



DIUS Consultation on Informal Adult Learning Response from the Workers' Educational Association

Introduction

We welcome the review, the widespread consultation and the commitment and enthusiasm of the Secretary of State for the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS).

This response is the outcome of extensive debate, reflection and consultation involving WEA students, staff, voluntary members and partner organisations. All involved with the WEA across England were enthusiastic about having the opportunity to put forward their views and experiences on issues that have always been at the centre of our work and mission.

Adult education engages the passion and interest of millions; as the Department recognises it has a rich history in the UK. Its future is of immense importance in our fluid, diverse and complex 21st Century society.

The WEA welcomes the government's emphasis on, and greatly expanded funding of, the skills and qualifications of adults who gained less from their schooling. We actively contribute to this, particularly through our Skills for Life and employer engagement provision.

Like DIUS we recognise that adult education has a wide significance in contemporary society; it has a strong appeal to many groups and is central to important government agendas such as:

- Health improvement
- Digital divide
- Community Cohesion and Citizenship
- Older people

Informal adult learning also has a key role to play in challenging inequality both in UK society and globally, linking the development of independent and critical thinking with democratic actions to secure greater social justice.

The term 'informal adult learning' (IAL) does capture many important facets of current provision: its flexibility, localness and conviviality. It also helps to express the way adult education can fashion innovative, prompt and imaginative responses to individual and community needs.

However, we feel that there is a need to provide a clear, positive definition of 'informal adult learning'. For example, in 'Learning: the treasure within' Delors (1996) - a report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century - four pillars of learning throughout life are identified:

- **Learning to know**, that is acquiring the instruments of understanding and the foundation for learning throughout life - meaning learning to learn
- **Learning to do**, comprising the ability to act creatively on one's environment
- **Learning to live together, learning to live with others** including participating and co-operating with other people in all human activities
- **Learning to be**, which is developing independence, judgement, and personal responsibility in order to become the agent of one's life.

This provides a helpful and challenging perspective on learning that could contribute to understanding different elements needed in a definition.

Understanding and improving current provision

We share the DIUS enthusiasm for the growth in informal education, often self-organised and highly flexible. The WEA itself depends upon the thirst for learning and the skills and enthusiasm of volunteers. We have always mixed one-off and informal 'events' (such as exhibitions, field trips, social gatherings) with more sustained and structured educational provision.

However, much of the success of adult education is built around highly structured provision: regular class meetings taught by professional tutors following negotiated schemes of work and agreed learning outcomes. This provision is supported and sustained by a professional infrastructure to ensure improvement and high standards. WEA members, and many others, see this structure as essential for their effective learning. Structured adult educational provision, stretching back to the early twentieth century tutorial classes, constitutes an invaluable and cost effective part of the UK's social and cultural landscape. This provision has continually evolved and improved; for example it now embraces personalised learning and is increasingly making use of information and learning technology. We are anxious that 'informal' should not be understood as necessarily casual or - indeed - unimportant.

Adult education has invariably been an important way through which citizens engage with the great issues and changes of the day. Contemporary UK society faces massive challenges such as globalisation, climate change and the social impact of technology. It is essential that there exists a variety

of ways through which we can understand and address these challenges in a critical and informed way.

Any vision for IAL needs to include a *spectrum* of opportunities embracing the individual and ‘casual’ as well as the sustained, structured and collective. This not only provides choice but recognises the *connectivity* between different sorts of adult learning. Informal individual learning, such as watching a TV programme or visiting a gallery, often sparks an interest developed through structured provision. Participation in ‘formal’, qualification-based learning often originates in local informal courses and vice versa with formal and/or structured learning leading to following up a subject through voluntary or individual activity.

Many WEA tutors and students would like to see a lighter ‘paperwork’ regime, particularly on shorter courses. However this should not be at the expense of recent quality improvements prompted in part by ALI and Ofsted requirements.

Additionally, the presence of a local infrastructure of professionally led publicly funded adult learning with high quality teaching can be instrumental in linking different forms, for example by using local experts and cultural practitioners as tutors.

Government Contribution

For over a hundred years government (centrally and through local government) has provided financial support along with a policy and regulatory framework for adult education. This support is invaluable in:

- Maintaining affordable provision and a professional infrastructure
- Monitoring and improving standards
- Ensuring that provision addresses public policy agendas
- Recognising the part of adult education in sustaining a vibrant civil society

A consequence of the sharpened focus on skills and qualifications, and machinery of government changes affecting local government, has been a reduction in funding available for IAL and consequent loss of adult learning places in publicly funded provision. This has arisen from:

- Reduction of IAL by FE Colleges
- Increase in course fees across the adult learning sector
- Flat-lining of ‘safeguard budget’
- Impact of age-related regulations

There is also a widespread and well founded popular perception that government does not value IAL to the same extent as skills and qualifications; this can impact upon the morale of staff and volunteers, and the attitudes of learners. Indeed IAL makes a significant contribution to skills development, particularly those ‘soft skills’ (such as communications, team working and problem solving), much valued by employers - as well as study and learning skills necessary for educational progression.

The recognition of the role of other government departments in supporting IAL is welcome; adult learning can and does make a critical and fundamental contribution to a range of policy objectives. Additionally, funding from these departments supports a wide range of valuable and innovative projects and activities, although these funds are usually time limited and heavily subscribed. What is more, many of the outcomes and benefits of adult learning are not recognised in mainstream funding for lifelong learning. These benefits include: improved health and well-being; increasing and prolonged independence for older people; changes in attitudes, including racial tolerance; increases in civil participation; enhanced community cohesion and regeneration; and benefits to children in the family¹). These outcomes often also tackle the complex policy issues which lie in the cracks between government departmental policies, and lack sustained financial or other support.

The scale of publicly funded adult learning outside of the skills agenda is quite modest and we would like to see an Independent Commissioner for Adult Learning appointed to:

- represent the interests of adults
- develop the learner voice
- lead cross departmental activity around public education campaigns e.g. on health improvement, community engagement, active citizenship etc
- oversee and develop a self-regulating framework for the funding of local and national infrastructures to sustain a vibrant lifelong learning system which is affordable and meets adults' needs
- determine the distribution of available Government funding across the sector

Government influence could also be used to encourage support for IAL (for instance by providing cheap/free accommodation that is not otherwise in use) and championing its contribution to a range of public policy agendas. We are not convinced that individual learning accounts/vouchers are the most appropriate mechanism for strengthening learner leadership.

DIUS funded IAL

'Traditional' DIUS funded IAL providers - such as WEA, other Specialist Designated Institutions (SDIs), and Local Authorities - have proved highly adaptable and able to tackle new agendas and areas of need, using and improving their established expertise, networks and public service ethos. Examples are plenty: skills for life, computer skills, family learning but also hundreds of complex local contexts such as work with offenders, substance abusers, the homeless, migrant communities etc.

¹ Feinstein L, Hammond C, Woods L, Preston J & Bynner J (2003), *The Contribution of Adult Learning to Health and Social Capital, Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning*, London, Institute of Education, Schuller T, Brassett-Grundy A, Green A, Hammond C, & Preston C (2002), *Learning, Continuity and Change in Adult Life*, The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, London, Institute of Education

The 'Safeguard' budget, and continued funding of SDIs, has helped underpin this and provide some stability, enabling this work to continue. The WEA has taken part - where possible - in PCDL partnerships but would agree that their progress has been uneven. It is questionable whether they provide a viable vehicle for an ambitious re-shaping of IAL. An alternative approach would be to build on the Local Strategic Partnership and Local Area Agreement framework. This framework already enables the allocation of resources around policy priorities and areas of educational, health and economic deprivation. The framework could be developed to encompass clearly defined community learning and ensure strong safeguards for local third sector providers.

As a national Association the WEA is acutely aware of the value of a national infrastructure that supports and enhances the activities of local staff and volunteers. Our proposals above (for the establishment of an Adult Learning Commissioner, and a sector-led, self regulating body to determine priorities and ensure the right balance and incentives to sustain responsiveness to local needs and a national infrastructure for adult learning) would help to achieve this.

Ensuring equality of access to learning

Equality of access- indeed an egalitarian perspective generally - is at the heart of adult education's mission; the WEA strives to ensure that all barriers to participation are removed, or at least minimised. Much of the structure of IAL is designed to encourage accessibility and participation.

In the current climate we are concerned that fee increases are deterring learners, especially *older adults* and those in families on low incomes many of whom have limited resources. For instance, 50% of those of retirement age qualify for pension tax credit (although only two thirds of these claim it). Older adults are a significant group of learners and IAL's contribution to their wellbeing and community involvement is well documented. We have experience too that in many low-paid households, adult and family learning is a powerful motivation to achieve success and such groups should not be deterred from participating. In this context it is worrying that - according to the recent NIACE survey (May 2008) - adult participation amongst employed adults is continuing to reduce.

The WEA is also acutely aware that funding and priority changes in FE have led to loss of community education provision often of a 'first steps' or 'community engagement' variety. This loss is having a detrimental impact on deprived communities and limiting opportunities to engage individuals in learning and skills development.

The acknowledgment by the DIUS of the 'digital divide' is also relevant and needs addressing through IAL. Frequently 'self-directed learning' using technology requires skills, resources and confidence that can best be

developed through structured adult learning. The use of well constructed 'blended learning' programmes can be effective here.

In recognising that resources will inevitably be scarce and limited, the identification of priorities through a combination of national commissioning and local strategic partnerships, involving statutory and voluntary organisations, can provide a mechanism to target them to those in greatest need.

New technology and broadcasting

The internet has transformed the availability of knowledge and the possibilities for communication, globally as well as nationally. IAL providers, including the WEA, are making increasing use of this to the benefit of learners. Government support in terms of capital grants for ILT equipment has stimulated progress. The major issue now is to secure widespread connectivity in dispersed locations.

There is no doubt that new media can greatly *enhance* adult learning but - at the same time - the social and civic character of much IAL (U3A as well as WEA) is a valuable community collective forum to counter the fragmenting and individualising impact of the internet. This is all the more true when combined with the outreach work and understanding of local community that is essential in an inclusive learning service. We see face to face and group based learning as a priority whilst recognising the additional value of one-to-one learning, reading, TV and other media, including museums, libraries and archives collections.

Similarly, whilst internet and new media expand the curriculum; they also fragment it. They offer huge - and global - opportunities for informal contact and learning for example around shared hobbies, faith communities, sporting interests, learning aims etc. but this militates against a shared culture. An important part of the adult education tradition in the UK is providing a context within UK history and culture and a capacity to learn about, understand and appreciate different cultures, beliefs and standpoints.

Conclusion

DIUS has performed a great service to current and future adult learners by initiating this debate and highlighting the importance of IAL. Preparing our response has underlined to us - as we're sure it will to the Secretary of State - its continuing vitality, relevance and importance within UK society. Its role touches and enhances government and public priorities at so many different points. The case for permanent public funding, support and enthusiasm is formidable.