

Written evidence submitted by Professor John Holford

I am Robert Peers Professor of Adult Education at the University of Nottingham, lead the international (Horizon 2020) project "ENLIVEN",¹ and edit the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. I have been active in adult education and lifelong learning as a professional practitioner, manager, organiser, teacher and researcher for over forty years.

I am also currently joint secretary to the Centenary Commission on Adult Education, and chair the #AdultEducation100 campaign: these are marking the centenary of the Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee's paradigm-shifting *Final Report* (1919; Cmd 321).

This submission is made in a personal capacity, based on my experience of research and practice in adult education and lifelong learning.

I also associate myself with the submission made to the Select Committee on behalf of the Centenary Commission.

Productivity and upskilling the workforce

1. The benefits of adult education and lifelong learning for the purposes of improving people's capacities at work, or for seeking work, are very well established. They are of clear importance, given likely future scenarios for the world of work (in the light of artificial intelligence, etc.) However, since the benefits of lifelong learning for vocational purposes have been dominant in UK and international policy agendas (to the point of fixation) over recent decades, I shall not dwell on them in this submission.
2. The focus of adult education policy on workplace skills is misplaced, even for the purposes for which it is intended. There is increasing evidence that a strong vocational bias in education systems has a negative impact on employment (see, e.g., Brunello and Rocco (2017); Golsteyn and Stenberg (2017); Hampf and Woessmann (2017); Hanushek, Schwerdt, Woessmann, and Zhang (2017); Krueger and Kumar (2004); Rözer and Bol (2019); Ryan (2003). This appears to be in part because contemporary labour markets require flexibility and adaptability, which is developed more effectively by broad education than through vocationally-specific skills.
3. One significant research finding, too often ignored, is the role workplaces play in adult learning. Research shows that while some workplaces provide "expansive" environments, encouraging workers' learning, others are much more "restrictive" (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson & Unwin 2009). This is not a matter (only) of what training courses an employer offers, but (much more important) of whether the *organisation of work* (production processes, group working, allocation of responsibilities, use of technologies, role of trade unions, etc.) encourages informal learning. Research also shows that learning "spills over" between dimensions of life (work, civic, personal). This applies

¹ Encouraging Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe, 2016-19 (funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme under Grant No. 693989).

not only to technical knowledge and skills (e.g. computers and plumbing), but also to learning of knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant to citizenship (Holford & van der Veen 2005). It is particularly significant in the light of such trends as individualised working, the “gig economy”, the decline of trade union membership, etc.

Social justice, health and well-being

4. Policy in recent years has undervalued adult learning for broader purposes. There is now a wealth of published, peer-reviewed, research that leaves little if any room for doubt on adult learning’s benefits for personal development, community and social cohesion, and the strength of democracy. I refer the Committee, e.g., to: Desjardins and Warnke (2012); McNair (2013, 2015); OECD CERI (2007); Schuller (2017); Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brassett-Grundy, and Bynner (2004); Thöne-Geyer (2014); UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2016). However, this research has been substantially ignored. (The reason for this seems largely a matter of the “conventional wisdom” of recent years: policy circles – left and right – have been fixated with vocational outcomes. The evidence that education and training benefit working life and economic productivity is no more – but also no less – robust than it is for its other benefits.)
5. There is very good evidence of the impact of adult learning on mental health: see, e.g., Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project (2008); Field (2009); Ipsos MORI and Department for Education (2018).
6. Developing metrics which establish the impact of adult education on key areas such as citizenship activity has proved difficult. Published results (e.g., Hoskins, Mascherini, and Saisana (2006), Holford (2008), Hoskins and Mascherini (2008), Stevens, Egglestone, Stevenson, and Patel (2019)), suggest the complexity of interactions among the various factors are hard to disentangle, and the costs of doing so probably disproportionate.
7. A key weakness in current policy and provision is that the benefits of learning are seen only in terms of their outcomes for individuals. It is now widely accepted that however valuable it is for individual adults, ***much of the benefit of educational provision goes to organisations, groups, communities and society as a whole. Adult education supports and encourages dialogue and understanding within and across communities, strengthens democracy, and is a key component in social cohesion.***

The role of local and combined authorities

8. There are very strong democratic grounds for supporting the devolution of policy- and decision-making to local authorities and combined authorities. However, there is a very serious danger that an accidental consequence of such devolution will be to cause serious, perhaps terminal, damage to key elements of what remains of our adult education infrastructure.
9. The Workers’ Educational Association is at particular risk. Only twenty years or so it undertook a major reconfiguration, moving away from the devolved regional structure it had evolved over the previous ninety years in order to work with new centralised funding systems. It now has limited capacity to

develop and service relationships with a growing number of devolved authorities. The WEA has been a central strength of British adult education: it needs to be properly resourced to enable it to operate effectively in this rapidly-changing environment. This requires, in my view, a significantly increased, and continuing, grant from central government to enable it to develop this infrastructure.

10. Local authority adult education has suffered severely since the post-2008 recession and the onset of austerity. Very substantial damage has been done: this needs to be repaired as a matter of priority.

Adequacy of the range, balance and quality of formal and informal ASALL education

11. *Educational provision for adults in Britain is dire and deteriorating.*

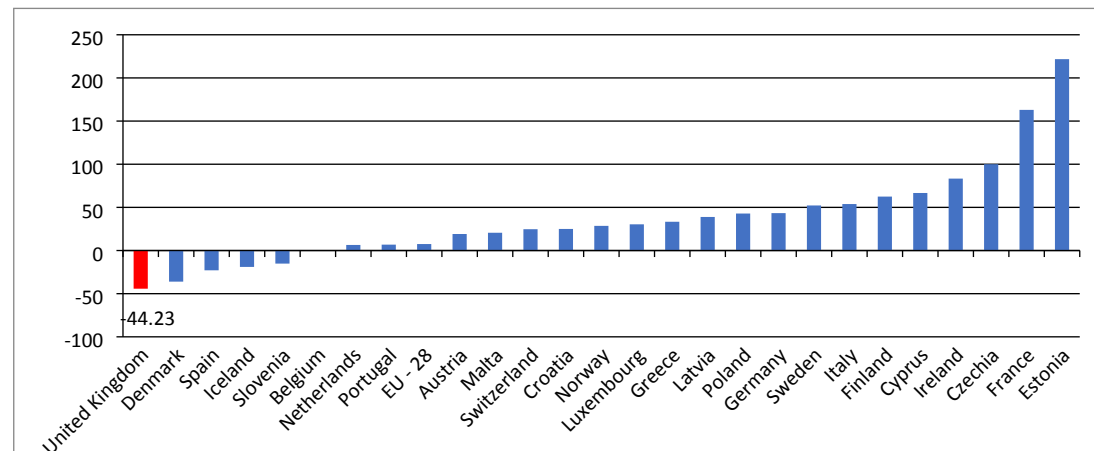
This is true of virtually all sectors. The number of adults in Britain participating in education and learning has plummeted across the board over the past fifteen years. The collapse began well before the 2008 financial crash, but has continued through the recession and austerity that followed. Although all groups participate less, it is still the well-educated and well-heeled who are the main beneficiaries of educational opportunities for adults.

12. ***Inequalities in participation.*** There are profound and growing inequalities in the impact of adult education. *For instance*, participation rates continue to be much greater among higher social classes than lower. The Social Mobility Commission (2019, p. 26) reports that nearly half of people (49 per cent) from the lowest social classes had undertaken no learning at all since leaving school. People working in higher managerial, professional and associate professional occupations were around twice as likely to participate in training as workers in intermediate and routine and manual occupations. (Social Mobility Commission, 2019, p. 38).

13. The broad contours of adult participation in lifelong learning in the UK over the last 25 years are well-established: participation rates rose until around 2004; since then, they have declined sharply. The Eurostat adult learning index showed 11% participation in 1994, 29% in 2004, 15% in 2018. Other data tell much the same story. There are many reasons for the decline: the recession since 2007 is often blamed, and clearly played a part. However, ENLIVEN research reveals that, in comparison with other EU countries, ***the UK has been particularly poor at ensuring inclusion and fairness during the recession and austerity years.***

14. For **inclusion**, we calculated the change in *participation by people with lower secondary education or less (ISCED levels 0-2)*. Over 2009-2018, adult education participation rates for these adults increased across most European countries, within and outside the EU. In contrast, ***the UK rate fell by about 44% (from 10.4% to 5.8%) – more than any other European country*** (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Percentage change in participation of adults with lower secondary education or less (ISCED levels 0-2) over the period 2009-2018.



Source: Source: Eurostat, data code [trng_lfse_03] (own calculations); Hungary excluded as an outlier (383.33%).

15. For **fairness** of participation, we compared the representation of a given group (in this case, the low educated) in 2009 and 2018. This was calculated by dividing the proportion of participants in adult education (aged 25-64) with ISCED levels 0-2 education, by the proportion of people with the same educational level in the entire population (same age group). A value above 1 indicates relative over-representation of the group in adult education; a value below 1 shows it is under-represented. Although the percentage of people with low education in the UK fell from 25.7% (2009) to 19.7% (2018) (data: Eurostat, code edat_lfse_03), *the percentage of low-educated participating in learning fell from 10.4% (2009) to 5.8% (2018)* (data: Eurostat, code trng_lfse_03). **This means representation of the low educated in adult learning fell from 40% to 29% (2009: $10.4 \div 25.7$; 2018: $5.8 \div 19.7$).**²

16. It is worth recalling that for much of the last century, British adult education was a model for the world. However, over recent decades (and under governments of all persuasions) most universities have closed their adult education departments, and courses to train and educate adult education professionals. Further education has shifted its focus away from education and training for all ages to a focus on young (and generally very young) adults. Local authority and WEA adult education capacity and provision have radically reduced (as mentioned above).

17. We must, **as a matter of urgency:**

- a. rebalance educational provision for adults, so that it provides for all aspects of personal, community and social life, and not only for the needs of a competitive economy;
- b. rebuild universities' capacity and infrastructure in delivering education to adults, and in training professionals in the field, along the lines of the proposals made by the Civic University Commission (2018, 2019);

² An ENLIVEN analysis of the Eurostat Adult Education Survey reached similar findings. For more extensive discussion, see Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova (2017).

- c. encourage Further Education colleges to take a more central and informed place in their local education ecology, along the lines of the recommendations of Baroness Sharp's commission (Sharp, 2011);
- d. rebuild local authority infrastructure in adult education;
- e. provide adequate support for the unique institutions, some with a national role, that are liable to be overlooked amid major reorganisation. Key examples are the WEA, the Open University and Birkbeck College, and the residential adult education colleges (Fircroft, Northern Ruskin, and Hillcroft).³

Lessons from abroad

18. Evidence from international research⁴ which I have led or contributed to shows *inter alia* the need for:

- a. Educational bodies equipped and resourced to provide a rich and diverse curriculum offering – adult learning depends on rich and diverse offer (supply), as well as on individuals' demand;
- b. Voluntary bodies that encourage adults to engage in diverse forms of learning, and facilitate their doing so;
- c. Financial mechanisms that enable educational bodies, individuals and groups to provide and take part in education;
- d. Systemic stability, so that expertise can grow and be applied, and so that public knowledge of how the system works – for instance, what courses are offered, where and by whom – is not constantly rendered obsolete;
- e. Mechanisms to ensure educational bodies are encouraged to address the needs of all members of their local communities, including – and especially – the poorest and those who have fared least well in education;
- f. Structures that encourage individuals to learn, and reward them (in many and varied ways) for doing so – markets provide some forms of encouragement, but by no means all those who should take part in adult education respond to financial incentives.

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³ For a recent report on the role and contribution of these residential colleges, see Clancy and Holford (2017). The position of Hillcroft, a residential college for women, has been particularly precarious; it may even now be too late to save it.

⁴ I refer here chiefly to: Education and Training for Governance & Active Citizenship in Europe (ETGACE 2000-03: see Holford and Van der Veen (2005)); Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Education System LLL2010, 2005-11: see Saar, Ure, and Holford (2013)); Lifelong Learning, Innovation, Growth & Human Capital Tracks in Europe (LLLight'in'Europe, 2012-15), and ENLIVEN (see note 1 above).

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