

European Agenda for Adult Learning: UK National Coordinator work programme 2015/17

England Impact Forum responses to the OECD report, *Building Skills for All: A Review of England. Policy insights from the survey of adult skills*

1. Background

In January 2016, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published its report, *Building Skills for All: A review of England Policy insights from the survey of adult skills*.¹

This report had been trailed by OECD, at the summative conference of the UK's contribution to the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL) in September 2015.

Skills planning and funding in the UK is devolved to the four administrations: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. However it is also worth noting that there are moves to devolve further within in England, linking skills planning, commissioning and delivery to local economic development and well-being.

The focus of the OECD report was on an analysis of data relating to England only, with source data being drawn from OECD's *Survey of Adult Skills*, which was published in 2013.² This document provided comparative analysis of data drawn from across 23 participating countries.

Of the UK administrations, only England and Northern Ireland invested in the survey. When the 2013 report was published it showed that England faced some challenges, some of which were shared by other developed countries, and others, which were unique or atypical.

The purpose of the 2016 report is to present the England-specific data in a single report, assess the implications of the identified challenges and recommend prioritised actions that are required to address these.

2. The England Impact Forum

The Forum was established in 2014 as part of the UK work programme for the EAAL. There are impact forums in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/building-skills-for-all-review-of-england.pdf>

² <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/>

purpose of the England forum is to discuss research and development activities related to the UK's programme of work and contextualise them for England. During the current UK work programme, the Forum will feed into the development of a 'State of the Nations' report on the impact of adult learning to be published in September 2017.

Membership of the Forum includes:

- Representatives of local and national policy makers in England
- Representatives from adult learning providers including colleges, local authorities, as well as private and third sector bodies
- Representatives of infrastructure bodies, or agencies in health or regeneration bodies with an interest in adult learning
- Employers and trades unions with an interest in the EAAL and adult learning policy
- Support agencies and curriculum specialist agencies in adult learning
- Universities and think-tanks researching in the field of adult learning
- EAAL project leads will be invited to attend and present their findings
- Representative of Learning & Work Institute or the programme's Research Group

The Forum had previously discussed the full *Survey of Adult Skills (2013)* so decided that the OECD report (2016) should be discussed as highly relevant to its terms of reference. Basic or essential skills, particularly contextualised approaches such as those promoted and piloted by the Citizens' Curriculum, are a key aspect of the UK EAAL National Coordinator programme.

OECD authors of the report were invited to attend the Forum but were unable to do so. A summary presentation (based on OECD material) was circulated prior to the meeting of the Impact Forum in February 2016. Dr. Janine Eldred, Senior Research Fellow, Learning and Work Institute summarised some of the key elements and recommendations of the report. This set the scene for Impact Forum members to discuss their responses to the report in small groups and prepare flipcharts with their feedback. The small groups were asked to discuss the key questions:

1. What are our responses to the headline findings?
2. What are our responses to the recommendations?
3. What would our priorities be for the development of literacy and numeracy (English and Maths) in England?
4. What evidence can we draw upon to support our priorities?

3. Feedback from the England Impact Forum discussion

3.1. What are our responses to the headline findings?

3.1.1 Is there anything new here?

Impact Forum members felt that there was a lot of information in the report which was familiar; this included such aspects as the impact of parental involvement on children's and young people's achievements; the diversity of adults who need support and the challenges of how to adopt the most effective teaching and learning approaches. The comparative statistics were probably some of the most interesting insights. There was felt to be, already, a great deal of collective insight and knowledge, amongst both research communities and practitioners, about levels of need and what works to help adults to develop the English and Maths which seem most relevant to their lives.

3.1.2 Is there a strong enough focus on valuing, training and developing the English and Maths teaching and learning workforce?

There were concerns that reductions in the amount and availability of continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers and assistants in the English and Maths sectors were not emphasised. Additionally, depressed teachers' pay and conditions, when compared with highly successful countries, was possibly a contributing factor, when trying to attract the most able and competent teachers. Forum members would have welcomed an analysis of how successful countries manage the Initial Teacher Training, CPD and pay-conditions systems of their workforce in this curriculum area.

3.1.3 Should there be even greater emphasis on intergenerational approaches?

The Forum welcomed the endorsement of evidence around the intergenerational impact of poor literacy and numeracy skills, recognising that parents with under-developed skills cannot support their children. This has been identified over many years of research.³ There was support for the recommendation of involving parents much more in early years' education, which should be implemented through more family learning programmes. This approach has long been evidenced and advocated to help support children's learning as well as develop adults' skills and therefore impact upon the intergenerational difficulties. In spite of the compelling

³ Bynner, J and Parsons, S, 2014: *The Impact of Adult Literacy and Numeracy*, research based on the 1970 British Cohort Study, London, Centre for Longitudinal Studies

data from the NIACE Inquiry into Family Learning⁴, this approach has not been given a high policy priority in recent years in the UK. However, the forum felt that, given its importance and proven impact, the recommendation could have been given greater prominence.

3.1.4 Was the diversity of contextualised approaches to basic skills given enough emphasis?

Members of the Forum felt that the presentation of contextualised basic skills as a subset of another recommendation was to underestimate its importance. Competence in basic skills is about being able to relate those skills to the diverse capabilities required to get on at work, at home, and in the community. The Forum supported the necessity to include literacy and numeracy in apprenticeship and traineeship programmes but were concerned about a lack of skills amongst the English and Maths teaching workforce and variable quality of teaching and learning. Literacy and numeracy are used in life-wide and lifelong situations and so opportunities for development and learning should reflect that diversity of contexts and settings. The work of the Citizens' Curriculum⁵, is evidencing how literacy and numeracy can be developed using holistic, contextualised approaches in a wide number of settings including, for example, housing, homelessness, health, financial management, drug and alcohol recovery and community development. Many of these contexts are where we find many people, who, for diverse reasons, benefited least from initial education. They often face challenges and difficulties in adult life which, research tells us, are closely linked with difficulties with literacy and numeracy. Evidence from work in these contexts, including the Citizens' Curriculum, highlights the importance of also developing high quality, so called, 'soft' skills, demanded, not only for employment, but for navigating and negotiating throughout life.

3.1.5 Is it possible to reform skills provision without reforming the ways people access learning (through information, advice, guidance, support, sign-posting and brokering)?

Forum members acknowledged that more could and should be done to offer information, assessment and guidance at the point of transitions from school to Further Education, Apprenticeships and Higher Education. This should be supported with the appropriate, relevant literacy and numeracy so that individuals can benefit most effectively from their progression. Similarly, adults returning to learning following job-loss, periods of long-term unemployment, require qualified support with

⁴ NIACE, 2013: *The Inquiry into Family Learning in England and Wales*, Leicester, NIACE

⁵ www.learningandwork.org.uk/our-work/life-and-.../citizens-curriculum

relevant information, advice and guidance. This seemed a significant gap in the report.

3.1.6 Is it possible to stop using qualifications as a proxy for skills?

In the general discussion generated by the Forum, great concerns were expressed about the instrumental approaches to the development of literacy and numeracy amongst the adult population, which sees these skills linked only to employment, work and economic impact. Qualifications are often used as a proxy for identifying the skills that have developed but the forum believed that the gap between levels of competence and the qualifications gained, should have been more highly emphasised. There was a strong feeling that this method of accountability is flawed and there is plenty of practitioner (and employer) anecdotal evidence to support this. Further systematic research into successful alternatives to qualifications, as proxies for skills and knowledge, should be explored, including, for example, entrepreneurship, employability, civic responsibilities and citizenship.

3.2 What are our responses to the recommendations?

3.2.1 Do the recommendations match the findings?

The Forum felt that the recommendations were not those that they would have proposed, given the evidence presented, alongside their practitioner and research experience. There was a strong feeling that initial education alone cannot address the challenges, which the report identified. It was believed to be naïve to think that only initial education can meet the ever-changing demands of living and longer years of working, in times of rapid technological, economic and social development. This was felt to be particularly important in the context of increased geographical mobility and the demands of responding to enforced migration and the needs of diverse migrant and refugee communities.

Put simply, schools cannot have all the answers. There must be a more holistic approach involving all players in a policy of Lifelong Learning.

Members wondered how the recommendation of the “the priority of priorities” on initial education had been reached. Previous evidence in *Learning Through Life*⁶ and other publications has indicated that a policy response based on addressing the “flow” (or new entrants to the labour market) over the “stock’ of those already in it, is an inefficient use of resources. Some concerns were expressed that literacy, numeracy and technical skills are embedded in schools’ systems but generally lose

⁶ www.learningandwork.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry/.../IFLL-summary...

priority in FE, HE or employment. Teaching and learning approaches in sectors other than schools, should be examined and key success factors identified so that transitions from school to work or to further formal learning, unemployment to employment, or changes in employment are supported. Each of these transition points demands an appropriate structure, and staff with the necessary professional competences and qualifications.

3.2.2 Are the recommendations sensitive enough to the devolution agenda?

Whilst recognising the timescale within which the OECD report was compiled, Forum members were keen to stress that although hitherto the funding system for adult basic skills in England has not supported the most effective ways of teaching and learning, policies were changing. With moves to devolve decision-making in England, members felt that there could be a greater focus on the evidence of 'what works' as opposed to simply continuing to support and fund qualifications.

As suggested above, England has, for many years, used qualifications as a proxy for skill levels, as a way to link funding of provision in adult basic skills and assess outcomes. However, the development and piloting of such initiatives as the Citizens' Curriculum and What Employers Want,⁷ in developing employability skills amongst young people, indicate how relevance, links to 'softer skills' and application to context are highly valued and cannot always be evidenced through qualifications.

With greater devolution, centralised approaches to investment in skills for life and work will be more heavily scrutinised and future emphasis could be on impact rather than certification.

3.3 Priority recommendations and actions from the England Impact Forum

3.3.1 Learn from what works elsewhere

We should use research to identify what other countries do that helps their schools and adults to achieve more successfully. The evidence should be used to inform the development of teachers, providers, curricula and accreditation.

Action:

OECD data and other international comparative studies (see for example, the work of the British Association of International and Comparative Education

⁷ www.learningandwork.org.uk/our.../what-employers-want-young-peopl...

www.baice.ac.uk) should be examined and summarised by Learning and Work Institute to identify the key success factors which help to inform systems and approaches in both compulsory and post-compulsory learning in other countries. Learning and Work Institute should share the insights widely amongst policy makers, providers and practitioners in the UK and across Europe.

3.3.2 Engage education leaders in the debate

Education leaders in both the schools and post-compulsory sectors should be made aware of the evidence of need and what works.

Actions:

- a) Advocacy organisations such as Learning and Work Institute, the Reading Agency and the Literacy Trust should raise awareness amongst the public, practitioners and providers, of the challenges identified by the OECD report.
- b) Advocacy and research organisations should work with the Department for Education and The Education and Training Foundation, to acknowledge the OECD data and analysis for England, to publicly recognise the challenges and help to inform and shape future priorities in all education sectors.

3.3.3 Integrate the learning process with other forms of support

Guidance opportunities should be offered at transition stages from school to FE, Apprenticeships and HE, which take into account literacy and numeracy achievements and developmental needs. Literacy and numeracy support should be integrated in all post-compulsory programmes, including HE, where individuals may present strong skills in other areas but less so in literacy and numeracy.

Actions:

- a) Forums such as the Association of Colleges, the Local Government Association (LGA) and forum for local providers (such as LEAFEA and HOLEX) should bring together careers guidance organisations, local authorities, Academy Trusts, schools, Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges representatives to explore, identify and implement assessment, information, guidance and support processes to ensure continuity at transition stages with a focus on English and Maths competence and achievement.
- b) HE and FE forums should collaborate more in identifying the best match for skills and aspirations, including offering additional learning alongside vocational and academic programmes. There is evidence that this kind of support can be highly

effective for international students who can out-perform their peers. It should be available for all students.

- c) Learning and Work Institute and its partner organisations, should explore and represent the evidence of the effectiveness of embedded and integrated approaches to teaching and learning English and Maths, such as the Citizens' Curriculum. This should inform work-force development programmes for both Initial Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development.

3.3.4 Look at family learning in the light of the report

Family learning should be a higher policy priority and the promotion of years of experience, knowledge and understanding shared widely and used to support training of both school and adult educators.

Actions:

- a) Learning and Work Institute and its partners should make strong representation to the Department for Education, using summaries of the impact of Family Learning, alongside the evidence of longitudinal studies and the OECD reports, to create a Family Learning 'deal' with nurseries and infant schools.
- b) Drawing on the evidence in a), a programme of CPD should be organised by DfE to equip staff in both compulsory and post-compulsory settings to successfully offer Family Learning programmes.

3.3.5 Don't forget devolution!

Regional and local networks, including the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), should be made aware of the need to develop literacy and numeracy as well as what works in teaching and learning. Integrating the development of these skills with work-place learning, apprenticeships, community development, health, housing and employment policies and practices will provide the diversity of platforms required to meet diversity of need.

Actions:

- a) Strong advocacy and representation should be made by LGA with local authorities and educational representatives on LEPs and City Region Boards to inform them of the challenges presented by the OECD report as well as some of the solutions identified.

b) LEPs and City Region Boards should advocate the vital importance of English and Maths, their priorities for review and development and offer their support through forums or conferences.

c) LEPS and City Region boards should prioritise CPD, for all teachers of English and Maths, of integrated and embedded approaches to teaching and learning. This should be co-funded with UK government departments (such as DfE and DWP.)

3.3.6 Don't forget the workplace!

Integration of literacy and numeracy in apprenticeships and traineeships should be reviewed in order to identify the most effective ways of supporting both young people and adults in their training.

Actions:

a) Linked with the devolution agenda, trades unions, employers' forums and City Region Boards should work co-operatively to communicate the benefits to employees as well as business and commerce, of investment in work-related English and Maths (as part of the STEM agenda).

b) Such networks and consortia should work with research and development organisations to inform and provide continuing learning opportunities for apprentices, trainees and employees.

c) Work-place trainers and HR staff should be supported with CPD in effective practices and approaches to integrated work-place English and Maths.

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Feedback

The England Impact Forum seeks feedback on this paper and the matters we raise. Please contact the independent chair, Mark Ravenhall via markravenhall@sky.com