

They march you up to the top of the hill, and they march you down again – Trends in adult learning in England

The paper reviews trends in adult learning in England in the ten years from the election of Labour government in 1997. It highlights an initial focus on expanding and widening participation in a wide range of initiatives in the years to 2002. From 2003 there has been a dramatic narrowing of focus giving priority to funding qualifications related to the labour market. Throughout the period it highlights restless change in institutional structures.

Introduction

What is to be done about the education of adults? The state in Britain has wrestled with the problem now for a century and more. It always recognizes the importance of giving opportunities for adults to get skills for work. However, who gets them varies over time – or, rather, the educationally privileged consistently get opportunities, others only sometimes. But learning for its own sake is a different matter. Governments periodically call for an enquiry to advise on the actions needed to stimulate adult participation across a wider range of activity. They follow this with a short burst of initiatives, then with a period of benign neglect. After a time they intervene to reassert utilitarian and economic priorities, often through a combination of regulatory and financial levers, arguing that if adults want education for leisure they can pay for it. After a while there is a call for another enquiry. Indeed, one was published this January (DIUS 2008).

It is a cycle that leaves policy affecting adult learners continually in flux. This has created a curious guerrilla mentality among adult educators, who have adapted to feeding on scraps, and making unlikely alliances across the social policy landscape. More often than not, too, the arrangements adults make for their own learning bear only a tangential relationship to the purposes ascribed to them by providers and policy makers alike, and they are largely invisible in public debates about education.

The case for investing in adult learning

We have recently seen a dramatic narrowing of government priorities to focus on skills for work. Yet, there has never been a time when it has been more urgent to settle on a generous and inclusive policy, and to stick with it. The case for an inclusive strategy is simply put. Two in three of the new and replacement jobs of the next decade need to be filled by adults currently outside the conventional workforce since there are just enough young people to fill only a third of them. Many posts will be filled by migrants,

women currently outside the labour market, and older people, often with poor previous experience of structured learning. The route to successful vocational education for these groups will often start in developing skills for learning in other settings – acquiring the key skill of learning to learn, and the confidence to take on other challenges in a variety of settings.

Organized learning also supports older people in shaping active, creative and meaningful lives after work, when many can look forward to thirty years or more, after their main working lives, and when many will need to adapt and develop skills to continue to earn to supplement inadequate pensions.

Learning has positive health effects, prolongs active life and shortens the period of morbidity. Participation in adult education is recognized in the UK's National Mental Health Strategy as an effective preventative health measure for people at risk of mental illness. Classes offer safe places for people wanting and needing to rebuild relationships – and needing low risk environments to do so, where no one will feel let down if you don't feel well enough to turn up to every meeting.

Adult learning has a powerful impact, as well, on families. Parental enthusiasm for learning spills over onto children, and vice versa. Government departments recognize that there is a pressing need for effective financial education; they recognize the role of learning in community regeneration; they acknowledge its place in effective strategies to reintegrate offenders, in combating drugs misuse, in developing sustainable ways of living on the planet. They are, however, recurrently uneasy about the role of the state in supporting learning that is for pleasure, for personal fulfilment, learning that satisfies an idle curiosity, or informs dissenting citizenship. Some of this work receives some public backing through a modest safeguard – but ten years into the life of the current British government utilitarianism holds sway once again, as post-compulsory education is funded primarily as a supplier of qualifications, which are seen as the best available proxy for skills for a rapidly changing labour market.

Of course, the swings in public policy are not just a matter of whim. Across the industrialized world there has been an intensification of investment in the skills of workers. The impact of global competition, the growth of international markets in education and training, coupled with increased economic migration combine to reinforce the human capital dimensions of industrial policy. There is an emphasis given to developing services and products with high value added for a global market, taking advantage of technological innovation and improved communications. This puts a premium on highly skilled people to develop, design and market these goods and services.

The central argument in this paper is that twin forces shape lifelong learning policy – the search for advantage in an increasingly competitive global economy, and the concern to secure social cohesion through the creation of learning societies where everyone can participate as informed and critical citizens. Yet in the UK, despite a

brave attempt at the end of the 1990s to develop policies hand in hand, vocational goals have more recently decisively won the battle for public resources. The resultant instability in British, but especially English policy affecting adult learners is, I believe, a mistake – not least when the knowledge economy guarantees that we have not yet imagined many of the jobs we will be doing fifteen years from now, just as a generation ago we would not have foreseen web design or biotechnology as major areas of employment now. Lifelong learning policy needs to encourage a breadth of curiosity, met by a variety of programmes offered in a variety of ways. Stop-go policy is no better for lifelong learning than it was for the British economy. There is, after all, more to life than work, and we diminish ourselves if we narrow our educational offer only to those things we already know the need for. Indeed, we prescribe what constitutes “useful learning” at our peril.

New government – new direction

When the New Labour government came to office in 1997, and combined education and employment in a single ministry, the effect was to make adult learning of all sorts much more central to policy making than it had ever been in the old education department. David Blunkett, the Secretary of State signalled this change, by making his first public speech after the election at the launch of Adult Learners’ Week. Much of his analysis drew on NIACE’s (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) work over a decade on behalf of those communities currently under-represented in education and training, on the findings of *Learning Works*, and the report of a task group on widening participation chaired by Helena Kennedy, and the work of the Fryer committee that he commissioned in that speech.

NIACE’s work shows clearly that social class, prior educational experience, current work status, and age all have a major impact on whether or not adults participate in informal, non-formal or formal learning after the completion of their initial education, and little has changed over the last decade. In his Preface to the government Green Paper, “The Learning Age”, produced in 1998, Blunkett argued:

As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings (DES 1998, p. 2).

To achieve the learning age he suggested, “we must all develop and sustain a regard for learning at whatever age”, (DES 1998, p. 4) and he recognised that for many people this would involve overcoming past experiences that had put them off learning. He was determined that the cultural breadth previously available to the affluent and well educated should be everyone’s right and expectation.

“The Learning Age” (1998) launched a host of new initiatives to realize this vision. Two had been promised in Labour’s manifesto. Individual Learning Accounts, which put £ 150 for learning in the pockets of a million people prepared to contribute £ 25 of their own money were an instant success, but poor control processes led to the sudden closure of the scheme, when several fraudulent organizations found ways to claim large sums for little or no provision. As a demand side measure, accounts demonstrated how quickly people could be stimulated to participate in learning; but the experience showed that unless well targeted the dominant beneficiaries would be already well educated adults.

The University for Industry (Ufi) was a brave initiative to use web-based technologies to make learning available for people at home or work, and to back this with an online information and advice service, and telephone helpline for adults wanting to know what to study, and where. Ufi was conceived as an institution for further education and work-based learning, notably for small and medium sized enterprises, to complement the great success of the Open University in opening distance-based higher education to millions of adult learners. Since its creation by the labour government of 1964–70, Ufi has enjoyed well over a billion pounds of public investment, but is still searching for the cost neutral business plan government was hoping to see in place after three years.

Two further initiatives, the Union Learning Fund and the Adult and Community Learning Fund, sought to use trade unions and the voluntary sector as intermediaries to stimulate participation, and to foster new curricular initiatives. Both were successful, and the role of union learning representatives has been backed by subsequent legislation, whilst funding for trade union learning initiatives has expanded throughout the last ten years. The Adult and Community Learning Fund, by contrast, was allowed to die quietly, once responsibility for it transferred from central government to its funding agency – not because the work was ineffective, but because it did not lead to measurable outcomes that contributed to national targets.

A cross-government study looking at deprived communities saw value in adult education, but highlighted the need for patience, since the transformation of communities was a twenty-year task. However, inter-departmental initiatives always struggle to secure intra-departmental priority; the Skills Policy Action team report was shelved. Nevertheless, social inclusion has become a recurrent concern for the government overall in the last decade, if not for its post-compulsory education policies.

Skills for Life

Whilst Labour carried over the Conservatives’ commitment to, and enthusiasm for national targets, they added a very welcome participation target in recognition that addressing non-participant groups was a key task for government. A further advisory

group reviewed the scale of poor literacy and numeracy skills among Britain's adults, and led to the adoption of a cross-government Skills for Life strategy, backed by a high-profile media campaign to secure literacy, numeracy, and language skills for all who needed it (Moser 1998). If the other flagship initiatives had their difficulties, the Skills for Life Strategy was an unqualified success. Well over a million and a half adults and young people have secured a first qualification. But its great strength was to recognize that the suite of national qualifications developed could only meet a fragment of the literacy and numeracy learning needs of people attracted to participate. Funding enabled providers to help three times as many adults who did not go on to gain certification strengthen skills, in the early years of the Strategy. The growth of demand for English for Speakers of Other Languages has been striking, as migration expanded, notably from the states joining the European Union. That expansion squeezed other provision, and produced a reverse of policy in 2007, as the government capped public investment in ESOL, introduced fees and a form of rationing to give priority to settled groups. Here, as elsewhere, government felt employers should be paying a higher proportion of costs, without establishing a mechanism to ensure that they did so.

Changing the institutional landscape – The Learning and Skills Council

There has been continual re-engineering of arrangements and institutions for funding and supporting the work throughout the period. Most importantly, the 2000 Learning and Skills Act nationalized local authority adult education budgets, abolished Training and Enterprise Councils and the Further Education Funding Council, and replaced them in 2000 with a network of local Learning and Skills Councils, backed by a national office. The Learning and Skills Council was charged with planning and funding post-compulsory education and training to secure economic competitiveness and a fair and inclusive society.

The junior minister for Adult Learning and Skills, Malcolm Wicks, set it an early challenge. To stimulate wider participation, Wicks encouraged the Council to launch an initiative to persuade people to sign up for courses of three to six hours. Initially, these were to be funded from colleges' and other providers' existing resources, but the initiative was so successful in increasing participation by people over sixty in particular that the Council agreed to fund many of the learners engaged in subsequent short-course programmes.

Bodies created at arm's length from government to carry out its remit take on a life of their own, and from the beginning the national council of the LSC gave a dramatically lower priority to learning for personal and community development, and civic engagement than the politicians had asked for. This was the era of national targets. For adult learning these were a Skills-for-Life target, new goals for technician level qualifications, and for higher education, a target of 50 percent participation in higher education by the age of thirty. This had the perhaps unintended consequence of halting and then

reversing the growth of mature student participation that had been a feature of English Higher Education since the late 1980s.

The targets adopted by government were for whole qualifications gained, and the bulk of adult study is incremental. Where a unitized curriculum and a credit accumulation and transfer system is in place, this mode of study presents no inhibition to qualifications gain. Yet despite major innovations in the development of credit-bearing courses in further and in higher education in the UK – where Scotland's SCOTVEC is a shining example – progress to a nationally recognized system in England has been painfully slow, in part at least because of the power of awarding bodies to inhibit the adoption of transferable credit. As a result the targets regime adopted by government has further privileged young people over adult participants, since institutions' performance is measured by their contributions to targets, and however valuable an adult's programme of study, if it does not help in the achievement of challenging targets, it risks receiving lower priority.

It is impossible to look back on the first term of the Labour government without reflecting that the blizzard of new initiatives unleashed often had contradictory effects to those intended. Despite commitment to widening participation, government was anxious to see robust evidence on impact of its policies. To address this, government established a Centre for the Economics of Education, and also the Wider Benefits of Learning research centre in 2001 which produced a powerful range of evidence of the impact of investing in education on other social policy goals of government, and on the acquisition and maintenance of social capital. It showed how learning served both to help some people to sustain independent lives and for others, the way learning led to transformation of life chances. Using major national longitudinal population cohort studies it established some surprising and powerful data. It found that comparing adults, interviewed at 33 and again at 42 who reported having taken part in some episode of learning over the period with those who reported not actively learning:

- Learners were 13 percent more likely to give up smoking.
- 34 percent of learners reported an increase in racial tolerance.
- Learners were much less likely to be politically cynical.
- Learners over forty were significantly less dissatisfied with their lives than those not reporting learning.
- There were modest differences in the likelihood of contracting cervical cancer among women.

What was most striking about the findings was that these changes were consistent whatever the learner's prior educational experience, and whatever the level of study engaged in. This is in marked contrast to the participation data illustrated above. They drew on medical data which shows that whilst learning does not inhibit the onset of Alzheimer's it does slow the rate of deterioration of other healthy cells in the brain. People who develop Alzheimer's but maintain active neural networks manifest its effects at a later stage, reducing the period of their lives where they are helplessly dependent on

others. Literally, it is better to use it than lose it. Taken together, these findings make a powerful case for modest public investment in adult learning of all sorts, and go some way towards meeting the challenge of one civil servant who argued that adult learning is an evidence free zone.

When launching “The Learning Age”, Blunkett talked of the time it takes to turn round an oil tanker. Overall investment in further education sector budgets grew quickly – fuelling the expansion of the Skills for Life programme and short courses, and a major expansion of participation by people over sixty. By 2003 adults accounted for some eight in ten of all learners in the further education system.

The Skills Strategy

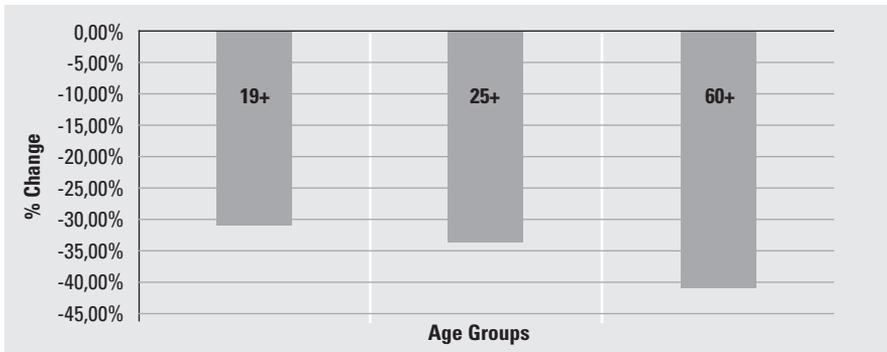
Now, whilst total investment continued to grow, a sharp redistribution began. It privileged younger students up to 25, and people learning at or for work. Gone were the short courses, and with them many of the older learners who found them so accessible. From 2003 when a new Skills Strategy was adopted, a new utilitarianism reasserted itself. There was no talk now of the time it takes to turn round an oil tanker. The primary task of post-school education was to service the economy, to respond to the challenges of globalization. To be fair, and largely because of the intervention of successive junior ministers, the “Skills Strategy White Papers” of 2003–05 did also recognize that adult learning serves purposes other than the narrowly economic.

The Skills Strategy established an entitlement to learning at level 2 (what a successful 16 year old might achieve) to complement the literacy, numeracy and language entitlement, (but only for people able and willing to study for the full qualification) and established Sector Skills Councils in yet another attempt to woo employers to play a shaping role in the system. Whilst a protected budget was identified for adult education in local authorities, college provision was to be radically reshaped, following a review of colleges by Sir Andrew Foster, which relegated their community development role to at best an optional extra.

As a result budgets spent on adult learning outside explicit vocational courses has plummeted over the last two years, with the loss of 1,400,000 adult learners from publicly funded provision, and the prospect of further dramatic losses to come, as the Government aligns public spending with the recommendations of its latest report on the skills needs of the British economy in the year 2020.

There are, of course, insufficient budgets to do everything, and there is widespread recognition that government, employers and individuals alike need to invest more to create a learning society. However, employers continue to spend well below the OECD average for investment, and access to learning opportunities at work is skewed heavily in favour of those who already have the most qualifications. Government is reluctant

Change in Learner Numbers 2004/05–2006/07



(drawn from Learning and Skills Council statistics)

to enact legislation requiring employers to train all their staff. Yet, to repeat, two thirds of the jobs of the next decade will be filled by adults.

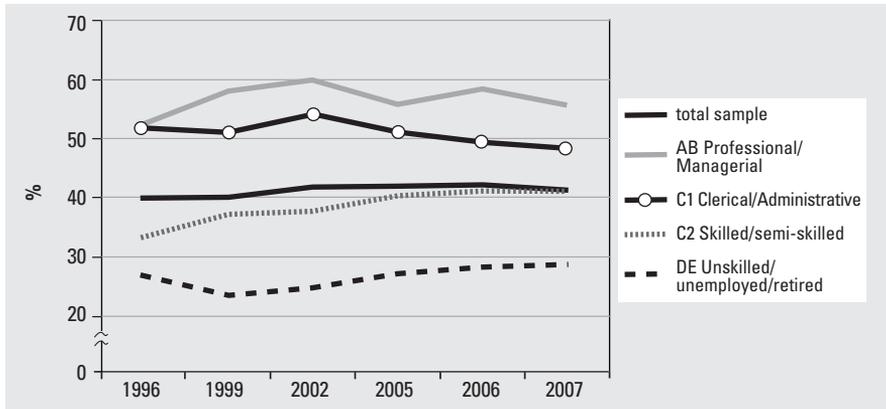
The Leitch Review

Government has taken some comfort from surveys, like NIACE’s which show that overall participation has held up, even when publicly-funded provision has fallen sharply. Indeed, since 2002, numbers reporting current or recent participation have dropped. However, participation affects different groups differently. This table shows dramatically that participation in learning is strongly associated with more affluent social class groups. Unskilled, unemployed and retired people’s participation has scarcely shifted in the last decade. Those with extended initial education are far more likely to continue learning than those who left school at the first opportunity.

There has been a levelling up of participation between 25 and 55 in the last few years, but older people are significantly less likely to participate. And current or recent participation is the most powerful predictor of future study. Less than one in eight of those who say they have done no learning since school plan to take up learning in the next three years.

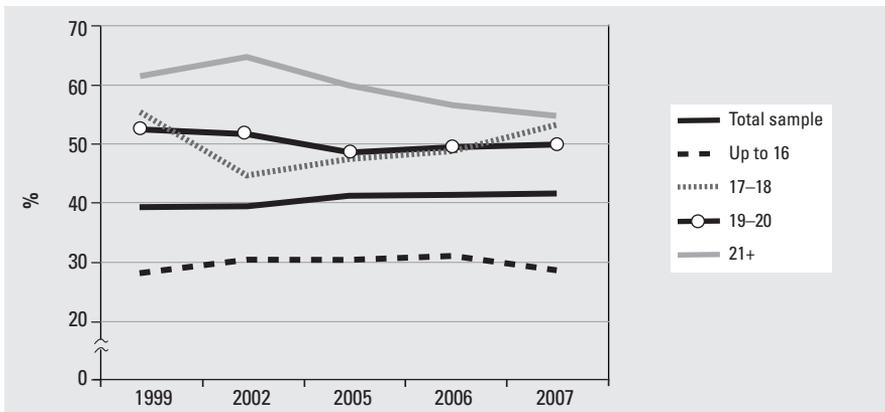
The shift in public spending priorities was endorsed and reinforced with the publication of the Treasury review of the skills needs of the British economy in 2020, chaired by Lord Leitch. “Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills” (2006) looked at the comparative skills of the UK workforce at that time, and at the skills levels needed to be competitive in an ever more competitive global market in 2020. Like earlier reports it recognized that qualifications are only a proxy for skills, and that productivity gains rely on the interplay of innovation, capital investment, managerial capacity as well as workers’ skills. Nonetheless, it argued that by 2020 almost all adults

Current or recent participation in learning by socio economic class: 1996–2007 compared



(Aldridge/Tuckett 2007, p. 13)

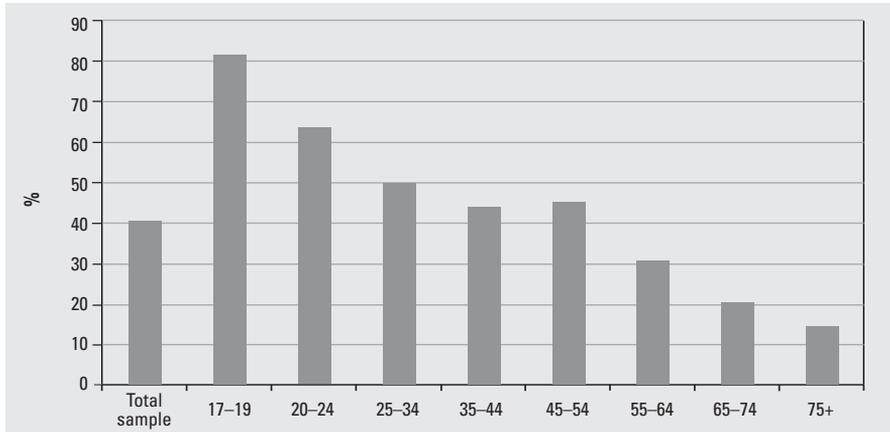
Current/recent participation in learning by terminal age of education 1999–2007



(Aldridge/Tuckett 2007, p. 17)

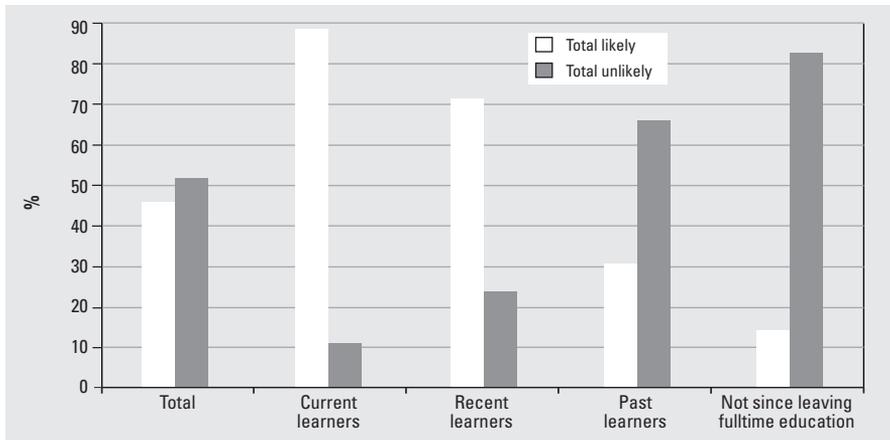
should achieve basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy; that nine in ten adults should acquire level 2 qualifications; and that four in ten adults should have a higher education qualification. Leitch was convinced that the education and training system should be employer-led, and that reformed Sector Skills Councils should play a lead role in overhauling vocational qualifications. There was to be a dramatic increase in workplace learning, notably through the Train to Gain programme launched in 2006. Demand was to be stimulated by giving individuals learning accounts to choose where and how to study. Skills brokers were to help employers identify skills needs among their workforce. It recognized that employers needed to invest more, but gave them

Current/recent participation in learning by age, 2007



(Aldridge/Tuckett 2007, p. 16)

Future intentions to take up learning 2007, by learning status



(Aldridge/Tuckett 2007, p. 23)

until 2010 to show that they would increase investment voluntarily. If not, the State should take powers to secure workplace learning for employees.

Despite the changing demography of the country, Leitch had little to recommend about mid-career or late career re-skilling, nor, despite an ambitious government target of securing 80 percent participation in the economy, did he say much about the learning needs of people currently outside the labour market or about how they were to be

equipped for a labour market making increased demands for skills. Nevertheless, the government accepted the report and set about implementing it.

Leitch also said nothing about the dramatic increase in migrant labour into the UK since 2000, both skilled and unskilled. Their arrival has had a dramatic impact on the demand for English classes, and once again government would like employers to pay the costs of their employees learning English; many refuse but Leitch offered no advice on how to make them comply. The result of the changes deriving from Leitch, exacerbated by the needs of new arrivals has been to squeeze dramatically opportunities for learners to choose to study part-time the subjects of their choice. Adult education programmes comparable to the range on offer in Germany's *Volkshochschulen* are now hard to find in Britain.

Impact on liberal adult education

Language courses have declined dramatically in the last five years; information and communications technology course enrolments have been hit by major fee rises, as public subsidy has been withdrawn, and the numbers of people over sixty have halved in publicly-funded courses in under three years.

But does this reduction in community-based adult education matter? Since I have worked in adult education, Hampshire has cut its adult education budget entirely more than once, without consciously reinstating the funding. Yet adults are like the weed, ground elder, hard to get rid of, and there is always provision around to cut the next time budgets tighten. I have no doubt that adults determined to find somewhere to learn will find what they need. But is that all you need to usher in the learning age? Clearly not for the people who benefited least from education the first time round, and for those working for the third of employers who do no training.

The latest consultation paper on Informal Learning (2008) launched by the Secretary of State celebrates the extraordinary diversity of self- and mutually organized learning activities, from reading groups to universities of the third age. It highlights the value of family learning, for adults and young people alike, the importance of libraries, museums and broadcasters, and the powerful possibilities of web-based learning communities, but under-values the role of classes taught by skilled teachers, and of their importance to people returning to learning.

We know that learning of all sorts is not only good for your health, sanity, family and communal relations, but it is also good for the economy. As Ford's Employee Development Scheme has shown since the late eighties, investing in learning for its own sake can lead to improved industrial relations, improved retention, improved problem solving in the workplace, and lower absenteeism – all things that affect the bottom line. The Scandinavian countries, study circle democracies, continue to combine large

scale investment in learning for its own sake, with impressive capacity to learn their way out of economic difficulties. For, surely, it is learning that is the key industrial skill, one that leaks from one arena to another. Once it takes hold, it is hard to contain, and you do it best when you can choose the vehicle through which to develop the habit. It is remarkable how quickly the British government seems to have forgotten this, and reverted to policies close in many ways to those that failed its Conservative predecessor, albeit with higher levels of investment committed. Understanding the value of permissive educational policies for adults has never been sufficiently rooted in our policy culture, and is always fragile. In my view, each time Government narrows and prescribes provision it is at our peril.

What I have tried to show in this paper is that over the last decade government in England in particular has encouraged and funded a wide array of measures to create a learning society, and has then retreated to narrow human capital policies. This has left many adult educators, and hundreds of thousands of learners, feeling like the Duke of York's ten thousand men in the children's nursery rhyme: that they have been marched up to the top of the hill, and then marched down again. Nevertheless, there are once again most modest causes for hope. Demographic change will have an impact, and a new and enlightened Secretary of State understands the value of community learning, and pendulums do swing back. During the life of the Labour government a large number of initiatives have been taken to broaden the reach and to increase the volume of adult participation in learning. They have shown conclusively that it is possible to increase adults' engagement in learning – whether in the workplace or the community.

Over the same period there have been a number of changes to institutional infrastructure, a plethora of new measures, most of which have been short-lived, and there have been major shifts of focus for public funding. The net effect of this policy restlessness is that many of the gains of the early years have been sharply reversed.

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