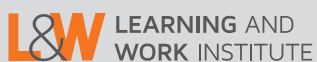


Towards a Culture of Lifelong Learning in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland Impact Forum
on Adult Learning





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4th Floor Arnhem House, 31 Waterloo Way, Leicester LE1 6LP

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www.learningandwork.org.uk

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About Learning and Work Institute

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Northern Ireland Impact Forum on Adult Learning

The NI Impact Forum was established in 2014 and managed by the Forum for Adult Learning NI (FALNI). It was one of four national Impact Forums set up by the Learning and Work Institute under the UK's EAAL Programme which ran until the end of 2021.

The Forum has met 3-4 times a year to explore issues of common concern and learn of practice and research from across the UK. It sought to identify ways to improve recognition and support of adult learning's (potential) impact on a wide range of core governmental agendas – through direct engagement, lobbying and the production of evidence

It had representatives from all the main statutory providers, voluntary and community sector organisations, awarding bodies, funders, trade unions, local councils and departmental officials. This work will now be continued by FALNI: <https://falni.org/>

As well as its UK partners, the Forum works with AONTAS, the voice of adult learning in the Republic of Ireland.

Acknowledgments

Huge thanks to the following for their time and contributions to the working groups that led to the presentations at our October webinar and to this report:

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We are also grateful to those who made inputs to our webinars this year: Professor Ellen Boeren (university of Glasgow), Fiona Aldridge (Learning and Work Institute), Brian Doran (SRC), Seamus McAleavey (NICVA), Professor John Holford (University of Nottingham) and Roger Arneil (dept. for the Economy).



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Foreword

“Learning is seen as an attractive, everyday activity, easily accessed and enjoyed by people of all ages and backgrounds, enhancing their lives, raising their aspirations and building learning communities.”

This statement is taken from a draft vision for lifelong learning in Northern Ireland contained in this report, which is the result of a challenge which we in FALNI set ourselves - to define what we mean by a culture of lifelong learning.

This challenge was prompted by the consultation launched by the Department for the Economy on its proposed new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland and the report which it had earlier commissioned from OECD. The OECD report recommended a more strategic approach to adult education, long advocated by FALNI, and the creation of a culture of lifelong learning to underpin the implementation of the Skills Strategy. This inevitably raised questions such as: What do we mean by such a culture? What are its characteristics? What would it look like in practice? Who would be responsible for it?

Because of FALNI's unique range of membership, stretching across the statutory, community and voluntary sectors and consisting of individuals and organisations steeped in the delivery and support of adult learning, we felt that we had an opportunity and, indeed a responsibility, to

attempt to answer these questions and take a lead in the debate around such a key issue.

We therefore wish to offer this report as a contribution to the success of the Skills Strategy and hope to engage further with the Department for the Economy to this end. However, we would also want to widen the debate to include discussion on how the creation of a genuine culture of lifelong learning could enhance and support the improvement of lives across a wide range of areas. As the report says, we will be arguing that “learning should sit at the core of the Programme for Government and be a golden thread running throughout all policy.”

I would like to thank all the FALNI members and supporters who gave their time so willingly to contribute to the various webinars and working groups which led to this report. I now look forward to some serious and valuable engagement with the important ideas and conclusions contained within it.

Trevor Neilands
Chair of the Northern Ireland Impact Forum



Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning in Northern Ireland

Recognition of the importance of lifelong learning is having an international revival after many years where governments failed to recognise its true potential for economic and societal growth and wellbeing. With the rapid and constant technological advancement of the worlds of work, learning and living, the skills and knowledge needed to navigate and make the most of the opportunities offered now need to be continually updated. The completion of statutory education, or the attainment of a degree in one's early twenties, will no longer suffice to secure and maintain employment, or meet the changing job market. This recognition is leading to a revitalisation of lifelong learning, but it is critical that the drive of the economic imperative does not lead to a narrowing of the true definition and practice of lifelong learning.¹

Countries across the globe are researching needs and formulating plans for the expansion of lifelong learning (as will be referenced later in this report). The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) has published a new report setting out a future-focused vision of education and calling for a major shift towards a culture of lifelong learning by 2050.

Embracing a culture of lifelong learning², UIL's contribution to the UNESCO International Commission on the Futures of Education, argues that creating a global culture of lifelong learning will be key to addressing the current challenges faced by humanity, from the climate crisis to technological and demographic change, not to

mention those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the inequalities it has exacerbated.

Drawing on the input of 12 distinguished experts from different disciplines and countries, the report reflects on the potential contribution of lifelong learning, both in transforming the field of education and in creating a more sustainable, healthy and inclusive future. The report presents a compelling vision for lifelong learning and the values and principles that must underpin it. It calls on the international community to see education as something with public as well as private value, and to recognize lifelong learning as a new human right.

¹ The following comes from UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning (<https://uil.unesco.org/fileadmin/keydocuments/LifelongLearning/en/UNESCOtechNotesLLL.pdf>):

In essence, lifelong learning is rooted in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages (children, young people, adults and the elderly, girls and boys, women and men) in all life-wide contexts (family, school, community, workplace and so on) and through a variety of modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) which together meet a wide range of learning needs and demands. Education systems which promote lifelong learning adopt a holistic and sector-wide approach involving all subsectors and levels to ensure the provision of learning opportunities for all individuals.

² UNESCO ILL (2020), Embracing a Culture of Lifelong Learning, UNESCO Hamburg



Looking to the future, the report sets out 10 key messages, each critical for creating a culture of lifelong learning:

1. Recognize the holistic character of lifelong learning
2. Promote transdisciplinary research and intersectoral collaboration for lifelong learning
3. Place vulnerable groups at the core of the lifelong learning agenda
4. Establish lifelong learning as a common good
5. Ensure greater and equitable access to learning technology
6. Transform schools and universities into lifelong learning institutions
7. Recognize and promote the collective dimension of learning
8. Encourage and support local lifelong learning initiatives, including learning cities
9. Re-engineer and revitalize workplace learning
10. Recognize lifelong learning as a human right.

The publication in 2020 of the **OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations**³, as a critical document to inform the creation of the next Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, was warmly welcomed by FALNI for placing the creation of a culture of lifelong learning amongst its key recommendations. This recommendation was subsequently included in the 2021 consultation on the strategy, where three key objectives are identified:

- starting a culture of Lifelong Learning early in life
- increasing adults' motivation to learn
- removing barriers for individuals and employers to adult learning opportunities.

The consultation proposes the development of a new lifelong learning project and action plan.

In this context FALNI decided that as the focus of its 2021 EAAL Impact Forum events, it would take up the challenge of stimulating debate on what creating a culture of lifelong learning in Northern Ireland might involve. As a Forum which attracts participants from across the different sectors of adult learning providers, as well as other stakeholders such as awarding bodies and local government, FALNI felt itself well-placed to collate a wide range of views and interests and ultimately make these available to a wider audience and specifically to those in Government. While these views and ideas will in the first instance be offered to assist DfE in the development of its lifelong learning action plan, FALNI will also seek engagement with other departments and ultimately aim to influence the next Programme for Government, where we believe a culture of lifelong learning should centrally sit.⁴

In 2021 three webinars were organised to stimulate thinking and then share emerging thoughts and proposals.⁵

In March 2021 the Forum heard presentations from Ellen Boeren (Professor of Education, University of Glasgow) and Fiona Aldridge (Director of Policy & Research, Learning & Work Institute) and discussed the key building blocks for a culture of lifelong learning.

In June 2021 Forum participants were stimulated by a variety of recent reports. They first heard more on the Skills Strategy Consultation paper from Roger Arneill (Dept for the Economy). This was followed by presentations on the Centenary Commission Report on Adult Education (Professor John Holford, University of Nottingham), on the Northern Ireland College



3 OECD (2020), **OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland (United Kingdom): Assessment and Recommendations**, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris

4 The research carried out by the Centre for Research into the Wider Benefits of Learning at University College London (1999-2004, continuing in the Institute of Education until 2010) generated important research reports showing the effects of learning in terms of individual well-being, family dynamics and community cohesion e.g. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10003177/> <https://www.slideshare.net/ttrb/centre-for-research-on-the-wider-benefits-of-learning-a-brief-retrospective>

5 Recordings of all three webinars can be viewed via the Recent Work pages of the Forum's website <http://www.falni.org>



of the Future Report (Brian Doran, Principle of Southern Regional College) and on the Manifesto for Change (Seamus McAleavey, CEO of NICVA).

Immediately following the June webinar four working groups were established to explore core building blocks for a culture of lifelong learning in Northern Ireland. These groups attracted 30 volunteers⁶ and were active over the next three months. The groups' task was to research and

discuss findings and then prepare presentations for a webinar in the autumn.

In October 2021 the final webinar of the year featured the presentations of the working groups on Vision, Engagement, Collaboration and Resources. The work of these groups and the discussions held at the webinar form the basis of this report.

6 A list of these volunteers is given in the Acknowledgments



Towards a Vision for Lifelong Learning in Northern Ireland

Vision gives direction and purpose. It articulates ambition, encouraging us to look forward. Without vision we can become locked in maintaining a status quo that no longer serves its purpose.

Northern Ireland has been without a shared vision for lifelong learning that can unify practitioners and inspire learners. FALNI seeks to engage all relevant stakeholders in agreeing a vision that can focus efforts to build a culture of lifelong learning.

In its deliberations the Vision Working Group examined the progress that various nations have so far achieved in creating vision and strategy for lifelong and adult learning. This included the examples of Sweden and Scotland.

Sweden

The strategy for lifelong learning⁷ (adopted in 2007) is based on the individual rather than systems and institutions, and is organised to support individual learning at different stages of life. The individual's opportunities, needs, motivations and potential are the starting points for the support and structures that are needed. The strategy covers all forms of learning: formal, non-formal and informal. Education in the public education system should be provided free of charge. In addition, a generous and equitable study support system should give everyone the opportunity to study, irrespective of their background and financial resources. The strategy focuses largely on quality, goal attainment and accessibility. The following issues are mentioned:

- Quality:
 - Transitions between different levels and parts of the education system
 - Transitions between education and working life

- Dead ends in the education system
- Study and vocational guidance that responds to the needs of individuals, society and the labour market
- Accessibility - equivalence coordination:
 - Opportunity to study for everyone, irrespective of background and financial resources
 - Geographical accessibility of education and adaptation to individuals' different living conditions
 - High level of equivalence in education as regards admission, design and content
 - Validation of knowledge and experience
 - Role of working life in learning and development,

In terms of adult education, it aims to promote the development of structures for greater coordination between different actors that support learning; and secure a well-developed infrastructure with guidance, validation, accessibility and study support.

7 See <https://uil.unesco.org/i/doc/lifelong-learning/policies/sweden-the-swedish-strategy-for-lifelong-learning.pdf>



Scotland

In 2014 the Scottish Government published **Adult Learning in Scotland: a statement of ambition**⁸,

which has subsequently influenced the 2021 draft **Adult Learning Strategy for Scotland**⁹

The heart of the Ambition is the tenet that everyone in Scotland has the right to access high quality learning to meet their needs and aspirations – throughout their lives. The vision is that Scotland is not only the best place in the world to grow up in, but also the best place to learn.

There are three core principles informing the Ambition:

- Learning should be **lifelong**, beginning in the Early Years, supported by Curriculum for Excellence through Broad General Education and Senior Phase and covering the whole age span of post-compulsory education. It should take into account the specific difficulties that some adults have in accessing learning opportunities because of their age, abilities, cultural or social backgrounds.
- Adult learning should be **life-wide**. It should cover the personal, work, family and community aspects of living which gives the scope for building a wide and open curriculum and creates a learning continuum which is not restricted by vocational imperatives.
- Adult learning should be **learner-centred**. The educational process must build around the interests and motives of the learner and seek to fulfil the purposes and goals he or she sees as relevant and important.



The 2021 draft strategy (which is subtitled – Creating the conditions to empower adults and improve life chances in Scotland) offers the following vision for adult learning:

Adult learning in Scotland will develop better skilled, educated, confident and empowered people contributing to connected and inclusive communities.

There are 20 recommendations arranged under five themes:

- Expanding and extending adult learning
- Connecting the adult learning journey
- Communication
- Access and inclusion
- Workforce development

The strategy is also based on the following overarching principles: inclusion, involvement, empowerment, equity, partnership and co-ordination.

The working group took inspiration from these international examples to create a draft vision. This was shared with other Forum members

at the October webinar and is given here in a slightly revised form.

⁸ See <https://www.education.gov.scot/Documents/adult-learning-statement.pdf>

⁹ See <https://learninglinkscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Adult-Learning-Strategy-Draft-13-May-2021.pdf>



Draft Vision

In 2050 learning is seen as an attractive, everyday activity, easily accessed and enjoyed by people of all ages and backgrounds, enhancing their lives, raising their aspirations and building learning communities. It is offered in a variety of formats, levels and venues through a collaborative and co-operative network of diverse providers, all working with other stakeholders to a shared vision based on learners' needs.

Forum members identified a number of principles that should underpin the vision – many of which mirror those of the Scottish draft strategy.

- **inclusion and access** – lifelong learning needs to be open to all, from cradle to grave, offering opportunities to learn informally and formally, through a variety of media, and recognising the importance of local, as well as centralised provision. Barriers such as finance and caring responsibilities need to be removed.
- **shared responsibility** – lifelong learning should not be the responsibility of one or two Government departments, but should be at the core of the Programme for Government because of its capacity to enable all core objectives. Similarly, responsibility for provision should be shared across the sectors, through a collective vision and collaborative relationships.
- **sustainability** – commitment and resourcing need to be long-term so that there is a secure and vibrant infrastructure to support learning opportunities
- **learner centred** – policy and practice should be built around learner needs and learners should be empowered to inform policy makers and providers
- **excitement** – learning should be something people want to do, rather than feel they have to do or are told to do. The full range of positive benefits should be promoted.

What would Northern Ireland look like if this vision is achieved?

- Northern Ireland would be recognised as a leading learning region
- Learning would be valued by our society
- Learning would sit at the core of the Programme for Government and be a golden thread running throughout all policy
- Northern Ireland would have a greater talent pool for innovation, creativity and business
- Business productivity would improve with greater employee access to training and personal development opportunities
- Providers across the sectors would work collaboratively to ensure learners have easy access to appropriate learning provision and progression routes
- Learning opportunities would be visible across everyday life
- Learning would be celebrated locally and regionally
- People's aspirations for themselves, their families and their communities would be boundless
- Expenditure on mental health and social care would have fallen
- Engaging in learning would be seen as the norm.

To enable this vision to be realised we will have to examine how to excite and engage people in learning, especially those who are most disillusioned; we need to build greater collaboration amongst policy-makers, funders and providers; and we need to ensure that there are sufficient resources to facilitate the changes and growth that will be required.



Increasing Engagement in Learning

The second Forum working group looked at the current participation rates for adults in Northern Ireland and how we might increase engagement.

Participation Rates

Recent statistics reported by the OECD¹⁰ and the Learning & Work Institute¹¹ show that Northern Ireland (NI) falls significantly behind other regions of the UK and other neighbouring countries, such as the Republic of Ireland (ROI), in terms of adult participation in learning.

According to the OECD report, Labour Force Survey results show Northern Ireland's uptake of learning trailing Ireland and the UK as a whole – figures of 10.9%, 12.6% and 14.8% respectively. The lower participation rates are largely amongst male, older and lower-educated individuals. Approximately 46% of adults in NI were found not to be interested in taking up learning, compared to 37% in England and 36% in Ireland.

The Learning and Work (L&W) participation in adult learning survey for 2020 showed only 27% of people in NI had taken up some form of learning in the period since the first lockdown – compared to Wales (38%), Scotland (39%) and England (44%).

The 2021 survey from L&W shows a remarkable leap in figures for Northern Ireland, increasing to 40%, a much higher growth than in the other UK nations. L&W do point out that contrasts with previous years need some caution due to the impact of lockdowns and a change in survey methodology to online. The rather small size of

the NI sample can also lead to disproportionate fluctuations. If L&W received some funds from NI then a more accurate figure would result. In the meantime, perhaps an average of the past four years might come closer to the mark – that would be just under 30%.

A further report from L&W¹², in partnership with Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCNNI), found that in 2017, 31 per cent of the working-age population had either no qualifications or low qualifications, and only 32 per cent had qualifications at level 4 or above. This compares to the UK as a whole with 26 per cent with having no or low qualifications and 38 per cent with level 4 or above. The Learning and Work Institute report concludes that, while improving, unless action is taken now, the present trajectory will see Northern Ireland's qualifications profile in 2030 continue to sit significantly below the UK average and below that in Ireland too.

Barriers to Participation

The Dept for the Economy produced a report in 2018 on Barriers to Participation and Progression in **Education: a review of the evidence**.¹³ The barriers identified are for the most part those that would also be found elsewhere in the UK and Ireland, and indeed further afield (with the exception of the Legacy of the Troubles). The most commonly cited by adults in this report are lack of time (which can result from caring

¹⁰ OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland (United Kingdom): Assessment and Recommendations, OECD 2020

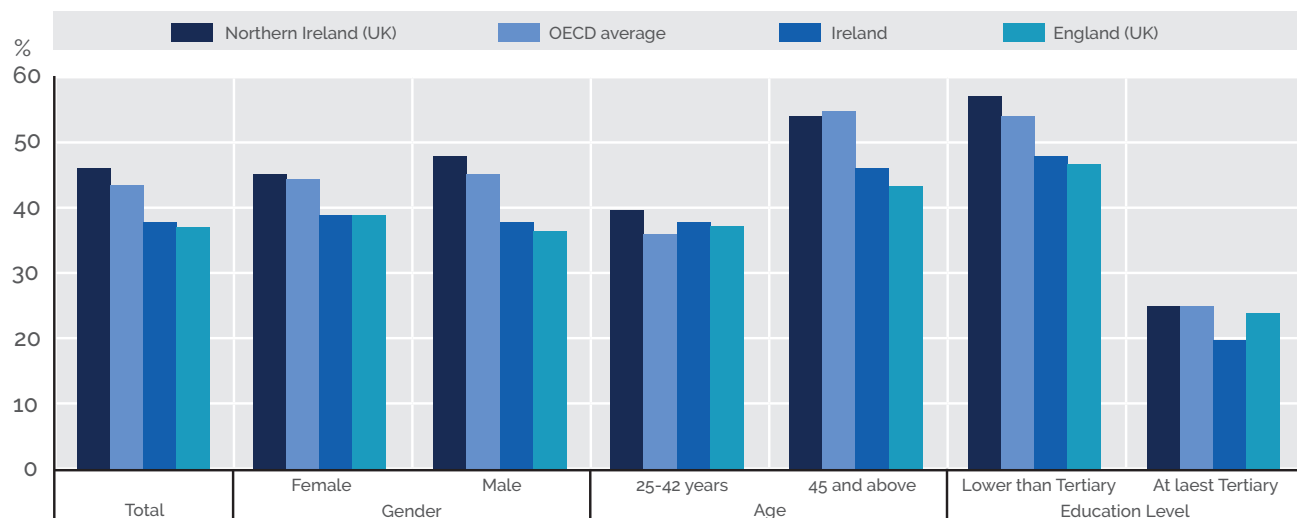
¹¹ Learning through Lockdown: Findings from the 2020 Adult Participation in Learning Survey, L&W 2020

¹² <https://falni.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/A-Higher-Skills-Ambition-for-NI.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Barriers-participation-progression-report.pdf>



Individuals who either did not want to, or did not, participate in adult learning across different demographics groups, 2012/15



Note: Due to sample size limitations, it is not possible to provide more granular breakdowns than those shown in the figure.
Source: OECD (2019(28)), Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015, 2019) (database), www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/.

responsibilities), lack of funding and lack of interest. These reasons for non-participation are also cited in the 2021 Adult Participation in Learning Survey from L&W, but it also finds that 29% of adults felt they were too old to learn.

What is striking in Northern Ireland is the much higher number of adults in comparison with England and Ireland who state that they do not want to participate in learning (see table above).

Increasing Participation Rates

Clearly there is a significant challenge to increase adult participation rates and especially overcome the high level of disillusionment with learning. However, the picture is not all gloom as there have been many very successful projects and schemes over the years which have succeeded in drawing in adults (including the less-motivated) to both informal and formal learning. Ask anyone involved in FE or community provision and they will each be able

to list several examples. Look at a report such as **Learn Well, Live Well**¹⁴ and the breadth and inventiveness of these projects is evident – and some more are included in this report.

From the numerous examples of good practice, it is clear that answers to engaging adults are out there, however they are not making the level of impact that is needed. There are two fundamental blocks to increasing the impact of such projects:

- the short-term nature of the projects means that they cannot make sustained change in the target groups/communities. It is rare that the delivery agents are in a position to mainstream the innovations into their core provision. This is particularly the case for projects run by VCSE organisations, which ironically are the best placed to engage critical target groups. Once a project is complete, no matter its success, because of instability of funding organisations

14 <https://falni.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Learn-Well-Live-Well-Report-Final.pdf>



are forced to move to the next project and learners in the area no longer have access to provision proven to work. It is important to encourage and support innovation, but too often organisations find themselves trapped in a constant loop of devising one novel project after another, without resources to continue successful programmes.

- the learning from these projects will be captured in evaluations, but there is no central, accessible bank for this data and so frequently energies are wasted 're-inventing the wheel'. Excellent work developed by a project in Coleraine might well be able to address a need in Enniskillen, but where is the means to share such information and resources.

The National Lottery Community Fund supports many projects across Northern Ireland. Some recent examples include:

Strabane Community Unemployed Group -

Using their grant, the group is delivering educational and recreational programmes aimed at upskilling and building personal confidence. These programmes will enable individuals to seek employment, possibly in a new career path, or return to education.

The Prince's Trust –

This project supports 62 people, aged 16-30, from across Northern Ireland who need additional help to access employment due to challenges from COVID-19. It provides a mix of learning and skills development activities. The Trust gives out small grants (£160) to remove financial barriers for vulnerable people to access education; these could be travel costs or equipment.

Black Mountain Action Group –

10 Peer Educators will be trained to help run programmes and plan and deliver social action

projects with their peers within their organisation. Following their training BMAG will employ four of the Peer Educators for 26 weeks at 8 hours per week, helping young people to reach their full potential. They will also gain valuable experience through volunteering and employment. The work will build stronger communities as the volunteers will engage with all community members and will plan and deliver local social action projects.

Liberty Consortium -

Its 'Ready, Steady, Go' project provides vocational training, intensive support and work experience for up to 7 days per week for young people with learning disabilities and autism.

This longer-term project provides a degree of security for both tutors and learners, knowing that the programme will be there to support them over a 4-year period. It offers work experience and volunteering that puts people in the centre of their community, and helps the young people create better relationships with support networks, as well as addressing their physical, mental and emotional well-being issues.



Making learning irresistible

The Adult Participation in Learning Survey from L&W allows some insight into what motivates adults to take up learning. The 2021 Survey found that the most common motivations related to personal interests or development – 40% were motivated because of an interest in the subject and 36% wanted to develop themselves as a person. Roughly a quarter of respondents wanted to do their job better or improve their job skills, but only 15% felt drawn to learn out of a desire to get a new job and 12 % said they wanted to change career.

Listening to the learner voice should be critical to generating plans to increase participation. As well as looking at motivation, promotional campaigns could pick up on the benefits that adults found from their engagement in learning. The 2021 Survey found that most of the perceived benefits centred around work – e.g. promotion or pay-rise, change to a new job or career, greater confidence and effectiveness at work. There has been a rise in the recognition of the health and wellbeing benefits accrued, perhaps heightened by the experience of learning through the pandemic. Other benefits include a greater love of learning, more tolerance, increased social capital and participation in their community.

The Working Group and participants in the October webinar generated many further ideas for growing engagement:

- Learning Champions – hearing of the success of peers and those commanding community respect can be highly effective in reaching the disillusioned and raising aspiration. Word of mouth is frequently the most effective engagement method, so we need learning champions at both regional and local levels. Since a high proportion of those expressing no interest in learning are men, it would be particularly important to find male champions.
- Support not confined to constant linear progression – learners can be lost if they feel pressured to progress before they judge themselves ready. There is not a single progression pathway or timetable that suits all and some learners will feel more supported if they can continue their learning at a similar level for a period.
- Tetris building blocks – addressing time constraints and anxiety around committing to large courses, offer 'bite-sized' pieces of learning that can cumulatively build to recognised qualifications.
- Learning Festivals/Learning Week – currently Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK and Ireland which does not have an annual festival celebrating the learning achievements of adults. The UNESCO Learning Cities of Belfast and Derry/Strabane have shown some of what is possible and the city of Cork believes it has begun to change the perception of learning for its citizens through its annual festival. With two of the eleven councils in NI already promoting learning, all councils could take this up, just as they are all involved, for example, in the Good Relations Week. A festival would also give providers a sense of common purpose and could build collaboration.
- Promotional campaigns – these could be linked to a Learning Festival, or pick up on other festivals or thematic weeks/days – such as Mental Health Awareness Week, or International Women's Day. Promotions should emphasise a broad range of rewards/benefits of learning.
- Greater role for local councils – one role is mentioned above in relation to a Festival, but councils could also host learning websites, allowing access to information on learning opportunities in their districts and boroughs from across all providers
- Offer what learners want, not just what society/funders believe they need – while some people will be drawn to learning to address a personal or professional need, many



others will be attracted to spaces to explore 'hobby' skills or simply follow their curiosity. So learning offers need to cover a wide range to entice those unsure of taking first steps.

- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – this is an area which is becoming well-developed in Ireland, allowing adults to gain recognition for the knowledge and skills which they have acquired across their lives and for which they do not have formal qualification.

- Linking schools and communities – employ liaison/mediation officers to build relationships and confidence between schools and parents and make schools community learning hubs for all ages.
- Social Prescribing – through this alternative process to medical prescribing, people can be connected to learning that they otherwise would not feel motivated to take up.

Union Learning Fund

The Union Learning Fund (ULF) for Northern Ireland was established in 2002 to promote activity by trade unions to support the government's objective of creating a learning society. The ULF's main aim is to promote a culture of learning which will equip people for work in a modern economy.

The Fund is managed and administered by NIC ICTU under an agreement with the Department for the Economy (DfE). The agreement directs the level and type of learning activity that should be supported by the Fund.

The ULF supports union learning projects to transform the lives of their members in developing skills, achieving qualifications, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities within the workplace.

With the support of dedicated Union Learning Representatives (ULR), the ULF has helped thousands of workers to access a wide range of learning opportunities. ULRs are at the forefront of efforts to improve the skills of the workforce. They are the key to the success of Union Learning.

[See ULF in Northern Ireland](#)



Building Collaborative Relationships

Collaboration, or partnership working, has been increasingly encouraged by funders and now also underpins the Programme for Government. As has already been shown by examples under Engagement, collaborative projects both within and across sectors are quite common, however, in building the collaboration needed to forge a culture of lifelong learning, we need to focus not just on relationships between providers, but also on relationships between and with policy makers, funders, learners and our neighbouring nations. We also need to think about how to relate to those operating in other spheres, such as health, justice and the arts.

In building a culture of lifelong learning we need it to be part of a wider cultural shift towards collaborative working and away from the current dominance of silo-culture. We need to acknowledge that whether we are funders, policy-makers or providers our practice most often lies in the comfort-blanket of silos, no matter how much we might rail against it. We need to be part of the change that we want to see, constantly challenging ourselves to think and work differently and build relationships beyond our familiar circles.

The nature of lifelong learning demands collaboration. It crosses disciplines, facilitates growth and change across age, gender, race and class, and addresses wide-ranging needs. In terms of Government support it therefore sits most obviously within the Programme for Government with multi-departmental responsibilities.

Collaboration is not easy and often throws up issues of power and control, access to

resources and recognition of contributions. These challenges can be exacerbated when the collaborations are relatively short-term – thankfully funders such as the National Lottery Community Fund do recognise that time to build solid working relationships is needed and must be resourced. Much has been written on collaboration and the resources of the Collaboration NI support service are still available to offer guidance.¹⁵

Developing Collaboration

Much of the current collaboration amongst providers is based on projects, with the extra challenges that brings as mentioned above. However, there are also long-standing collaborative relationships between FE Colleges and community providers. The relationship between these two sectors could be further developed, particularly to ensure that learner pathways and transitions between providers are smooth and supportive.

15 <https://collaborationni.nicva.org/about-collaboration-ni>





Tech Connects Collaboration

The Tech Connects programme offers free training to young people in Belfast to develop digital skills and to raise awareness of ICT career pathways. It encourages young people to choose relevant subjects and skills that are required to work in the rapidly expanding technology and digital sector in Northern Ireland.

The programme is a collaborative project delivered by Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) and the Bytes Project, with input from industry experts and employers. It is funded by Belfast City Council through its PEACE IV Action Plan.

Damian Duffy, Director of Curriculum at BMC, explains the rationale for the programme: *"There has been tremendous growth in the IT and Digital sectors in Northern Ireland over the last few years and Tech Connects provides a starting point for young people wanting to explore the potential of technology and the many different opportunities that it opens up for them. We know that digital*

skills will be increasingly in demand across all sectors of the economy and not just those industries traditionally seen as IT."

Benefits of Collaboration

The College benefits from an approach which incorporates a strong youth work methodology, which allows it to engage with learners who may have been hesitant around engaging with the College in a formal setting.

The Bytes Project benefits from connecting with the College on other related initiatives, like the Bring IT On campaign, and from building relationships with staff in the Creative & Digital School. It can also build links with the wider further education sector in Northern Ireland as BMC is the Digital Hub for all NI Colleges.

The learners benefit from an informal and relaxed setting where they can develop at their own pace and identify particular areas that they may wish to pursue through further learning or development opportunities.



Stephen Dallas, Director of Bytes: *"There's a danger that some of our young people will miss out on fulfilling their potential by not developing their digital skills, particularly those young people from our most disadvantaged communities. Programmes like Tech Connects will help to ensure that all of our young people can equip themselves with the tools to navigate this new world and flourish in it."*

Challenges

This was a new partnership approach which involved responding to a specific brief that was prescriptive in terms of the tender brief issued by the local authority.

Implementing what was initially designed as a face-to-face intervention to fit with Covid-19

restrictions was a significant challenge, which involved adapting the delivery model to an online format. Further challenges included changes in personnel and the risk of "zoom fatigue".

Sustainability

Implementation has demonstrated that there is significant demand for this type of programme from other types of learner. Many more individuals could have benefited from the intervention, but were ineligible due to domicile postcode, or for being outside the target age range. Work is ongoing on further developing the project model.

For more information about the project contact: techconnects@belfastmet.ac.uk

There can also be thematic consortia in the VCSE sector, such as the Women's Regional Consortium and Together for You (an alliance of mental health charities), which provide a strong focus on learner needs. Greater geographical collaboration could be facilitated if local councils became more proactive around learning in their areas. Collaboration needs to be encouraged and facilitated as organisations are mostly in competitive relations with one another over funding.

Trusting relationships and shared purpose are key to effective collaboration and it is through networks such as FALNI that providers from across the sectors can come together to identify learner needs, learn more about one another and hear about successful initiatives. These connections do not happen without facilitation.

What FALNI has demonstrated over recent years are the benefits of working with and learning from other nations. This has been possible through the European Agenda for Adult Learning

funding which will no longer be available in the UK after 2021, but the UK nations and Ireland have agreed to continue to find ways to work together through the Network for Adult Learning Across Borders (NALAB). FALNI will also be partnering with AONTAS¹⁶ to examine areas of common concern on the island of Ireland.

Something that could be learned from AONTAS, and from Scotland's Learning Partnership, is how to harness the learner voice as both countries have successful models which both influence the lobbying of these agencies and also interact directly with policy-makers. FALNI will also look at the Community Education Network run by AONTAS which not only allows the identification of common issues, but also provides support and development opportunities for community providers.

Throughout all the collaborations that are needed in building a culture of lifelong learning, the focus should always be on benefits for the learner.

¹⁶ <https://www.aontas.com/>



Resourcing Lifelong Learning

There are some very strong elements already in place on which to build the culture of lifelong learning – well-regarded FE colleges and a diverse VCSE sector, both with skilled and motivated staff. However, investment has suffered in recent years and for the VCSE in particular there has been the loss of regional infrastructure and increased instability, exacerbated by the loss of key European funds.

It must be acknowledged that not all learning requires the same level of infrastructural support. Many adults are self-motivating and increasingly access learning online – although for that to be equitable digital infrastructure needs to be improved and supports in place to address affordability of broadband and hardware.

Others, as well as being self-motivated, are self-organising, whether through informal interest groups set up via social media, or on a larger scale through organisations like U3A.

As with earlier sections of this report, the following are offered as areas to be further explored.

Funding

To enable the many ideas for creating a culture of lifelong learning that are contained in this report (and which is likely to be expanded upon in subsequent stakeholder engagement), funding will need to be assigned. Investment in learning and skills, right across the UK, has been in relative decline and it seems likely that some degree of new funding will be required. However, many of the initiatives may need relatively modest investment and this may even be found through savings generated by more efficient delivery.

As mentioned earlier, the endless cycle of short-term funded projects is wasteful in terms of funds and human resources and leads to inequity of provision for learners. A shared vision and a commitment to collaboration amongst funders (both governmental and philanthropic) should focus on what is best for the learner, greater security for providers and their staff, and ensuring that the learning supported is shared for continual improvement of provision.

Funding needs to support the full breadth of lifelong learning, cradle to the grave: currently there is an imbalance across the lifespan, reflecting the historic model of learning for work largely ending in a person's early twenties. For both economic and wellbeing reasons arising from rapid and on-going technological and demographic change, funding needs to be adjusted to facilitate learning throughout life.

Lifelong learning embraces formal, informal and non-formal learning, with each contributing to the range of learner needs. Again, funding tends to concentrate on formal and qualification-based provision deemed to have economic benefits, despite the evidence that informal and non-formal provision not only provides many with their preferred entry points to learning, but also significantly contributes to other important



outcomes such as health and wellbeing, community inclusion and social cohesion (outcomes which contribute to savings in public services).

Individual Support

Northern Ireland, like the rest of the UK, experimented with individual learning accounts about twenty years ago, but this has been discontinued. It was revived in Scotland four years ago and offers individuals up to £200 towards training costs in approved skills areas (Agriculture, Business, Construction, Early Years and Childcare, Health & Safety, STEM, Social Care and Transport). Wales also offers personal learning accounts, similarly targeted.

Cost of study is cited as one of the main barriers to participation, so measures to alleviate this could be effective. Support can be targeted to meet needs and employment opportunities, rather than the earlier blanket approach. An additional benefit is that it gives the learner a greater sense of control.

Guidance

Navigating the learning system is tricky as it is highly complex, with multiple providers (even more so now with so much online), qualification levels, entry requirements and unclear progression pathways, to name a few. Guidance offered by providers can tend to retention of the learner rather than being impartial – perhaps providers should be rewarded for progression even when this is outside their own organisations.

Guidance services need to be proactive, visible and accessible in local communities rather than remote and official, as the less confident may not avail of the service if it involves travel, or comes across as bureaucratic.

Guidance also has to be age-appropriate – what is designed for young adults might not suit the more mature.

Guidance Services in Ireland

The Adult Educational Guidance Services (AEGS) are managed by the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

The ETB AEGS provide impartial careers and education information to adults who wish to return to education and training, or are already registered on an FET programme within the ETBs - to make informed educational, career and life choices.

Guidance is provided in group settings and on a one-to-one basis for those who require further supports - to identify clients' own lifelong learning and career plans. NCGE supports the provision of quality guidance within the AEGS services of the ETBs and provides and coordinates Continuing Professional

Development (CPD) for the guidance staff of the AEGS.

Department of Education guidelines state that guidance should be a key aspect of Adult Literacy and Community Education programmes and should be available at all stages, including pre-entry and pre exit stages, on an integrated basis. The Adult Educational Guidance Service (AEGS) provides personal, educational and vocational guidance, which supports learners to make informed decisions about course choice and certification (if required), progression plans, recognition of prior learning etc.

Referral to the support offered by the AEGS is included in the One Step Up site created and managed by AONTAS, as part of its EAAL programme.



One Step Up signposts thousands of people in Ireland every year towards accessing their education and training options by freely providing information about where to look for

- courses
- funding and guidance supports
- contact details for various services
- and much more to support people to find their learning pathway.

Information

Effective guidance needs accurate and accessible information on available provision – which is also needed for those with the confidence to plan their own learning.

Centralised information that covers both formal and informal provision is currently lacking. Those wishing to access FE provision can search college websites, but for those seeking a less formal first step to return to learning, or something very local, or wanting leisure learning, then many sites would have to be accessed and even then may not offer the full picture.

A one-stop shop learning website for the whole of NI may not be the solution, but this provision might be taken on by local councils – after all council websites are where people access information on other local services.

Staffing Development

Within VCSE provision there is little opportunity for staff involved in organising and/or delivering learning to develop careers and gain qualifications. To improve quality provision and help staff retention (often insecure because of short-term funding), support for CPD for community-based learning staff would give this part of lifelong learning provision development opportunities and deserved recognition.

Research

Designing a culture of lifelong learning will be more effective when based around knowledge and research and there are critical areas where too little is known at present. The VCSE sector is an important player, engaging the hard to reach, providing safe first steps and developing innovative programmes, however the scale and collective impact of the providers cannot be accurately described. A survey of community education provision, comparable to that published by AONTAS in 2021, would be invaluable both to gather this information and to begin to bond the disparate organisations.

The Learning & Work Institute (as mentioned above) carries out an annual survey of adult participation in learning. While this covers NI, the sample is relatively small and resources to expand the survey would give all working in adult and lifelong learning much more accurate information.

Mention has already been made of the wealth of information about effective engagement and delivery that is lost because evaluations are scattered across a plethora of funders. While these hopefully inform the funders' practice, the learning is not currently collected and shared with policy-makers, academics or practitioners to be analysed and influence policy and provision.



AONTAS

AONTAS is Ireland's national adult learning organisation for adult and community education providers and adult learners. It promotes the value and benefits of adult learning, and advocates on behalf of the sector. Founded in 1969, it is an independent NGO, with 500 members nationwide. Membership of AONTAS includes individuals as well as a number of state bodies such as Education and Training Boards (ETBs), community education organisations, trade unions, Institutes of Technology, providers of learning, and community projects amongst others.

The Community Education Network (CEN) was established in 2007 by AONTAS. It is a network of over 100 independently managed community education providers who work collaboratively, sharing information and resources, engaging in professional development and working to

ensure that community education is valued and resourced.

Learner voice is at the heart of AONTAS' work. The Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum is a large-scale project designed to ensure FET is actively engaging learner voice and creating policy that is responsive to learner needs.

AONTAS produces a number of publications and periodicals such as *The Adult Learners Journal* as well as research publications.

In addition to promoting adult learning in Ireland, AONTAS is the national coordinating body for the European Agenda for Adult Learning, which is aimed at increasing participation in adult learning across the EU, enhancing policies and supports for adult learners, and gathering and disseminating best practices.

A Voice for Adult Learning

FALNI was established in 2010 to start to bring together stakeholders in adult learning from across the sectors to meet the lack of a collective voice for adult learning in NI. The Forum is open in its membership and has operated mostly through voluntary inputs. Thanks to the support of L&W and funding through EAAL, FALNI has been able to expand its operations and engage many more organisations in its events and forge a more unified voice. However, like much other European funding, EAAL will finish at the end of 2021.

The support that FALNI has received from stakeholders across the sectors through their continued involvement in its activities, clearly evidences the need that is felt for an organisation to speak for adult learning, support and unify stakeholders and link adult learning in NI to the other parts of the UK and Ireland. For FALNI to fulfil this need, and to place it on a comparable footing to adult learning advocacy bodies elsewhere, secure funding is required.







4th floor, Arnhem House,
31 Waterloo Way, Leicester LE1 6LP

T: +44 (0)116 204 4200

E: enquiries@learningandwork.org.uk

W: www.learningandwork.org.uk

@LearnWorkUK