Developments: Preparing for the future changes to the economy

2019-2020 has seen a number of policy developments in adult education in the UK. In England, the government has committed to the creation of a National Skills Fund and a National Retraining Scheme, which will aim to prepare workers for future changes to the economy. This will help to address challenges to the economy, including:

- automation and advances in technology that are changing the nature of work
- an ageing population and extended working lives
- an entrenched productivity gap relative to other advanced economies and
- low social mobility by international standards.

Given the decline in employer investment in training and the number of adults participating in learning, it will be crucial that these programs effectively engage employers and adults.

Autonomy for the regions

In September 2020 the government announced free entitlement to Level 3 full- time courses to match skills gaps and flexible loans for higher level qualifications up to Level 4-5. From August 2020 education budgets in England have been devolved (transferred) from the central government to a number of regions. This gives these areas the power to decide how adult education funding should be invested, and how the outcomes should be measured.

Local areas are now running pilots to help decide on the changes they may make to their approach to adult education, for example, whether to invest more in basic skills training. The Learning and Work Institute is actively supporting to shape their plans for devolution. The evidence suggests that devolution is an opportunity to ensure that adult education, learning and skills are effectively joined up with other local policy agendas.

Basic skill policy and a Personal Learning Account program launched

In basic skills policy in England, the existing entitlement to fully funded adult literacy and numeracy courses has been supplemented with a basic digital skills entitlement. This aims to address the challenge that around one in five adults lack basic digital skills, yet 90% of all jobs in the next 20 years will require these skills. Providers will also be able to deliver new essential digital skills qualifications. As the entitlement will be funded from the existing Adult Education Budget, providers will have to decide how to deliver these courses within their existing budget.

In Wales, a Personal Learning Account pilot program was launched with the aim to provide free training for people in work and below the Welsh average to retrain to work in key sectors. In response to COVID-19 the pilot will be expanded to be a national programme from April 2021.

The situation of adult education has stayed the same in the last years. The adult education funding situation has also stayed the same. UK civil society is consulted in policy making to a certain extent. A number of policies in a wide range of areas support European Pillar of Social Rights, however they have not been created specifically in response. L&W is not aware of a consultation process on the EPSR. There are some policies on Upskilling Pathways and the reports from the European Semester partially

corresponds to L&Ws experience in the sector. There have been some initiatives on the implementation of the SDGs, such as the new entitlement to basic digital skills learning.

Challenges: Corona takes a toll

The response to the corona pandemic was the most immediate challenge in England and Wales over the last year. Adult education providers will need to continue to develop blended options for online learning, as the restrictions will continue in 2021. For the future, not enough is known about the impact on participation in learning, and the impact in terms of quality of provision and learning outcomes.

The example of Wales is only one of the many changes that have occurred as a result of the corona pandemic. Providers had to experiment moving their provision partly or entirely online.

This has highlighted inequalities in access to learning, especially for those who face exclusion through poor digital, literacy or language skills, and/or face digital poverty, lacking a suitable device or data connection.

The impact of the pandemic on the labor market is likely to mean that more adults will need or wish to retrain for new careers. Learning provision will need to be tailored to respond to emerging opportunities and address skills gaps. More widely, adult education needs to consider how it can help address challenges such as increased prevalence of mental ill health and digitalisation of the society.

Flexible learning is needed to tackle the challenges

Learning and Work (L&W) argues that to support adults in the increasingly challenging labour market, all adults should be entitled to free learning for their first full qualification, or modules of a qualification, up to and including Level 3. This would be a much wider entitlement than most adults have today. The increased flexibility of funding modules of learning would enable people to gain specific skills for moving into a new role, rather than forcing them to undertake a lengthy qualification.

Declining trend in participation

In January 2020, L&W published the 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey, which records the lowest participation rate in the 23-year history of the survey. It is the third year in a row in which the participation rate has fallen to a record low. Just one third (33 per cent) of adults say that they have participated in learning during the previous three years, while 38 per cent say that they have not done any learning since leaving full time education.

Since 2010, the participation rate has dropped by 10 percentage points. That is equivalent to 3.8 million fewer adults taking part in learning since the start of the decade. The fall follows a significant decline in investment over the last decade. Between 2009-10 and 2018-19, government spending on adult education excluding apprenticeships fell by 47%. Employer investment in training remains low, as inequalities among the UK population persist, especially among the under-represented parts of the population and those furthest away from the labour market.

Participation declines with age and the discrepancies between the best and worst

performing English regions has widened. Participation in Scotland (38 per cent) is much higher than in England (33 per cent), Wales (30 per cent) or Northern Ireland (22 per cent). In autumn 2020, the Government will conduct a Comprehensive Spending Review and publish a White Paper on Further Education. L&W considers that these will be key opportunities to influence the Governments response to the challenges we face.

Call to boost participation and quality of adult education

In 2020/2021 the focus of L&W will be to continue their work across their strategic plan. This includes research, development and policy work on

- lifelong learning
- essential and life skills
- employment and social security
- good work and progression
- apprenticeships and technical education and
- social justice and inclusion.

According to L&W the government should invest to boost participation and quality of adult education, ensure a joined-up approach with other policy agendas (employment, health and communities), and make effective use of evaluation to understand what works.