
A National Education Service for Adults Too

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ABSTRACT This article highlights the current collapse of adult learning opportunities and the key importance of adult learning to a new public education in a fast-changing world, and makes practical proposals for Labour's National Education Service.

Adult Learning Matters

Schools matter. So do universities. Together they command a large majority of our spending on education, and an even larger proportion of the attention given to education by politicians and the press. As a result, and despite the chaos of academicisation, school budgets have been easier to protect than those of colleges, which have shrunk by 30% over the last seven years, at a time when universities have seen their resources soar by a quarter.

But adult learners, it seems, miss out either way. There are now, in England, two million fewer publicly supported adult learning places in the further education (FE) sector than there were in 2004. And mature student numbers in higher education have fallen by more than 50% in the last five years, since, under the Conservatives, tuition fees were trebled. On top of that, alone among the developed European Union (EU) countries, employers in Britain have reduced their investment in education and training – having learned too well from Labour's disastrous Train to Gain programme that government pays for training.

The impact of policy neglect is stark. We still have nine million adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties in the UK, one in two of whom are out of work. We have a completely dysfunctional system for supporting access of refugees, asylum seekers and settled linguistic minorities to ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages). Access courses have withered, extra-mural departments disappeared, college budgets focus on 16-19-year-olds, and the voluntary sector is trapped more and more by a narrow utilitarian and neoliberal

funding and quality assurance regime offering quick sprints to a qualification. At the same time, libraries and community centres, alongside Sure Start services, have closed down. We could hardly have done better if we had consciously set out to destroy adult learning chances than we have managed to do, apparently by accident, over the last 15 years.

Yet the need for adult learning has never been greater. All the key challenges we face involve adults learning, adapting behaviour and helping to shape change. Whether we look at climate change, a rapidly ageing demography, the need for better alignment between services and people's well-being, or urban renewal, it is today's adults who will need to engage, adapt and shape change. To renew democracy, to rebuild a culture in which everyone's voice can be heard, and tolerance and diversity be respected, we need strategies involving people in learning together throughout their lifespan. And report after report from the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Labour Office and the World Economic Forum highlights the importance of lifelong learning in responding to the rapid spread of robotics and artificial intelligence – the fourth industrial revolution, which threatens to eradicate many white-collar jobs and transform others, faster than blue-collar jobs fell to globalisation a generation ago.

To be clear: adult learning matters. It can transform lives, fire new enthusiasms and satisfy old curiosities. It can be a route to gain or maintain employment, and the means to sustain one's livelihood. It can offer second chances to people who missed out in their earlier education, and first chances to people who never had the chance to go to school. It offers opportunities for people to rub shoulders with others from all backgrounds – and to strengthen social capital.

There is powerful evidence that adult learning has positive health effects, prolongs active life and shortens the period of morbidity. Participation in adult education is recognised as an effective preventative health measure for people at risk of mental illness, and a safe place to rebuild relationships when recovering. Adults who learn have a positive impact on their families, too. Teach an adult, but especially a mother, and children will learn better, too.

But as well as offering the potential for transformation, adult learning provision can, without effective targeting, reinforce inequality and the marginalisation of marginalised groups. There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating the social and economic value of adult learning, and evidence aplenty of how to overcome the exclusion of marginalised groups.

What, Then, is to Be Done?

A new public education must have a core commitment to securing a broad range of learning opportunities for adults. However, this commitment must be to life-wide learning as well as to lifelong learning.

There is no shortage of study groups and commissions currently looking at what is needed to improve lifelong learning opportunities – ranging from the

UPP Civic University Commission to Policy Connect, from the Liberal Democrat and Labour Party Commissions to the Centenary Commission on Adult Education with which we are connected. Each will have a different balance of priorities. Our concern is that an understandable concern for renewing the skills of workers is effectively balanced by renewing education for a democratic and inclusive culture.

Labour's National Education Service needs, in our view, to be firmly centred on creating a national system that fosters a culture of learning from cradle to grave, and opportunities to embrace education whenever people are ready to participate. That means a system which reclaims the strengths of Sure Start alongside creative inter-generational learning, giving pre-school children the best possible start. It means making learning how to learn the fundamental task of school education. It means moving sharply away from the neoliberal narrowing of vocational education, and creating opportunities for people to access structured education at key transition points throughout their adult lives. It must secure a right to free basic education – to literacy, numeracy and digital skills – for every adult. Public services have to include effective face-to-face and online guidance. An inclusive system will include outreach and promotional campaigns, enlisting under-represented groups; it will offer modular courses, offering adults the opportunity to acquire and transfer credit, and to have their existing knowledge and skills validated and accredited. It will, too, recognise that although public provision is key, there is a vital role for civil society, voluntary organisations and employers to play. A national education service for adults needs a national strategy, devolved planning, and a commitment to co-creation with learners. In creating this system, there are, of course, rich lessons worth learning from the past, and new opportunities to look for the future.

The 1919 Report

This year marks the centenary of the publication of the final report of the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee (Ministry of Reconstruction, Board of Adult Education, 1919). It is an extraordinary document, the work of a committee that laboured through the grim later years of the Great War, addressing the learning needs of an expanded democracy, readying itself to create a better world. Given the almost complete invisibility of adult learners in the policy thinking of contemporary governments, it is striking to note the confident central assertions of the committee:

The necessary conclusion is that adult education must not be regarded as a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there, nor as a thing which concerns only a short span of early manhood [sic], but that adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be universal and lifelong.

The report made clear recommendations for universities, local government and the emergent technical colleges, and identified a key role for voluntary agencies, arguing that however enlightened state and municipal government may be, they will never capture all the needs and interests of their populations. Voluntary association fosters those interests, and requires state support. Government should fund, devolve responsibility for what is studied, and resist the temptation to censor studies. Altogether, the report is an inspiring confirmation that important though work is, there is much more to a life worth living; education has a key role to play in liberating adults as active citizens.

While there has been a tendency to regard the 1919 report as something of a false start, soon overwhelmed by the public spending cuts of the early 1920s, its impact on thinking, experiment and practice should not be underrated. The framework set out in the report influenced much of what happened later. And it ignited some 'slow-burning fuses'.

Army education got off the ground earlier in the Second World War, and with a broader remit than in the 1914-18 war, due in part to the report's focus on the importance of citizenship education in the armed forces; it had become easier to argue the case by 1939-40 than previously. Similarly, an initial, pre-publication recommendation for bursaries for adult students to attend universities was implemented in 1919-23, at least for male army officers (by then drawn from somewhat lower down the social scale than had been the case in 1914). This temporary cohort of 33,668 ex-service students formed the first generation of 'mature students', laying a foundation for subsequent efforts (they also regenerated undergraduate student societies, especially creating societies in support of the new League of Nations, and played a part in founding the National Union of Students as a bridge to restoring peaceful contact between students of formerly belligerent countries [Laqua & Brewis, 2018]).

The report was alive to the value of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), and to the extra-mural interests of a small number of universities. Following the report, the WEA thrived, expanding its reach nationally, universities' extra-mural departments proliferated, and local authorities' adult education services offered a wider range of practical, aesthetic and sports provision – perhaps best illustrated eventually in the 1980s work of the Inner London Education Authority's rich programme of adult studies.

David Blunkett

The Labour government elected in 1997 picked up this expansive vision of the role adult learning plays in people's lives. In an inspiring introduction to its Green Paper, 'The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain', David Blunkett (then Education and Employment Secretary) outlined the way the organisations of the working class were forged at a time when people came together to learn their way out of their difficulties. He recognised the central role learning plays in equipping people to engage with the changing world of work, but went on to argue:

Learning enables people to play a full part in their community and 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 and are encouraging adults to enter and re-enter learning at every point of their lives as parents, at work and as citizens.

(Blunkett, 1998)

Blunkett's initiatives built on the findings of reports led by Ron Dearing, John Tomlinson and Helena Kennedy that stressed the need for widening participation and inclusive provision to make learning accessible to the full range of Britain's communities. It led to the offer of the Individual Learning Account (effective and popular until fraudsters brought it to an end); to the University for Industry; to a national free telephone and online advice service; to initiatives in community learning and an expansion of FE; and to a cross-government national literacy, numeracy and ESOL programme, Skills for Life, that helped five million people. Blunkett's vision, like that of the authors of the 1919 report, should surely influence the shapers of the National Education Service (NES) to be ambitious for the adults at its heart.

One of Blunkett's early initiatives was to establish an advisory group, chaired by Bob Fryer, whose first report included eight principles to inform lifelong learning policy:

- Coherence: lifelong learning should constitute an overall education strategy for the government;
- Equity: lifelong learning should be for the many, not the few;
- People before structures: learners and learning should be the focus of policy and good practice;
- Variety and diversity: learning should be for the whole of life and life enhancing;
- Lifelong learning should engage the whole of government;
- Quality and flexibility: the quality and flexibility of provision for lifelong learning will be paramount;
- Effective partnership: new opportunities for lifelong learning can be promoted through effective and inclusive partnerships;
- Responsibility: lifelong learning should be a shared responsibility (Fryer, 1997).

Ten years later, in *Learning through Life*, the report of a two-year national inquiry into lifelong learning policy, Tom Schuller and David Watson usefully highlighted the different needs of distinct age groups of adults (Schuller & Watson, 2009). They identified four groupings: broadly 18-25, managing learning for ever more varied entry into the labour market; 25-50, when learning has to be squeezed into busy lives where work, family and social life each make large demands on time; 50-75, when paid work is less central, when much of the maintenance of civil society institutions is undertaken, but when

people's creativity is often under-used; and finally, 75-plus, when age increasingly limits mobility but learning can have a major impact on quality of life.

Schuller and Watson also identified four capabilities central to a citizens' curriculum:

- Digital capability: the fastest changing of the four, enabling people to engage with and make sense of a rapidly changing world;
- Health capability: the skills to maintain health, to recognise circumstances that generate good and poor health, and to engage effectively with health service providers;
- Financial capability: skills to have control of one's finances, skills of estimation and planning, and the ability to critically appraise financial options;
- Civic capability: making sense of, and shaping, one's own culture and other cultures, recognition of the rights and responsibilities central to active democracy, and a framework of ethical values that recognise public goods (Schuller & Watson, 2009).

Any effective system of lifelong learning will support the development of those capabilities.

NES for Adults – Key Elements

The National Education Service needs to reaffirm that education is a universal human right without which other rights cannot be fully exercised, and that that right is lifelong. Here are some key features that the NES for adults should include:

- It will need to be secured through the adoption of a clear *national strategy* which recognises that devolved structures regionally and locally are more effective at securing the range and character of comprehensive provision best fitted to people's needs and aspirations, and that 'localism' should not be used by devolved and mayoral authorities to narrow the options that should be available to adult learners. There should be no central control of curriculum, though national priorities can be supported through dedicated budgets.
- The national strategy must secure *the right to free literacy, numeracy and digital skills for adults, and the right to ESOL*.
- There should be a *National Learning Entitlement* (NLE), guaranteeing the same core levels of support to everyone as they move beyond compulsory education. Schuller et al (2018) argued in an article proposing an NLE that this should be set at a minimum of £5000 for two years' full-time study, to be taken full or part time at any point in people's lives. The sum could be topped up for expensive subjects like medicine or engineering, and there should be access to low-interest loans. Adults without higher education qualifications should also have access to the NLE.

- All providers should have explicit commitments to securing *equality of opportunity and inclusion*, and report annually on outcomes:
- *Universities* should be required to renew their responsibility to make the fruits of their activities accessible to the wider communities that sustain them through civic educational engagement. New universities created through the Higher Education and Research Act of 2017 should be expected to demonstrate an adult education dimension, and those based on fresh models of distributed adult learning, such as the evolving Co-operative University, should be encouraged. The distinctive role of the Open University should be recognised in a revised financial settlement, with a wider sectoral role supporting part-time and distance learners in other higher education institutions (HEIs) that choose such support.
- *Colleges'* budgets and missions need to be rebalanced to re-engage the adults lost over the last decade, and they also need to have a key role in second-chance education.
- *Community education services* need to combine a rich programme of cultural, creative and practical learning opportunities with strategies for engaging under-represented communities.
- *Schools* can be encouraged to be essential components of rich inter-generational and community services.
- *Voluntary-sector* bodies deserve encouragement, recognition that they have a role to play as vehicles for independent and critical thinking (a primary principle of the 1919 report), and support to identify and meet previously unmet needs, and they need to foster innovative strategies.
- The use of *employer training levy* funds should be broadened to include continuing training and development for adult employees, and as part of the annual report procedures of public companies, employers should report on staff training and development expenditure, and on how much is spent on the least-well-paid 20% of employees.
- Public and employer support for *union learning* initiatives, centred on peer support and motivation, and on negotiating with employers, needs maintaining and strengthening.
- *Adult guidance and advice services*, online and face to face, require strengthening, and Department for Education (DfE) and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) advice services for unemployed and under-employed adults should be encouraged.
- The educational role of *broadcast media and online services*, and of *libraries, museums*, and *sporting and other cultural institutions*, should attract recognition and support.
- *Venues for adult learning* need to be available at a wide variety of times, and need to be affordable, with a new 'right to a venue' introduced to facilitate access that is as locally situated to learners as possible.
- *The adult education workforce* should be refreshed by opportunities for professional development, including 'train the trainers' and 'grow your own tutors' programmes, together with schemes to equip participants to facilitate

discussions, study groups and ‘pop-up’ learning episodes, all of which can assist in delivering effective schemes of non-formal learning in diverse community and workplace settings.

- *Learning cities, learning communities and learning regions* need to be fostered to bring together providers of all sorts with agencies representing users’ interests. In Suwon in Korea, the learning city is a compelling vision of a learning society, guaranteeing a library within ten minutes of everyone’s home, and a learning centre within twenty minutes – in hairdressers, in cafes and metro stations, in employers’ premises, in bars and in religious centres.
- A key element of the NES will be a commitment to *promoting engagement* – through the celebration of existing learners, and encouragement of others to join in.
- In order to stimulate life-wide as well as lifelong learning, two *regional funds* should be established: for education for community regeneration (drawing on the strengths of the New Deal for Communities initiatives of the 2000s); and for education for sustainability to foster education to accelerate moves to a carbon-free society.

Finally, all this will cost money. And while free education for all is a glorious goal, too often Treasury discipline limits the numbers who benefit from free provision. Clearly, at the core, there needs to be a free public education system (Benn, 2018). But the State will not be able alone to fully meet all the needs and interests of learning in adult life. While education for the young, and for those who have missed out on the key skills, should be free, other actors can and should contribute to the costs of an adult NES. The employer levy is one example. Graduate taxes are another. And where people seek to learn for pleasure, affordable contributions are a reasonable part of the mix, not to secure the marketisation of education or present barriers, but to create a learning society where we all have roles to play.

If we manage all this, we shall have an NES to be proud of, and go a long way to creating a learning society for old and young alike.

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