

WP7: Impact monitoring report

2017-19

1. Introduction

This report summarises impacts achieved in key areas by the four national Impact Forums established in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales under Work Package 7 of the EAAL 2017-19 Programme.¹ It draws on the following material:

- Observational evidence collected at the meetings of the Impact Forums by representatives of Learning & Work Institute as EAAL National Coordinator, attending in a monitoring capacity.
- Impacts reported at the end of the Programme by the Chairs of each Impact Forum.

Established in 2014, Impact Forums are independent stakeholder meetings which discuss research and development activities related to the UK's programme of work and contextualise them for each UK nation and report back formally to the UK National Coordinator each quarter. The Impact Forums are seen as platforms for: sharing experience, insight and practice; research evidence; discussion and debate; consultation, coordinated development activities, advocacy and change. They help to offer responses to policy development and inform practice, supported by researched evidence

Six quarterly Impact Forums were delivered in each nation during the course of the current Programme. No set model was prescribed for the Impact Forums, leaving each Chair free to determine the most appropriate approach to be taken. Both the England and Northern Ireland Impact Forums operated with core membership and invited additional participants with specialist interests to attend individual meetings depending on the topics for discussion. In contrast, the Wales Impact Forum did not have a core membership and each meeting was convened as a discrete thematic workshop or seminar. In Scotland, the approach was to link the work of the EAAL with the development of a new adult learning strategy. In total, the Forums engaged representatives of over 300 organisations across the UK.

Each Forum determined the scope and focus of its own activity, within a broad framework of expectations set out in the Programme's bid. This specified the following objectives:

- Sharing existing research, including identifying and disseminating regional and local case studies.

¹ The Impact Forums contributed to the Programme's Engagement and Support theme.

- Promoting evidence-based approaches to policy development and formulation across the UK
- Regularly disseminating evidence to networks from Work Packages 2-6.

2. Types of impact observed

Given that each Forum determined its own approaches and outcomes, a common method of assessing impact was used. This was based on the impact criteria in the European Agenda final report.

2.1 Increased participation of low-skilled / low-qualified adults in learning.

UK Impact Forums were not expected directly to increase participation in learning in a quantitative sense. Rather, evidence was sought on the ways that, through their activities, they have strengthened, promoted and disseminated evidence on effective approaches to engaging more adults in learning who had low levels of skills and qualifications, to influence the strategic and operational actions of partners responsible for the funding, planning and delivery of learning opportunities.

Evidence indicates that all the Forums played a key role in supporting the research and development activities being delivered through other Work Packages with a focus on increasing the participation of low-skilled adults in learning. In relation to the research and development projects for the Citizens' Curriculum (WP2) and in-work progression (WPs 4 and 5) they provided a mechanism for:

- engaging stakeholders;
- identifying in-scope material for literature review;
- identifying and recruiting development project partners and case study sites;
- sharing and testing draft outputs.

Work Package leads were invited to provide inputs into Forum meetings, and Chairs supported follow-up engagement with relevant stakeholders. For example, the Northern Ireland Forum provided on-going support to WP5 with the mapping of programmes in Northern Ireland to support in-work progression for excluded groups.

In Wales, the Forum supported the work of the special development project to support progression pathways for adults in low-skilled jobs in the retail sector. The research for this project included direct engagement with adults in low-skilled work via employee focus groups.

Beyond the EAAL Work Packages, the Forums provided a means for sharing new evidence from wider research and development programmes and projects. For example, the England Forum disseminated the evaluation findings of a two-year national research programme on effective approaches to promoting improved mental

wellbeing through adult learning for adults with mild to moderate mental health conditions.

2.2 Increased involvement of stakeholders at national, regional and local level

Stakeholder engagement was at the core of the Impact Forums' work. Over the reporting period, there was evidence of the increased involvement of stakeholders of different kinds.

- All the Forums strengthened their engagement with policymakers. Among the devolved nations, this was evident in enhanced links to national policymakers in education and other departments. For example, in Scotland, links were strengthened with several Scottish Government departments and the Forum secured ministerial involvement in considering the impact of adult learning. In Northern Ireland the Forum saw increased attendance from departmental officials in education, health and communities. In England, the focus was on working with regional stakeholders in devolution areas, such as Greater London Authority.
- Learning providers were a key stakeholder group with which all Forums reported increasing the range and quality of their interactions across the post-16 sector, including higher education, further education and adult community learning. For example, all three of Northern Ireland's universities took part in the final meeting, and the number of FE colleges engaged also increased. In England, the Forum's reach into the adult community learning sector was deepened with the on-going involvement of the Chair and Vice-Chair of the forum for heads of local authority adult learning services (LEAFEA), and through targeted work on residential colleges.
- Enhanced engagement with stakeholders with special interests was particularly evident in relation to Family Learning. For example, in England the final meeting of the programme was delivered jointly with the National Family Learning Forum, and in Wales, the Forum co-ordinated a meeting of Family Learning providers and practitioners. Both these events took place to disseminate the findings of the research undertaken for WP3 (the impact of Family Learning). Linking with these networks helped to extend the Forums' reach into the Third Sector.

2.3 Increased involvement of the broader socio-economic area including social partners and individual employers

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The Forums sought to strengthen links with stakeholders in all adult education contexts, including the workplace. With evidence of growing in-work poverty and declining social mobility in the UK, and a well-established link between educational disadvantage and poor employment outcomes, there was a particular focus on how engaging Trades Unions and employers could help to address the learning needs of adults in low-paid, low-skilled work.

Forums reported increased involvement of Trades Unions through various activities. For example:

- In Wales, the development project on progression for workers in low-skilled retail jobs was delivered in partnerships with the GMB Trade Union and Wales Trades Union Congress.
- The Wales Forum hosted a seminar on the topic of *The Future of Work in Wales* which included input from TUC.
- The Northern Ireland Forum continued its relationships in workplace learning with ICTU and NIPSA, and developed a new link to the Trade Union, UNITE.

Links with employers were developed through the involvement in the Forums of a number of business networks. Activity included:

- The engagement of Business in the Community by the Northern Ireland Forum.
- The involvement of employers via Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses in the consultation led by the Scotland Forum on the new adult learning strategy.

2.4 Policy reforms, action plans and strategies

Strengthening the evidence base for policy, strategy and planning was a key purpose of the Forums. Messages and insights from research and practice on the impact of adult learning were disseminated through Forum members to inform national, local and organisational developments.

The Forums supported the development of policies, strategies and action plans in a range of ways and at different levels. The following examples illustrate the breadth and diversity of this work.

- Work was undertaken to influence emerging national learning and skills strategies. In Scotland, the work of the Impact Forum led to the charring organisation - Scotland's Impact Forum – leading the stakeholder consultation on the need for a new national adult learning strategy.

- Northern Ireland’s Forum met with the Director of Skills at the Department of Education and shared the WP5 report on strengthening in-work progression routes for adults in low-paid work, as part of the Department’s consultation on a new skills strategy. Also in Northern Ireland, the findings of *Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: the impact of adult learning across the UK*, were mapped to the draft Programme for Government in preparation for policy advocacy when the devolved government at Stormont is restored.
- The England Forum focused on influencing emerging arrangements for the funding and planning of adult learning and skills in the local devolution areas. In particular, the Forum provided on-going support to work to develop a robust approach to capturing and reporting the outcomes of adult education. In particular, close working with the LEAFEA network resulted in the involvement of other Forum members in the advisory group for a project to develop a new outcomes framework to be piloted by local authority adult learning services in 2020.
- All the Forums were involved in the development and dissemination of the new framework for adult learning workforce development that was produced through WP6. This work stressed the need for workforce development to be embedded in policies and strategies at all levels, to support effective delivery. In Wales, this activity overlapped with and supported wider work by the Welsh Government to create more coherent progression pathways for professionals across the post-16 sector.

2.5 Transnational co-operation resulting in knowledge transfer and exchange of good practice

The Forums developed productive transnational links through a range of activities.

- Cross-border links to related work in Ireland were developed by the Northern Ireland Forum. The Impact Forum Chair is a member of the advisory group for EAAL Ireland (IE) where he gave inputs there on the work of the Northern Ireland Forum and the report *Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: the impact of adult learning across the UK*. Links to AONTAS, the IE National Coordinator, were strengthened through a joint conference in October 2018 which led to the establishment of NALAB.
- Findings and models from the ENLIVEN Horizon 2020 research project were disseminated to the England Forum. The input shared evidence on effective approaches to the design and delivery of adult learning.
- Postings, including author blogs, on EPAL as part of the dissemination activity for WP6.

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3. Key messages

3.1 Impact Forums enable greater awareness of devolved policies and practice

The Impact Forums enabled more closely aligned five nations work with the Republic of Ireland over sharing good practice across borders. This was seen as particularly important at the time of discussions about the UK's future role in Europe.

Influential reports from UK impact forums helped support better regional policy development and practice. There was a great deal of interest in devolved administrations in the progress of English devolution of adult education funding to city-regions, and possible lessons learned in working across policy 'silos'. In England, the Greater London *Skills for Londoners* strategy and subsequent policy development was influenced by Impact Forum work on the outcome measurement.

In Northern Ireland, as a follow up to our publications, *Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise: the impact of adult learning across the UK* (2017); *Learning Work and Health* (2018), there were discussions with policymakers on how it links with the Executive's *Programme for Government (PfG)*. Research is underway with Stormont Research Department to cross reference *Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise* to the PfG with the civil servants leading PfG roll-out.

In Scotland, the skills minister announced the development of a new policy for adult learning. A review was announced of funding arrangements for the whole non-formal sector with a view to moving funding from some sectors to adult learning. The main driver was a demographic drop in the numbers of young people in Scotland, which shifted focus away from provision young people to lifelong learning. The Scotland Forum held an impact event at the Scottish Parliament, involving nine award finalists making presentations to politicians, as well as inputting to initial discussions on the future of ESF in Scotland post-Brexit.

In Wales, Government made a commitment (or a 'right' to) to lifelong learning. L&W, partly through the Impact Forum events, worked with Welsh Government to shape what this will look like, and planning is underway for a conference. Inputs included learning from Estonia about how a small country can develop lifelong learning, and there is an opportunity for the impact forum to contribute.

3.2 Impact Forums allow research and practice examples to be shared across the UK

One of the aims of the Impact Forums is to contextualise UK and international research and practice for devolved jurisdictions. Other EAAL work packages were regularly presented to Impact Forums dependent on their own agendas and policy contexts.

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In Wales, the development project on progression for workers in low-skilled retail jobs found that the Welsh retail sector is very diverse with regards to workforce skills and qualifications. Low paid workers in Wales are unprepared for the disruption that is going to be caused by automation. The project identified an urgent unmet need for digital skills and linked with the Union Learning Fund to see how existing materials and support could be adapted.

The exploration of the needs of the learning and skills workforce as written up in *Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: implications for the adult learning workforce* (2019), was enabled by taking interim findings to each Impact Forum. This provided a ready-made focus group of researchers and practitioners who were already familiar with the project.

3.3 Impact Forums work more effectively when they link to emerging policy development

The experience from Scotland and Northern Ireland highlights the importance of timing in the delivery of impact forums. The development of a new adult learning strategy in Scotland meant the Forum provided an important space for consultation with the adult education community. There was a willingness to engage with research from others part of the UK and Europe, such as via the Commission's 2019 Synthesis Report of adult education policies and practice. As the chair of the England Impact Forum was a co-editor of this publication, he was able to feed in its findings to forums in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, the suspension of the Assembly created a space for debate on adult learning, but not the means to influence policy change. The commissioning of a government review linked to the work of the Forum (*Healthy, Wealthy and Wise*) gave a place at the table for forum members during the OECD Skills Review in late 2019. Work with the National Coordinator for the Republic of Ireland (IE) enables reciprocal membership across borders and ultimately the creation of the 5 nations collaboration launched at the summative conference of the IE National Coordinator in November 2019.

In Northern Ireland and Wales, we saw the value of links with larger scale conferences, where forums were held in the midst of the event. This enabled a wider awareness and potential reach for the forum's work. At a time of diminishing resources, it was also seen as a more efficient use for participants.

In England, where there is a number of forums and 'stakeholder groups' funded by the government, it was found useful to link to the work of those groups: the local authority adults education forum (LEAFEA) and the National Family Learning

Forums. The England Impact Forum could build on these links in taking the work forward.

4. Taking the work forward

The Impact Forums have demonstrated the value of regularly bringing together adult education stakeholders from across sectors for facilitated consideration of current policy, research and practice. They have enabled the dissemination and cross-fertilisation of ideas and identification of areas for shared action.

It is therefore intended that the four Impact Forums will continue to meet at least three times a year in each devolved region of the UK. To strengthen the outreach, stakeholder engagement and dissemination aspects of the Forums' work, they will extend their reach through monthly progress blogs for EPALE UK.

The Forums will also be responsible for overseeing city-region projects under Work Package 3 and contributing to the final publication. It is believed that providing these common strands of development work for all the Forums to engage with will help to bring greater coherence and a shared sense of purpose across the piece, while still allowing each Forum to adopt different and distinctive approaches to suit their needs and contexts.

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