

Written evidence submitted by the Institutes for Adult Learning

Introduction

- The Institutes for Adult Learning (the IALs) are nine long established education organisations who support over 130,000 adult learners (aged 19+) every year. While each of the nine is established in its own right, we are brought together as a network by virtue of having in common the status of “Specialist Designated Institutions” derived from the 1992 Education Act.
- We work strategically as a group to share good practice, influence policy development and to deliver a vision – *for every adult to be inspired, motivated and enabled to learn throughout their lives.*
- The nine members of the group are: City Lit, Fircroft College, Mary Ward Centre, Morley College London, Northern College, Richmond & Hillcroft Adult Community College, Ruskin College, the WEA and WMC (Working Men’s College).
- The IALs provide a wide curriculum, offering a choice of entry points for people of many different backgrounds and interests. These include a high proportion of people from disadvantaged communities who may come to the courses with few or no qualifications, as a means of building confidence or making new contacts within their community, to develop new skills perhaps with the intention of going on to study for a qualification or to seek work.
- The IALs welcome the opportunity to take part in the Select Committee’s inquiry into Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning. We are particularly pleased to see that the terms of reference encourage responses which cover the wide range of outcomes which adult learning can achieve (in work and in terms of social justice and health) and explore the full range of approaches to learning (formal and informal) which can be found across the IAL network.

What are the benefits of adult skills and lifelong learning (ASALL) for productivity and upskilling the workforce?

1. Investment in adult skills and lifelong learning has a clear and direct benefit on productivity and upskilling (see, for example, the NIESR report, *Skills and Productivity in an International Context* published in 2015 by BIS). Yet in the UK, one in five adults, around nine million people, lack either functional literacy or numeracy. Recent analysis by the Learning and Work Institute suggests that the UK is set to slip still further in comparison to other G7 countries – from 4th to 6th – for the number of people lacking these essential skills, unless new investment is forthcoming. The scope for improving productivity through supporting adult skills at all levels therefore, and particularly for those who are lowest skilled, is considerable.
2. Community adult learning, of the type provided by the Institutes for Adult Learning (IALs), provides essential support for many people who are furthest from the job market and are seeking to progress into work. All IALs enrol a

significant proportion of students with low or no qualifications as well as many who are seeking work and/or claiming income-related benefits. Joining a course can often be the catalyst for adult learners finding work, not only from acquiring specific work-related skills but also from gaining the confidence and the focus to apply and progress.

3. The nature of the modern workplace means that adult learning is increasingly crucial for people of all ages regardless of their level of skills and qualifications. Longer working lives and more frequent career changes mean regular upskilling is a necessity. Rapid developments in technology require us all to acquire knowledge to stay on top of the platforms we use in the workplace and at home. Automation means that reskilling and redeployment are the only options available to many employees who wish to stay in the workforce at all (as the design of the National Retraining Scheme acknowledges).
4. The IALs are alert to the demands and challenges of the 21st century workplace. The IALs have close links with employers and unions and in some cases are able to provide courses in partnership, including learning in the workplace itself. For many adult learners, having provision located in the community allows for a level of flexibility in venue and timing which enables them to fit courses around working lives.
5. Flexible community-based adult learning is also increasingly important in the light of modern working practices such as the increase in self-employment, flexible working, holding more than one job and other trends which move away from the paradigm of staying with a single employer for long periods and working a standard eight hour day. A combination of workplace and community learning offers maximum flexibility for all parts of the workforce, though more can be done to help the self-employed and those in SMEs, as larger employers still tend to invest more in training.
6. Surveys of employers often show that they are not satisfied with the skills levels of school leavers and graduates. Surveys of adult learners on the other hand tend to show increases in confidence, resilience, communication skills, problem solving, and adaptability - many of the qualities which modern employers look for.
7. Funding for adult education is increasingly devolved to the Mayoral Combined Authorities and the GLA, whose initial strategies have been focused primarily on skills for employment and increasing productivity. IALs in devolved areas have engaged actively with the development of the GLA/MCAs' skills strategies and community adult learning is increasingly recognised as an important part of the approach to delivering employment and productivity outcomes at a regional level.

What are the benefits of ASALL for social justice, health and well-being?

8. Each of the IALs were founded on charitable purposes which promote social justice and this is carried through in our individual and collective mission(s) and vision(s).

9. IAL students are from the widest possible range of backgrounds and circumstances. The accessibility of community adult learning leads to remarkable diversity not only within colleges as a whole but even within individual classes. IALs have considerable reach into disadvantaged communities and have expertise in supporting adults with specific needs.
10. Positive outcomes are identifiable across the adult student population regardless of background. The benefits of ASALL are seen both at individual *and* community level. Individuals report outcomes in terms of progression and wellbeing. There is also evidence of adult learners being more active citizens in their communities – being more likely to volunteer or to vote in local elections for example. Adult education colleges are often seen as well regarded hubs in their communities and providers also work in partnership with other community organisations.
11. One of the key characteristics of adult learning is the opportunity to explore ideas and challenge views in a safe and supportive environment. Development of critical thinking is often cited as an outcome of adult learning and by encouraging students to challenge misinformation, prejudice and inequality, community learning has a significant part to play in promoting social justice.
12. As the Social Mobility Commission has argued, the education system as a whole contributes to inequality when individuals (often already from poorer backgrounds) leave school without qualifications or without functional skills and cannot get a foothold on better employment or other progression routes. Adult education is a means of rectifying this imbalance by offering those with low or no qualifications an opportunity to get back into education and to find a pathway which is right for them.
13. Inter-generational inequality can also be tackled through adult learning. Adult learners are more likely to support their children in their learning and to “normalise” and promote the benefits of learning which may contribute to breaking cycles of low attainment and diminished prospects.
14. The health and wellbeing benefits of adult learning are increasingly well documented. The Department for Education’s *Community learning mental health research project* (2018) for example, found a number of positive improvements in the mental health of learners in the study. The WEA’s most recent Impact Report found that students visited the GP less often than the national average. The What Works Well-Being Centre concluded that “existing evidence shows us that learning is good for well-being” (particularly where this is targeted on specific groups with identifiable needs).
15. One of the most interesting conclusions of most health and wellbeing studies is that benefits can come from *any type* of adult learning – the focus does not have to be explicitly health related. This is an important principle as it suggests that there are benefits in motivating people to learn based on what they are interested in rather than what is deemed “good” for them.

16. The IALs would certainly welcome schemes such as social prescribing and other means by which the health service can connect people more easily with learning opportunities. The sorts of health conditions, such as mild depression and anxiety, which adult learning is shown to improve, are also amongst those conditions which the health service is under increasing pressure to treat.
17. The ability of adult learning to instil confidence and resilience is also crucial here in terms of supporting people to have more control over their own lives and to adapt to change and challenge. Community adult learning is also a means of countering social isolation and loneliness, which in turn can exacerbate mental ill-health.

What role can local authorities/combined authority areas play in ASALL provision?

18. We know that the overall level of participation in adult learning is decreasing and the pressures on local authority budgets are certainly a significant contributory factor to this. Not only because of direct funding but also the impact on related services. "There are real concerns about the impact which falling local government spending will have on the ability to maintain libraries, childrens' centres, museums and other community locations where adult learning is offered" (UCU, *Adult and community education*, Policy briefing, January 2016).
19. The IALs derive funding from multiple sources including national government (usually through the ESFA) and regional bodies of which the Combined Authorities are increasingly important. Although local government funding tends not to be the main source for most IALs, close strategic working with local authorities remains important.
20. The devolution of previously national AEB to the GLA/MCA's has presented new opportunities and ways of working for the IALs and other providers, though it has not been without challenges particularly for those providers operating nationally (and across regional boundaries).
21. Learners should not be disadvantaged by where they live – either within a Combined Authority area or not – and we hope to see funding maintained by national government in areas which do not have a devolution deal, and an expectation that adult and community learning continues to be funded through the AEB by both the ESFA and combined authorities.
22. We would like to see local and regional government making full use of the range of outcomes which adult learning providers can offer including those relating to skills/productivity; health & wellbeing; community engagement and participation.
23. We would also like to encourage more "joining up" or cross-referring of local, regional and national strategies so that, for example, local industrial strategies also link with health and education strategies covering the same geographical areas. The benefits of adult learning can be best understood in a

“holistic” way – multiple benefits for people who enter into learning for multiple reasons. Hence, silo approaches will not deliver the best outcomes.

24. This could also extend to the method of funding – the ability to use funding flexibly and in an agile way would be more effective than having multiple contracts narrowly defined. Allowing good quality adult education providers to use their funding flexibly will make the most of having a wide curriculum and a range of approaches to support a diverse community of learners.
25. Local and regional funders would benefit by recognising the specialisms which IALs and other providers have – e.g. in creative industries and the arts; specific provision for adult learners with disabilities; support for learners with trauma or mental health needs. These areas of provision could progress local/regional priorities beyond mainstream education and skills objectives
26. Creating more opportunities for learning is especially important and the proposal in the Augar review of post-18 Education Funding to make use of the post-18 local education infrastructure should be explored. This should include informal community learning venues as well as colleges in order to encourage maximum use of facilities where adult learning can take place at flexible times throughout the week.
27. Investment in Information, Advice & Guidance is especially essential and there is a clear role for local/regional agencies in this, including signposting from outside education settings (e.g. job centres, health centres, community hubs).
28. The IAL network is national, as are other adult learning networks such as Holesx and Association of Colleges. There is value in local and regional agencies learning from each other and sharing best practice and we would welcome assistance to existing networks to facilitate this.

To what extent is the range, balance and quality of formal and informal ASALL education adequate?

29. All of the Institutes for Adult Learning are rated as Good or above by OFSTED (including Outstanding providers) and this is typical of the sector - out of 238 community and skills providers as of June 2016, 86 per cent were judged to be good or outstanding at their latest inspection (Adult Education: Too Important To Be Left To Chance, University of Warwick).
30. Just as importantly, student surveys carried out by the IALs consistently show high satisfaction rates.
31. Taken together, the IAL’s reach covers the whole of England (and in the case of the WEA, Scotland as well). As previously noted, however, local authority budget cuts have reduced the level of provision across the sector as a whole and there will inevitably be cold spots in provision in some areas.
32. The IALs also offer, between us, examples of many different and complementary approaches to adult learning – such as residential settings;

accredited courses; provision in community venues; specialist provision for learners with particular needs.

33. The Augar Review and others have pointed out the education system's bias towards University education and the need to redress the balance towards other forms and levels of learning. Often this is couched as an argument for a higher status for technical education but we would also argue that lower level qualifications and "informal" learning are just as valuable both in their own right (for the benefits they bring to confidence, health etc) and also as gateways to further/higher education and other progression pathways (such as into employment). We would argue for a balanced and lifelong education system which allows learners of any age and background to choose what's right for them.
34. We feel that the Inquiry is a significant opportunity to promote the the importance of "informal" (or unaccredited) education and the wide range of positive outcomes it brings for individuals and communities. There is always a danger of informal learning being lost in the drive towards readily-measured outcomes related to educational qualifications and employability measures. It should not be an either/or – for many people informal learning can provide outcomes which are just as important as those that could be achieved through an accredited course (including work-related outcomes) and learners should have the choice for when informal or formal routes are best for them.
35. Choice and accessibility are enhanced by the wide curriculum which the IALs are able to offer. Recent changes to the OFSTED inspection framework are a step in the right direction in retaining this, offering providers the opportunity to define their approach in terms of student needs and destinations rather than a prescribed or narrow set of measures.
36. We would like to see more collaboration and linkage across the education sector – with adult, further and higher education bodies working more closely together (the competitive nature of funding not helpful in this regard). Better linkage could help to make all types of provision equally accessible to adult learners, as pathways and access points will be clearer.
37. The increasing use of online learning platforms will be challenging in terms of quality control – trusted sites and signposting will become increasingly important. There is a role for IALs and other established learning providers in this both as content providers and providing guidance for students more generally.
38. While there are many positives when reviewing the range, balance and quality of existing adult learning provision, it is nevertheless true that financial, cultural and structural barriers currently stand in the way of all-age learning being the norm. The education system is geared towards most people's learning taking place before the age of 25 (or considerably sooner in many cases) with only occasional (if any) returns to formal or structured learning later in life. We need a system – and a national culture – which facilitates learning at any age. Longer working lives - with multiple job/career changes – necessitates this and as we have argued throughout this response,

the wider benefits to the economy, to communities and for individuals would be immense.

Who currently participates in and benefits from lifelong learning?

39. The IALs support students of all ages (from 19 upwards) and all social and cultural backgrounds. In line with our missions and charitable purposes, the IALs enrol high percentages of students who are from groups under-represented or disadvantaged in other parts of the education sector or in society at large.
40. Although it is difficult to generalise across the whole of the IAL network, cumulatively one can expect to see a high percentage of: students identifying as BAMER; women; people who report disabilities or long-term medical conditions; those with low/no qualifications; students who are unemployed or on low incomes or benefits; an average age which tends towards older age brackets.
41. IAL provision is unusual in being able to offer publicly funded courses, with subsidised entry for disadvantaged learners, within the same institution as non-accredited courses for learners who are able to pay. It is important to maintain this flexibility both from the point of view of inclusiveness and bringing communities together as well as the opportunity to cross-subsidise provision where possible and diversify income streams.
42. The wider context of participation is provided by the Learning & Work Institute's *Adult Participation in Learning Survey*, which was most recently published in 2018. This offers similarities and contrasts with the IAL student demographic – with the national participation rates suggesting that you are more likely to be in learning if you are in work, with higher qualifications, generally younger and from higher social class groups. This reflects the tendency for most adult learning to be provided or supported by employers or at least to be work-related in some form.
43. IAL students tend to have a broader range of motivations and interests than work/employment alone and the support which an IAL provider offers may appeal to a wider group of learners than other more formal or workplace education settings.
44. The finding of the latest L&W Participation Survey that the number of adult learners is at the lowest in the twenty-year history of the survey is of considerable concern to the IALs and the rest of the adult education sector. It reflects the long period of under-funding and lack of strategic national planning for adult education and requires urgent attention by the Government in forthcoming spending reviews.
45. Although it is certainly true that levels of participation in publicly-funded adult learning have declined, the level of self-started, informal and particularly online adult learning probably means that we only have a partial view of the true full range of participation. Definitions of learning also come into play, as not all activities are universally recognised (even by the "learner" themselves).

46. This is another reason why any national lifelong learning strategy needs to acknowledge “informal” learning and the continuum which exists for learners who may move between formal/structured courses and self-organised and unaccredited learning, depending on their current needs and requirements.
47. Adult learners can only make informed choices about their learning needs and opportunities, however, if there is a solid Information, Advice and Guidance framework. We know that simple lack of awareness of what is available is often the biggest barrier to accessing learning. IAL students often tell us how random and unstructured the process of finding out about adult education courses is. Those who are participating are often those who were fortunate enough to stumble on the right piece of information at the right time.
48. Word of mouth and local knowledge are often the key motivation for taking up adult learning. Community adult learning can often have a positive “ripple” effect as those who are connected to adult learners (their children or family, their wider community) also benefit, either through taking up learning themselves or because adult learners tend to become more engaged and positive in family and community life.

What lessons can the UK learn from abroad?

49. The IALs are part of wider networks - such as the UK Impact Forum and epale – who are better placed provide a global overview of best practice and we recommend their work to the Committee.

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