Progress on numeracy, but wide inequalities in adult learning persist in the UK

A country-wide adult numeracy programme is an encouraging development in the UK. According to EAEAs member Learning and Work Institute, more needs to be done to address stark inequalities in access to learning: it is still individuals who invest in their learning, and not the government or employers.

A new 559m 3-year UK-wide adult numeracy programme has been established, with funding allocated to local authorities. The programme supports non-formal learning as well as accredited courses. Alongside delivery, research and evaluation activities will also take place to identify effective practices.

Access to learning remains uneven

Funding for adult learning remains broadly unchanged in the UK. Although there has been new investment in some programmes (e.g. Multiply adult numeracy), other programme funding has remained unchanged and has therefore declined in terms of value, particularly in the context of high inflation and rising delivery costs. L&W's new research shows that individuals invest more in their learning than either the Government or employers. However, there are stark inequalities in who can invest in their learning. This suggests the Government needs to do more to streamline funding entitlements and ensure the most disadvantaged can access learning.

Funding sources of ALE in the UK:

- Project funding
- Programme funding
- Operating grants/structural funding
- Fees paid by individuals
- Contribution paid by employers
- Formula funding
- Donations and other philanthropic funding

Going beyond the labour market

L&W responded to a Government consultation on a new funding and accountability system for Further Education (including adult education) in England. Along with other organisations, we advocated strongly that outcomes of learning should not be limited to labour market measures, and should encompass a wider range of measures including social outcomes such as improved health and wellbeing. The Government recently announced changes to the policy which recognised these concerns.

Highlighting the very best in adult learning

L&W organised the annual Festival of Learning (in England) and Adult Learners' Week (in Wales). For the first time, two new regional learning awards programmes were held alongside the national Festival of Learning awards: the Mayor of London Adult Learning Awards and the West Midlands Adult Learning Awards. All of these activities aim to highlight the very best in adult learning, showcasing the benefits to learners and policymakers.

Higher ambition needed

The overall situation is mixed. Adults can and do benefit from a range of different learning programmes which lead to positive outcomes in terms of employment, further learning and skills development, and a range of personal and social outcomes. However, stagnating public investment means that over the past decade, many learning opportunities have been lost and too many people, particularly the most disadvantaged, miss out on opportunities to benefit from learning. A higher ambition for adult education and lifelong learning is a necessity to support economic growth and a wide range of social benefits.

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Deliver outcomes which extend beyond the labour market

Learning and work proposes the following three key recommendations to improve the ALE situation in the UK:

- Create an adequately resourced funding system which supports and encourages participation by the most disadvantaged adults, and allows providers to deliver high-quality programmes.
- Recognise the value of adult learning in delivering outcomes which extend beyond the labour market, and ensure that this is reflected in policy, programme design and commissioning.
- Engage the widest possible range of stakeholders, including the public sector, civil

society and businesses to promote and disseminate the benefits of adult learning, and create a culture in which an expectation of adult learning is the norm.