



**Educational Centres Association  
Environment and Informal Adult Learning Conference  
Central Hall, Westminster  
6 May 2008**

**Ministerial Endorsement**

Joan Ruddock, Minister for Climate Change, Biodiversity and Waste welcomed the ECA's initiative to hold a conference on the Environmental and Informal Adult Learning saying:

*"40% of the CO2 emissions in Britain are the direct result of actions and decisions that we, as individuals make, each and every day. I warmly welcome this initiative which brings together a distinguished panel to help draw out the key messages which the Government, funders and learning providers need to address." "If the environmental challenges which face us are to be met, it is imperative that we unlock the talents and potential of people in every community to help make a difference. I fully support the Educational Centres Association's objective of promoting the informal learning needed to help people understand 'greener living'."*

**Attendance and venue**

There were some 50 delegates representing government departments, national adult learning organisations, local authorities, colleges and voluntary organisations. Delegates were well mixed at tables and discussions forums enriched by the variety of experiences and points of view put forward at each table. Perhaps during the afternoon, there might have been some further mixing of delegates, even perhaps bringing delegates back into 'interest groups' in order to suggest ways forward for (e.g.) statutory providers, national adult learning organisations, voluntary community organisations etc. As it was, there was some loss of energy towards the end of the afternoon. The conference venue was adequate and we kept cool on the first hot day of the summer, but it was a relief to emerge into the fresh air at 4pm. We were kept well supplied with food and drink by the in-house catering service during the day. All of the food was locally and sustainably sourced where possible.

**Welcome to the conference: Bob Fryer**

Prof. Bob Fryer has a wealth of experience in presenting the importance of adult learning issues to Labour governments since 1997. He kept the conference wheels on the tracks throughout the morning, and his good humour and intellectual strength were both apparent. In his introduction and at several other points during the day he reflected the importance of writers such as Baumann

and Beck who have defined contemporary society as a 'risk society'. Such a risk society presents us with often overwhelming choices, the outcomes of which are not always obvious. An example during the day was the 'risk' of dwindling energy supplies and possible economic collapse, versus the 'risk' of reliance on nuclear power, with the devastating consequences that can stem from nuclear accidents. This framework was important as it linked our perhaps local and parochial professional concerns with wider issues that affect every human being on the planet (and the future of many other life forms too). Fryer also introduced the notion of a 'discursive democracy' in which citizens are brought together to share ideas and to set out priorities and preferences. Other speakers during the day used 'participatory democracy' to mean much the same thing. There was certainly a sense that 'representative democracy', in which citizens come together as voters to choose between what are often perceived as the 'lesser of two evils' every so many years was not adequate to ensuring a future sustainable society. We were meeting only days after less than half of Londoners had exercised their vote in the closely fought election to be London's mayor.

### **Alan Tuckett (NIACE)**

Alan Tuckett has recently completed 20 years as Director of NIACE and thus has as broad a view of the adult learning field as anyone. He emphasised the interest of NIACE in environmental themes, going back to 'Learning for the Future', a 1993 publication. He described provision as a diaspora around the fringes of the colleges, and learning as spilling out of organised activities. He questioned what the role of the state was in supporting this 'diaspora' – a question I felt did not receive an adequate answer during the day. He emphasised the dramatic reduction in formal learning enrolments 04/5 to 06/7 – 30% at 19+, 33% at 25+ and 39% at 60% - and the decision to cut many shorter courses. ACL (now LSC Adult Safeguarded Learning – surely any activity with such a title cannot have much of a future?) has reduced from 450k enrolments in 2004 to 250k in 2007. He asked:

- How did such figures square with the government's rhetorical commitment to adult learning?
- What should be the balance between learning for economic development and learning for sustainable development?
- Should adult learning be seen as a 'culture' (Frank Coffield prefers to call this an 'ecology') rather than a 'structure'?

Like many commentators, Alan was puzzled that the green movement (unlike, say, the feminist movement a generation back) was so little represented in adult learning. To me this was less surprising, as science has always been a weak curriculum area in adult learning, a fact reflected in, for example, the NIACE publications list. He also reminded us of the weak links between adult learning and the voluntary community sector (VCS). This last point could perhaps have

been more developed during the day – in fact most ACL activities are seen as relatively formal by the VCS, many of whose activities (campaigns, discussion groups, film showings, activity sessions, public meetings) are so informal that an adult educator might not recognise them as ‘learning’ or ‘education’ at all. It was certainly quite surprising that only occasionally during the day did this conceptual concern arise, despite the wealth of literature on ‘formal’, ‘non-formal’ and ‘informal’ learning. Perhaps thinking in such categorical terms is not useful, and we should envision a wide spectrum of adult learning opportunities from formal through to non-formal, organised by an equally wide range of statutory and voluntary bodies.

### **Mark Walton (Every Action Counts)**

Mark Walton described the important work of EAC in promoting work around: saving energy; travelling wisely; shopping ethically; saving resources; caring for our own area. He emphasised that it includes some formal learning, e.g. community development workers trained in how to support communities in taking action; accredited training for community champions. The extent to which formal / informal might support one another in environmental learning emerged from a number of projects during the day. Mark emphasised that environmental issues relate to inequalities – some communities are more at risk than others (Beck emphasises a similar point: risks are generalised, but impact more heavily on poor and working-class people; the Union Carbide / Bhopal disaster is often used as an example). Mark told us that we can create new knowledge by working together on shared problems. There is a need for urgent action, and to understand risk in order to prioritise actions. Governmental compartmentalisation is a difficulty, e.g. it was the ECA who spotted that environmental issues were being ignored in the informal learning consultation. He preferred to think of us ‘working towards the answer’ rather than ‘knowing the answer’, which is how some environmental organisations present themselves. But, I reflected, in many cases we do know the answer, and the problem is how to make it a reality – giving up plastic bags a good example, and it was great to be at a conference with not a plastic bag in sight!

### **Discussion Forum 1**

Each table was asked to debate:

*What informal learning opportunities do you provide and how does that provision relate to environmental and sustainability issues. Consider:*

- a) directly environmental topic-based learning*
- b) sustainability issues embedded in non-environmental programmes.*

This was an entirely appropriate topic as we began to get to know one another around the table and to understand others’ points of view. In my own group this included: Field Studies Council (VCS environmental learning organisation), Somerset Community Food (VCS), Friends Centre Brighton (independent a.e. centres) Basingbourne Village College (local authority), NIACE, Isle of Wight Network (NIACE-funded project).

## Feedback

The report back provided an excellent basis for rest of the day's work. I noted down:

- Improve links with public broadcasting
- Sustainable thread in all provision
- The poorest always suffer the most, despite having lowest carbon footprint
- Adult learning not part of culture of many people
- Integrate sustainable agenda into wider work of VCS
- Possible loss of experienced tutors because of qualification/training demands
- Harnessing the skills of grandparents (e.g. via schools, NFWI or U3A)
- Lack of hard science in adult learning
- Negative impact of regulation in, for example, use of kitchens to teach cookery skills
- Problems with bureaucracies
- Finding out what people want to learn
- Adult learning as a resource for VCS
- Clearer definition of sustainability in order to embed it
- Importance of 'really' informal and intergenerational learning.

## David Lammy MP (DIUS)

The Minister spoke about the importance of innovation in public services. How can we help people to have the skills to join in sustainability debates and take action in their own lives? He wanted an aspirational society in which education creates the basis for lifelong learning. Learning opportunities should reach out into communities through (e.g.) libraries and Internet. He argued that 'we can build a society where no-one is left behind, and people have higher wages and more secure and fulfilling lives - a society where people can aspire to a brighter future with better education and skills for them and their children'. He pointed out that all government departments and Lottery fund adult learning, a point that was perhaps not taken up sufficiently in rest of conference, though it is crucial to VCS. David Lammy asked: How can we target funding to maximise learning? What is role of public sector broadcasting, especially BBC?

A question-and-answer session followed. This was restrained but produced some perhaps firmer statements than in the Minister's speech. He asserted that 'We're not here to back off the skills agenda that has been set by Leitch'. The job of government is to listen, but then to prioritise. And the current priority is people without basic skills who he said "would be grossly left behind if we don't accelerate the skills agenda". There seemed general agreement that personal learning accounts were going to be helpful, and that the work of other government departments was important in ensuring that wider learning needs were met. Some questions seemed quite difficult and were not met with clear answers: why were library services being reduced in some areas? What is the

connection between individual educational deficits and collective action? How do local and national aspects of sustainability fit in with the global challenge?

The Minister admitted some uncertainty on how 'joined up' with the skills agenda the work of other departments and the Lottery around climate change is. He thought libraries were a useful 'collective space' for community learning. Indirectly he reflected that policy sometimes has unexpected (in this example very good) outcomes: Sure Start had been about children, but had had excellent outcomes for parents, some of whom were now progressing via the teaching assistant route to become teachers themselves.

On the global challenge, he felt there was still much to be done to 'get our own house in order' in relation to adult learning.

Hopefully David Lammy will be around long enough for the ECA and, indeed, other organisations represented at the conference, to follow up many of the points that could only be dealt with quite superficially in this half-hour exchange of views.

**Shirley Ali Khan (Bulmer Foundation)**

How can we define sustainable development in a way that resonates with people? – the search for a language that contributes to 'public learning'. At the moment the emphasis is on lifestyles rather than development, despite the fact that the Chief Scientist has said that 'food security is a key issue'. In the search for a society not dependent on fossil fuels we need a commitment similar to that of the World War I Ministry of Reconstruction (which produced the famous and seldom bettered 1919 Adult Education Report). John Denham has reminded us in relation to science policy that without an understanding of the risks we face we cannot move forward. But no government department (including DIUS) prepared to face up to this. The Informal Learning consultation document concentrates on leisure and pleasure learning, whereas much self-directed learning is in the environmental field. The 'real world' learning that people want is often quite complicated, e.g. permaculture. In fostering a positive disposition to sustainability, we must recognise that the present rhetoric is fine but the implementation poor. We need 'value-driven' organisations to address the agenda set by the necessity to move from an oil-dependent to oil-free society, and we need to make our voices heard across government departments.

**Sophie Duncan (BBC)**

Sophie Duncan explained how as the informal learning arm of the corporation, BBC Learning exists to support adults and families in accessing opportunities inspired by broadcasts.

She gave the example of Breathing Places as a way in which the BBC has successfully worked with a wide range of partners to inspire and equip the public

to engage in creating spaces for wildlife and people, helping to transform them from 'armchair enthusiasts' into 'wildlife champions'.

She argued that the ingredients essential to this kind of campaigning TV are:

- Audience – people get involved when its local and when their children get inspired
- Broadcast – calls to action effective on both network programmes and local radio
- Partners – working with bodies such as libraries – importance of 'shared agendas'

Lessons that have been learnt so far have shown that to engage a higher number of people you need a low entry bar, so everyone can act and engage. This realisation informed the Breathing Places 'Do One Thing' campaign.

She emphasised that the environment is a learning place. So far 650 Breathing Places have been created across the UK. The creators of these are now being encouraged to run events at the spaces for local people to attend, thereby passing on their learning to others.

To illustrate the breath of the engagement that Breathing Places has generated, Sophie's presentation ended with an abundance of visual material drawn from the BBC's resources.

### **Peter Templeton (WEA)**

This was particularly helpful contribution, since it reflected considerable debate on the consultation paper within WEA and also had a sense of history. Post-lunch torpor was avoided. Peter Templeton reminded us that the root of the emphasis on skills is James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech of 1976, following hard on economic crisis arising from the 1973 oil price rises, and the British government's decision to go to the IMF for support. In that sense it can be seen as part of the global restructuring of capital. As I have argued elsewhere, public expenditure is only justified when it contributes to economic growth and the accumulation of private capital. Peter might have added that the issue about sustainable development is whether a continuing world economy is possible without addressing the issues about sustainability as raised by Prof. Ali Khan before lunch. Peter added that we knew there was an environmental crisis back in the 70s but we managed to ignore it through 3 decades of TINA (There is no alternative) and 'It's the economy, stupid'.

The speaker referred us to Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson, *Fantasy Island* (Constable, 2007) which questions whether it is possible to have both sustainability and economic growth, a position which I have long felt to be logically unsustainable! If you search for this book on Google, the first item that appears is a theme park of the same name near Skegness, which makes the point neatly.

Turning to the consultation document, the document does not define 'informal', does not mention the environment, and has a largely consumerist approach (what Prof. Ali Khan called 'pleasure and leisure learning').

Peter is interested in 'co-intentional learning' – groups coming together to learn, and how we can provide them with resources and tutors; Immediately I thought of the Scandinavian study circles, but they were an intrinsic part of Nordic social democracy!

## **Discussion Forum 2**

Our set task was to discuss:

*Enhancing equality of access and creating effective reach – how can different interest groups be encouraged to engage?*

### **Feedback**

- There was an enthusiastic report on the work of the NFWI. They use good speakers and funding follows because of their reputation. They also use trained volunteers in their informal learning work.
- There was discussion of the benefits and pitfalls of voucher systems. At the moment there is cross-subsidy between different kinds of courses. (This might have been better focussed as a discussion of the benefits and pitfalls of the move to a 'demand-led' system).
- Start simply, e.g. through taster sessions in Adult Learners Week, through family and intergenerational learning and through initiatives such as the ECA Teddy Bear project
- Start where people are
- Celebrating success
- The Transition Town movement is a significant focus in the search for sustainability but does not seem to articulate with state-funded learning.

### **Joy Greasley (NFWI)**

Joy Greasley reminded us that the role of the NFWI is to use informal learning to build skills and to campaign on issues. This link seemed to me important in relation to other points made at the conference on how the skills agenda might meet the sustainability debate. NFWI runs a few explicitly sustainable courses such as organic gardening, but in general reflects sustainability in its operational mode, such as 'green' buildings at Denman College and local sourcing of food. And they make sure people know what is going on. NFWI believed in 'learning about, through and with the environment'. Joy Greasley told us about 'eco-teams' – 6-8 households meeting weekly to understand and change their carbon print. I thought, yes, this is what I mean by informal learning, and there is in fact a lot of it going on, to my knowledge. The 'WI Carbon Challenge' includes tips on how to save energy.

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NFWI is involved in a national project funded by FSA on budgeting and planning healthy meals in deprived areas. This project is called 'Let's Cook'. A short film has been made by the NFWI called 'A World without Jam' (an ironic comment on the popular image of the WI) which deals with climate change.

They use partnership working to maximise funds, using resources from different government departments. But short-term funding is still a problem. Volunteers need to be 'trained, supported and encouraged' and that means core funding. Many people in the VCS would agree, I reflected, that core funding is indeed the holy grail of the sector.

Joyce summed up the NFWI work as VISION – PASSION – ACTION.

### Discussion Forum 3

*What can your organisation do to make a difference?*

*What will delegates be recommending to DIUS in their response to the consultation?*

There were plenty of suggestions, and here are some of them:

1. Partnership with other local and national organisations
2. Getting environmental messages across everywhere
3. Embedding sustainable skills into life skills
4. Skills of economic growth and sustainable development may not be so different in fact!
5. A national database of informal learning providers
6. Encouraging government departments to talk to one another and provide sustainable funding for learning about the environment
7. Developing 'environmentally intuitive citizens'
8. Supporting other consultation events
9. Developing focussed, visionary solutions
10. Lobbying for a follow-up to Every Action Counts
11. Building in self-funding business development into Lottery funded projects.

### PLENARY

Delegates were treated to a plenary involving the four afternoon speakers. In general they repeated points made earlier rather than attempting to make new ones. Important points made were:

- Transition Towns feels like an exciting movement and may be the 'new Agenda 21' in linking local action to global problems
- In resource terms, should we be weaning government off that part of the skills agenda that is really 'business training' and therefore what firms should be doing and paying for themselves ( I noted that firms are in any case on yet another final warning about getting their training house in order – by 2010 this time)
- We value business capital, but not social and environmental capital.

By this time everyone was pretty tired. It had been a long and busy day. But even so, I was really sorry that no-one stood up and spent a minute congratulating the ECA for putting on this event, and for insisting that sustainability issues belong in the informal learning consultation. So thank you, women and men of the Educational Centres Association. And thank you Bernard Godding for keeping the principle of adult education as a social movement alive into the twenty-first century.

**John Payne**  
**May 2008**

### **ANALYSIS OF EVALUATION FORMS**

***Evaluation Forms returned: 21 (Total present: 46 delegates, 8 presenters) (range of marks from 5=excellent, 4=very good, 3=good, 2=average, to 1=below average)***

Of the 756 evaluation boxes on the forms returned, 229 (30.29%) were graded *Excellent*, and 228 (30.16%) graded *Very Good*. 88 (11.64%) were graded *Good*, 34 (4.50%) *Average* and 5 (0.66%) *Below Average*. 172 (22.75%) were left blank, with no decision or judged to be not applicable (for example if there was no support technology for a particular presentation.) It is clear that the conference was a success, with over 60% being voted *Excellent* or *Very Good*. If the boxes left blank are subtracted from the total the results are even more spectacular: the total number of boxes completed being 584. This gives 39.21% *Excellent*, 39.04% *Very Good*, 15.07% *Good*, 5.82% *Average* and .86% *Below Average*, meaning that a total of 93.32% were voted good or above, of which 78.25% were very good or above. These are really excellent percentages, especially coming from such an informed and articulate audience.

### **Speakers:**

All the speakers had mostly praise for the content of their presentations, and it seems to have been generally recognised that the keynote presentation (David Lammy) would be limited to the party line to a certain extent. Some comments include: [Alan Tuckett (Informal Adult Learning) 'interesting national context for I.A.L.']; Mark Walton (Every Action Counts) 'Good points, thoughtfully made', 'Lots to think about'. Professor Ali-Khan (Sustainability Challenge) scored most highly for the content of her presentation – 'Incisive summary of the real challenge facing us', 'many useful points', although one comment was 'thought-provoking but a lot of negativity'. Sophie Duncan (Media-linked Partnerships) for the BBC had very high marks and many enthusiastic comments for content, delivery *and* support technology 'Good example of community partnerships', 'relevant and interesting', 'optimistic ... practical participation', 'thoroughly enjoyable'. 'good use of visual aids'; Peter Templeton WEA, (Building Environmental Aspects into programmes) 'Thought provoking look back and forward', and Joy Greasley, NWFI (Identifying opportunities for new environmental learning) had an

enthusiastic response for 'excellent working examples of community action ... inspiring and informative', 'fantastic – sensible, true, encouraging, great message ...']

**Chairing and links:** 'Very effective chairing' 'A brilliant linking exercise', 'Well run and audible'.

**Groupwork:** Although these were quite highly marked, there were few comments, although in the general comments the networking of the groups was considered most useful by several people. Different tables obviously had different opinions.

**Parts of conference found most useful:**

A wide-ranging number of comments, including 'government viewpoint on this subject as elucidated by David Lammy'; various individual presentations, the BBC and WI inputs being found particularly well presented. Networking, as in many conferences, found useful. One question: 'Why can the WI access funding to teach when those in adult ed are constrained by quality & other issues? ..' Some future work inspired: 'possible option to liaise with BBC and WI locally', 'Speakers triggering thoughts about my organisation's delivery.'

**What do you expect to take from this event to your own work that would aid those developments?:**

Several interesting comments here, with several energised to take ideas forward: 'Support a campaign for successor to Every Action Counts,' 'Possibility to co-ordinate island (of Man) Adult Learning re environment', 'Will respond on behalf of my organisation to the DIUS consultation', 'will inform consultation process', 'will look for volunteers', etc.

***Pre-conference material and preparation, programme construction and content:***

All comments favourable. Particular praise for time-keeping and time left for discussion ('wide-ranging timetable admirably kept to', 'well organised and well paced'. Of all the analyses this analyst has done, this conference, to my mind justifiably, is the one that has had the most favourable comment on timekeeping.

The evaluations for the ECA organisation of the conference were as high as usual, with a majority of evaluations at (5) and (4). Someone wished that the caterers had had a separate entrance for their trolley, but even so there were no 'Below Average' evaluations, and only 3 'Average'.

**General Comments**

Many thanked the ECA for, in one comment 'a very thought-provoking event', and 'the hard work that had gone into organising it'. 'Food and venue excellent', 'Very useful in sharing expertise on sustainability issues,' 'Hope we can recruit more ECA members as a result.' More visual aids would have been welcomed

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by one comment, although with so many short and varied presentations this was not repeated by anyone else. The final comment on one evaluation received should be, I think, a succinct way of demonstrating the result which the ECA had been hoping for: 'Informative – will take action.'

**Hazel Dunn**

**June 2008**