

# adults learning *extra*

June 2013

**Learning  
for a better  
world**

**A vision for  
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# adults learning

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## A vision for adult learning in Europe

**T**he *Learning for a Better World* conference, which took place in Cardiff at the end of April, brought together adult education professionals from all over Europe to discuss the future of adult learning in the European Union.

It was an exciting and stimulating event which highlighted the many common challenges faced by the 27 member states, reflected the state of adult learning in the four UK home nations and sketched the beginnings of a renewed vision for adult learning in Europe.

The event kick-started the UK's contribution to the EU Agenda for Adult Learning, which sets out the priorities on which member states should concentrate in order to achieve the longer-term vision of the Agenda – 'equal opportunity access to high-quality lifelong learning for all' – and to contribute to *Europe 2020*, the EU strategy for economic growth and social cohesion.

The EU Agenda, adopted by Council Resolution in November 2011, identifies five priorities for adult learning in Europe for 2012-14:

- Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
- Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
- Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through adult learning;

- Enhancing the creativity and innovation of adults and their learning environments; and
- Improving the knowledge base on adult learning and monitoring the adult learning sector.

NIACE organised the conference in its capacity as UK co-ordinator of the EU Agenda. The national co-ordinator role is to support implementation of the priorities at national level, ensuring liaison with relevant authorities and stakeholders, and facilitating cooperation and exchange of good practice between member states. In the coming months, NIACE will run innovation projects and peer learning activities which will build on April's conference, leading to a second major conference in Edinburgh in June 2014.

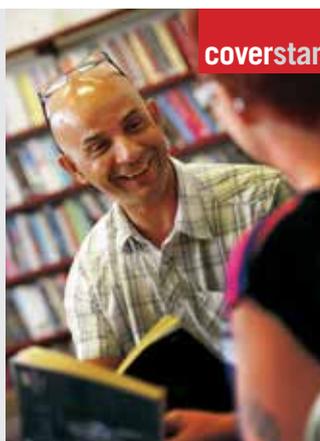
As the contributors to this special issue of *Adults Learning* demonstrate, there are enormous benefits to the work, not least the different perspective discussion with European partners can bring to our own work, placing it in a wider context, and the realisation that there really is a great deal to learn and share with partners in the other UK nations and in the EU more widely.

We hope this issue will serve as a useful stimulus for further discussion and look forward to reflecting readers' thoughts and opinions in coming issues.

Paul Stanistreet, Editor



As a 16-year-old with no qualifications, **Shaun Allison** began working on building sites as a bricklayer. He eventually became self-employed, but, when recession came, fell on difficult times. It gave Shaun a chance to consider what he really wanted to do. He enrolled on a literacy course at Kirklees College in 2008, where it was suggested that he attend the Huddersfield Library Reading Group. Shaun loved the group and progressed through his literacy exams. Library staff asked Shaun if he would run the reading group, which he did, supporting others with their literacy, often on a one-to-one basis. To develop this newfound skill, Shaun also completed an Adult Learner Support course. He also mentors young people on probation, encouraging them to take advantage of opportunities, including learning. Shaun won an Adult Learners' Week award in recognition of his achievements in 2012.



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### Editorial

Paul Stanistreet,  
Editor, *Adults Learning*

NIACE,  
21 De Montfort Street,  
Leicester LE1 7GE

Tel. 0116 2044211

Email paul.stanistreet@niace.org.uk

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**W**hen you are deeply involved in the policy, practice and culture of a system how can you get the perspective needed to assess it and influence changes to improve it? That is the challenge all of us face with our busy lives and the ever-faster pace of modern work and life. In learning and education we can become so caught up in the immediate challenges, particularly in our age of austerity, that, as the funding cuts bite, we focus only on survival.

In Cardiff, with colleagues from 14 European Union nations, we took 24 hours out of busy schedules to take stock and gain a new perspective on learning for adults. It is amazing how powerful it can be to have to explain and describe the system you are working in to others who have little knowledge of the context, let alone the details. The very act of explaining requires reflection: where do I start? What do I

and actions.

In my opening speech I set out three challenges which I believe face every one of the EU nations. The first challenge is that there are too many citizens across the EU who lack the skills they need to get on in work and life. At NIACE we are developing a citizens' curriculum which encompasses a broad and basic set of skills which we think are needed for every adult: English, maths, financial, digital, health, wellbeing, citizenship. These are the fundamentals we believe enable adults to participate in our democracy, attain and stay in a job, remain healthy and go onto further learning throughout life. The changing world requires all of us to be willing and able to learn new things, to be open to change, to shape the world we live in. More than anything, we believe that this citizens' curriculum would provide adults with the self-esteem and confidence to

# Making time for change

In the fast-changing world of adult learning it can be difficult to see beyond the immediate challenges. But reflecting on what we do – and seeing how colleagues in other countries face comparable challenges – is essential in recognising what is, and what isn't, working, and in challenging ourselves to do better, writes **DAVID HUGHES**

include? Why is it like that? What explains the policies, the practices, the behaviours? What are the real priorities for learning in England and Wales? From that reflection and description flows understanding of the good things and the not so good things about the system we work in. Beyond that, come ideas and inspirations from other countries, stimulating different thinking

view themselves as learners, ready for what the world throws at them.

The figures across the EU differ, but in every country there are millions of people lacking some of these fundamentals and we need the EU and the nation states to invest to support people to gain new skills. That investment alone, though, would not be

enough, because there are too many people who do not see learning as a good thing. Our annual participation survey provides some challenging figures for the UK. Each year we ask a representative sample of adults across the UK about their participation in learning in the last few years and their intentions for the future. Overall, 38 per cent of adults have participated in learning in the last three years,

### THREE CHALLENGES

1. There are too many citizens across the EU who lack the skills they need to get on in work and life.
2. We know too little about how to motivate people to become learners and about the barriers that prevent participation.
3. Politicians' enthusiasm for learning is not reflected in government investment. We need to persuade governments to invest more.

a figure fairly consistent over the 20 years of the survey. What is most worrying, though, is the increased impact recent learning has on future intentions to learn. Over four-fifths of current learners say that they intend to learn in the future; the same figure for those who have done no learning since leaving full-time education is only 14 per cent.

Our survey and what we know about attitudes to learning lead me to the second big challenge we face: we need to do more to find ways to motivate people to become learners. Successful learners become lifelong learners, with all of the benefits which learning can bring. But many adults have a negative view of learning and we need to do more to understand those views and find ways to influence people.

My third challenge is a bit of a conundrum. Every politician I meet agrees that learning is a good thing and that there is a long list of benefits for the individual and their family, their community, for businesses, our society and for our economy. They will be able to give examples of constituents who have achieved amazing things through participating in learning and would usually hate to think that people saw them as against learning. So why then is the investment from governments not

bounteous? This disconnect between belief in and investment in learning for adults needs to be understood if we are to meet my third challenge of persuading governments to invest more.

Part of the answer to persuasion and influence is to make the case in their terms rather than in ours, of course. In this age of austerity we need to put the economic case for a stronger economy as well as the potential savings to be made to the social care, health, pensions and benefits budgets. We might have to say a little less about the uplifting, moral, cultural and intellectual cases for more adults learning.

The new EU Agenda for Adult Learning provides us with a great opportunity to address these three challenges. We will be able, over the next two years, to raise the profile of adult learning, share good practice and make the case for greater investment by the state, employers and individuals. We will be able to learn more about who participates and the motivations we need to tap into in order to reach out to engage adults who benefited least from the initial education system.

NIACE was asked to lead a broad partnership of organisations across the UK on this work and to collaborate with our colleagues across the other EU nations. It is exciting work which will bring many benefits. Not least, we have already begun to reflect and to have our thinking challenged by how others see things and by what they believe to be the 'norm'. For me, that is energising and nourishing; I look forward to more challenge and to more stimulation from across the UK and the EU.

The Education Council Resolution on a renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning, adopted in November 2011, is available here: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2011:372:0001:0006:EN:PDF>

It builds on the *Action Plan on Adult Learning* (2008-2010), which can be downloaded here: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/policy-adult\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/policy-adult_en.htm)

**David Hughes**  
is Chief Executive  
of NIACE

# The European agenda for adult learning

The lack of skills among the adult population of the EU is a major challenge, particularly given demographic change and the growing demand for high-level skills. Adult education is critical in rising to the challenge, which is why the EU needs a renewed agenda for adult learning, writes **MARTINA NI-CHEALLAIGH**



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**T**he lack of skills among adults is a challenge that often goes unnoticed, but the reality is that in Europe around 73 million adults have attained at most lower secondary level education. However, scarcely nine per cent of the adult population of the European Union participated in lifelong learning activities in 2012, while, for this lower-educated group, the figure was only four per cent. Yet, Cedefop forecasts predict that only 15 per cent of jobs in 2020 will be for the low-skilled, down from 26.6 per cent in 2011. The demand for high-level skills will reach 35 per cent, while 50 per cent will require medium-level skills. Demographics pose another challenge. In 2012 Europe's workforce began to shrink because of the decline in the youth cohorts in many member states. Most of the 2020 workforce is already in the labour market and these people will need to renew and upgrade their skills to stay in work, or to get back into work in the case of over 26 million unemployed. Those aged 65-plus will almost equal the under-19s by 2020 and are an emerging target group for learning as they live longer, more active lives and work longer in some cases. Furthermore, new skills are necessary for everyone to actively participate in a constantly changing,

modern society. Given this situation, adults need to participate regularly in learning to enhance their personal and professional skills and competences.

Education and training, including adult learning, can therefore make a significant contribution to *Europe 2020: European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*. The success of its flagship initiatives – on innovation, youth, digital society, resource efficiency, industrial policy, new skills and jobs, and fighting poverty – requires that people have adequate skills and further learning. Two of the specific educational goals are reducing early school leaving to below 10 per cent and ensuring that at least 40 per cent of young adults complete tertiary or equivalent education. This raises the profile of education and training on the EU agenda.

## **Council Resolution**

The Education Council Resolution on a renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning, adopted in November 2011, continues and consolidates policy in the field of adult learning, building on the achievements of the *Action Plan on Adult Learning* (2008-2010), and complementing policy initiatives in the areas of school education, higher education (Bologna

process) and vocational education and training (Copenhagen process), thus ensuring coverage of the lifelong learning cycle.

The Agenda underlines that 'adult learning provides a means of up-skilling or reskilling those affected by unemployment, restructuring and career transitions, as well as making an important contribution to social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development.' Alignment with the four strategic objectives of 'ET2020', the framework for European cooperation in education and training, ensures that the European Agenda for Adult Learning is part of mainstream EU policy in the field, and provides the framework for cooperation and exchange of good practice among member states, by addressing:

- Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
- Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
- Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through adult learning; and
- Enhancing the creativity and innovation of adults and their learning environments.

A further objective, to improve the knowledge base on adult learning and the monitoring of the sector, was later added.

Aimed at increasing participation and enabling all adults to develop and renew their skills and competences throughout their lives, the Agenda provides a vision for adult learning systems in 2020 characterised by increased demand for access to flexible, high-quality teaching and learning opportunities and an enhanced role for local authorities, employers, social partners, civil society and cultural organisations. It emphasises:

- Autonomy of the learner but also responsibility for his/her learning pathway and outcomes;
- Learning later in life to promote active, autonomous and healthy ageing among seniors, and using their knowledge and experience for the benefit of society;
- Greater openness in higher education to adults and the community at large;

- Developing new skills necessary for active participation in modern society; and
- Fostering solidarity between different age groups, between cultures and people of all backgrounds.

Particular attention is paid to improving provision for the high number of low-skilled Europeans targeted in *Europe 2020*, starting with literacy, numeracy and second-chance measures. Acquiring basic skills as a foundation for lifelong learning, addressing the problem of early school leaving and tackling issues such as the education and social inclusion of migrants, Roma and disadvantaged groups all require concerted action in school, community and adult education. For the period 2012-14, priorities focus on awareness-raising, outreach, guidance and access for those who are disadvantaged because of their poor basic skills, inadequate work skills and/or skills for successful integration into society. A further priority is promoting the Agenda at national, regional and local level where it will have most impact on improving participation rates, which requires effective liaison with all the relevant ministries and stakeholders.

### **New impetus**

More recent EU policy papers reiterate and give new impetus to many of the issues raised in the European Agenda for Adult Learning. The *Rethinking Education Communication* (2012) focuses on the supply of skills and reinforcing the *Europe 2020* agenda for new skills and jobs. It stresses that the 'first step must be that foundation or basic skills are achieved by all', as these skills, which are being redefined by the on-going digital revolution, are a gateway to employment and social inclusion. A forthcoming communication will focus on open educational resources; the use of such resources requires that adult learners are proficient in using ICTs.

The Education Council adopted a recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning in December 2012. It invites member states, no later than 2018, to put in place arrangements enabling individuals' learning outcomes – knowledge, skills

and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning – to be identified, documented and recognised to obtain a full or part qualification, or access to further education and training. This could play an important role in enhancing employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for and participation in lifelong learning, particularly in the case of the socio-economically disadvantaged or the low-qualified.

Countries have designated national coordinators for adult learning to network with ministries and multiple stakeholders in their country, with a view to improving coherence between policies on adult learning and broader socio-economic policies, and to facilitate cooperation with the European Commission and other member states. NIACE is national coordinator for the United Kingdom.

In terms of its performance at European level, the United Kingdom has good rates of adult participation in lifelong learning, and well-developed adult learning services through further education colleges, community learning and, in recent times, the Skills for Life programme. A good research base is provided, for example, by NIACE, NRDC and universities. Structures are in place to facilitate skills development, for example, the National Qualifications Frameworks, awarding bodies and skills councils, a learning outcomes approach that includes validation of non-formal and informal learning, particularly to gain access to higher education, and wide civil-society involvement. However, challenges remain in terms of: rising numbers of early school-leavers and the young unemployed, all of whom are potential clients for adult learning; and persistent high numbers of low-skilled adults and workers, despite successful initiatives, and this in parallel to a shortage of workers with high-quality vocational and technical skills. The many regional or national policies and system variations make for an interesting but challenging array of bodies to be coordinated.

*Martina Ni-Cheallaigh is Policy Officer, Coordination of Adult Education Policy, for the European Commission*

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# The state of adult learning across the UK

The European Agenda for Adult Learning presents a timely opportunity for assessing the UK's position. In order to co-operate, and to benefit from the experiences and aspirations of other European countries, it helps to know where we are. And, at first sight, the UK seems to be something of an adult learning success, writes **JOHN FIELD**

**T**he European Commission, with the aim of promoting co-operation, has set out six key benchmarks for 2020. The UK performs relatively well on most of these already, and seems well placed to meet or exceed all of them by the end of the decade. On one benchmark – the proportion of working-age adults participating in education and training each year – the UK stands at 15.8 per cent, compared with an EU average of 8.9 per cent and a benchmark of 15 per cent. The UK is also well ahead of target in the number of 30-34 year olds with higher education qualifications: against a 2020 benchmark of 40 per cent, the proportion of 30-34 year olds with a third-level qualification in the UK currently stands at 45.8 per cent.

Though all are relevant to lifelong learning, the EU's other benchmarks are less directly related to adults. The UK is behind the benchmark but ahead of current EU averages in graduate employment rates, and ahead of both current average and benchmark in early years education. But there are two areas of considerable concern. The UK lags behind both the benchmark and EU average in respect of early leaving, something that the previous Labour government set out to address. As for

academic performance at age 15, the PISA tests suggest that the UK is doing relatively well in science; in maths and reading, it is doing better than the EU average but is some way off the benchmark.

So if we are to take the 2020 EU benchmarks seriously, the UK is an adult learning star, but the initial education system shows some significant weaknesses. This won't surprise many of our colleagues in northern European countries like Germany and Finland, who have repeatedly said that they see the UK's adult learning system as largely compensating for the failings of our schools and initial vocational education system. Moreover, we might pose a number of questions about the EU benchmarks. Leaving aside the more philosophical issue of whether benchmarks are simply a form of remote state control, I have two grave concerns about the 2020 process.

The first is that it is lacking ambition. While some European nations might reasonably serve as models of good practice in adult learning (the Nordic nations most obviously) these are a minority. Moreover, they also represent only one broad model of adult learning, namely the Scandinavian welfarist model.

At a time of accelerating globalisation, we should also be benchmarking Europe against the Asian countries and the emerging capitalist superpowers like Russia and Brazil, where we might learn positive as well as negative lessons from much more dynamic and marketised systems for adult learning, or systems in which other non-government actors play a major role.

## Major omissions

The second is that, like all benchmarks, the 2020 goals tell us something, but not much. They miss out important parts of the story. They jumble together a range of different educational experiences and outcomes under the broad headings of 'tertiary qualifications' or 'adult participation', with no regard for quality or value. This is inherent in any set of single benchmarks, particularly if you are trying to cover a continental patchwork of tetchy nations, each of which has its own systems and structures. What are less forgivable are the major omissions. I find it particularly astonishing that the benchmarks explicitly exclude older adults: by focusing on those who are of working age, they effectively announce that the EU sees third-age or fourth-age learning as of no great interest.



time and part-time forms. Participation in basic skills provision – known by different names in different parts of the UK – has grown considerably in range and scale since the 1970s. At the same time, there are also well-known problems in the UK's lifelong learning systems, and while there are important beacons of hope, there are acute challenges in engaging some groups.

If we look at the learning landscape across the UK, we can see important recent changes in provision. In Scotland, part-time provision in colleges has nose-dived over the last three years, partly in order to maintain free tuition in higher education; this has had a disproportionate impact on women learners and older learners. We have also seen a dramatic decline in Scotland in the number of small, often community-based, voluntary-sector providers. In England, the number of adults in publicly funded provision has been falling since before the current recession, again with disproportionate consequences for older adults. And in all four UK countries, the number of mature full-time and part-time students in universities has fallen, particularly dramatically in England since higher tuition fees, but also over the last five years in the other countries as well, including Scotland.

There are also clear challenges of co-ordination in the four countries. Of course, this partly reflects the rich diversity of providers, and the variety of changing practices in workplaces, as well as the difficulties of steering a system where the vast majority of learners attend voluntarily. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, co-ordination is not made easier by a weak evidence base; while NIACE surveys provide great overview data, you can't do much further analysis without separate data. What we

can say is that there are differences in headline participation rates between the four nations, and even larger variations between the different regions within England which also require attention.

At the same time, there are also real strengths. The supply side continues to show considerable dynamism, particularly in the adoption of blended learning and the use of digital technologies to support learners. This isn't particularly new in itself (though the pace at which digitisation is developing is certainly new), but rather represents a continuing adaptability and willingness to experiment on the part of providers and learners alike. One word of warning: if the market is allowed full rein, this will have two negative consequences, in that it will provide an opening for unscrupulous traders, and will reinforce existing social and age inequalities.

We also have well-tested qualifications frameworks, allowing learners to accumulate credit and take it with them. This makes the UK one of the few parts of Europe where the principle of educational and labour mobility poses few challenges, at least in principle. In practice, things are not working quite so smoothly; it is one thing to design a common framework, and quite another to persuade gatekeepers to observe it, but at least we have more or less cracked the first stage, and have learned some lessons about the second.

So the European Agenda comes at an important period in the development of adult learning in the UK and in Europe. We all share a common external environment, in which our shared memberships of different international organisations can be a source of information and inspiration. Adult learning has the potential to make a major contribution to addressing the present recession, and it can also help tackle some of the increasingly pressing social and political challenges of our changing continent. The risk is that we take a short-term view that is solely concerned with immediate problems, and ignores those challenges and opportunities that will face us for long after the present crisis is over.

*John Field is Professor of Lifelong Learning, University of Stirling*

And, of course, benchmarks flatten out the experiences of diverse populations, concealing the peaks and troughs in which particular groups thrive or languish.

As it happens, the contours of participation are relatively well understood in the UK. If I may say so, they are particularly clear in the case of England, where the government has conducted its own surveys of participation, alongside the annual UK-wide surveys carried out by NIACE, as well as studies conducted for the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, and other sources of information such as the Labour Force Survey and the data published by the Skills Funding Agency. We are also fortunate in that social scientists have been able to plunder other, major social surveys, such as the longitudinal cohort studies, to find out how learning participation relates to other factors and experiences.

Briefly, these surveys have confirmed that adult learning in the UK follows some well known patterns. While overall levels of participation are relatively high, some groups are far more likely to participate than others. Adult access to higher education has been extremely strong for many years, in both its full-

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# A collaborative future with learners at its heart

In Wales, as in the rest of the UK and in Europe more widely, public funding is under enormous pressure. Spending resources effectively demands greater collaboration within the sector, as well as with local authorities, employers, unions and the voluntary sector, the Welsh Government's Deputy Skills Minister Jeff Cuthbert tells **PAUL STANISTREET**

Jeff Cuthbert makes no apology for the Welsh Government's focus on skills and employment. The Deputy Minister for Skills and Technology is frank about the need to prioritise. Focusing public money on improving the skills and qualification levels of the workforce, and on boosting the employability of those who are not employed so that they can make a full contribution to the economy, is essential, he says, not least because 'it is crucial for the Welsh economy that we have people who are highly motivated, who are flexible, who are skilled to the right level'. But this does not necessarily mean a lesser role for adult community learning, which, Cuthbert says, is part of the same learning continuum, a 'first step' crucial 'in improving people's self-esteem, in making them more aware of where there are opportunities for them, or in helping them to be more involved and motivated to help develop their local communities'. As a former principal of an adult education centre, Cuthbert has an informed commitment to 'the very crucial and important role' adult community learning can play, especially 'for those who, for whatever reason, may not want to go to a formal learning environment'.

I met the Deputy Minister a few moments after he concluded his contribution to *Learning for a Better World*. He told delegates about the challenges facing Wales – economic and

demographic challenges shared by countries across the United Kingdom and Europe – stressing his desire to ensure the continuance of a broad offer informed by recognition of the wider benefits of adult learning and the need to 'keep the learner at the heart of everything we do' but also acknowledging that 'increasing demands on our budgets' were 'making the judgement on where we invest ever more difficult'. 'We want to protect learning to the best of our ability,' he tells me. 'But we live in the real world and the financial pressures are enormous. We're anticipating further reductions to the Welsh block grant over the next couple of years – they might be quite significant reductions – so the time is right to make sure we're spending what resources we have in the most effective way. We have to look at spending in all areas of public life and this is one of them.'

Ensuring the resource is spent effectively will mean 'drawing upon the skills of those who have got expertise, who are already in the business, and encouraging greater collaboration and sharing of responsibilities', Cuthbert says. 'In Wales, as in the rest of the UK, the pressure on public funding means that key partners engaged in adult learning with us have to share good practice, and work together to eliminate poor practice, so that the service we offer to adults is the very best it can be

within resources.’ The Welsh Government is in the process of finalising a formal review of post-16 funding arrangements which will see the introduction of a new planning and funding system in Wales from 2014-15. This is essential in ensuring a more efficient use of resources, Cuthbert says. ‘It has been said in the past that there was a funding system there but not much planning. That’s got to change. We’ve got to have greater collaboration, sharing of resources between institutions. That’s one of the factors that is driving the merger of [institutions within] the further education sector so that we have larger institutions with greater resources to offer a wider range of opportunities for people who want to take them up.’

Similarly, he adds, for those who are not ready – or do not want – to pursue learning in a more formal setting, it is important that adult learning continues to play its traditional supportive role, creating a range of different types of opportunity to suit the varying needs of learners in different localities. For that reason, he says, ‘we expect to see greater collaboration between community learning providers, whether that is through statutory providers like local education authorities, the voluntary sector, and, indeed, colleges. We will insist that collaboration is a real vehicle, therefore enabling us to spend the Welsh pound as effectively as we can.’

### **Adult community learning**

Cuthbert recognises that adult community learning has a very important role to play, and is keen that his commitment – and that of the Welsh Government – is taken seriously and not seen as mere ‘empty phrases’. The Welsh Government published a policy statement on adult community learning in 2010 – *Delivering Community Learning for Wales* – setting out its vision for adult learning in Wales and giving the sector a steer as to its main priorities. These include a commitment to ‘second chance’ learning for those whose initial educational experience was poor; support for adults with poor basic skills and those not in employment, education and training; and provision for those aged over 50.

‘We know that one of the greatest drivers of improved communities is the ability of people to feel valued and part of their community. There is plenty of evidence that shows that if people have a better appreciation of themselves through learning new skills, whatever that may be – and it needn’t just be technical skills, useful though they are – then they feel a

greater sense of identity and of worth within their communities and are far less likely to take part in criminal or anti-social activities and more likely to make healthy lifestyle choices, which in turn helps, for example, to reduce expenditure on the NHS. All these things are linked together and shouldn’t be seen in isolation. Some of our most disadvantaged areas also have the greatest need in terms of learning, in its broadest sense. Many people feel excluded and, because their self-esteem is so low, feel that learning opportunities are not meant for them. These are barriers we have to break down and adult community learning is often a first step, especially for those whose



experience of learning in school was less than satisfactory. I believe everybody has untapped resources in terms of their abilities and there is no doubt that adult learning has a valuable role to play.'

One of the themes of the conference was that the enthusiasm of politicians for the sector was often not followed through in terms of sustained investment – giving rise to the suspicion that the commitment of government amounts to not much more than 'empty phrases'. When budgets are tight adult education is often the first line of provision to be cut. Given the fiscal climate, I ask, is it

 It has been said in the past that there was a funding system there but not much planning. That's got to change. We've got to have greater collaboration 

possible to deliver both a strong economic focus and a broad commitment to the wider benefits of adult learning? 'In the real world we are under enormous financial pressures,' he says. 'We know that our income from the UK government will be reduced over the next few years – that's public knowledge. It demands certain decisions and, clearly, adult community learning, like any other part of the public purse, will feel that pain. But what is crucial is that we manage it, we make sure any reductions are proportionate, that it goes hand-in-hand with planning of provision so that the impact on people is minimised. That's not to suggest that there won't be a negative impact; I'd be delighted if there isn't but that's unlikely to be the case. We know a lot now about how to deliver education and learning to people, we've had decades of experience, both on the formal and the informal side. It is very much up to the sector to seize those good experiences, and I believe that this conference will be part of that work, to make sure that they build upon what they do well even if it is within restricted resources.'

There is a strong social justice argument for preserving a broad, affordable adult learning offer, Cuthbert says, but that applies to many

areas of public spending, all of which are under pressure, all of which will 'feel a share of the pain'. 'It will come down to the Welsh Government taking priority decisions based on the needs of people in Wales, and the localities within Wales,' he continues. 'That's why our partnerships with local authorities are so important because we will be looking to them to tell us what they need in their areas. The voluntary sector has a crucial role to play here as well, in reaching people in their areas. There were several people present who would probably call themselves part of the voluntary sector and it is very good to see that partnership. But let's not deceive ourselves. Perhaps there never has been a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. And if there is one now it is a much smaller pot.'

#### **Opportunity for all**

The Welsh Government's policy statement was the first phase in developing a new national vision and approach to adult learning. There is a lot more to do, Cuthbert says, to provide sustainable community provision for Wales and to ensure 'equality of opportunity for all, regardless of where people live'. There are some significant challenges to which adult learning can make a substantial contribution. High on the list is the problem of ensuring higher levels of functional literacy and numeracy. 'We are bringing in significant changes to what is being taught in schools, and new qualifications in numeracy and literacy will start to appear in a few years time, but while that is fine in terms of future adults, we know there is a significant problem in many parts of Wales, including my own constituency [of Caerphilly], where the levels of functional literacy and numeracy [among adults] are far too low. In my constituency roughly a third of adults – those 25 and over – have significant problems with literacy and numeracy. That cannot be allowed to continue.'

Changing that, he says, requires, 'in the first place, that people acknowledge that they have an issue with literacy or numeracy. Then our providers must be sure that they have a means of helping to meet that. This applies within the workplace. The Wales Union Learning Fund directs a lot of resources at improving levels of what we call essential skills. Very often, people feel far more comfortable with their peers in the workplace following courses that help improve their essential skills. And, again, in the community more generally people need to overcome that stigma that they all too

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often feel of not being able to read, write and understand number as well as they should. If they do take those steps then the whole quality of life is improved dramatically. Those of us who can read, write and use number to a reasonable degree often take it for granted but we have to recognise that it is a problem for far too many of our population and adult community learning can help in that.'

A second major challenge is that of demographic change. Like many countries in Western Europe, Wales will have to find ways to cope with an ageing population. 'The population is getting older and that brings a range of issues in terms of public services,' Cuthbert explains. 'Adult community learning has an important role to play, especially in helping to improve the health and wellbeing of the nation. We are all very pleased to be living longer, but it is a cost to the health service so if we can help to reduce that by educating people in terms of how to take care of themselves through simple measures such as healthy eating, taking moderate exercise, avoiding smoking, which is still the biggest cause of ill health in Wales, watching what we eat and drink, those simple steps which can come through vehicles like adult learning, then we are going to ease those pressures on the health service. We are not necessarily talking about small sums here, it can be very significant.'

### **Working longer**

People will be working longer, he says, a fact that has clear implications for adult learning: we can no longer afford to see it as 'predominantly a leisure activity' pursued in the main by older people. There is growing demand among younger adults, eager to develop their skills to move on at work or to change career, as well as an increasing interest among older adults in retraining and up-skilling to extend their working lives. 'The nature of work has changed. We no longer, by and large, have very physically demanding occupations like mining and steel-making in Wales. They went out a generation ago. People are therefore more fit and able to carry on working longer and may well choose to do so. When they do retire people will want to keep their minds active and adult community learning can assist people to keep their minds and bodies active by learning new things. It is absolutely vital if people want to enjoy their later years and to be useful members of society. We have to have a service that can meet all those changes.'

Many of the challenges Cuthbert describes will resonate with providers and practitioners in different parts of the UK, as well as in Europe more widely. Like education ministers elsewhere, he faces the challenge of marrying fee rises – those with the ability to pay should pay, he says – with the maintenance of a broad offer, accessible to all, particularly the most disadvantaged, which caters to the learning needs of all adults and recognises the diverse needs of different communities. 'Nobody believes the economy is cash rich or that we have stacks of money we can dish out on a variety of public services. Judgements have to be made. The different areas of Wales can be very different indeed, both culturally and geographically, and in terms of the local economy. They all have different needs, different aspirations, different demands. But we do need to bring those together and if we can't arrange a system that is capable of providing a decent service for Wales – a country of three million people – then we've got to look at ourselves. It's not all down to government. Certainly, we have to provide the stimulus and the environment for our partners to work in, but it comes down to frontline delivery and that's the role of our partners.'

Partnership is crucial, he says, not least with the other nations of the United Kingdom, and Cuthbert is keen to share good practice. Devolution has been a significant stimulus to collaboration within Wales, narrowing the gap between providers and decision makers, and between providers and other key stakeholders. 'I think our strength in Wales, being a small nation within the UK, is that we have solid partnerships and there is a spirit and a willingness to work together to collaborate, to share ideas, and for the statutory sector to work with the voluntary sector. We have brought together FE colleges requiring them to be a little more open with people in terms of what they offer and to avoid unnecessary duplication of resources. These are things that we are doing in Wales and I think we are doing them well, and we would be very pleased to share our experiences with the other nations, and likewise look to see how they have developed things. Scotland, Northern Ireland and parts of England face a similar situation to the one we face here in Wales, socially and economically. There is a willingness to share ideas and to move forward together as far as we can, though, in Wales, we are prepared to do our own thing where we believe it is in the best interests of the people of Wales.'

Common ground,  
common challenges



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# The conference brought together adult education professionals from each of the four countries of the United Kingdom. Here, four delegates, from Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland, give their reflections on the conference and consider the challenges ahead

## We face common challenges and have much to share, say **Colin Neilands**

**W**orking in adult learning in Northern Ireland's voluntary sector can feel very isolating and so an opportunity to come together with colleagues from across the UK is very welcome.

While there are variations across the nations/regions in terms of government policies and related funding, the challenges facing adult educators are, by and large, common. With responsibility for education a devolved matter in each part of the UK, opportunities to unite across our boundaries are more important than ever – as is encouraging our relevant government departments to share learning and best practice.

I was delighted to be able to contribute to the workshop on adult learning and democracy. The Workers' Educational Association in Northern Ireland intends to place more emphasis on this in the future – a return to the roots of the organisation. Regional democracy in Northern Ireland is still quite young and a sad reflection of this normalisation has been a decline in voter turnout at the last elections. Apathy is a common concern across the UK and it will be useful if we can share adult learning approaches to countering this and building greater grassroots activism once more.

For those of us who have been involved in adult learning for some years, something that was striking was how many of the issues remain the same. How many government initiatives have there been over the past decade to tackle basic skills and engage the low skilled and 'hard to reach'? Yet the statistics show how far we still have to go. While, on the one hand, this can be seen as evidence that greater investment in adult learning is needed, on the other, it could be viewed as adult learning providers failing. We are all aware of the positive impact that our efforts are having, but we face a common challenge in evidencing the greater contribution that learning makes to society and the economy – something which was raised several times at the conference. Adult learning contributes to all aspects of government responsibility – this is a strength but also a huge challenge when lobbying governments which, all too often, think and operate in silos.

Overall, I came away from the conference revitalised. The work that we do can be stressful and, in the current economic climate, uncertain. To be with enthusiastic, positive and passionate advocates of adult learning for two days was a terrific boost.

*Colin Neilands is Director of WEA NI*

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## Important that the voice of learners continues to be heard, writes **Chris Minter**

**T**he conference in Cardiff had many jovial moments but there was also an underlying feeling of purposefulness and a strong sense of the serious challenges to be addressed in the next 18

months. As an Englishman in Cardiff I did have a sense that we are not yet creating enough from the diversity within the UK. We were reminded of this through the conference because representation was drawn not just

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from England and Wales but also Scotland and Northern Ireland. This was very timely but the challenge is to learn to use our own national perspectives as a 'community of practice' that gives us more influence in Europe than our past attempts to speak with a single UK voice.

There is no doubt for me that the 'champagne moment' of the conference was when learners grasped the microphone and stood to speak and be heard. We are always at our best when we include learners and listen to them. Too often, in England, the European Union is caricatured as telling us what to do and we need a new narrative based upon a union of Europeans that, above all, listens to learners and respects what they say. Adopting the Global Charter for Learners that came to this conference from Belem, via Scotland, would be a significant start. Using digital media to put in place new platforms for learners to directly influence European policy would be another.

Yet the biggest challenge lies within our own minds. In our approach to adults and how they learn, the skills we need are those of listening and of co-operation. These are the skills that will enable us not only to craft an approach to our professional development that can provide 'bonding' social capital but also to bridge across to other ways of learning that appeal to a

wider spectrum of society. If we want a majority of adults in England to participate in learning then we need to learn from other approaches, such as how local democratic movements reach a wider audience, how skills can be useful for personal development or how new participatory approaches to technology like Web 2.0 merge with existing ways of teaching, learning and assessing.

No-one across Europe will dispute the current priority of jobs and growth but if the crisis provokes a panic and reduces education to a narrow preparation for employment the result may be to reduce our long-term employability. Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO (a global design firm), argues that, above all, we need the capabilities to make connections and to innovate in the wider world as well as increasing the depth of narrow technical competences. It is in developing those broader skills of cooperation and creativity that non-formal education is at its best, whether in England or throughout Europe. This remains true when we listen to learners, respond to other ways of learning or create jobs and growth.

*Chris Minter is Director of the Educational Centres Association*

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## A re-affirmation of our values – but also a challenge to better measure our outcomes, say **Maggi Dawson and Jeremy Gass**

**T**he conference was both stimulating and challenging. We felt that the speakers reaffirmed our values whilst challenging us to measure our outcomes. We welcomed the suggestion that we set targets against deprivation levels and participation rather than against curriculum. We were delighted by David Hughes' statement that 'NIACE is about empowerment and equality'. This resonates with the core values of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA).

We appreciated the opportunity to meet colleagues from across the UK and Europe and, in the WEA, we seized on this to develop further joint working across our UK-wide movement; the four WEAs are now exploring funding sources to undertake impact assessment case studies on the wider outcomes for learners, including looking at control groups, and we are looking into joint projects,

possibly through the Interreg programme.

The key conference words and phrases that resonated with us were:

- equality of participation and access to learning;
- empowerment through learning;
- putting democracy at the heart of everything we do;
- offering a second chance;
- the challenge of engaging with ageing adults and the retired, especially to address social-class inequalities;
- That learning needs to stay relevant; and
- The need to measure impact.

There were encouraging words from the Welsh Government's Deputy Minister for Skills, Jeff Cuthbert. He mentioned the Welsh Government's focus on second-chance learning

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through adult community learning (ACL), and that adult learning needs to play a greater role as people are working longer and need to upskill and reskill. He spelt out the difficult choices we face in terms of where to invest in adult learning when the budget settlement is tight, and the need to focus resources where they are most effective. We are pleased that the Welsh Government continues to support community learning through its ACL policy statement and will be looking at creating a more sustainable model for ACL in Wales, with funding of post-16 learning being re-profiled over the next few months.

It was useful to see the EU policy framework through the contribution from Martina Ni Cheallaigh, and she is right in saying we need

to tighten the links between vocational and adult learning, and that we need new and good teachers able to teach in open and flexible situations using new technologies.

The challenges from Professor John Field were also well made: that we have a well-established qualifications framework but how many learners have made use of this, or wish to; and that we need to emphasise that participation in learning is for the benefit of wider society. With a 23 per cent drop in participation in adult learning in Wales, we will be heeding these challenges.

*Maggi Dawson is General Secretary and Jeremy Gass Chair of WEA South Wales*

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## Challenges at home have a resonance across the UK and Europe, writes **Fiona Boucher**

**S**haring and networking, exploring, recognising and accepting difference while seeking the common ground, the trends and issues in policy and practice which we all identify and want to influence in the UK and in Europe: that was Cardiff.

The power of purposeful adult learning came across in the case studies highlighted as part of the presentations, in contributions from the floor and in conversations over coffee during the breaks and in the bar. It was, as it always is, a treat to listen to, reflect on and learn from a range of learners' voices during the conference. We really must get better at capturing the passion and the power of these learners and at engaging them with policy-makers. It is something we are quite good at in Scotland but are always seeking to improve.

There is also no doubt that the deliberations during the conference were enriched by the representatives from the 10 or so other countries outwith the four nations, both in giving us an insight into their policy and practice and in contributing new perspectives on our own situations.

It is clear that the effects of the economic recession across Europe in terms of employment and learning are common ground and in Scotland, in or out, as part of the UK or as an independent nation state, we all have a stake in the EU Agenda for Adult Learning.

The particular challenges we currently face here in Scotland, raising the profile of adult learning alongside community work and youth

work, securing significant investment and establishing adult learning in a strong place as the reform of post-16 education in Scotland progresses, have a resonance across the UK and Europe.

Part of the response to this is developing a new framework for adult learning. A framework which reflects the current context, trends and issues and has broad support politically, from learning providers and from learners. A framework which both serves us nationally but also has a synergy with a European and a global agenda. Cardiff helped focus this. The debate in session and workshop ranged across the wider social and economic policy in the UK, the current state of learning, the contexts for adult learning and some of the wider challenges, like increasing participation of low-skilled or less-qualified adults and learner motivations. A particular challenge we are grappling with is measuring the social and economic value of what we do.

While we came away with new thoughts and ideas to take back to enrich our own work, there was a broad agreement about what needs to be done between now and the next gathering in the summer of 2014 to move on the debate on contributing to the EU Agenda. The meeting in Edinburgh, sharing this and building the common ground, is one we should all look forward to.

*Fiona Boucher is Director of Scotland's Learning Partnership*

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**I**n preparing my reflections on the conference, I went back to the Council's Resolution on a renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning. In the style of such Euro-documents, the resolution tracks back over several previous resolutions and conclusions. It has lots of 'having regard to', 'accordingly' and 'whereas' – not the most readable of formats, but it provided me with some useful pegs on which to hang my

# Getting the focus right

**TOM SCHULLER** reflects on the European Agenda for Adult Learning, particularly its calls for balance and a focus on outcomes – both key themes of the conference – and considers some of the challenges facing practitioners and policy-makers in the field

reactions to discussions had during the event.

The resolution refers to a 'balanced allocation of education and training resources'. This begs the question of what is meant by 'balanced', and so takes us straight to the issue of priorities. In the NIACE-sponsored Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL) we tackled the issue head-on by proposing a division of the adult learning life course into four stages, with dividing lines at 25, 50 and 75. We followed this up with an extensive analysis of how public and private resources are

allocated across these stages, and showed how the vast bulk goes to the first (18-25) stage – about 86 per cent of the total – with the others getting around 11 per cent, two per cent and virtually zero, respectively.

This is only one way of addressing the balance issue. There are plenty of dimensions other than age – for example, one could focus on different social groups and how far they have had initial education. The dimensions are not in competition with each other. But what is needed is a solid account of how resources are currently distributed; what their sources are; and what the priorities are for redistribution in order to achieve a better balance.

## Focus on outcomes

The resolution also repeats calls for a stronger focus on outcomes. Here the conference provided a wonderful example, in the workshop on the social and economic value of learning. The Silver Linings project in Gateshead uses music (the ukulele, to be precise) to help patients with Alzheimer's disease to recover some of their memory. Shaun Hegarty's presentation showed not only the patients and their families benefitting, but also the staff, with even kitchen staff taking part in the music, dancing and reminiscence work. However, Shaun also took us through the SROI (social returns on investment) approach to measuring the benefits, and to putting some kind of economic value on them. SROI makes a framework available to others for carrying out similar evaluations. He wisely included sober reflections on how far everything could be brought within such a calculus. Not everything can be reduced to a pound sign, but the discipline of attempting such evaluations is very necessary.

The NIACE publication *Valuing the Impact of Adult Learning* represents a very different approach. It draws on Daniel Fujiwara's expertise in the Treasury's Green Book approach, applying an econometric approach to large-scale data from the British Household Panel Survey.

One key conclusion we can draw from this is that we need diverse approaches to evaluation. Included in these could well be techniques such as randomised control trials, very rarely used in analyses of adult learning. But the crucial thing is that methods should be appropriate as well as rigorous, without any single 'gold standard'.

My second thought under this heading is that evaluations of adult learning should be more open to null or negative results. This means identifying where an initiative or a learning episode has either led to no discernible effect or to an effect which damages

rather than benefits the learner or those around them. Historically, the adult learning community has – understandably – not shown itself to be very keen on such findings, but they are now needed if we are to move to a more mature stage of research and evaluation.

The resolution calls for liaison between ‘relevant ministries’; it refers to an ‘adult learning sector’; and it talks about ‘stakeholders’. I lump all these together to pose the question ‘Who exactly do we understand to be the main agents?’ Which ministries are most relevant, how well-defined is the sector, and who are the significant stakeholders? How well do all of these represent changing priorities? A prominent example is the growth of adult learning as a factor in meeting the health challenges of an ageing society (as illustrated above) – but how often is the Ministry of Health regarded as a relevant player?

This is an obvious question of where comparative analyses will be useful, not because there is any single ideal model, but because comparison of which agencies are involved in different jurisdictions should be a fertile source of reflection and illumination. This can happen at different levels: the variance between countries, or provinces within a country, or local administrations within a province, should throw up interesting ideas, for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers alike.

This is an obvious issue for EU action – though it’s worth noting also that the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in Hamburg is also well placed to carry out such work, and indeed its ASEM education and research network is currently addressing the issue.

Taking the question of who should be involved a step further, one concern I had about the conference was the virtual absence of the private sector. There are two aspects to this. First is the role of private employers, whose attitude to and investment in adult learning is a crucial feature of the landscape. This is fairly well-trodden ground – even though their absence from the conference confirmed the difficulty of getting full engagement.

Much less well-understood is the position and significance of private providers of adult learning. As part of the IFLL we carried out an analysis of the private training market (<http://www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry/Sector-Papers.htm>), which I believe to have been quite ground-breaking, and sadly under-discussed. Both profit-making and non-profit providers will certainly occupy an increasing share of the sector, especially as technology continues to offer new modes of delivery. How will innovations such as the Khan Academy and MOOCs affect the sector? We don’t know,

but we do know that any discussion will look increasingly irrelevant if it does not take account of them and make efforts to include them in our analyses and debates.

One of the strongest components of NIACE’s brand is its annual survey of participation in adult learning, which has been running for many years. It is a hugely valuable source of information and insights. I know that those responsible are already experimenting with ways of modifying the survey, and I would strongly support this. The overall picture, sketched over many years, is familiar and, at headline level, quite stable. We need to deepen and vary the work, while maintaining, as far as possible, its continuity and comparability over time.

### **Better picture**

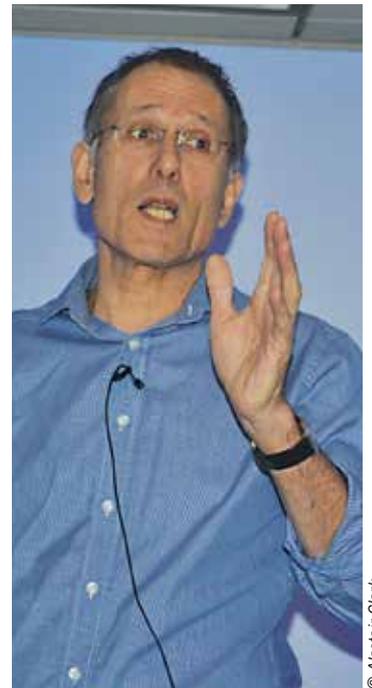
For example, to get a better picture of overall participation we need more detail on the duration of the learning undertaken. This is the kind of information supplied in the analyses recently carried out by Alan Felstead and colleagues. They show, among many other things, that taking duration into account affects the picture on relative gender access to training: a higher proportion of women undertake some kind of training, but men do it for longer. So the overall volumes of training undertaken by women and men need to include both dimensions.

I would add a further query on gender, which is that the recent Department for Business, Innovation and Skills survey of adult and community learning showed a much greater difference in participation in favour of women: the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills results show something like a 70/30 split in favour of women, which is higher than the NIACE data. This doesn’t mean they are irreconcilable, but we need to establish the basis for the differences in order to move towards a common knowledge base.

Finally, I propose – or perhaps support already existing proposals – that there should be a move towards a Local Participation Index (LPI). An LPI would be within a common national framework, but would have a strong local focus, allowing stakeholders at that level to shape the debate to their own priorities. The Canadians had something along these lines which offered an excellent platform for local debate.

In England, the hollowing out of local democracy makes such an initiative significantly more difficult. Which bodies could most authoritatively undertake this? It’s hard to say.

*Tom Schuller is Director of Longview*



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# Looking ahead to Edinburgh

When NIACE accepted the role of UK national coordinator for the EU Agenda for Adult Learning it designed eight 'peer learning' projects to showcase at the initial conference in Cardiff. The aim was to help set out where we should be by the time delegates meet again in Edinburgh next year, writes **MARK RAVENHALL**

**W**hen NIACE was asked to take on the role of UK national coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning, we were keen to do two things. The first was to link the work, embed it if you like, in the wider policy development and research work the Institute does. The second was to add something new, a new dimension to this work that engages UK partners and colleagues in the rest of Europe.

To do this we designed eight projects that we showcased in Cardiff. But the aim was not just to set out these 'peer learning activities'. It was also to think about where we would like to be by the time we all meet again in Edinburgh next year.

In what follows I give a brief summary of each of the projects, setting out where we would like to be in 2014. In case readers would like to hear more or get involved in any of the work I also give the name of the NIACE staff contact.

## Measuring the social and economic value of adult learning

*Penny Lamb, Head of Policy Development:  
penny.lamb@niace.org.uk*

With the current climate of austerity and constrained public-sector funding in the UK and other European countries, a number of reviews and reforms are taking place putting significant scrutiny and pressure on adult learning budgets. This is happening at the same time as changes to employment, and to demographic and living patterns, making the case for adult learning's contribution to social cohesion as well as economic impact more important than ever.

This project aims to pull together and share the best practice in this field, providing UK case studies for sharing across European countries, capturing economic and social value from case studies, and sharing emerging work on using outcomes frameworks for capturing wider value.

The workshop in Cardiff wanted to see the following five things happen before the Edinburgh event.

- Further development of the outcomes framework for wider use.
- Production and circulation of the message that any work on outcomes is proportionate and fit for purpose.
- Better links made between outcomes and curriculum design.
- Exploration of the feasibility of randomised control trials.
- Consultation with 'critical friends' from UK Treasury/European Commission.

▽ Baroness Margaret Sharp, who chaired the Independent Commission on Colleges in their Communities, contributing to a workshop



## Adult learning and local democracy

Simon Beer, Programme Manager:  
[simon.beer@niace.org.uk](mailto:simon.beer@niace.org.uk)

This project aims to promote the role of adult learning in Local Democracy Week (LDW) each October. In the UK educational activities during the week are predominately focused on school children. This project will share good practice from across Europe using examples where LDW is a success and share best practice and materials for developing democratic engagement activities linked to adult learning services provided locally. To raise awareness NIACE will develop a LDW Adult Learning Award for launch in October 2013.

In Cardiff we heard inspiring examples from Sweden, where democratic engagement is part of mainstream adult learning, and Northern Ireland about the links between adult education and the peace process.

Delegates felt strongly that, as we move towards Edinburgh, we needed to:

- Develop a concept of democracy as 'a central vision, not a separate subject but as part of the mainstream curriculum'.
- Campaign for better funding for this area of the curriculum, including better working in partnership with issues-driven, civil society groups (such as environmental activists).
- Challenge the attitudes of the majority of UK adult education professionals and teacher trainers who no longer see it as part of their work.
- Develop a bank of materials and make better use of social media.
- Promote the value of engagement, democratic participation and dialogue between all 'participants', including learners, providers and politicians.

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## The NIACE inquiries into the nature of basic skills

Carol Taylor, Director of Development and Research: [carol.taylor@niace.org.uk](mailto:carol.taylor@niace.org.uk)

A central concern across Europe is adult basic skills; literacy, language, numeracy and digital competences are necessary for greater workforce participation and social inclusion. In recent years, NIACE has published inquiries into literacy and numeracy in England. Working with UK partners and with the



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European Basic Skills Network, the aim is to exchange examples of promising policy and practice at national or regional level, facilitating cooperation between European stakeholders, in order to raise awareness about relevant issues to adult learning providers.

Delegates heard about the inquiries and raised a set of further questions to be addressed by the time of the Edinburgh conference:

- How do we measure success in basic skills learning for: the learner; the provider; the policy maker?
- How do we use digital technologies to enhance the learner experience in relation to basic skills learning?
- How do we secure better support from employers in recognising and addressing the basic skills needs of employees?
- How can we improve the links to other policy areas, such as health and housing?
- How do we secure better quality for basic skills teaching and learning?

△ Portuguese adult educator Pascal Paulus talking about self-organised learning

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## What participation surveys say about motivation to learn

Fiona Aldridge, Head of Learning for Work: [fiona.aldridge@niace.org.uk](mailto:fiona.aldridge@niace.org.uk)

For the last 16 years NIACE has undertaken an annual national participation survey which has shown, despite a relatively high adult participation rate compared to other European

countries, less likelihood of participation from those groups with lower skills and less initial education. Other UK surveys have shown that employers tend to invest in more highly skilled staff.

The workshop stressed the importance of learner voice in designing research into participation, as well as learning itself. Issues of access and motivation to learn were explored, noting that there were different issues and barriers for different people. It was felt that those who want to learn will generally find a way, but the question remains as to how providers and government motivates those who do not already want to learn.

Initial engagement is one issue, but we also need to ensure that participation leads to reengagement. The impact of cultural environment was noted in this respect and the value people place on learning and education. Do people see learning as a luxury for the well-off? One of the issues is the relevance and perception of the word 'learning'; should the surveys use the word 'learning', and what are the consequences not doing so?

Before Edinburgh, NIACE will work with the UK Commission for Employment and Skills to undertake quantitative research, and follow up with qualitative research to look at why these gaps in participations still occur and what can be done about it.

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## The NIACE Inquiry into the Learning Family

*Jan Novitzky, Programme Manager:  
jan.novitzky@niace.org.uk*

The workshop began with a discussion about the experience of family learning of the participants and an outline of the work and findings of the recent NIACE inquiry. Participants explored the feasibility of establishing a vibrant European network for family learning on the back of the inquiry's research.

Five conclusions from the workshop were:

- There is considerable qualitative and quantitative evidence from the NIACE inquiry, as well as the experience of the workshop participants, that family learning is beneficial in a variety of ways to adults and children, especially those who have experienced disadvantage.
- Family learning operates differently in the four countries in the UK, so the first step towards setting up a European network is sharing of experience and practice in the UK. It was recognised that sharing ideas about what works in different places and

building partnerships across different countries would help to spread good practice.

- Careful consideration should be given to family learning definitions and vocabulary when planning for a European network since in several European countries, the word 'family' has religious connotations.
- An existing European network for intergenerational learning, which has 23 members and is coming to the end of its funding period, may provide some useful contacts, as could the EAEA and national co-ordinators when seeking potential partners for a European network.
- The new Lifelong Learning Programme (2014-20) will have provision to fund cross-sectoral networks, which may be relevant to a family learning network, which could include school-sector partners as well as adult educators.

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## Self-organised groups and Community Learning Trusts

*Cheryl Turner, Head of Learning in Communities: cheryl.turner@niace.org.uk*

The Community Learning Trust initiative is a major innovation in the delivery of community education in England, embracing a more dynamic relationship between informal, non-formal and formal learning in communities. The project looks at the influence of new and emerging technologies on non-formal pedagogies and in particular the work in developing countries such as that by Sugatra Mitra. It will investigate the transferability of such approaches to adult learning settings, working closely with the European Foundation for Quality in eLearning. It will establish a number of test sites in the UK linking closely with such initiatives as the Community Learning Innovation Fund.

The workshop explored how current community learning practice supports self-organised learning, what successful self-organised learning looked like and the role of digital literacy, as well as, in light of government policies, how providers could strengthen provision.

Work to be done before Edinburgh in 2014:

- Exploration of the monitoring and evaluation of learning planned and delivered through self-organised groups and Community Learning Trusts.
- Developing a dialogue on quality control and risk in relation to provision through self-organised groups and Community Learning Trusts.

- Mapping of practice in relation to the first steps in self-organised groups and Community Learning Trusts.
- Development of a 'praxis' in relation to encouraging/promoting self-organised groups and Community Learning Trusts.

## Employability skills for young adults

Nicola Aylward, Project Officer,  
nicola.aylward@niace.org.uk

Employability skills are the non-vocational skills that people use at work. They are very wide-ranging, such as communication skills, team-working skills, organisational skills and problem-solving skills. These skills are important because, without them, people can find it much harder to find work or succeed in work. With the current high levels of 19-24 unemployment in the UK, this is a particular issue in an increasingly competitive job market.

Working with young adults and a group of employers, this project will look at what an 'employable citizen' of the future looks like, with the aim of building a community of practice of employers, learning providers and learner representative groups.

The main message from the workshop was that the methodology should use young people as interviewers; and while the power relationship may inhibit tough questioning, it is good that each party hears the other's view.

Other points raised were that: any employability research should aim to produce a better understanding of the recruitment process; the research process should also be dialogical, challenging perceptions, and unpicking what employers mean by attitudes; and the role of manager was important and would also affect the perceptions of young people. It was also asked how successful training and education providers were at providing job-finding skills. Perhaps further research is needed on this issue.

## Supporting social inclusion in basic skills

Joyce Black, Head of Skills for Life:  
joyce.black@niace.org.uk

Working with the European Basic Skills Network, this project aims to bring together the thinking of 64 members from 34 countries. The project will identify specific initiatives, programmes or practices that are designed to deliver basic skills activities to socially



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disadvantaged adults, collecting effective practice examples aiming at identifying innovative elements that can be applicable in different social and cultural EU contexts.

Participants highlighted a number of things that can make adults more likely to participate in basic skills provision, including: the focus of the course/session being relevant to the learner and their lives; delivering provision in a place that is familiar to the learner or they already go to; and the main focus of the course/session being something the learner is interested in and not necessarily accredited.

The knowledge, experience and ongoing training of teachers and intermediaries is critical in basic skills teaching and learning – this is equally important not just for specialist input but for intermediaries knowing how and where to signpost to appropriate learning opportunities.

Digital inclusion was seen as another key element for this agenda – coupled with the need for people to develop literacy skills so that they can use digital technology more effectively. But it is equally important to find ways to link the use of technologies from a superficial use to effective use in supporting learning.

Like the other projects there was a focus on sharing good practice across Europe in order to learn more about what approaches work with different groups. A directory/good practice portal was suggested, as was collation of better evidence on the impact of the learning.

Mark Ravenhall is Senior Research Fellow  
at NIACE

△ Swedish adult educator  
Ingegerd Akelsson Le  
Douaron contributing to  
the workshop on adult  
learning and democracy

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Celine Castelino, edited by Chris Taylor

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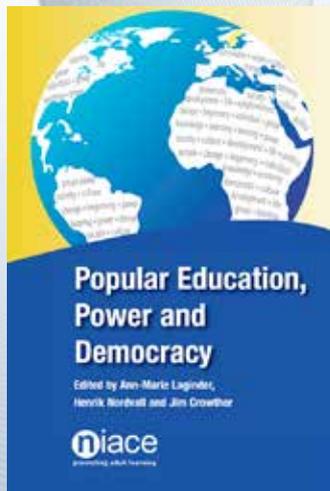
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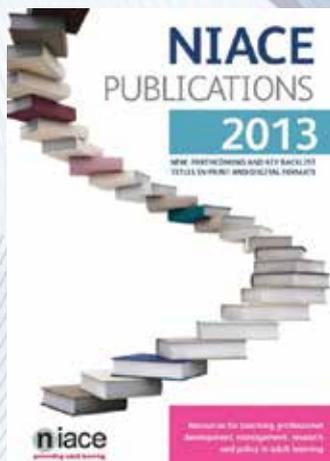
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