

Informal Learning - Shaping the Way Forward

DIUS Consultation 2008

A response from the Association for Education and Ageing (AEA)

Introduction

The AEA welcomes the discussion that the Secretary of State has introduced and the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The Association has existed for over 20 years with the aim of promoting learning in later life. As an organisation run on a purely voluntary basis, it has concentrated mainly on assisting its members – drawn from across the entire education world – to develop more, better and different learning experiences for older people. In recent years the Association's membership has broadened to embrace other professions working with older people and older learners themselves. This reflects the general acceptance of the value of later life learning and, in line with your consultation, the fact that it takes place in a range of settings.

This broadening of the Association has coincided with a dramatic loss of older people to the formal adult education scene. It may be that they are now learning elsewhere but that is as yet unproven and it is hoped that this consultation might highlight just where older learners are now gathered. We do have a major concern however that any evidence of older learner being active outside the state funded/subsidised formal provision may be used as a justification for a continued reduced state responsibility. The Association hopes that this will not be the case, and that the consultation will also draw in other Government departments to share responsibility and resourcing.

NIACE's adult learners' week awards constantly show that for many (older) adults support is needed to access adult education. These first steps into formal provision can take place in a community setting. Such steps may also be made as a result of engagement or dialogue with some other Government service or departments and, crucially, from informal adult education in all its forms. There is a danger that without state support – which tends to have an inclusion agenda - many vulnerable, isolated, unskilled and excluded (older) adults will be excluded.

Of equal importance in traditional adult education arrangements is the role of the teacher / tutor who, for many adults on the first steps to learning, is the key agency of change. The (welcome) suggestion that local authorities move to developing a facilitation role as a complementary activity to that of service provider, combined with a belief in the value of technology, may threaten to remove this vital personal factor in the learning journey of so many adults. It is unfortunate that so much of this teaching expertise is currently being lost to the system and may be irreplaceable.

Sadly this consultation is not questioning the existing and recent skills strategies, but accepts that what constitutes informal adult learning is just what is left. Surely this policy must be capable of being challenged and reconsidered? Informal learning cannot be just what is left over – thereby constantly subject to the whims of skills policies, and the beneficiary of whatever resources are left over after these are implemented. Any such strategies and definitions exclude the learner who most often – especially with the appropriate guidance and information – knows what multiple purposes their learning is for.

The AEA believes in the value of learning in later life. It has published a refereed journal containing research evidence concerning the benefits, and has organised many events with older people, researchers and practitioners about later life learning. The AEA has worked closely with NIACE in its Older & Bolder work and has been gratified to see in recent year how widely the concept of later life learning is now being accepted - in health and social care particularly – although hard evidence of its

benefit is still patchy. The association believes that ownership for later life learning must be shared across government – at all levels – particularly as resources from Department of Health, and Department of Work and Pensions have been expended on ‘educational’ activities in the past without any real attempt to link them to other educational provision to obtain better value for money. We are particularly saddened that the Link Age Plus pilot programme inspired by the Social Exclusion Unit report on Excluded Older People failed to test or develop this concept of joining up local and national government and health provision to better serve and advise older people. This sort of service could have offered holistic information, advice and guidance that helped older people make choices and consider appropriate educational opportunities – informal or formal!

We are equally concerned with the unforeseen impact of the implementation of the 2006 Age (Employment) regulations which, due to insufficient advice and guidance to providers, have prompted the removal of age related concessions for many older people without any alternative strategy of positive action (or more easily delivered means-testing processes) being advocated by Government.

The impact of the age regulations and the disappearance of much non-accredited adult education provision have left many – particularly older - people bereft, frustrated, angry and isolated. Ironically, this coincides with the promotion of Opportunity Age with all its positive rhetoric, which so many believed would be the driver for creating a world of choice and opportunity for older people. It is a huge shame that the key element of this ‘opportunity’ – education – is an endangered species.

The Association for Education & Ageing hopes that this consultation will truly create new *and* state supported/encouraged opportunities for older people to engage with learning as a mechanism to helping them better understand their world and their continued contribution to it.

It is in this spirit and to this end that we have attempted to answer all your questions:

Understanding and improving current provision

<p>How can we understand more about the factors that are driving this diversity of activity?</p>	<p>Older adults learn because they want to, they desire social networks, they wish/need to reflect on life’s experiences, consider their world to today and look towards the future. Some may wish to exorcise old ghosts and negative earlier life education experiences. The range of opportunities for older adults has always been broad, but for so long many were not recognised as adult learning. There was no overall publicity, linking, sharing or progression to and from other learning episodes. The broader definition of learning we use the more inclusive and less elitist we become. We do not need so much to ‘understand’ the factors as to recognise and validate them.</p>
<p>What are the conditions that make it easier for learners to learn?</p>	<p>Supportive environments, with some degree of empathy (perhaps around being older), a knowledge of progression options, some peer support, quick successes and encouragement, accreditation always an option but not the main driver. Appropriate environments in terms of physical factors, - heating, lighting, accessibility, furnishings etc. Appropriate teaching methods geared to the student body (and individuals). Awareness from the tutor/facilitator of where each student is coming from, why they are there and what they are seeking – long and short term.</p>

<p>How can we support and develop models of self-organised adult education?</p>	<p>The U3A is an excellent model but in the main appeals to the already well-educated and active older person. There is little evidence that it serves as an access route to other provision. Having said this, its success indicates the meeting of a range of valid educational and related needs.</p> <p>There are other excellent examples which better illustrate the modal. Open Age in West London is led by older people themselves and reaches across all communities and ethnic groups. It works with the state supported sector as required – involving not just education but housing, libraries, museums and other cultural departments. The key elements therefore are autonomy, facilitation, encouragement, championing, respect, collaboration, and cooperation. This is one example which is crying out for more publicity, financial support and rigorous evaluation. We have no doubt that it would stand up to this sort of examination.</p>
<p>How can we improve the connectivity between different episodes?</p>	<p>Who owns the connection process, and to what end? Learning providers are not good at sharing, still working in silo cultures. There has to be a guidance process that encourages the learner to make the connection between learning episodes. This means that all providers/facilitators/tutors/IAG providers will have a responsibility if not duty to do this and will require training.</p>
<p>How can we further develop the culture of volunteering to support informal adult learning?</p>	<p>The term ‘volunteering’ requires better understanding. For many older people, ‘volunteering’ comes from a desire to fulfil a role and to be valued. It is this to our minds which should come first for older people – the opportunity to examine, reflect, dream, plan, worry, aspire, and assess existing skills and new skill needs. The report commissioned by the DfES in 1990 into the value of learning in later life (<i>Learning in Later Life: Motivation and Impact</i>) suggested that those older people active in the voluntary sector are more likely to engage in adult learning. There is a (yet unproven) assertion that later life learning leads to voluntary / community / civic / cultural / environmental and intergenerational involvement.</p>
<p>What are the conditions most likely to foster innovative approaches to adult learning?</p>	<p>Less bureaucracy, less intrusive quality monitoring and evaluation processes, radically changed ways of accrediting learning (let the learner decide – rather than the provider/funder). IAG processes should be integral to any provision to encourage learner to re-examine goals and progression options (and not just vertical or non-progression). Wider definition of skills with less state imposed value judgements of required skills (Trust the learner!)</p>

The Government contribution

<p>Whether, and if so how, Government support for informal adult learning can be improved?</p>	<p>It should be the duty of every local authority Director of Adult Services to commission an audit of existing informal adult learning in their area. For older people there should be a regularly updated (hard copy and Internet accessible) Directory of Opportunity that embraces ALL learning and IAG opportunities as well as engagement in other ways. The DWP LinkAge plus pilot programme created an opportunity to test this concept but it did not deliver. Each local authority (through the LGA and/or other mechanism) is required to create an informal learning strategy that embraces all the key agencies and stake holders in the locality as well as learners and community groups. The Government, through its local authority funding mechanism, pump primes a local informal learning/community education budget which can be</p>
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	<p>matched from different government departments and EU funding streams into which local organisations bid. An element is set aside for new innovations which have evidence of need as well as evidence that such provision does not already exist in an accessible form to the group/provider bidding.</p>
<p>Whether (we) agree that, given the diversity of demand, need and type of provision that is made, it would be inappropriate to aim for a common funding system across Government, or a centralised strategy?</p>	<p>See above. Local authorities have key role to hold funds, draw in the key agencies and thus create their own priorities. The Government has the difficult task of getting the real as well as tacit support of other departments. In the area of older people there is already agreement as expressed in the Opportunity Age Strategy Partnership Group of the value of later life learning thus making for older people this 'buy in' more achievable.</p>
<p>How can we ensure there is proper recognition and understanding of the wide variety of ways in which Government is supporting informal adult learning?</p>	<p>DIUS, like its predecessor DfES, is not very good at singing its successes. Also, within the field of education there is a hierarchical approach to education (often reflecting the education journey of the policy makers themselves) that places adult learning at the bottom of the pile. At another level the desire to draw in other Government departments to accept their responsibility for informal learning is praiseworthy but, experience suggests, highly unlikely. For older people there already are attempts to work across Government – underpinned by Opportunity Age so the task is marginally easier - but it will also require DIUS to re-consider the value of its investment. The safeguarded budget for Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL) has not increased for several years and is subject to Government imposed targets. On the evidence of LSC participation figures and the annual NIACE survey of participation and intentions to learn it could be argued that Government is NOT at present supporting informal adult learning!</p>
<p>How can we make better use of Government resources?</p>	<p>There needs to be an avoidance of duplication. For older people, the Government is considering advice services around health, pension planning and career prospects. Yet there is no evidence on any link between these services and creating (as it was hoped Link Age Plus would deliver) an all-embracing IAG service for older people and those in midlife to help plan their future. In addition a lot of Government resources are already being spent on 'learning' opportunities for older people through the POPPS programme, and NSF Standard 8 for example. These initiatives are jealously guarded by the funding source and do not attempt to share the learning and developments with others. There is no standardised evaluation process, recording of developed practice, exit strategies which consider embedding through collaboration, nor evidence of systematic and sustained engagement of other sectors. One of the key issues is around individual department accountability and ownership. There has to be some latitude in and encouragement for releasing resources to be shared with other departments. It might be more appropriate for this process to be transferred to local authorities through a single awarding and evaluation mechanism.</p>
<p>Are there areas where Government should be actively removing barriers or creating flexibilities in order to improve the use of resources?</p>	<p>See above. There are strong arguments for the re-creation of individual learning accounts for (older) adults that will embrace community learning (informal and formal), citizenship education and cultural, artistic, environmental and ecological dimensions that could be funded from across Government. NIACE evidence, gathered through its Adult Learners Week Awards, provides rich, moving and eloquent statements of adults whose lives have</p>

	<p>changed because of their engagement in learning – give added weight to the suggestion – “Trust the learner!”</p> <p>In the social care sector, the possibility of individualised budgets for people to manage their own care arrangements not only calls for greater understanding and skill on their part, but also provides opportunities for service departments / sectors to plan their resources and delivery across traditional boundaries.</p>
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DIUS-funded informal adult education

<p>Is the adult education service basically a 1970s model, or is it a successful service that has the potential, with the reforms currently in train, to develop and thrive in the 21st Century?</p>	<p>It is hard to define what adult education (AE) is today because of the battering it has taken with reduced funding (in real terms), changes to structures such as local authorities, funding bodies, accountability systems, quality controls, and greater central control and interference. If anything, it is underappreciated, under-funded, frustrated and lacking in confidence and sense of purpose. The funding squeeze has meant so many skills being lost to the service – skills which will be required in the future but unlikely to be re-discovered. Even within local authorities adult education is a Cinderella service with little appreciation of its potential. In the further education sector the pendulum approach to FE governance, and links to the community have completely eroded any sense of community responsibility and made it difficult for those dedicated to working closely and responsively to community and individual need to operate with any flexibility and sensitivity. The recent changes to local authority responsibilities have produced a situation whereby adult services do not necessarily appreciate the resource they have available, and are now responsible for.</p>
<p>How are local authorities now organising their adult education services? What are their visions for the future and what are their experiences of different models of delivery today?</p>	<p>AEA still has not got any sense that there is any emerging strategy or structure for adult education across local authorities. For the benefit of older people, there is a need to get local authorities to develop a strategy that speaks of the value of later life learning thus allowing lifelong learning partnerships to include them in their strategies and draw down money. We understand that NIACE through its Older & Bolder work has been encouraging local authorities to collaborate with PCTs and others to share resources but there is no evidence of this happening in a sustained and replicable way.</p>
<p>Have we taken partnership working as far as we can?</p>	<p>Not gone far enough, but partnership working is problematic at all levels. Who owns it, who created it, who funds it, who is it accountable to? There is a tendency to be suspicious – to believe that funding is being threatened or demanded. There seems little impetus at Government level to show its ability and desire to work in partnership and to set an example to others. The older people’s partnership strategy group working on the back of Opportunity Age is an example of a communication network, but it shows no evidence through shared funding, mutual agenda setting etc. that it is yet a ‘partnership’.</p>
<p>In terms of using the DIUS safeguarded budget, would it be better in future to focus spend on infrastructure and on the organisation of an effective service, rather than through direct subsidies to providers for putting on services?</p>	<p>The DIUS safeguarded budget is ludicrously insufficient and until it is raised the cynics observing this consultation will doubt the Department’s desire for real debate and commitment to this issue. There is a huge leeching of skills from the sector at local level that will be hard to replace. It is slightly invidious and hard to react to this as an “either-or” situation. Pragmatically it seems to make</p>

	<p>sense for the Department to fund a (mainly local) infrastructure and service, which then can access resources from across Government – local, regional, national and European.</p>
<p>Do we need the service to be learner-led?</p>	<p>Yes, but there needs to be better and more inclusive processes to ‘consult’ with learners. Learner panels have a limited appeal; the representatives in time become unrepresentative. In the area of older people there are a range of forums facilitated by the same wide range of agencies. The one model supported by national Government is through the Better Government for Older People Programme and the regional Older People’s Advisory Groups. Yet even here there are issues of representation and renewal. There needs to be some curriculum development – possibly allied to the emerging citizenship agenda – which assists all (older) adults in assessing and asserting their needs.</p> <p>The key unresolved issue is that speaking to ‘learners’ gives us no help in determining the needs of ‘non’ learners. This makes the need for joined-up IAG services and programmes that build on advice agencies like Citizens’ Advice (which work with people in all kinds of situations) the more vital.</p> <p>The earlier experience of individual learner accounts was an excellent experience of learner led education until lax administration allowed the process to be removed from the learner and handed to a huge range of unproven providers.</p> <p>New technology has a role but there are dangers that its potential is overestimated – certainly while so many (older) people have limited access to technology.</p> <p>The notion on skills academies and skills strategies is basically flawed. There is no agreed definition of skills needs – is it core or basic skills, specialist skills, or skills for living? There is an argument that many employers and sectors are not sure what their immediate (and certainly not future) skills needs are.</p> <p>We have had regular skills policy papers – trying to look ten or more years ahead, but no one to our knowledge has revisited any of the earlier skills strategies to see in retrospect they were right. Unless we do this then there can be no trust in future forecasts or in an educational process that prescribes skills needs and allocates resources narrowly and not in response to individual needs.</p>

Equality of access

<p>How can we do better in ensuring that no one is excluded from the benefits of learning? Or from the same opportunities that others enjoy?</p>	<p>The Department should consider broadening the remit and areas of research of the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre to consider issues relevant to older people, access issues and learning engagement (and benefits) at time of crisis and life change.</p> <p>The whole IAG process needs broadening also to embrace non vocational issues which for many (older) adults are of greater and more immediate concern.</p> <p>The Government needs to consider the impact of the implementation of the 2006 Age Regulations on adult education and informal learning. This exercise may wish to reflect on the deliberate decision not to give advice to providers, resulting in wide and often incorrect interpretation. Local legal advice often advocated ‘playing safe’ and ‘taking no risks’ and thus failed to target excluded and vulnerable groups which it could have done on</p>
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	the grounds of 'positive action' and, in the case of older people, looking at their needs strategically rather than allowing the blanket removal of age related concessions with no compensatory procedures.
How well do we understand the barriers to learning as they exist at present?	We do not currently understand these well, and part of that is the difficulty of determining (as opposed to prescribing) the needs of 'non-learners'. This is why there have to be closer liaison and communication with community organisations, advice agencies and agencies where excluded (older) adults are visible such as GP surgeries, day care centres, and job related services.
What further actions could Government most usefully take to ensure more equal access to informal learning?	More funding, local ownership, extended duty of well being on local adult services, examples of local partnership, evidence of partnership and collaboration at government level, trusting the learner, not so narrowly and restrictively prescribing skills requirements.
What further actions could others most usefully take?	Agree to work in partnership and share resources – led by the Government' example. Redefine 'progression' in terms of being more aware of what else is available in the community to utilise learning gains as well as offering other learning opportunities.
What more can Government do to overcome the 'digital divide'?	Better funding of public service broadcasting, reduced licence fee for excluded groups – based on means testing. Wider access to public facilities – libraries etc. Encourage IT hardware appropriate to vulnerable groups – keyboard, mouse, etc.

Broadcasting and technology

What are the barriers to making the most of technology for learners? How can these be overcome?	Cost, accessibility, jargon, perceptions. Intergenerational learning is proving to be effective but often there are not the courses and processes to build on the initial skill gain and the developed sense of curiosity.
What do we know about learning opportunities that will become available utilising new technologies over the next ten to 15 years?	We don't and we shouldn't try to forecast them. Who would have said 30 year ago that everyone would need keyboard (typing) skills for computers and texting on mobile phones? No one predicted how language would develop for texting purposes. No one predicted that we could control many aspects of our immediate environment by pushing a button on a remote control. We have to target general communication and individual skills as a mechanism to better ensure that the general (older) adult population is equipped to cope and respond.
What opportunities, if any, are there to make learning a more central consideration in the future of broadband and the digital switchover?	In <i>Learning in Later Life: a public spending challenge</i> (NIACE & Age Concern 2006) the authors advocate that all public policy developments and changes include funded educational programmes to help people understand and cope with changes. As a matter of course this is worthy of consideration. The same should apply to digital developments. There is a perception among those designing and delivering new services that education is simply about creating information, which it is not. Links with education providers i.e. adult education services – would help create the appropriate processes to enhance understanding. It should be noted that these processes need not be 'traditional' classes. In recent years there has been great success in transmitting information among older people about 'falls' through theatre, drama, art and music.
How can we make greater use of	Who owns the process? Who sets the agenda? How do we

interactive television?	overcome the narrow perspectives – particularly on ageing – among media professionals?
How can the connectivity between broadcasting, physical and virtual resources and informal learning be further enhanced?	Not competent to comment
How can we bring new Information and Communications Technology together with more established teaching and learning models?	At the moment many of the established models are being lost. There has to be processes whereby the learner can easily and effortlessly transfer their learning experience and gains into other environments – particularly the home. Learn Direct and the Open University can offer some models for consideration.

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on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Association for Education and Ageing,

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