute of Lifelong Learning at Leicester University. He is treasurer of the International Council for Adult Education. He was Vice-Chair of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning 1997-9, President of the International League for Social Commitment in Adult Education in 1986-7, and President of the Pre-School Learning Alliance from 1999-2003. He advises UNESCO on adult learning. Alan was a member of the Adult Learning Committee of the Learning and Skills Council 2000 to 2007, and of the Government's Skills Alliance 1997-2003. He has seven honorary doctorates, is a Fellow of City & Guilds, and was inducted into the International Hall of Fame for Adult Education in 2006. He was awarded the OBE in 1995.

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Notes

- ¹ A Green Paper is a consultative document issued by the government and containing policy proposals for public discussion.
- ² The 16-hour rule forbids those claiming housing benefit and those claiming job seeker's allowance who have passed their nineteenth birthday to study for more than 16 hours of guided learning per week. This applies to all levels of learning from basic ESOL courses to degree level study. In addition, Jobcentre Plus may require claimants to abandon courses of study in order to take up employment.