

**Educational
Centres
Association**



Educational Centres Association

Response to

BIS | Department for Business
Innovation & Skills

NEW CHALLENGES, NEW CHANCES

**Review of Informal Adult
and Community Learning**

October 2011

Background

The Educational Centres Association

The Educational Centres Association (ECA) is a national umbrella body and registered charity which promotes, supports and provides adult, intergenerational and family learning.

It was founded in 1920 as the Educational Settlements Association. Funded by successive administrations, the ECA contributed significantly to the development of thinking in the period leading up to the 1944 Education Act, and was an advocate for non-formal residential adult learning in the post war years. The ECA was engaged in the consultation regarding the Russell report, and has responded to subsequent consultations.

Association members were instrumental in launching the provision of Adult Basic Skills in the late 1970s and have continued to develop innovative practice across a broad range of learning agendas through the 20th Century and onwards to the present day. We are in reciprocal membership with NIACE and have as members Local Authorities, FE Colleges, Community and Voluntary organisations, schools, awarding bodies, Universities and Museums. Under our constitution we have scope for direct election of adult learners to the main board.

In 2001 the ECA attracted audiences of over 500 people to a series of conferences run in conjunction with the Learning and Skills Council, and has continued to offer conferences and opportunities for educators and learners to meet and discuss issues across a broad scope of adult learning issues within the arts and culture sector. It has also contributed to several successful European projects on the themes of Intergenerational learning, staff development and citizenship (such as the award winning Teddy Bear and TEACH projects).

The Association plays an active role in the Community Sector Coalition where it acts as strand leader for adult learning including citizenship learning and empowerment. It helped to structure the 'Take Part' Learning Framework which linked to TEACH, a Grundtvig project promoting leadership development in European citizenship education. Our Community Journalism Project, which was part funded by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, further extended our citizenship agenda in the field.

The ECA has won praise from previous DEFRA Ministers Joan Ruddock and Hilary Benn for its encouragement of Environmental Learning and advocacy that came during an extensive period of work in which it contributed to Every Action Counts, a community based initiative promoting sustainable development attitudes and behaviours. The Association continues to promote learning around these issues as part of its remit.

When formulating a response to this consultation we have asked the Association's regional representatives to consult ECA members in their regions either on a one to one basis or as in the Eastern region by organising a members meeting to contribute responses to the consultation. We have also considered the formal responses made by a number of our members.

Formal Response to Review

Q1. Do you agree that BIS-funded IACL contributes to the development of the Big Society and complements the delivery of other Government policies, and if yes, which policies and how might IACL's contribution be measured?

Yes we agree that BIS funded IACL contributes to the development of the Big Society. We would also go further and say the Government's aims for the Big Society and decentralisation of power will not work as intended unless: -

- learning and access to learning are built into the Big Society framework.
- It is acknowledged that the Voluntary and Community Sector need resources to support volunteers, build volunteers capacity and provide voluntary opportunities. It is expected that this sector will play a large role in the Big Society at a time when many VCS organisations are having to cut back on staff and reduce what they can achieve.
- A role is given to Third Sector learning organisations who support, promote and deliver IACL opportunities and are amongst the best placed to understand the needs, opportunities and constraints relating to the majority of VCS organisations at this time and the relevant learning support and provision that would provide the best fit and allow the Big Society to achieve its full potential.

IACL complements the delivery of many other Government policies. For example the ECA contributed substantially to the Government Chief Scientist's Foresight Project on Mental Capital & Wellbeing and welcomes the Prime Minister's initiative in bringing this area of agenda to the fore through the Office of National Statistics. We believe that informal adult learning is the bedrock on which this is founded and it is therefore strategically important that national as well as local resources are deployed to support a diverse range of IACL opportunities. The consultation document already mentions localism, wellbeing and social and digital inclusion which we would agree that IACL supports. Other examples of the role IACL can play in Government policies would include opportunities that complement Defra, DECC and the Department of Transport's policies on environmental sustainability and cutting carbon as well as policies concerning health, social care, social mobility, employment etc. We believe that learning that supports cross policy areas could be enhanced if the Government could bring together different sectors as well as combating the silo effect of piecemeal funding from across departments.

Due to the differing nature, purpose and outcomes of the many IACL opportunities available, measuring their contribution will prove difficult. During

consultation with ECA members, some adult educators felt that the outcomes from learning should be set by the learners themselves and the success of IACL might be recognised by whether learners go on to other opportunities; these may be lifewide as well as just those formally provided’.

Q2. Should BIS funded IACL be aimed solely at supporting specific outcomes such as progression to training and employment, or enable progression in a broader sense?

Although we understand and agree with the importance of providing IACL opportunities from which the learner progresses to training and employment, we feel that to solely support such a specific outcome would lose the sense of what IACL is, can be and the huge impact it can have on many areas of learners’ lives. It is important that all lifelong learning is recognised as valid and as having an impact on learners’ lives.

It is therefore our view that BIS funding should not be focused solely on provision that leads to progression in training and employment. Any move to fund only IACL that focuses explicitly on these areas would lessen opportunities to ‘learn for learning’s sake’ and reduce opportunities taken for fun and enjoyment which have been shown to help to build confidence, contribute to community engagement and encourage and foster a culture of lifelong learning through building skills and capacity in individuals’ lives and contributing to positive physical and mental wellbeing.

Building a culture of lifelong learning within the population would lead to an increase in learners, an increase in opportunities provided, a greater understanding by employers of the benefits of funding and providing training opportunities for their staff and an increase in individual and community capacity. It also recognises the importance of informal learning as a step towards other learning which in turn may act as another stepping stone towards more formal learning and training opportunities.

Adult learners act as significant role models in their communities and their function as mentors widens the circle of influence and access to information on which ‘the Information Society’ is grounded. In addition the role of parents as active learners is known to have a deep influence on the preparedness and ability of their children to benefit from all kind of learning opportunities.

As the Lifelong Learning Minister has himself stated, work in the creative and practical crafts has a significant place in IACL. In addition to the contribution that it makes to many lives as a means of expressing creativity and providing therapeutic engagement, it also contributes more widely to mental wellbeing and frequently acts as a catalyst for change for individuals coping with in complexities of a variable job market and attendant ‘portfolio careers’.

Q3. If the latter, what other types of progression are relevant and how could they be measured?

IACL opportunities are wide ranging so can result in a range of progression outcomes from increased self confidence to employment. As stated in our answer to question 1 adult educators consulted by the ECA feel that the success of IACL might be recognised by whether learners go on to other opportunities, and that these may be lifewide as opposed to just take-up of formal opportunities. Often progression for an individual includes changes in attitudes or behaviours and may not be immediately discernable to the learners themselves. Progression in an individual might not be explicitly linked to subject matter; for example an adult with low basic skills may undertake a cookery class which in turns improves their literacy and numeracy which contributes to progression within their lives. All of these factors make progression hard to measure. A national framework which could be interpreted at local levels and which takes into account a range of outcomes and impact indicators and recognises that progression may not be immediate may be a way in which progression could be measured.

Q4. What should be the respective national and local roles in relation to IACL?

National Role

At a national level we would like to see a clear definition of IACL and a statement of aims and objectives agreed between BIS and the sector which sets the parameters for BIS investment.

A national IACL infrastructure should be developed which can be applied at a local level and provides guidance on evidence of need, community involvement, staff training, CPD, quality assurance, defining and evidencing impact, joining services and pooling budgets.

The current yearly funding arrangements through BIS do not provide value for money or stability for the sector as it impedes effective planning and delivery of IACL. We would like BIS to address this by lengthening its funding cycles to 3 years. We would also like to see commitment to longer term funding to develop local infrastructures for IACL (see local roles below).

We would encourage cross government working with BIS securing agreements from and appointing learning leads at other government departments to push the IACL learning agenda as a way in which they can help to achieve their priorities and to negotiate further funding from these sources.

Local Roles

We would wish to see local providers and groups from all sectors including the VCS and learners to come together in their local areas to develop an IACL infrastructure which is coordinated to ensure wide and varied learning opportunities that would meet local needs and priorities, address different policy areas and is accountable at a local level. This infrastructure should work to encourage providers to communicate, work together and share their expertise to address these priorities and needs.

Q5. What (if any) steps could facilitate the changing role of central Government in IACL?

A move towards localism will need to be supported by a development programme in which definitions, frameworks and guidance are developed to set out the parameters for local providers / infrastructure to work. There is the potential for national associations, such as the ECA, which support local learning providers to play a significant role / act as facilitators as the role of central Government changes. As mentioned in Question 4, longer term funding to set these infrastructures in place is needed if they are to succeed.

Q6. What are the implications of seeking a wider local provider base?

Seeking a wider local provider base will have implications on existing providers who are funded by BIS and care must be taken to not destabilise these organisations when redistributing the funding available. Although IACL is part of a safeguarded budget we would like to see that it has been 'inflation proofed' so in real terms funding does not decrease which will help to address this issue.

A positive aspect of seeking a wider local provider base would be the involvement of many more Third Sector organisations, many of whom are capable of providing excellent learning opportunities in targeted areas of need. The knowledge and expertise held by the Third Sector would be an asset to partnerships and these organisations are also well placed to access funding from non-government sources which can be used to increase resources in local areas. The Third Sector also has a wealth of experience in training and working with volunteers which will be invaluable in building the Big Society. In order to ensure that there is a wider range of providers and smaller consortia we feel that there is a case for minimum contract values not applying to IACL.

Q7. What would a localised IACL offer mean for providers, such as the Workers' Educational Association, delivering learning across localities?

We would suggest that local infrastructures for IACL should strengthen partnership working and include organisations which work at national, regional and local levels including all government funded providers ensuring that local approaches to planning, delivery and evaluation are responsive and coherent.

Q8. Should BIS-funded IACL be targeted or universal, and why?

The ECA believes that lifelong learning is fundamental to personal development and therefore much of the BIS funded IACL should be universal and help to establish a culture of lifelong learning which will equip people to cope with the life changes they encounter.

We believe there is a need for some targeted funding for disadvantaged adults and particular needs within communities but feel that to target all BIS funding would be a mistake. Targeted funding can also create silos of provision which are seen as opportunities either for 'rich' or 'poor' learners. This segregation eliminates the benefits of people from different backgrounds learning together and in doing so learning about each other. Targeted funding may also miss hidden areas of disadvantage if appropriate methods are not used to select them, for example postcode allocation, particularly in rural areas.

Q9. What are the key challenges to generating fee income and what associated solutions would encourage more sophisticated approaches to income generation?

The setting of fee levels is a challenge to providers. We would advocate the use of a hybrid fees model which included differentiated and sliding fee scales with subsidised places. Fees will need to be decided upon locally taking into account what people can afford to pay and what learning is needed. The subsidies could be funded by BIS IACL funding or alternatively this shortfall could be made up by generating surplus fees through higher charges for more for popular classes.

We would advocate that people experiencing high levels of poverty be entitled to a defined amount of free access to IACL opportunities. We realise that some educators believe that non-fee paying learners may not attend their classes regularly but would argue that this depends on the perceived importance and quality of the learning offered.

Q10. In a localised model, what are the key challenges and associated solutions that would secure accountability for tax payers' investment?

We believe that localised models will need a clearly defined framework to work effectively and to ensure accountability. They will need to have a range of representatives that reflect the true needs and priorities of the local area, including learners and community organisers / representatives as well as providers and other local bodies from a range of sectors. Participatory and Community budgeting approaches may help both providers and learners to establish the real costs associated with providing learning opportunities. This wide range of stakeholders should ensure that funding is spent where it is needed and where it will provide value for money and bring benefit to the communities. For example in some areas it may be more appropriate to fund self organised learning for disadvantaged groups rather than funding provision that is less appropriate. A localised model should encourage partnership working particularly that in which budgets are shared, provision is not needlessly duplicated, procurement can be shared and particular groups are able to bring in monies from non-government sources which will add value to the tax payers' investments.

Q11. Which, if any, of options a) b) and c) on page 13 present a proportionate approach to measuring impact? Are there any alternatives?

In terms of record keeping, quantifying outcomes and statistical returns it should be recognised that in their present form the methods used for collecting these details are seen as particularly intrusive and unhelpful by both learners and part time tutors. We would therefore not wish to place more of an administrative burden on providers and any solution must be cost and time effective whilst being fit for purpose and providing genuinely useful information which can inform future provision .

We agree that Option A is important as it allows local providers the flexibility to develop appropriate evaluation methods for their provision and we believe that option C would provide useful in creating a national picture as long as the questions asked were appropriate and reflected the true intentions and outcomes of IACL. It will be important that learners are helped to assess the impact of learning on their own lives.

While recognising that there is a clear need to provide aggregated responses to the Department and other stakeholders regarding use of public monies we believe that smarter tools exist and that there should be investment on a 'spend to save' basis to bring this about.

Q12. What core information should recipients of BIS investment have to provide in relation to learner characteristics and learning activity?

We think there is a need to reassess the way we collect and handle data and that a more scientific approach to this could be taken, for instance through involvement of the Office of National Statistics.

To minimise costs we would suggest that only data which will be used, including basic demographics in terms of age gender etc which is collected anyway, as well as key performance indicators (success, impact, cost effectiveness etc), quantitative and qualitative evidence, is provided.

Although difficult to measure, the quality of the learner's experience should be paramount when collecting data including the realisation of learners' aspirations.

Q13. How can administrative data be used effectively to map fee income and learner disadvantage?

This is another aspect where a more scientific approach would be useful – colleagues within the sector do not necessarily have the technical skills to deal with these issues but they could supervise relevant and appropriate research carried out by the academic community.

There is a need to develop how we can collect data which is clear and reflects multiple purposes whilst lowering the time spent on administration. It may be possible for a consortium or appropriate body to hold relevant data for the area or to make use of existing frameworks. Giving learners a sense of their 'ownership' of the data handling process would be consistent with models of the Big Society.

Q14. What factors should be taken into account in the distribution of BIS funding for IACL?

If a revision of the current funding distribution is to take place, this needs to be staggered to allow existing organisations which currently receive funds to seek measures / ways in which a reduction in core funding can be managed without destabilising the organisation.

We would wish to see BIS work with the sector to reallocate funding as appropriate with allocation of resources based on factors including population levels, income levels and indices of deprivation, including rurality and wellbeing levels. These allocations should be regularly reviewed to ensure funding is distributed equitably and in accordance with agreed priorities.

If the Government is minded to change the emphasis on its funding for IACL in the context of the Big Society then it needs to recognise that resources are needed for learning to support effective engagement by people in their own communities. Ordinary people may lack the knowledge, experience and confidence to take up a role within their community; IACL is an effective way to help them to engage in community development. Learning for change and development will in our view be the crucial underpinning factor for the Big Society

In the context of the individual lifecycle and changes in patterns of relationship and interaction with the environment there is strong evidence that IACL can build resilience in individuals and communities. Support for this kind of informal learning helps build sustainable communities and protects individuals from environmental impacts. For these reasons and those presented above the present safeguarded money should be progressively increased, at least in line with inflation. IACL Trusts or their equivalent once established should also be required to coordinate with other bodies that contribute to public protection and resilience.

Q15. Which, if any, of options a), b) and c) on page 15 would best secure more localised delivery and are there alternatives that could be considered

We believe that there should be a local consortium arrangement so that every local area has an adult learning consortium that receives and distributes the IACL funding for that area. This should be a non-profit body which has as part of its mandate learner and community representatives and clearly identified lines of accountability to its stakeholders and means of being monitored; the body would draw together a substantial and wide range of appropriate provision for its area. LEAP in Suffolk (see case study below) is a good example of a successful body along these lines but we would suggest that these new consortia would differ in terms of the inclusion of learners who would have a clear and defined stake in the body.

Leap Case Study

ECA member West Suffolk College is involved in the Leap (Learning enterprise access points) Project which was formed in 2007 by University Campus Suffolk (UCS), Suffolk Learning and Skills Council, Suffolk County Council and the East of England Development Agency and is unique to Suffolk. It aims to make access to education and skills as local as possible in response to the rural nature of the county and recognises the problems of transport to education provision.

Through a network of Centres and Points throughout the county it delivers free and impartial, high quality information, advice and guidance to everyone seeking education or training opportunities.

Leap Centres have expert advisors who can provide up-to-date information, advice and guidance on all aspects of education. They can also help with CV writing and offer tips on interview and presentation skills. The Centres have teaching rooms and state-of-the-art IT suites.

Leap Points are micro versions of the Centres and based mainly in Libraries and Children's Centres. The Points offer information, advice and sign-posting to local learning opportunities.

Leap also works with businesses wanting to improve the skills of their workforce.

The project is seen as very successful in terms of attracting learners, 'lost' private providers and the mapping of classes and smaller groups. Although the project is expensive to run, it has continued running past its original funding date as the centres and points are seen as a real strength to the county and it has attracted more funding to keep the service open for a further 2 years and has the support of all the local councillors.

Q16. Should BIS IACL funding be used to fund capacity building and innovation?

We would like to see a proportion of BIS IACL funding used to fund capacity building and innovation but only if the present safeguarded funding is inflation proofed by the Treasury. Otherwise the overall value of the fund will diminish and thus constrain the very developments the initiative is designed to support.

We have already counselled and advised with regard to issues of environmental sustainability, family and intergenerational learning that these are national priorities which can be successfully addressed through IACL and would wish to see these matters included within the priorities.

We believe this funding should be guided by a national framework but be determined at a local level and show value for money with defined measures to demonstrate its impact.

Q17. If yes, how should funding be balanced and what type of activity should be funded?

As outlined above we believe that use of this funding should be determined locally. This would allow funding for capacity building and innovation which complements, enhances and gives new direction to existing provision in that area or provides a transferable model for use by other providers.

Among activities that should be funded we would include capacity building within communities particularly aimed at engaging and training volunteers to play active roles within their community and help the Big Society to become a reality. Funding outreach staff would be essential to this. Volunteers would need to be given adequate support and deployed appropriately according to their capabilities and the need in local communities.

We would like to see support mechanisms developed for self organised group learning which could act as progression routes for established classes, allowing resources to be made available for new learners.

We acknowledge the usefulness of digital learning and believe that engagement with digital media should be an integral part of everyone's learning opportunities, especially as many older people are currently excluded for various reasons. However we feel that in some cases too much emphasis is placed on digital media / internet for learning experiences. Much informal learning is as much about experience as it is about knowledge and to some extent digital learning only provides a removed experience. Currently digital learning does not appear to have as much capacity as face to face learning does to assess any other needs that a learner may have and ways in which these could be addressed. Since we feel that there are many excellent online learning resources already available to learners we do not believe this small amount of funding from BIS should be used provide more.

Q18. Is there a need for quality assurance arrangements to be changed in light of the potential changes to BIS funded IACL? If yes, in what way?

If the provider base for IACL is widened then quality assurance arrangements need to be consistent across this base and have the purpose of improving learner experience. If external inspectors are brought in to assess quality, for example Ofsted inspectors, we feel it is imperative that the inspectors have a grounded knowledge and understanding of, and comprehend the social and economic outcomes of IACL.

We would like to see national guidance, for providers who work with self organised groups and for these groups themselves, to help support them to offer high quality learning.

Q19. What adjustments to current workforce development arrangements in England would best support the new vision for IACL?

It is acknowledged within the IACL teaching community that PTTLs qualification is not suitable for everyone engaged in supporting learners and that the need to hold it can often mean the loss of tutors who inspire learners with their knowledge, passion and enthusiasm for the subject which they are teaching and in instances where learners, for example those classed as vulnerable, may respond better to someone who has been in a similar situation and who is acting as the trainer / mentor.

More flexible approaches that are congruent with the actual job roles of staff should be instituted and where relevant fully recognised by the Institute for Learning and related bodies. However these bodies themselves will need to change to be more consistent with life in Adult Community Learning where boundaries are more diffuse and training requirements for staff similarly diverse.

These workforce issues require consideration in their own right, since the training of individuals who support the informal learning of others needs to be congruent with that underlying expectation as a requirement.