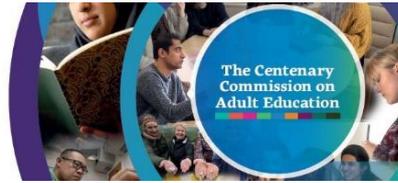




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Adult Lifelong Education: Reimagining National & Regional Policies for the Covid Era

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Report to the Centenary Commission on Adult Education
and the Adult Education 100 Steering Group

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to our colleague Nigel Todd, who died while the research was in progress. Nigel was an inspiring adult educator, a member of the Adult Education Steering Group, and a driving force behind the Centenary Commission on Adult Education. His kindness, support and commitment to social justice embodied the possibilities of adult education for a change.

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Executive summary and recommendations

This report aims to contribute to shaping national, regional and local thinking in adult education and lifelong learning, and to broaden and re-orientate policy debates in this key area of policy. It is based on three months' research, funded by the University of Nottingham, for the Adult Education 100 campaign and the Centenary Commission on Adult Education.

The report findings are based on the perspectives of practitioners gathered in focus groups and discussion at policy roundtables. It asks how these relate to current trends and priorities in this 'COVID era' (British Academy, 2021).

Summary of findings and recommendations

The following summary is based on the key findings of our research. The recommendations are directed at organisations that provide, and those that advocate the importance of, adult education.

1. Organisational co-operation

Findings:

The report recognises the importance of specific and localised 'skills ecologies' in cities and regions across England and Wales. We find, however, that the educational needs of citizens and learners are most effectively articulated and addressed when there is embedded and lasting collaboration between a wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies and organisations.

Recommendation 1:

Our first and over-riding recommendation is that adult education organisations should consider not only the distinctive contributions they can make to establishing a rich provision and take-up of education and training by adults, but also how they can work most effectively in partnership to build and strengthen the structures, funding, institutions, and attitudes needed.

2. Language of policy and of practice

Findings:

The language used to discuss and justify adult learning and education is restricted and needs to be widened. The emphasis on employability as the motive for lifelong learning does not recognise or meet the complex and diverse needs of adults in the COVID era. A research circle inspired by the Centenary Commission has shown that

Participatory Action Research methods can widen and deepen understanding of this problem.

Recommendation 2:

To deepen understanding of this problem we recommend further development of research circles on adult education using Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods. These should investigate how skills for jobs and education for life can be blended together in specific practices and activities and share this knowledge. They can build on the achievements of the community, democracy and dialogue research circle, addressing also other foci set out in the Centenary Commission's 2019 report. Invitations should be extended to participants from a range of agencies, such as combined mayoral authorities, local authorities, members of the LGA Co-operative Councils Innovation Network, and others associated with the Adult Education 100 campaign.¹

3. Digital divides, poverty and creative responses to COVID-19

Findings:

In each focus group, participants from England and Wales highlighted the significance and value of different forms of digital learning. They also stressed, however, that the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened existing divisions and exclusions. They began to explore their organisations' differing responses to these dilemmas, and the factors that shaping organisational practices, emphasising the need to evaluate the diverse experiences of students and teachers.

Recommendation 3:

To add to existing organisational evaluations on digital learning, we recommend a Participatory Action Research project (and research circle) focussed on digital learning divides be established in one or more regions of England and/or Wales.²

4. Concerns, trends and threats: Patterns of participation and funding

Findings:

The Department for Education (DfE), the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL), and the Learning and Work Institute, have each published national data in 2021 confirming that the decline in participation in community adult learning intensified during the COVID pandemic. Members of our focus groups recognised these national

¹ These circles should be time-limited: their first phase, a cycle of planning, action, reflection and evaluation, should be completed within one year; quarterly reports should be submitted to the Adult Education100 Steering Group.

² This project should also complete its first cycle within one year and submit quarterly reports to the Adult Education100 Steering Group.

patterns. However, they also confirmed that local authorities and national, regional and local voluntary and community sector organisations, have responded to particular needs, and illustrated how they have done so. Focus group members also reported ways in which needs have been affected and shaped by the consequences of austerity policies since 2010.

The capacity of colleges, and other adult education providers, to respond to the needs of COVID-furloughed and redundant workers are currently limited by gaps between the 'Skills Guarantee', level 3 provision (for some), and the needs of students. These have been intensified by recent 'clawbacks' in government funding.

Several recent reports, including the Centenary Commission's, have advocated the introduction of new forms of individual learning accounts. The Centenary Commission also recommended the introduction of 'Community Learning Accounts', to 'ensure that funding is made available to informal, community-based learning initiatives led by local groups'.

Recommendation 4:

We recommend that the Adult Education 100 campaign review previous experience with individual learning accounts (ILAs), with a view to elaborating how the Centenary Commission's recommendation for Community Learning Accounts (CLA) might be put into practice; and that the campaign, perhaps working with partners, institute an in-depth study on the design, funding and evaluation of CLAs and their relationship to ILAs.

5. Partnership and collaboration: re-building local, regional and national strategies and making connections

Findings :

Practitioners' experiences of funding, of meeting demand, and of building trust, shaped different their perspectives on the possibilities of partnership, collaboration and re-building different forms of national, regional and local strategies for lifelong learning and adult education. They saw the need for 'collaboration' as extending beyond education to include work with health and housing agencies, and allied networks.

Recommendation 5:

We recommend a mapping exercise on connections between policy and practice in regeneration, health, and lifelong learning. This would review how far related skills and knowledge gaps have been addressed, and what further possibilities might be available for re-imagining policy and practice. This should focus on a region, extending collaboration between regional and local authorities, third sector and community-based organisations, and further and higher education. It should be designed and completed within one year.

6. Sustaining and developing new practices

Findings:

Despite constantly changing funding frameworks, many organisations in the voluntary sector have survived, and continue to make innovative and valuable contributions, particularly to the education of excluded groups and communities. However, the contemporary 'flux and shuffle' between different forms of lifelong learning provision is often combined with a restricting emphasis on employability and 'skills for jobs'. This limits the choice, and range of opportunities, available to individuals and communities. However, adult education has a key role in developing new practices and responding to today's major challenges. One example is climate change: the WEA's development of 'green branches' is an example of how innovatively adult education can respond.

Recommendation 6:

Adult education organisations should continue to seek ways of promoting their own perspectives, knowledge, and methods, in policy debates. In particular, we encourage them to continue to develop, and to explain the social and economic value of, educational methods and approaches that blend 'skills for jobs' with 'education for life' and humane and civic forms of adult lifelong education.

We note a growing awareness among many parliamentarians (both MPs and Lords), of weaknesses in current policy and practice on adult lifelong education. The Centenary Commission and the Adult Education 100 campaign should continue, in partnership with other individuals and organisations, to highlight – on the basis of evidence – changes needed in policy, and gaps between official rhetoric and current practice.

1. Introduction

Adult education providers are fighting for financial survival. We may not be around if something isn't done urgently (Senior local authority officer, February 2021).

1.1 Policy context

A series of reports on adult education and lifelong learning has been published since 2019. In addition to the Centenary Commission on Adult Education's report "*A Permanent National Necessity ...: Adult Education and Lifelong Learning for 21st Century Britain* (2019), these include independent commissions, think tanks, and the House of Commons Education Select Committee report, *A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution* (2020). Subsequently a White Paper on further education and skills (2021) *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth* was published in January 2021. The Post-16 Education and Skills Bill was introduced in the House of Lords in May 2021.

While the White Paper was welcomed for raising the policy profile of the FE sector, it was criticised by some for an over-emphasis on young adults (rather than adults of all ages), and for hardly mentioning the wider benefits of lifelong learning for health or creativity. Neither did it address the complex needs of communities and those struggling with loneliness and isolation. Instead, its scope was narrow, emphasising the needs of employers for 'job-ready' employees (Holford, 2021). Nor did it recognise that the human tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic may also offer an opportunity to re-imagine education as a public good (Stanistreet, 2021).

This report, based on findings from a small-scale three month research project (January-March 2021) on 'Strategic Intervention in Policy Debates on Adult Lifelong Education' funded by the University of Nottingham, starts from a different position.

1.2 Our contributions to policy debates

The report is designed to broaden and re-orientate policy debates on adult education and lifelong learning by drawing on the perspectives of practitioners and researchers, in the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic – and as we shape the 'COVID decade' that lies ahead (British Academy, 2021).

Since 2019, the Centenary Commission on Adult Education has promoted informed policy discussion by asking how adult education can develop to support and enrich the lives of people and the communities in which they live and work. Our premise is that policy learning and dialogue must be local and regional, as well as national: local 'skills ecologies' (see Hodgson and Spours, 2013, 2015, 2017) are key to 21st century adult learning. These require partnerships between further, adult, and higher education, the public sector, and voluntary and community sector bodies – and stronger and more dialogic inter-institutional networks. Consequently, in January 2021, organisations from each of these sectors were invited to contribute to this next phase of the Centenary Commission's work.

1.3 Methods

The project combined three focus groups, two webinars and a policy roundtable. The focus groups were designed to understand the diverse perspectives of adult educators – in different regions of England and Wales – in the first three months of 2021. We aimed to listen to, and learn from, a range of local, regional and national views and to feed these into further national policy debates on different forms of adult education and lifelong learning. We then disseminated our findings at a policy roundtable.

In the first focus group, we met representatives of higher education and partner organisations. The second focus group was with senior officers from local authorities. Finally, in the third focus group, we met national, regional and local leaders from the voluntary and community sector. The focus groups were an opportunity to share and debate definitions of adult education and lifelong learning. We asked whether policies and practices need to change, reviewed how practices could be re-shaped, and what ‘resources of hope’ practitioners can draw upon.

In the focus groups the following questions were asked:

- What kinds of adult education do you offer, and what do you plan to offer? (i.e., before, during and after the pandemic)
- What has shaped your practices before and during COVID19?
- What are the implications of digital exclusion and inclusion for adults’ learning?
- How are different practices supporting communities and their development within your area?

The objectives of the policy roundtable were to:

- Learn from regional developments;
- Share learning from others;
- Review the latest policy debates;
- Brief participants on perspectives of the Centenary Commission and arguments about how adult education and lifelong learning can and should develop;
- Ask how the White Paper, and other policies, shape practices and planning in different regions in England.

1.4 Conceptual framework

Three related concepts – policy, policy learning, and policy memory – formed the theoretical basis of our report:

- **Policy:** We report on practitioners' shared and nuanced understandings of policy and how they frame contemporary practice (Ball, 2017).
- **Policy learning:** We report on how practitioners understand national, regional and local policy and practice.
- **Policy memory:** We argue why and how a memory of earlier debates and forms of adult education and lifelong learning can enrich contemporary policy practice – and how policy memory strengthens our case for education for life, rather than just 'skills for jobs'. Lack of policy memory (Higham, 2005; Keep, 2009 and Hodgson, 2015) and 'institutional amnesia' (Pollitt, 2000; 2009) matter.

Higham (2005) argues that a lack of memory, processes of re-organisation, and a wider policy context reinforce one another with implications for policy learning:

This institutional and personnel discontinuity mitigated against the development of forms of 'policy memory' in the institutions which is probably necessary for the development of policy learning. Initiatives arose in response to a variety of perceived issues and problems, some specifically educational, others grounded in the broader context (2005:4).

Hodgson emphasises : 'We need to capture the policy memory that resides with those who have worked or researched in the FE sector over many years, in order to avoid repeating past mistakes' (Hodgson, 2015). The same argument applies to those working in adult and community learning and universities. As Pollitt argues, whose voice is called upon, who is listened to, and what is remembered or forgotten, in each institutional context, matters. In turn, Pollitt suggests different manifestations of speed and time (2009: 203) include an acceleration and fragmentation in which doctrines of radical change may embody 'contempt for the past' (2009: 207). Each of the following sections of the report briefly considers why, and how, policy learning and memory relate to contemporary debates and the recommendations we make.

Two recurring themes were reported in our research: first, the uneven effect of the COVID pandemic on the lives of individuals and communities; second, it was repeatedly emphasised that the government's austerity policies and practices, since 2010, have profoundly shaped and heightened these differences. A regional manager of a large voluntary organisation recognised:

The pandemic has laid another layer of disadvantage for many ... Engaging people in digital learning has replicated long-term problems.

This is also highlighted by the Learning and Work Institute:

The effects of the crisis have been unequal. The pandemic has created new inequalities and exposed existing ones (2021: 4).

2. Context: From Ministry of Reconstruction 1919 to Centenary Commission 2019 – and COVID-19

It's about not going back to life before COVID
(Senior local authority officer, February 2021).

The following section of the report emphasises connections between the historical context and the contemporary work of the Centenary Commission on Adult Education. It highlights why a critical understanding of different manifestations of adult education must build on contemporary policy learning and not a 'contempt for the past' (Pollitt, 2009: 207).

2.1 Historical context

In November 2019, the Centenary Commission on Adult Education issued its report, *"A Permanent National Necessity ...": Adult Education and Lifelong Learning for 21st Century Britain*. The Commission trod in the footsteps of the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee, whose *Final Report* (1919) had been published exactly a century earlier. The Ministry of Reconstruction was established to design a country 'fit for the heroes who had won the war', and its Adult Education Committee saw adult education as essential to the process of building a fairer and more democratic society, and expiating the carnage of the Western Front.

According to a covering letter to the Prime Minister – David Lloyd George – from the Adult Education committee's chairman, printed as a foreword to the 1919 report, the 'goal of "all education" must be citizenship – that is, the rights and duties of each individual as a member of the community'. He continued:

the essence of democracy being not passive but active participation by all in citizenship, education in a democratic country must aim at fitting each individual progressively not only for his personal, domestic and vocational duties, but, above all, for those duties of citizenship for which these earlier stages are training grounds (1919: 4-5).

The 'necessary conclusion' was that adult education should not be seen as 'a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there', nor relevant only to a short period of early adulthood. It was 'a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong'. It should, moreover, be 'spread uniformly and systematically over the whole community'.

This was essential for 'the economic recovery of the nation', but also for 'the proper use of their responsibilities by millions of new voters' (it was in 1918 that the franchise had been extended to all adult men, and many women). These required 'a far wider body of intelligent public opinion after the war than there was before' which could 'only be created gradually by a long, thorough, universal process of education continued into and throughout the life of the adult'.

2.2 Contemporary contexts

The 2019 Centenary Commission also reported at what its chair called 'a critical time'. In her Foreword, Dame Helen Ghosh continued: 'we face a series of social, political, economic, technological and demographic challenges'. Climate crisis; inequalities of gender, race, disability, sexuality and social origin; the failure of representative politics

to deliver change for many 'left behind' by economic and social change; the threat posed by Artificial Intelligence to employment. Those challenges were, indeed, acute, and they have not disappeared. Yet neither she nor the Centenary Commission's members foresaw that – within weeks – the country, and the world, would be in the grip of a global pandemic. Many have compared the effects of coronavirus to the world wars. The parallel is instructive: not so much in the scale of human loss – though that has been shocking and painful – as in the light shone on the nature and capacity of our economic, social and political institutions.

'It has always been a challenge,' the Centenary Commission observed, to 'balance provision for adult education and lifelong learning in support of economic prosperity, on the one hand, and for individual flourishing, social and community development and democratic engagement on the other.' But it argued that 'over the last 20 years at least, we have got that balance wrong', with policy focussing too strongly on the economic dimension. 'This has had damaging consequences for personal development, social fulfilment, community engagement, and the health of democracy' (2019: 6).

When the coronavirus pandemic hit in early 2020, the Adult Education 100 campaign (which had established and sponsored the Centenary Commission) was planning – in conjunction with the WEA and its other partners – a programme of workshops, conferences and seminars across the country to discuss the Commission's report, and to alert the political world to its message. As lockdown followed virus, these plans were inevitably affected. The Commission held some very well-attended webinars, but the bulk of the 'engagement' strategy had to be shelved. Adult educators and adult education organisations across the country faced intense pressures, not least the need to address the needs of students and communities in new ways – and, very often, to develop their own capacities in online learning.

In the light of this, and as it became apparent that the pandemic's impact would be deep and long-lasting, in late 2020 the University of Nottingham made a modest grant available to undertake a short-term 'impact' project building on the Centenary Commission's report and related research to broaden and reorientate policy debate in adult and lifelong learning. One particular concern was that devolution to metropolitan combined authorities in England would mean that policy had to be formulated regionally. In many ways this chimed with research showing that 'skills ecologies' are very much local, and must be addressed through local partnerships of further, higher and adult education, across private and public sectors, and civil society. Yet it was far from clear that sufficient local and regional capacity existed to undertake the in-depth debate and reflection required to design and implement locally appropriate adult and lifelong education policies. This was particularly true if the need were for policies to think along lines that diverged from the 'skills for jobs' direction entrenched in recent decades. Yet – as the Centenary Commission had argued – that direction, deeply flawed, had manifestly failed.

The plan developed was to make a 'strategic intervention in policy debate on adult lifelong education' at two levels. Nationally, three experienced journalists were engaged to use their expertise, contacts and networks to place items in the mainstream media across the political spectrum. The aim was 'to reach areas of the media which seldom discuss adult learning, taking insight and news about this field from a media "ghetto" into the mainstream. As part of this, a high-profile national online policy workshop would engage leading figures in discussion of learning strategy for

the post-pandemic world. That national element has been pressed forward by a Media Impact Group, and in two national webinars chaired by former House of Commons Speaker John Bercow held in early March 2021.

There was also a regional dimension. This is the focus of the present final draft of our report. This dimension has involved research on the role of mutual aid and community adult education in strengthening communities. This drew on support from the Local Government Association's Co-operative Councils Innovation Network, and a series of online focus groups and a policy roundtable with leading figures in regional and local government, further, higher and adult education. The aim was to explore how regional adult and lifelong education policymakers and providers (those who provide courses are, of course, also in important ways makers of adult education policy) have responded to the pandemic, how they have adapted over the past year, and what can be learnt from their experiences.

Finally, we acknowledge that the catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic has embedded, reproduced and amplified existing material on social inequalities in the UK (Forster, 2018; Learning and Work Institute 2021; ONS 2021; Shaw, 2020). For example, figures published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), in March 2021, confirmed that in the year between February 2020 and 2021 63% (437,000) of those who lost their jobs were under 25 and a further 25% were aged 25 to 34 (174,000) (Langford, 2021). The Learning and Work Institute emphasised further stark local and regional differences:

The effects of the crisis have been unequal. The pandemic has created new inequalities and exposed existing ones. Young people account for one half of the fall in employment, five times their share of total employment. Those on lower incomes, single parents, disabled people and people from BAME backgrounds have seen some of the largest drops in incomes and jobs....The number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits has risen three times faster in areas with the highest pre-crisis unemployment than in areas which had lower unemployment (2021: 4)

In the next section of the report, and in our analysis of the implications for practice, we ask how various national, regional and local organisations have worked to meet the needs of specific groups, protecting and nurturing adult education and lifelong learning, in the context of the conditions and available possibilities.

3. Language of policy and practice

'We are dancing around the meanings' (Member of first focus group, a former senior manager of a national voluntary organisation)

This section reviews the language of policy and practice. We report on why a 'double-shuffle' (between dominant narrow forms of lifelong learning for employability, or 'skills for work', and extended possibilities of 'education for life') matters. We emphasise that the language and practices of adult education need to be understood in relation to the overall decline in patterns of participation. These concerns, this crisis, and possible responses to it, are addressed in subsequent sections of the report.

3.1 Skills for work *and* education for life

Definitions, debates, and policy contexts for lifelong learning and adult education matter. Participants in each of the focus groups referred to national and European policy reports (e.g., Faure, 1972; Delors, 1996; Fryer, 1997; Schuller and Watson, 2009) and emphasised differences, and tensions, between notions of lifelong learning and lifelong adult education, and dominant contemporary forms of practice. These have also been extensively critiqued in a range of research (see, e.g., Clancy, 2019; Formenti and West, 2018; Forster, 2018; Holford, 2016; Tuckett, 2017; West, 2016).

The possibilities of lifelong learning are limited and restricted if policy and practices emphasise skills for jobs and exclude education for broader aspects of life – what is sometimes called 'life-wide' learning. Narrow forms of education and training for employability limit the scope and connections that can be built and sustained. By contrast the idea of lifelong education takes inspiration from Faure (1972) and Delors (1996), and advocated by UNESCO, aims to recognise collective possibilities for social justice.

In each focus group, various participants emphasised a range of perspectives about the language and practices of lifelong learning and why these were often problematic. A dominant view, in the first focus group, was that earlier meanings of lifelong education have been 'hijacked' by narrower forms of lifelong learning. Two other related perspectives have implications for different forms of partnership and collaboration and sustaining and developing practice – the focus of sections 5 and 6 of this report. One view, on re-invention and renewal and new forms of partnership and collaboration, spoke of 'casting the net quite widely': making connections and 'being open to learning from new social movements and new possibilities'. This contemporary work related to the policy memories of others. They asked if there were possibilities for 'dancing around the meanings' of existing provision, teaching critically and developing processes of discovery – alongside students – and sustained by 'resources of hope' (an idea taken from Williams, 1989). Participants remembered particular practices. Examples included a cross city network of TUC Unemployed Workers' Centres in the early 1980's and work by a national voluntary organisation developing citizenship and political education (for a review of work on women, democracy and adult education see Turner, 2018 and Clancy, 2019; and for different

perspectives on active citizenship and adult education see, e.g., Caldwell, 2013, Holford, 2016, and Moran et al., 2019).

In this flux, or 'double-shuffle' (Hall, 2005), between dominant and marginal meanings and practices, other experiences, reported in the focus groups, reinforced these differences. Participants reported that funding has been awarded to particular forms of lifelong learning for employability – according to a status of more 'serious learning'. By contrast, other forms of learning are perceived to have been marginalised. Consequently, provision, in some parts of England, 'is like a desert'. Participants reported that narrow forms of skills and employability individualise what are collective experiences. The potential to be profoundly transformative and supportive by recognising and learning from suffering and uncertainty (Formenti and West, 2018:105) may be marginalised.

In each focus group, participants also began to trace their own experiences and struggles – and those of other adults they work alongside. Before we report on these stories, and our further findings, we summarise recent and current patterns of participation in lifelong learning and adult education. The individual and collective stories we analyse in the next sections of the report need to be placed in these wider social and political contexts.

3.2 Concerns, trends and threats

Concerns about language and practices need to be understood in relation to the overall decline in patterns of participation in adult education. Data published by Government (26 March 2021), reported on participation by adults (19+) in further education (FE) and skills in England for the first two quarters of the 2020/21 academic year (August 2020 to January 2021). These indicate:

- Adult government-funded further education and skills participation decreased by 15.0% to 1,168,100 compared to 1,373,800 in the same period in 2019/20.
- Adult education and training participation decreased by 10.5% to 583,300 compared to 651,500 in 2019/20.
- Community learning participation decreased by 47.6% to 137,100 compared to 261,700 in 2019/20.

The 2020 Adult Participation in Learning Survey (Learning and Work Institute, 2020) showed the divisions between different people's experiences of learning during the COVID pandemic. For example, over two in five (43%) – or 22 million people across the UK – took part in some form of learning during that phase of the lockdown. However, participation varies across different groups, and those who would benefit most from adult education and lifelong learning are the least likely to participate. Various stark indicators include:

- Only 20% of adults who left school or college at the first opportunity participated in lockdown learning compared with 57% of those adults who stayed in education until 21.

- Only 34% of adults who were out of work took part in lockdown learning compared with 52% who were in employment.

The next section of the report builds on these concerns about restricted and extended forms of lifelong learning and adult education. We analyse how local authorities, and national, regional and local voluntary and community sector groups, have been working to meet needs by 'piecing together' different local forms of provision.

4 Practices, divides and inequality: voices of practitioners

It's been liberating for those who did engage. But the flip side is around disadvantage and digital exclusion. The benefits are to the less disadvantaged. (Local authority adult education officer)

We now present our findings on how COVID-19 has shaped various forms of practice in lifelong learning and adult education. We also review practitioners' perceptions of the gaps between government policies and local needs. Each highlight how responsive and innovative local authority practitioners were. Equally, representatives of diverse voluntary and community sectors, in several regions of England and Wales, were also aware of the complexities of digital poverty and exclusion. In each case senses of struggle, loss, and recovery, embodied their experiences. Participants emphasised why local practices must be understood in the contexts of material and social inequalities in their city and region and how these may shape different forms of lifelong learning and adult education (James and Theriault, 2020; Shaw, 2020; Waller et al, 2020).

4.1 Speed and meeting needs

Senior officers of three neighbouring local authorities in the North East of England emphasised how positively their Councils had responded to COVID-19. For them, what had shaped and embodied the last year was a sense of transformation:

But what adult education normally does really quietly has literally come to the surface. Much more. But not measurable impacts.... this year the discussion has shifted.

A colleague in the same authority also recognised this shift and the context they were working within:

Before lockdown, small numbers. From September [2020] we have been inundated with numbers for learners with learning difficulties. Mental health. Strange behaviours from adult learners that we can link to lockdown.

Another participant, from a neighbouring authority in the North East, shared similar concerns – and recognised not only how these related to the needs of adults, but also the implications for their Council:

[We] are finding exactly the same. People furthest from the labour market need progression routes. In the last five years there's been a lot of a move away from traditional community learning. A move towards online. This has helped a lot with Covid needs. Local authorities as providers will come into their own.

Each of these perspectives relate to Formenti and West's analysis of critical perspectives which 'trouble' assumptions about transformation and individual and collective experiences:

We should remember that the emotions of discontent, embarrassment, loss, sadness, rage and shame are powerful and ubiquitous, as well as being relational and social. We may look to others, in adult education, for instance, who similarly struggle and use our social awareness, feelings and mutual understanding, over time, to integrate new thinking and awareness into a reordered life (2018: 82).

4.2 Digital divides, poverty and creative responses to COVID-19

In each of the focus groups, participants across England and Wales highlighted the significance and value of different forms of digital learning. At the same time, they stressed how the COVID-19 pandemic is deepening existing divisions and exclusions and the unease they felt about this. They began to explore the differing responses of their organisations to these dilemmas. Their perspectives must first be placed in a wider context that examines the nature and consequences of digital divides and digital poverty.

Reports by the International Labour Organisation (2020), Marmot (2020) and Mikolai, Keenan and Kulu (2020) emphasise a series of inter-related issues. These include access to digital infrastructures and learning resources that are affordable, a lack of institutional capacity and resources, and teachers having to learn new methods of teaching. Each can generate innovation. But the ILO also highlights a central problem:

[T]he shifts we are seeing have the potential to exacerbate the existing digital divide and widen inequalities for those who already face disadvantages in trying to access and engage in learning (2020: 2).

Mikolai, Keenan and Kulu (2020) analysed evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study and identified five dimensions of vulnerability. The digital dimension, and access to a computer and the internet, vary by type of household but intersecting vulnerabilities also vary by household and region. Two examples illustrate their wider argument. Among working-age households (with and without children), severe health and digital vulnerabilities intersect with employment, financial, and housing disadvantage. They also reported geographical differences:

Comparing the North and South of England, households in the North experience higher levels of severe digital and financial vulnerabilities whereas those in the South are somewhat more likely to experience severe employment vulnerabilities. London stands out; households in London are particularly exposed to severe housing and digital vulnerabilities when compared to other areas of England (Mikolai et al, 2020:4).

A sophisticated awareness of the implications of digital differences is essential if provision is to meet diverse needs. This was evident in Wales. As an organisation, Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales (AOC|ALW) is aware that digital exclusion has many variables, related not only to lack of technology or connectivity. Reasons for an individual's being excluded from the digital world include self-exclusion due to confidence issues, a lack of trust in digital technology, an absence of intrinsic motivation to change one's way of life, and financial constraints. Intersecting factors such as gender, race, age, and social class also play a part in whether an individual is more or less likely to be digitally excluded.

However, with the assistance of Welsh Government funding, AOC|ALW have been proactive in providing learners with an accessible alternative to their traditional paper-based enrolment and face-to-face learning. Learners are now able to enrol online on online courses (as well as blended and/or face-to-face) through the AOC|ALW website; in turn, online enrolment creates for each learner their own unique area on the AOC|ALW website called 'MyAccount'. This provides a complete record

of the learner's courses and outcomes, as well as providing a reference point for key support resources and other learning related materials. In addition, certificates for non-accredited courses can now be downloaded from MyAccount on course completion, and for accredited courses an updated status is provided of the learner's progress towards certification. The MyAccount feature can also then simplify subsequent online enrolments by pre-populating the relevant learner details.

Consideration is given to the type of device required (laptop, iPad, tablet, etc.), and the appropriate device is then allocated. In turn, devices have either been hand delivered by members of staff or (to minimise physical contact) couriered direct to learners' home addresses. In addition, AOC|ALW have provided an organisational Office 365 account which includes an email address to support direct communication. AOC|ALW have also provided help and technical support for both loaned devices and learners' own devices, supporting the learner in navigating through the different learning platforms required to engage in provision.

As an organisation AOC|ALW have recognised that although assessable accredited provision has continued during Covid-19, they have needed to offer a greater level of non-accredited provision to help keep learners engaged and promote their organisational commitment to the mental health and wellbeing of adult learners.

A similar commitment was evident in local authorities in England, and in voluntary and community sector organisations. Participants in focus groups emphasised the different meanings of access and connections and referred to emerging debates about what may be lost if digital learning is not combined, or blended, with other forms. For example, in their Annual Impact Report (2021) and review of the 'Impact through lockdown – the move to online', the WEA confirmed that the organisation had moved from a small number of courses using their virtual learning environment to over 200 courses in the Spring Term of 2020. While 6,477 students enrolled on courses online in 2019-20, by the Summer of 2020, 98% of WEA courses and students were online. This was their mode of delivery during the various lockdowns. There were limited opportunities to re-open venues even in the short periods in between each lockdown. However, once social distancing measures are eased, the WEA plan is to switch back to face to face learning for many courses whilst also retaining online where it is effective and appropriate.

However, compared to a co-ordinated approach by a national organisation in Wales, our preliminary findings (which merit further investigation) suggest local provision in England is fragmented and reliant on a patchwork of initiatives within and across local authorities – albeit supported by highly motivated practitioners with detailed and nuanced understanding of local needs. Our snapshot of provision in England generates a picture of practitioners grappling with the systems – or infrastructures – for learning, relationships for learning, and being troubled by – but also responding to – different forms of recovery. Several participants referred to digital inclusion strategies with different partners from within the voluntary sector, other councils and government departments. They also reported residents who do not have access to personal computers, and to emerging forms of work with voluntary and community sector organisations meeting the needs of different groups, including the elderly. Their experiences mirrored research by the ILO (2020) and Mikolai, Keenan and Kulu (2020). Representatives of other national organisations in Wales echoed this,

emphasising for instance how these experiences related to the national scope of work from a Race Council/ BAME perspective:

It is a really difficult time. People work in hospitals, come home and face problems. Mostly BAME people are dying for non-genetic reasons to do with (inequality/disadvantage). There is an Increase in domestic abuse: trapped at home with abuser. There is also a difference between settled communities and migrants/asylum seekers': some don't speak English; how do you upskill when language is a real problem? Many have families abroad.

In terms of relationships for learning, practitioners emphasised that digital learning may offer greater access to learning (for some). However, they also highlighted the complexity and dilemmas of online learning in terms of collective and collaborative experiences. This has generated dilemmas for different organisations.

4.3 Pride, struggle, loss and recovery

One national voluntary organisation has shifted to digital provision with a consequence that courses are not necessarily local – yet it recognises that some students wanted to retain a sense of local community provision. A regional manager, within the organisation, emphasised that it has

moved as much online as possible, but some it didn't. It has enabled some to engage. Move forward together. It's been liberating for those who did engage. But the flip side is around disadvantage and digital exclusion. The benefits are to the less disadvantaged. Pandemic has laid another layer of disadvantage for many. We have limited resources compared to colleges- in provision of computers for example. Engaging people in digital learning has replicated long-term problems.

Others reinforced this view. A local authority senior officer emphasised the need for an evaluation of digital learning:

The elephant in the room? We've all moved online, but who says it's any good? It's much easier to be compliant and switch off. We can't tell as well as we can in a classroom, especially with vulnerable learners where teachers' skills are very important. How much learning is actually being lost?

At an institutional level the principal of a residential college for adults also recognised the gains, for some, of new ways of working: for instance, the time saved in travel and greater ease of access to meetings. But she also emphasised what has been lost in human contact between students and those they work with.

A further sense of loss and recovery she mentioned related to a lack of face-to-face contact and the impact this has had on the mental health of students and those in recovery from drink and other drug addiction. These complex processes of recovery extend beyond individuals in the college, to communities. These experiences should be seen in the light of Clancy and Holford's (2017) review of student experiences in what were then four residential colleges for adults in England (Fircroft, Hillcroft, Northern, and Ruskin). In one of these, for example, it was reported that 44% of students declared a disability or learning difficulty. However, as Clancy and Holford note, these colleges place considerable emphasis on particular forms of second chance education, enabling vulnerable adults to reconnect with themselves as

learners, and re-gain confidence – or acquire it for the first time. As the staff at Northern College expressed it – and this was a sentiment echoed throughout staff interviews in all the colleges – ‘our specialism is our students’.

This sense of pride, struggle, loss and recovery was also evident in the range of voluntary and community groups we met. Three organisations in the North West gave an insight into the tensions between COVID, digital learning, and their values. One co-ordinator emphasised:

We are a tiny women’s organisation. But we have achieved a phenomenal amount over the last year. There has been a big push on devices (including computers) for women. Inequality was there before COVID. But there has been some light: COVID offered us an opportunity as an organisation to innovate and adapt. Women trained others to learn. WEA one of our funders. Provision and practice depended on women’s voices being central.

Another summarised their work:

We operate out of a women’s centre and work with the WEA – and other organisations. The manager trusted us so we could do an online ESF course. Women have wanted to embrace it. We have had over 3000 hours of engagement with women since last March [2020].

A sense of innovation and adaptation was also evident in a third, small, organisation:

We put time into getting people together (walks), also had a go at a session of getting people together online and in a physical space to get the best of both (but more clunky). The walks were brilliant. Socially distanced walks. We do very *ad hoc* things. We don’t have to do 10-week classes.

As a regional manager of a national organisation commented, ‘the practice of walking underlines a key purpose and benefit of lifelong learning. It’s about health and wellbeing.’

This sense of struggle and recovery, manifested amongst both local authority practitioners and representatives of the diverse voluntary and community sector, relates to different forms of innovation and adaptation. But, as we report below, making connections and developing new forms of partnership and collaboration are contested and complex.

5. Partnership and collaboration: re-building local, regional and national strategies

There is a danger that we just go back to business as usual on funding, whereas we'll have a long tail of need (Local authority officer)

The FE sector across the UK have the opportunity to advance social purpose and active citizenship through rich partnerships across the Third Sector (Director of a national voluntary organisation)

Re-building national, regional and local forms of lifelong learning and adult education needs to be shaped by the experiences of those who work directly with adults. In our research practitioners identified three themes. They emphasised the importance of complex and unstable funding, meeting demand, and building trust – and how each shaped their different perspectives on local forms of partnership and collaboration.

5.1 Funding and meeting demand

First, there was scepticism about government rhetoric and funding:

'levelling up'? – in fact we've gone the wrong way. But adult learning has stopped the rot. We're not funded for that, so there is a mismatch between what we are doing and what we've been funded for. Like taking food parcels out for the very vulnerable. There is a mismatch between need and sources of funding – putting us under huge financial burden.

The gap between government emphasis on funding Level 3 qualifications and local needs was problematic for representatives of neighbouring authorities:

We provide different levels of education. We are not going to increase Level 3 provision. That's not what's needed.

They added that government seemed insensitive to need.

Each of the participants in the focus group with local authorities, held in mid-February 2021, agreed. The 'distance between rhetoric and reality' generated difficulties for them:

Adult education providers are fighting for financial survival. We may not be around if something isn't done *urgently*. There is still talk of 'clawback' because not enough adults coming through the doors! We're in a crisis situation at the moment. We don't want to be 'the next Debenhams', because when it's gone, it's gone.

Government announcements over adult education funding have reinforced this sense of crisis and instability. In March 2021, the government set the threshold for the budget administered by the Education Skills Funding Agency at 90% of 'delivery'. This has been a major concern. Forecasts in Autumn 2020 estimated that a college (or other organisation providing adult education) would be able to offer only 80% of provision because of the effects of COVID on participation; in some instances, it was as low as 50% – well below the 90% threshold. Julian Gravatt, Deputy Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges, analysed the implications of these changes. 'It's the fear of

hope taken away just when there's more hope around', he wrote (Gravatt 2021). He added that the FE and skills white paper included a promise to simplify funding mechanisms adult education. But £50 million will be 'clawed back' – cut – from budgets in December 2021. Consequently, while government is emphasising particular forms of collaboration (with employers), colleges and other organisations will at the same time be making cuts – because of the government's own funding decision.

Practitioners reported three other specific concerns about gaps between government rhetoric, funding, and needs of adult learners. First, under the new local devolved funding regimes of mayoral combined authorities, the emphasis on vocational skills has sometimes replaced all other types of provision. Second, they criticised the government's decision to end support for the Union Learning Fund (ULF), with effect from March 2021 – despite support for the Fund from a range of employers including British Steel, Heathrow Airport, Liberty Steel and Tesco, and criticism from across the political spectrum. (Melissa Benn, a member of the Centenary Commission, pointed out the value of the ULF, the range of workers it has supported, and the evaluation in 2018-19 by Unionlearn and the DfE that confirmed for every £1 invested in the Fund produced an economic return of £12.30 (Benn 2021).)

Finally, participants in the focus groups recognised the uncertain financial position of some residential adult education colleges, and the threat that this would remove opportunities for adults who are learning in work and returning to study. In mid-2017, there were four residential colleges for adults in England with a regional and/or national remit: Fircroft College, in Selly Oak, Birmingham; Hillcroft College, in Surbiton, Surrey³; Ruskin College in Old Headington, Oxford; and Northern College, in Stainborough, Barnsley, South Yorkshire. All four, independently constituted charities regulated by their own trust deeds, have long and illustrious histories of educational experiment and innovation – a theme we re-examine in the final section of the report. Developing in the early and mid-twentieth century, the colleges responded to a demand for emancipatory education for working people. Their ethos has emphasised the whole person and the cultivation of individual well-being, placing considerable emphasis on learning communally, and on understanding others and learning from them how to live a useful and productive life. They account for a tiny proportion of public spending: a mere £13 million – rather less than 0.01% of the £1.5 billion Adult Skills Budget – and contribute disproportionately to the public good.

5.2 Funding, demand and trust: National strategies and local practices

Our preliminary analysis of three other complex relationships between national strategies and local practices is presented below. Our findings are further snapshots of current debates on the roles of local authorities, local and combined authorities, universities, further education, and the voluntary and community sectors, in relation to lifelong learning and adult education. They highlight other dilemmas about partnership and collaboration.

³ In September 2017, the governing body of Richmond Adult Community College and the Hillcroft College Council agreed to proceed with a merger, creating the Richmond and Hillcroft Adult and Community College.

5.2.1 Roles of local authorities

A senior manager, representing a borough council in Outer London, reflected on recent changes and gave their perspective on how their local authority is working:

Before the pandemic it all felt very contractual (how we thought about service provision). Now community needs have come to the fore. In planning for the future we need to be aware about social isolation – think about community needs more holistically. We are now working with partners in an ecosystem with view to putting collaboration and place-based work on the agenda.

Diamond (2021) analyses how these concerns relate to memories of earlier practices in adult education and lifelong learning:

There was a sense in these discussions of two different but perhaps linked dimensions. Firstly, the importance of understanding and working to sustain ecosystems of practice which were, themselves, embedded in a sense of place and locality. This will require supporting practitioners to link with or have knowledge of congruent place-based developments from health or housing. The revival of the concept of the 'local' and looking to work collaboratively with others is very powerful. In 2002 the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit commissioned a report on the place of Skills for Life in the new Neighbourhood Renewal Initiative across 88 areas in the UK (Diamond et al 2002). Those areas which demonstrated a holistic approach had good well networked adult education practitioners and services. In 2021 the second theme is that of 'connectivity'. We understand the social divide and unequal access to digital services. We need to think creatively about developing broad alliances so that we are not connected at the local level but are recognised for the skills and expertise we bring. (Diamond 2021)

5.2.2 Localism and different institutions

The second related theme was how perspectives on localism, and the role of combined authorities, varied across the focus groups. These are preliminary findings, of course, but participants identified a series of important questions – which have implications for diverse forms of lifelong learning and adult education. Participants spoke from different positions within and across institutions.

One, who participated in the policy roundtable from a combined authority, framed their role as 'brokering collaboration'. Others emphasised that combined authorities were not only at an early stage of development but had 'mixed' ways of working. One principal, for example, was positive about the dual structures established by the combined authority, including an overall College Forum and an Adult and Community Learning Alliance (ACLA). One of the perceived benefits of these structures was that they provided a wider consideration of adults as citizens and as residents with needs within particular geographic communities.

But a regional manager of a national organisation was cautious, emphasising that:

Localism and voice give potential for collective action. But it must be citizen led – mustn't allow big local voices [local/regional authorities] to crowd out people's voices.

There were further reflections about policy learning and devolution – from a participant based in a regional consultancy working within and beyond a region:

What can we learn from devolved nations? The lack of a coherent national strategy around adult education in England is very noticeable.

A third participant, who co-ordinates a think tank for regional democracy, agreed but emphasised that:

There is a difference in scale between England and Wales. We need further decentralisation to regions in England. We need to move to smaller scale.

These preliminary findings about the role of local authorities and localism and combined authorities relate, in turn, to a series of questions posed about the respective roles of different institutions in community-based adult education. For example, could a college in Rochdale – or a university in Greater Manchester and the North West – meet the needs of adults in the ways in which the Citizens' Curriculum and a place-based curriculum does in Rochdale? Further work is needed to think through the contributions of colleges and/or universities, in community engagement and as 'anchor institutions', in partnership with local authorities and diverse organisations from the voluntary and community sector. Axelroth and Dubb highlight the relationships, but also the differences:

The concept of an anchor institution mission is related to, yet distinct from, the broader concept of community engagement. Community engagement, understood in its broadest sense, involves universities interacting with the outside world in a "problem-solving" framework and can be applied to any scale of problems — be they local, regional, national, or even global. By contrast, an anchor institution mission implies a specific engagement of the institution with its surrounding community (Axelroth and Dubb, 2010: 2).

Diamond offers further questions for reflection :

Arguably the concept of 'anchor institution' goes with the localism agenda. Whilst this might seem incomplete and, at times, contradictory it does offer a 'policy and practice space' within which we can work. The challenge (as always) is to navigate this space so that there is the maximum feasible gain for those who rely on adult education provision. It is, also, the case that after more than a decade of austerity there are a growing number of policy networks and practitioners seeking to provide an alternative policy prospectus. Adult Education is central to the success of such endeavours (Diamond, 2021).

Having reviewed our preliminary findings, and dilemmas about partnership and collaboration, the penultimate section of the report asks how new ways of developing practice offer starting points for re-imagining lifelong learning and adult education.

6. Sustaining and developing new practices and re-imagining adult lifelong education: voices of practitioners

'How do we develop a sociable and emancipatory education, touching the heart and a poetry of the soul?' (Participant, Focus group 1)

In section 3 of this report, and in our analysis of the language of policy and practice, we emphasised a sense of re-invention and a renewal of lifelong learning and adult education. 'Casting a net quite widely' and making connections to 'being open' to new possibilities can be sustained by 'resources of hope' (Williams, 1989). We conclude our report by identifying three examples of practice that echo this sentiment. The first imagines new possibilities and ways of working with existing practices. The second example reviews the development of a conference and exchange, in May 2021, on new ways of thinking about fostering community, democracy and dialogue. Finally, using particular examples of new practice, we ask how adult education and lifelong learning relate to the crisis of climate change. Each example has implications for the critical development of practice – sustained by forms of 'triple' professionalism (Spours, in Gannon, 2014).

6.1 Imagining possibilities: working with existing practices

We have reported how the contemporary 'flux and shuffle' between different forms of lifelong learning provision is often combined with a problematic emphasis on employability and a restricted perspective on 'skills for jobs'. This framing of policy and practice has particular implications for colleges and the voluntary sector, both of which must work in a constantly changing funding framework. The latter have often worked on contracts – or on the basis of bidding for funding from the National Lottery and similar charitable sources. In the focus groups, participants asked whether, in 'dancing around the meanings' of lifelong learning and employment-related provision, there were spaces for developing and extending practice – while meeting funding requirements. Can a wider perspective and more 'useful' approach towards employability be developed?

In their reflections on these dilemmas, participants drew on their own experiences. They sensed these processes of learning and teaching would be significantly more creative and enjoyable for students – and teachers – and more motivating than the employment-oriented courses that many had observed in their previous roles. Their dilemma was whether it was possible to take provision in more critical and exploratory directions – by involving project-based learning, research, and activities based around issues in communities. Rather than a set of narrowly defined learning outcomes, the starting point would be contemporary questions that have a real-world impact. For example, a 'Confidence for Employment' course does not have to be 'delivered': it could include a small Community Art Project planned, designed and executed by students. Such a project would usually involve skills such as research, communication, team working, planning, negotiating, problem solving, innovation and creativity – skills cited as highly desirable by employers.

6.2 Imagining new possibilities: Conference and exchange

The previous dilemma, and following example, have a wider context. Our second example reviews the development of a conference and exchange. A core Centenary Commission theme (2019) was 'Fostering Community Debate and Dialogue'. This called for participation and reflection on what resources of hope practitioners share and the next steps and actions they can take. Since September 2020, a group of practitioners and researchers have met each month (they also participated in the first focus group in February 2021). Their collaboration led to an event held in May 2021 (and further events planned for July and September). Organisers are from a variety of backgrounds in further and higher education, voluntary, community and co-operative sectors, and trade union education. They recognise that we are living through a time of deepening crisis in many of our communities: economically, democratically, socially and ecologically. They seek to 'make hope practical and despair unconvincing', in the inspiring words of adult educator Raymond Williams (1989).

The May 2021 conference was an exchange of experience and critical engagement with new and existing forms of practice in order to think about new forms of democratic adult learning. By celebrating that work organisers wanted to create time and space to pause, reflect and re-group. The invitation recognised that despite adult education's having been starved of funding in recent years, adults have continued to learn in diverse ways. Many new initiatives have sprung up, some involving voluntary organisations, charities, social movements, co-operatives, trade unions, informal groups, online networks and new alliances – and all have addressed the urgent need for adult learning. Others are attempting to redefine the nature and content of learning itself. The exchange and conference are designed to build upon these creative practices, learn from them and support the development of new alliances.

This example of practice has been shaped by a wide range of influences – and different forms of policy learning. These include research circles in Sweden (Holmstrand et al, 2017), the long tradition of British adult education classes' engaging in original research leading to original contributions to academic and/or policy knowledge, and different forms of popular participation in research. For example, the tradition of British adult education classes engaging in original research has led to contributions to academic and/or policy knowledge including local studies, archaeology and local history, women's studies, wildlife and ecological studies, workplace health and safety and trade union studies. Several examples of major social policy debates have been generated by adult education. These include Coates and Silburn's Penguin Special, *Poverty* (1970) derived from a WEA/University of Nottingham class. Work such as Lovett (1982) and Lovett, Clarke and Kilmurray (1983) in Liverpool and Northern Ireland also emerged from this tradition.

Such participatory action research approaches centre on the idea that research and action must be done 'with' (rather than 'to' or 'for') people. This is strongly linked to activist-theorists such as Paulo Freire (1972), Miles Horton (1990), and Orlando Fals Borda (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991), and to movements such as the Civil Rights movement in the USA and the women's movement. It casts academics and practitioners as co-investigators, tackling 'moral-political liabilities' (McLean, 2006: 72) and enabling the 'disembedding [of] thought from everyday activity'. The emphasis, in each example, is on 'the democratization of knowledge whereby more and more social

actors are involved in the definition of problems and the application of solutions' (ibid.). This is essentially self-reflective. Issues are defined by communities – seeking collaboration across boundaries of academic discipline, as well as across class and power differentials – what Watson (2008) describes as the 'co-production' of knowledge.

Diamond, quoted in section 5 above, argues that this approach, with its commitment to discussion, dialogue, self-reflection and a willingness to learn, could form the basis of further joint initiatives with other policy and practice networks – from health and housing, for example. The opportunity to exchange ideas and to shape the policy priorities of others would be another step towards embedding the values and principles of adult education within public policy making and practice. A common feature, across all participatory action research, is the iterative approach: study, plan, act, study, revise plan, and act again. Our final example illustrates these possibilities within other contexts.

6.3 Adult education, lifelong learning and climate change

We conclude our report by recognising the immense contributions of our colleague Nigel Todd, a founding and key member of the Adult Education 100 campaign, who died while this project was in progress. Nigel's life was shaped by adult education; his recent roles included WEA Ambassador and Chair of Trustees of the Co-operative College. A discussion paper, 'Climate Change and the Longer Term Future of the WEA', from which we quote below, shows something of how he imagined the contribution of one organisation to life wide learning and the threat of climate change. In it he combined analysis with a call for action, re-imagining adult education *for a change*:

There are many facets to change over the next decade covering economics, finance, politics, competing ideologies and, as we know, pandemics. Additionally, a new, or resurgent, ingredient in change is the present 'fluid' state of public opinion and political behaviour, as displayed in elections across Europe, the United States and more widely. Recent election and referendum results have been beyond the comprehension of governmental and media elites, commentators and pollsters. To understand what the next few years hold will require analyses that dig deep into the social structure together with organisational responses that are both flexible and nimble when it comes to reacting to evidence.

Our first point, therefore, is that the WEA has a built-in advantage in coping with any developing situation because it is designed to investigate and evaluate, and to connect with all kinds of communities, especially those that sense they have been 'left behind'. The WEA's 'democracy' spanning localism, and the ability to bring broader understandings together across a national plane, is a powerful advantage that should be cultivated.

Overshadowing and impacting upon all other factors is *climate change*. The reality, trends and impacts of climate change on societal sustainability have been scientifically validated, and have mobilised most of the world's governments to sign the recent Paris Climate Accord. This is not to exclude the need for debate about climate change. Indeed, the WEA is well placed philosophically to serve as a forum for informed test-

and-contest. But we know that climate change is happening, and we are aware of the likely results ranging from threats to food security, alterations in patterns of biodiversity, diminishing polar ice caps contributing to global warming, more frequent 'climate incidents' such as flooding, and increased pressures prompting global migrations of people.

Accordingly, our principal contribution is to stress the absolute necessity for the WEA to embrace the challenge of climate change.

As it happens, the WEA is no stranger to touching on sustainability, but has rarely got beyond 'fits and starts'. Pioneering science awareness education programmes and projects in the 1960s, hosted by the Yorkshire and the North East Districts, produced a degree of national level reciprocity, and may even have influenced the first science foundation courses offered by the Open University. Yet the impetus petered out. H.J. Fyrth and Maurice Goldsmith's compelling pamphlet, *Saving The Earth From Man For Man, or Oh! What A Wonderful Future Before Us If Only We Learn To Survive*, published by the London District in 1970 for European Conservation Year, appears to have met with a similar fate.

Since 2000, there have been further initiatives, and not just within the WEA, as 'green agendas' and movements have made their presence felt more strongly. The Learning & Skills Council's 2005 document *From Here to Sustainability: The Learning and Skills Council's Strategy for Sustainable Development*, combined with the Learning & Skills Improvement Council's 2013 report *Embedding Sustainability into Teaching, Learning and Curriculum in the Learning and Skills Sector*, held some prospect of a more consistent policy. Austerity and government re-organisations seem to have put an end to the promised progress.

The WEA North East Green Branch emerged from this milieu in 2011. It was based on the outcomes of the Association's Self-Assessment Review that revealed the extreme marginality of science awareness and environmental education in the WEA's curriculum. One Region was even considering eliminating the curriculum area altogether. But good and innovative work was taking place, if sporadically, in most Regions. Forming a thematic Branch looked like a lesson worth drawing from the SAR, and this led, eventually, to a positive encounter with National Conference in 2016 that focussed largely on greening the curriculum and sustainability.

More recently, the Lipman-Miliband Trust has funded a 'Greening the WEA' project, led by the NE Green Branch, to encourage the formation of Green Branches in other Regions and Scotland, working towards a national networking and gathering that could potentially produce a 'WEA Green Manifesto for Adult Education' (Todd, 2020).

Conclusion

The 'green branch' is not, of course, the only or dominant model in the WEA's branch network. But green and 'history and heritage' thematic branches, developed in the North East and other regions, add to and extend other forms of adult education and lifelong learning analysed in our report. Each example embodies different forms of adult education for a change (Thompson, 1980) and builds on policy memories. But Nigel Todd's commitment, his recognition of the absolute need to respond to climate change, and his emphasis on how political and social factors shape these possibilities, should sustain what we do next and form 'resources of hope' (Williams, 1989) to be drawn upon in our work.

In an earlier review of professional learning in further education, Gannon (2014) summarised Spours' emerging definition of 'triple professionalism' – grounded in practices and shaped by the context and conditions we each work within. We have reported on a range of practices shaped by specific local conditions. But the dispositions sustaining these practices (exemplified by Nigel Todd) include being inspirational and able to work with other partners – particularly in a locality or region. Democratic, activist and ecological forms of professionalism underpin the co-production of knowledge and development. Yet they are also nurtured by access to local, national and international networks. We hope our insights into specific practices throw light on wider questions of policy and contribute to further critical engagement with the possibilities of lifelong learning and adult education – for a change.

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