



More than just education

A participatory action research project on adult education in London

A Toynbee Hall project

commissioned by the Greater London Authority to inform development of the Skills Roadmap for London and approaches to improving access to adult education for Londoners

February 2022

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About Toynbee Hall:

Based in the East End of London since 1884, Toynbee Hall works with the local community and a wide range of partners to shape a fairer and happier future. We offer high quality advice and support, and engage with communities to have a more meaningful say over the things that affect them and shape platforms for social change.

The Research and Policy Team at Toynbee Hall aim to identify systemic failures which create exclusion and hardship, whether from public policy, legislation, regulation, service or product design, or any form of cultural influence. We ensure that people affected by those failures are involved in designing solutions through connecting Experts by Experience and Peer Researchers to decision-makers and innovators, and supporting them to influence effectively for change.

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About the Greater London Authority:

The Greater London Authority (GLA) is an administrative organisation responsible for Greater London's strategic administration, having jurisdiction over a wide variety of policy sectors, including transportation, health, education and youth, economic development and fire and emergency planning and is led by a directly elected Mayor and 25 members of the London Assembly

www.london.gov.uk

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Executive Summary

Responsibility for the Adult Education Budget in the capital was delegated to the Mayor of London at the start of the academic year of 2019/20. Learners in the capital have unfortunately been impacted by the pandemic for most of that period. Access to adult education during the pandemic has also affected people unequally, particularly with the transition to more online services, with those already disadvantaged facing additional barriers to learning. As a result, there is a need to make adult education in London even more accessible, more engaging and more locally relevant in the coming years, in order to remedy these inequalities.

This is a Toynbee Hall report on adult education commissioned by the Greater London Authority (GLA) to inform the preparation of the Mayor's Skills Roadmap for London. For this project we worked with a group of peer researchers who had lived experience of being part of one or more of the priority groups identified by the GLA as having the most to gain from adult education. Over the course of five months our peer researchers co-designed and co-produced the research and conducted in-depth interviews with over 50 people from across London about how adult education services could be improved. For this project Toynbee Hall adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. This style of research involves professional researchers and members of communities

(peer researchers) working in partnership to develop the project scope, carry out the data collection, and analyse the findings. As an important aim of this project was to improve access to adult education, this research deliberately focused on the barriers experienced by those who participated in the study, and how they felt access to and engagement with adult education could be improved. We also learned from the positive experiences that some interviewees shared and have referenced some of this good practice in our recommendations. It should be noted that as a qualitative piece of work our interviews should not be taken as a statistically representative sample of all Londoners but rather an in-depth look at the experiences of some of the more marginalised of Londoners.

A consistent theme throughout our interviews was the need for a more holistic adult education service that recognised the benefits of courses outside of immediate employment opportunities. In particular, local people wanted more decision-making power in steering the content of courses and in creating more supportive learning environments through which to build stronger communities.

Our key findings:

The term “adult education” is still very much associated with helping to get someone into work or switch careers, rather than its broader meaning.

Even when interviewees wanted support for a wider range of goals from their learning, there was a perception that adult education was just about advancing employment. However, when individuals discussed what an ideal offer of adult education would look like, building a community and developing confidence were seen as very important core goals as well as ways of improving employment outcomes.

People are primarily reliant on social connections for finding courses

Over-reliance on online dissemination methods is hampering knowledge of what courses are available. There is still a need for physical information on adult learning opportunities, such as leaflets and stalls in local schools, community centres and faith groups, in order to let more people know about what is on offer.

Lingering impact of trauma has led to distrust of education institutions and a reluctance to engage with them

Negative past experiences in a formal education setting must be acknowledged and a demonstration of a clear difference between adult and childhood education needs to be made in order to make people comfortable returning to education.

Disabled people disproportionately face barriers and a proactive approach to inclusion must be made

Some interviewees reported instances during engagement with adult education providers that seemed to risk violating either the spirit or the letter of equalities legislation, especially centred on the provision of reasonable adjustments. They also reported facing significant additional costs when accessing education. As well as having to overcome these barriers, disabled people we spoke to felt that the onus unfairly remains on the individual to advocate for themselves and educate others about their needs.

Even when a course is nominally free or cheap the actual total cost learners incur may be too expensive

Additional costs such as cover for care and travel, as well as loss of income due to a potential reduction in working hours, all mean that fee-free courses may in fact be too expensive for those on low incomes. The pandemic has also exacerbated this as reduced costs in some areas have been offset by increased costs for internet and utilities and lower incomes. Additionally, many people are actively dissuaded by their work coaches and benefits advisors from pursuing adult education when they receive benefits.

Childhood education styles do not work for many people

A frequent challenge for interviewees was repeatedly being taught in the same way as in childhood which impaired their ability to grasp the topic. This was especially pertinent as for many the particular subjects they struggled with were ones that those around them were unable to help them with. Many people felt current settings for adult education are clinical and formal, and often bring up trauma.

Our top recommendations:

As a priority, framing of adult education in London needs to de-centre qualifications for employment and instead highlight the many other benefits that individuals can receive from getting involved with adult education

Education providers and the GLA should work together to promote a more holistic view of adult education, highlighting wider benefits in addition to career progress. Additionally, evaluation of learners' outcomes and the courses in general needs to consider soft skills and confidence building when assessing the value of a course.

A multi-method approach to raising awareness of adult education and relevant funding should be initiated across London

The GLA and local councils, in collaboration with education providers, should make sure that information on courses and relevant funding is shared with Londoners to enable them to pursue adult education. Information should be disseminated in a number of ways, including leaflets and local stalls via schools and faith groups, to ensure those with limited digital access or other support needs are also able to have a full understanding of the offer and their entitlements.

Co-production methods should be used to empower marginalised groups to re-engage with adult education and improve it for the benefit of others

Education providers should adopt co-production processes to design new curriculums and learning environments for adult education in collaboration with groups who have had personal negative experiences of education. This process is not about seeking feedback from learners, but working in partnership with them to design what a good learning experience looks like and making improvements collectively. This is especially important to help people regain trust in the education system. For example, designing more accommodating classroom environments in collaboration with disabled people would go a long way to reducing the additional difficulties disabled learners face.

Classrooms should be designed to emphasise collaboration between students rather than prioritising a focus on the teacher only

For most interviewees the social component of learning was key in helping them learn best. Education providers should work to design their learning environments to be more informal, promote community building, and make use of varied locations such as community centres or outdoor spaces.

Course content should be collaboratively designed with local people to respond to the needs of an area

Education providers and local councils should consult with residents to find what local people would like to learn and what types of courses would draw people into making the first steps into adult education. In particular there was high demand for "fill in the gaps" courses focused on areas such as how to file tax returns or building self-confidence, and many interviewees discussed how more student-led and project-based learning would be a safer way to engage with subjects they feared.

In general, we found people - particularly those in priority groups - wanted to engage with adult education but faced many barriers to being able to actively participate. People recognise the value that could be gained from adult education, not just in employment terms, but about confidence, wellbeing and social integration. They want a say in how they access it, what it looks like, and where it is held. Reframing how we conceive of adult education is key to empowering Londoners to build and participate in an adult education system that provides more than just work-focussed education.

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1. Introduction

This is a Toynbee Hall report on adult education commissioned by the Greater London Authority (GLA) as part of the GLA's stakeholder engagement on the Skills Roadmap for London. With the responsibility for the Adult Education Budget only recently delegated to the Mayor of London (at the start of the academic year of 2019/20), there is a need to understand what a post-pandemic landscape of adult education in the capital should look like in order to engage people who traditionally would be less likely to engage with learning opportunities.

The primary aim of this project was to use peer research, guided by disadvantaged Londoners who are the primary target of the Adult Education Budget, in order to explore the ways in which adult education within London can be made more accessible and locally relevant. Our project took a Participatory Action Research approach and was co-produced with a team of 10 peer researchers from across London, who designed our interview guide, sourced and conducted interviews with 51 Londoners, and co-developed recommendations.

We worked closely with the GLA in developing this project. Through weekly meetings and regular discussions, we worked together to make sure that the GLA and providers' insights informed the project development. Throughout the project we were guided by our steering group which was formed from a mixture of organisations including the GLA, local authorities, and lived experience experts, Toynbee Hall staff and our peer researchers. This group of relevant experts reviewed the project at key milestones and provided important feedback and direction to the research. To avoid conflict of interest, and in light of the fact that there are sufficient insights from adult education providers through the GLA, we excluded education providers from our steering group.



2.

Background

Toynbee Hall's (2021) Pandemic Stories peer research into the impact of the pandemic found insecure workers are those hardest hit in the capital in financial terms, with some falling through gaps in government support for part or all of the crisis. Future employment prospects are a big concern and are driving poor mental health in both young and older people. As part of the Pandemic Stories project, our peer researchers made the recommendation that support measures should be targeted at low-income households, gig economy workers, and people in their middle-ages who have been or will be forced to change careers because of the crisis. There is therefore a need to understand adult education demands in light of the potential influx of people who will be required to reskill, and who may also have greater financial and emotional barriers to learning and training than before the crisis.

In particular, insights from the GLA show that those most in need of accessible education before the pandemic have even greater need now, and there is a risk that groups such as older Londoners and disabled people who may not have sufficient digital literacy or access to digital devices or connectivity, may be left behind as provision moves increasingly online. Individual barriers to adult education are also important to look at, with issues such as a lack of confidence, language barriers and poor mental health particularly pertinent for those most at risk of long-term unemployment¹. It is likely that more can be done in the context of health and wellbeing, which we will address in this report.



¹ See research commissioned by the Department of Education: Learning and Work Institute (2018) *Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups*.

3.

Methodology

For this project Toynbee Hall adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. This style of research involves professional researchers and members of communities (peer researchers) working in partnership to understand a topic and make changes to improve the situation².

“Adult education in London needs to be informed and designed by the people it serves.” – Interviewee

Using their personal networks and those of Toynbee Hall, our peer researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 51 people from across 15 boroughs, in order to explore barriers to adult education and potential solutions. Translations of the interview guide were made in community languages to support the access of those with limited English, and interviews were conducted largely online due to pandemic restrictions and mobility restrictions of some interviewees.

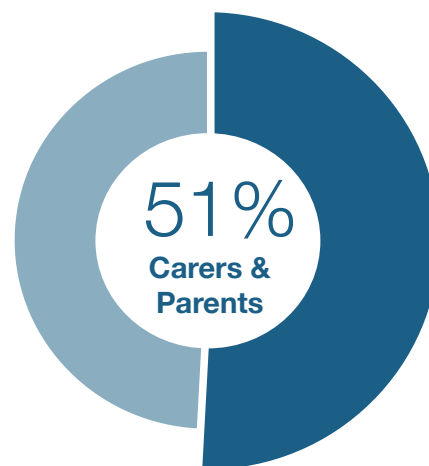
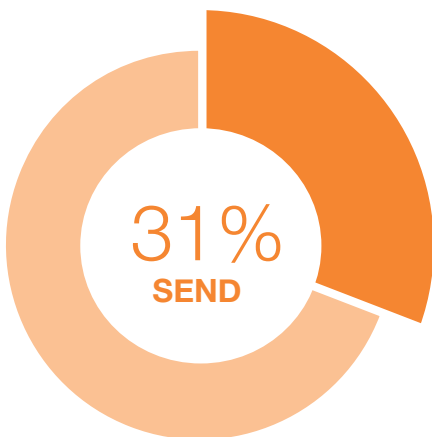
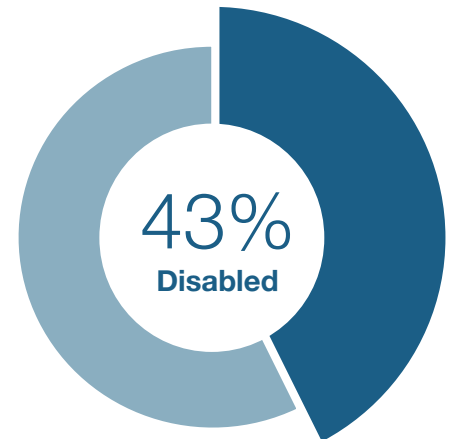
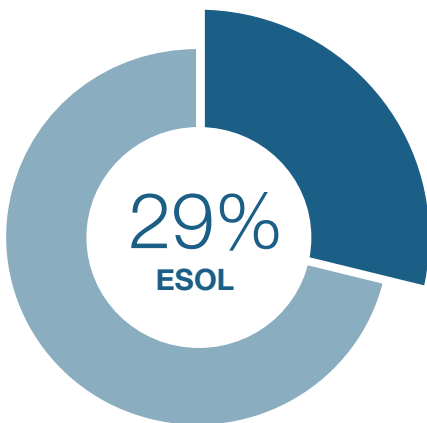
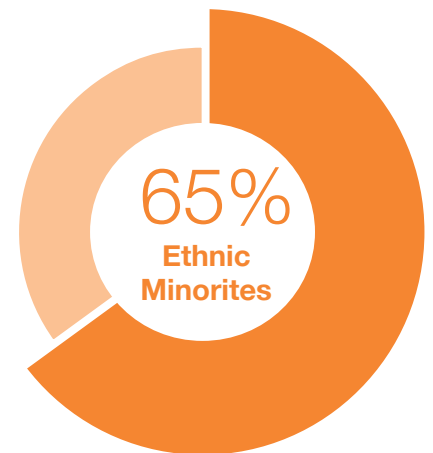
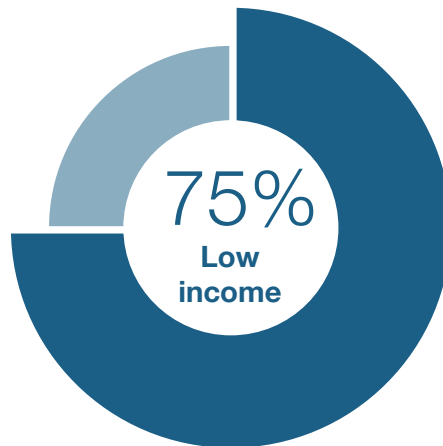
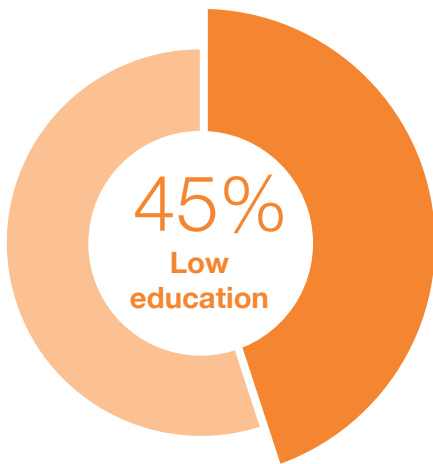
In particular we focused on the following groups identified by the GLA as those most in need of accessible adult education, including:

- Low-income Londoners and those with no or low qualifications
- Older Londoners (aged 50+)
- Ethnic minorities
- People with English as a second or foreign language
- Disabled Londoners and/or those with chronic health conditions
 - Those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- People with caring responsibilities, including parents



² See: Freire, P. (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, and Kindon, S., Pain, R. and Kesby, M. (2010) *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*. London: Routledge.

Interviewees' profile



Our interviewees ranged from 21 to 75 years old, with 31% aged 50 or older. Individuals from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background accounted for almost two thirds (65%) of our interviewees, and two fifths (43%) of those we spoke with were disabled people. The vast majority (75%) had a low household income (less than £1480 per month). In terms of education, 45% had an education qualification of level 3 or below (with 27% at level 2 or below) and around a third (31%) of our interviewees have a learning difficulty. Caring responsibilities for children under 18 or adults with long-term health conditions and impairments were also common, with 51% of our interviewees impacted. Furthermore for 29% of our interviewees English was not their main language.

4. Key Findings



The meaning and purpose of adult education

“To have a choice of society mobility ... means I need these qualifications.”

“Education is the open sesame to so much.”

“I don't think it has to be academic at all. I think learning an instrument, the arts or something is so important but it's not really quantified as such because it doesn't have any quantifiable economic benefit to the country. Politicians aren't really interested in that but it could make people happier.”

“If it was focused on holistic stuff first, like coming together, learning things together, building confidence and stuff like that, I definitely would be interested in that.”

- **The term “adult education” is still very much associated with helping to get someone into work or switch careers, rather than its broader meaning.** In general interviewees liked the idea of something more holistic that worked to develop the whole of a person including building confidence, growing relationships with others in their community, helping people find their purpose, learn how to learn, and inspiring enjoyment in the process of education for its own sake. Despite this preference interviewees felt that this was out of the realm of what adult education is. Indeed all retirees that we spoke to felt that adult education had nothing to offer them (for instance, saying “I don't want to go to work, and do not want to go back” and “Nothing is applicable” whilst still expressing a great desire to learn new things.
- **When talking in ideal terms people overwhelmingly wanted to have forms of adult education that would support them achieving a wide variety of goals including improving their emotional and social situations.** In particular building a community was very important, with interviewees speaking about the loneliness of unemployment, the importance of companionship and camaraderie for the elderly, and how fostering a community atmosphere where people help each other helps both building a supportive social network and in helping individuals better understand classes, thereby improving learning outcomes.
- **Confidence was the most common aim for people taking or wanting to take an adult education course, and this was linked to the desire to cultivate a sense of social inclusion and belonging.** This remained the case even for people in full employment with many interested in qualifications as a way of proving that they are capable. As one participant stated, “it's that wish fulfilment stuff”. Qualifications were seen as a way of building this confidence for many with lower levels of education, enabling them to access a social realm and level of respect they feel excluded from. Additionally, many interviewees brought up the common language that comes from education and how significant that was for them to be able to be taken seriously in their day-to-day lives.

Awareness and searching for courses

“I think the problem is people are not involved. Courses are available but people are not informed or motivated.”

“I get told about adult education in London; I don't get told about how I'm going to access it.”

“I could've done with help at time, and if it was there I certainly wasn't signposted to it and I would have been too wary of something that was too linked to job centres as they've done such a poor job of supporting people and are too linked to punishment.”

“It was easy to attend. The thing is knowing they are available. How do you find out what courses are available?”

“There are carer's hubs for young people, but I don't see any carer's hubs for anybody who's over 25 for example. If they had a carer's hub for people over 25 in particular who are struggling to find funding, who are struggling to access courses, who are struggling to even find out about them [that will help a lot].”

- **People are primarily reliant on their social connections for finding suitable and affordable courses.** It should be noted though that once people are involved in an adult education institution that they trust, they tend to stay within the system. In particular social connections were important for enabling people to navigate funding opportunities in institutions where the process was more complex or when they had limited time. Being able to get information about where others in similar circumstances had gone (for instance who was best to speak to within an organisation or what proof might be needed) allowed those with the most pressures to use their limited time more effectively.
- **Over-reliance on online awareness in many cases is hampering overall knowledge of what is available.** Though the impact of the pandemic has exacerbated this, interviewees felt this was already a trend that was sped up from pre-COVID times rather than something new. Additionally, some interviewees recounted that

when asking for printed copies of course lists, certain adult education organisations would not provide this and instead insisted on people viewing their website, without recognition of the impediments that might prevent people from doing so.

- **It was important to interviewees that there is recognition that accessibility spans a wide range of areas and that more effort should be made to explain how courses are accessible from the very start.** Language and disability were key concerns, but other areas that interviewees wanted highlighted were potential financial considerations for those on low-incomes and what type of technical knowledge would be required to participate fully. This was suggested to be accompanied by information about what pre-courses might be needed and/or links to guides for self-help. With pre-courses there was a preference for shorter and more targeted digital skills training, rather than having all potential digital skills grouped in a longer course. In particular older interviewees felt that it would be helpful to have some form of assessment (whether one done through an organisation or a self-assessment) so they would be able to know what relative level of technical ability they were considered to be at so they had a better understanding of what courses would be the most useful for them.
- **Areas where people needed the most help with funding were focused mainly on navigating the application process quickly.** Interviewees wanted a central hub of accessible information about what they were entitled to that would be attached to a unified funding application portal. For many a sticking point with funding was having to learn each organisation's different procedures which meant there was often duplication of effort when they wanted to complete multiple courses. In some instances, a lack of clarity within organisations also meant investing their limited time in navigating these structures only to have their funding application ultimately rejected. It was also flagged a number of times in interviews that for people whose circumstances had changed part-way through a course, they had been unable to find out if they were able to get funding and consequently had to borrow money or drop out. For a number of interviewees there was a sense that the burden was unfairly on individuals to be aware of all the available support and there was a suggestion that having

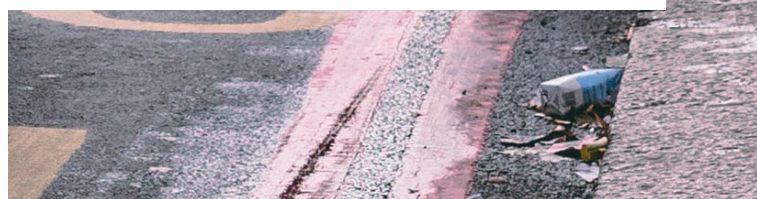
a programme similar to a benefits calculator³ that would flag all the funding and support they could receive in a simple manner would be helpful.

- **More support is needed in helping individuals complete funding and support applications.**

In particular many of our disabled interviewees felt they were not adequately helped to complete the necessary forms (and in some cases denied that support entirely on the basis that they had yet to prove through completing said form that they required this support). It was felt that more support could be given through a variety of platforms, rather than just online, to accommodate this. Whilst support from staff members was preferred there was also a desire for step by step guides in print format as well. Some interviewees furthermore wanted a shift in the system where possible from needing to complete funding and support applications to some form of automatic awards.



³ See Entitled To (www.entitledto.co.uk/) and Turn2Us (benefits-calculator-2.turn2us.org.uk/) for examples of calculators referenced by interviewees.



The lasting impact of negative past experiences

“The schooling system is where I faced a lot of discrimination.”

“In a way a lot of it is bullying ... is harassment.”

“No replication of stressful, punitive aspects of traditional education!”

“I don't really recall anything positive ... from my experiences of education.”

“[I] left school with someone ringing in my head that I'll never achieve.”

“I've got the self-confidence and self-worth of a bloody teenager.”

“It can be difficult to revisit 'core subjects' like Maths and English.”

- **One of the most significant areas discussed in interviews which disproportionately affected disabled people was the lingering impact of trauma from childhood education.** Common stories include being denied not only education support but practical support (for instance being deliberately left alone on the floor unable to walk and having to crawl for help, deemed “unfit” to attend regular classes, forbidden from practical accommodations such as sitting near the front for those with hearing loss). For older interviewees many lived through being labelled “**educationally subnormal**” and other offensive labels (this was especially acute in those who would nowadays be labelled as neurodiverse), and this was deeply internalised. As a consequence, there is a significant distrust of education systems with the view that in essence the “**structures are the same and given a smiley face**”.
- **Criticism from teachers and expulsion or exclusion in childhood has created huge deficits in self-confidence which make people feel that education is beyond them regardless of their current position.** This was particularly common for those who suspected they fell into SEND categories but had been unable to pursue a formal diagnosis as adults. As a consequence,

they felt that support would always be out of reach and also felt that without a diagnosis they had limited insight into what would be most helpful for them.

- **Negative past experiences in specific subjects, particularly in English and Maths classes, can make academic courses feel too daunting to go back to but are not as linked with a reluctance to engage with adult education overall.** This was often associated with classes that organised lessons in sets, with those in lower sets having experienced shame at being put in them. English and Maths were seen as uniquely hard, in part due to the pressure that was put on people by families and schools to do well in them, as well as the idea that if they did not succeed in these traditional subjects they would always find it difficult to get into high status work. Many participants had the experience of failing these particular subjects multiple times, both as children and as adults, and so returning to them was demoralising, especially as they felt that the way most courses are taught hasn't changed since their school days.



Barriers for disabled people

“I didn’t know about it and I didn’t seek it [adult education] - maybe it didn’t feel like it was for me.”

“We’re being conned and we are being used.”

“You have to go on a safari to find it [support for additional needs].”

“There was a lady who was always asking if we needed helping. She was supportive and lovely.”

- **Disabled people felt they received far less out of adult education than non-disabled people.** Across interviews there was a sense that adult education providers would rather argue that a disabled person doesn’t need to do a particular course, have certain accommodations, or gain a particular qualification than create the appropriate support structures to enable them to access adult education. A frequent criticism was only being offered the option to do a course without receiving a qualification, instead of changes being made to the assessment process. There was a sense that they were used to fulfil ‘tick box’ criteria when it came to diversity reporting, but that no meaningful inclusion was actually in place.
- **Some interviewees reported instances within their adult education experiences that seem to risk violating either the spirit or the letter of equalities legislation.** One interviewee had their reasonable adjustments removed a few weeks after receiving them and was told by the institution that part-time courses weren’t subjected to legal obligations for educational support. Another was refused support to access the system through which they were told all requests for reasonable adjustments had to be made. For these interviewees many had assumed that as they were being told this by the institution it must be legal, indicating a lack of understanding about key rights and a need for signposting to advice services.
- **Getting the right support and recognition of needs is an exhausting process, often starting well in advance of courses beginning.** Within adult education there is an onus on disabled people to advocate for themselves, with their needs not

considered in advance. Furthermore, when requesting support there was an expectation to talk in terms of being deficient which was seen as disempowering. In addition, many disabled people feel there is a lack of awareness from adult education providers as to what their needs are and they are often offered solutions that they do not want. For those who suspected they had learning difficulties getting a diagnosis as an adult was also seen as a significant barrier, requiring time, effort and in some cases money that people didn’t have in order to be able to access the support they needed.

- **Disabled people also face significant additional financial costs to navigate adult education.** This varied from having to gather funds to get transport to tube stations to needing to organise captioning software for online courses to being denied refunds for arriving late or missing a session due to their condition. These additional costs can become part of the extra costs described by research from Scope (2019) which found that disabled people on average face extra costs of £583 per month, with one in five facing additional costs of over £1000 per month.
- **Sensory considerations such as heat and noise sensitivity were also barriers to both accessing educational buildings themselves and travelling for adult education.** In particular large open concourses were highlighted as exacerbating distressing sounds, and noise dampeners such as plants were not often featured to help with this.

Financial barriers

“If the course is £20 and I’ve got £50 a week to live on I won’t be coming.”

“[With reduction] it’s £30 to £40 each semester and that’s quite a lot - if you’re on benefits that’s quite a lot of money.”

“Most people are curious but are inhibited as they are focused on survival.”

“It’s a shame if they [the DWP] don’t come on-board - how is a person supposed to progress?”

“I’ve been told I cannot access adult education because I would lose my benefits. I was scared of doing anything to upset the system.”

“The meeting with the local job centre - it was quite a negative feedback I got in terms of any adult education. Adult education was not even mentioned - it was just a case of ‘you need to find a job’.”

“I don’t know because if I didn’t have the money I’d feel uncomfortable asking for it. Maybe if on sign-up forms, people who earned beneath a certain threshold were offered support, it’d be better than asking for it.”

- **Universal Credit and the benefits systems represent a serious barrier for many who want to participate in adult education, with many being dissuaded from pursuing learning.** Several interviewees described being interrogated about adult education courses they had considered doing, with many finding it difficult to convince work coaches of the benefit of doing a programme. For those who had been assessed as having a limited capacity for work there was a fear that doing a course would later be used against them. On top of this, those working on low-incomes had been told that they could only take training opportunities if they declined work, which for many meant jeopardising connections they had built over many years. One interviewee recounted how after losing his job during the pandemic he was told that he would not be able to do more advanced courses and

should instead change career and start from level 1 qualifications if he wanted to do adult education. As he described it, “you’re [the system is] asking so much of an individual to sacrifice” in order to be allowed to learn.

- **Longer courses are too expensive for many on low incomes, even if the course itself is free.** It needs to be properly recognised that taking part in adult education for many low-income people represents a trade-off where work hours are reduced in order to accommodate learning. There was a fear from some of our interviewees that committing to a longer course meant restricting their incomes too much, and some had experienced making changes to their working patterns only for the course to be cancelled at the last minute due to a lack of participants, placing them in precarious positions. Additional costs such as travel or care also need to be considered.
- **Absence of guarantees for continued funding onto the next levels of courses is another barrier for those who wish to engage with learning.** For those who were seeking better employment prospects there was a hesitancy to commit to level 1 courses as they feared that funding may be withdrawn before they could progress to level 2 or 3. Others describe being assured that they could access support from an institution only to be told very far into the process that they were ineligible. Furthermore, people frequently don’t have the right information in terms of what financial support is available and where they should go for it, and in some instances the cost of travel between organisations to try and organise this was prohibitive.
- **Caring responsibilities remain a significant barrier to participating in adult education.** As well as reducing the time and energy a person has available, there is the added potential costs of arranging cover for caring responsibilities, meaning that even for fully funded courses carers were priced out of attending.

Spaces and places

“I think that [having more informal options] is a good way of pushing people in the right direction. If they start off informally, it may encourage them to go to more formal options.”

“Creating trust and bonds and meaningful relationships doesn’t happen in a classroom setting.”

“[I would chose holding classes in a library] because a library means that it is definitely not secretly the government.”

“As it becomes less localised, barriers increase unless you happen to be a car driver.”

- **Overall people want the option to pursue adult education in more informal spaces.** Many interviewees felt current settings for adult education have tended to be quite clinical and formal, replicating places where they have had negative experiences. In particular, one interviewee discussed how her trauma from childhood education made adult education inaccessible to her as the buildings trigger traumatic flashbacks. Whilst they would prefer a learning environment that was less institutional, having a mixture of online and informal spaces as part of the experience was seen as desirable in allowing more people to access education who are commonly excluded.
- **In an ideal world, adult education courses would have a wider choice of different venues.** One theme that emerged across interviews was the wish for adult education spaces that took people away from their daily life and helped bring about a “[transportation to a new headspace](#)”. The idea here was that going somewhere unconventional would help people to break from the stresses of daily life that can inhibit their ability to learn and concentrate.



Course content

“Come and meet people, figure out what your transferable skills are, figure out what you want to do.”

“If I learn computer that improves my self-confidence because I see on the computer compare the price, compare the world. And if I learn English that’s the thing that will help me, which I need when I need a doctor, when I need to fill out a form, when paying a bill online.”

- **Shorter courses that sought to “fill in the gaps” left by school were the most popular way people felt they could be brought into adult education.** Having access to very brief, low commitment programmes was seen as a way to encourage people who had negative experiences the most - as one interviewee noted, being able to take part in fun workshops and other free, simple, learning experiences when they had first been made unemployed allowed them to say “I am worthy”.
- **Terminology needs to be simplified and explained where it cannot be avoided as it risks excluding people.** As one interviewee noted, her lack of academic terminology had resulted in her having to drop out of many courses and had resulted in a fear of engaging with new courses. As she explained, “sometimes it makes me frightened to speak”. This barrier was also present amongst those who had come to the UK from different countries even when their first language was English and made it harder for people to determine the appropriate course level for themselves.
- **Adult education learning styles need to be distinguished from childhood education styles as for many people these methods do not work.** A frequent challenge for interviewees was repeatedly being taught the same way which impaired their ability to grasp the topic. This was especially pertinent as for many the subjects they struggled with were ones that those around them were unable to help them with. One interviewee recounted how - after many years of being told she was bad at all STEM subjects - a hairdressing and beauty course had taught her science, and a

fellow classmate had explained fractions using day to day examples which allowed her to finally grasp the concept.

- **Fixed time frames are a challenge for many people.** Many interviewees noted that because of the limited time and the fast pace of many classes there was a hesitancy to ask for clarification or other help from teaching staff for fear of slowing the course down and delaying other students. This was particularly the case for those who had language barriers or learning difficulties which made them more self-conscious. Additionally, timelines meant that for those who were consumed outside of classes with pressing matters, there was generally not enough time to complete coursework or study.
- **Mentoring was raised by many interviewees as a way to help with accessibility and with figuring out education paths before and during adult education.** Unlike teaching assistants, mentors were seen as people with more of a disconnect from the service itself which would make people feel more comfortable discussing challenges they had with the institution or questions they had about subject matter that they felt too embarrassed to bring up in class.
- **Course content should be collaboratively designed with local people to respond to the needs of an area.** Across all interviews there was a strong desire that local adult education providers should work with a selection of learners from across the community to both suggest new courses but also to design how those courses should look. It was felt that involvement of local people would ensure that adult education courses more directly helped the local area and that adult education itself became an important part of people’s lives. In particular many interviewees wanted those with lived experience of exclusion from education to be centred within this process through some form of steering panel who would be able to suggest ways to bring in people hesitant about returning to education, and best support them through their learning.

- **Courses suggested by interviewees to engage people in education generally sought to combine creativity with the ability to develop skills useful for work and life and deepening local connections.**

Throughout interviews there was an eagerness to pursue core skills through less traditional means. Interviews in the east end seemed to tend to lean towards more creative ways for people to develop their English language ability (for instance through a documentary making course where people could learn how to capture local oral history through interviews) whilst many interviewees in other parts of London wanted courses that combined artistic expressions like music and visual art with social sciences. Interviewees suggested that course content should take on a local focus, with broad support for local history courses that would let people learn more about where they live and the communities in the area.



Impact of the pandemic

“It was really, really difficult to stay focused because I have a really short attention span. Being in a room with a lecturer was far more engaging than being behind a computer screen.”

“I wanted to do online classes but because of the pandemic, we had to look after the children at home.”

“People have either embraced the digital world or been alienated from it.”

- **Within our interviews there was a divide between those who had benefited from the shifts that had come with the pandemic and those who had not.** Generally, the majority of people had poorer experiences over the pandemic. However, for those (predominantly people with access needs) who had benefited from extra time saved from travelling, the increased variety of online learning had allowed them to engage after many years of avoiding adult education.
- **Whilst the shift to online learning has resulted in reduced costs in some areas these have been offset by increased costs in others and lower incomes.** In particular, many on lower incomes reported the internet and utilities being a significant cost, even when offset by no transport costs.
- **Covid anxiety is still a large factor in hesitancy to move back to in-person learning.** Interviewees talked about the worries of travelling far from their local area, and some felt they were learning to re-engage with society from scratch. Hybrid online-offline systems were seen as the easiest ways to accommodate the different paces and abilities of people to do in-person learning.
- **Over the course of the pandemic, overcrowding in households has significantly impacted the ability of those with caring responsibilities on low incomes to take part in adult education.** Alongside the pressures caused by a lack of space and time, for example when looking after children’s needs, access to the internet and computers were often reserved for schoolwork. Furthermore, social networks that normally could potentially be called upon to help with care work in order to free up time for learning were not available due to restrictions.
- **The technological divide has been exacerbated, with restrictions not just on people accessing online courses but also finding out about adult education in the first place.** For many people the loss of access to physical locations such as schools represented a loss of information. Additionally, many older people reported needing support to get online and as a consequence online courses were harder to access, particularly those earlier in the morning during school runs of children or neighbours who might otherwise help them.
- **Motivation to attend adult education has decreased for many people over the pandemic as a by-product of increased life stresses.** There was also a feeling for some that a significant social element is missing from online courses and that communicating through online platforms just isn’t the same and doesn’t create the space for you to learn from others as effectively. Some also find it more difficult to focus in an online setting.

Additional findings

“More involvement with different age groups – so you can see different views and it won't be a one sided view.”

“The criteria for the courses were not met by me – so I had to take a step or two back.”

“I would be excited if there is a taster session so you can see if you like it.”

“They just assume that older people don't need career advice. They just think ‘right they got it when they were young and they're going to do exactly the same thing for the next forty years’, but that's not the case. People change and people realise that they want to do different things, and the way that you think and feel changes as you get older.”

- **For some interviewees a solution to engagement was pulling in those traditionally excluded from education and getting them to steer the direction of policy.** This lived experience was seen as essential when it came to co-production to ensure that courses and providers become more accessible, and that subjects are taught in ways that draw in people less likely to want to partake in adult education.
- **Stereotypes of those who were formerly within the criminal justice system, or those associated with people who were, had large impacts on the adult education experience for some interviewees.** One interviewee recounted being denied resources to complete a course project with their class partner as they were labelled as potential “thieves” by the teacher, and another discussed being asked by people if they could purchase drugs from them.
- **There is a feeling from some that the toll of physical labour is not considered when designing courses and assessment timelines.** Those with manual jobs or caring responsibilities were often more exhausted by the end of the day, which impaired their ability to focus and study. Interviewees in these situations wanted a greater acknowledgement of the day-to-day pressures which impacted their ability to learn, and a greater flexibility to accommodate this.
- **Course prerequisites often restrict certain subjects to those already holding qualifications.** A lack of recognition of life or work experience when it came to being admitted to higher level courses meant that many people felt they could not partake in courses that would help them advance their career without committing large amounts of time and money to work through all levels. One interviewee noted she had worked in the field for a decade but was still expected to do a level 1 and 2 course before she could complete a level 3 course which would help her day-to-day, even when her workplace was happy to provide references to attest to her capability of completing the course successfully. This ultimately meant she was unable to commit to adult education as she could not afford the whole set of courses.
- **Many interviewees wanted opportunities to have taster sessions or “pick and mix” courses where they could test out what they enjoyed before settling on a single course.** This was especially important for interviewees who had experienced issues with securing funding or who were older and wanted to change career paths where there was a greater pressure to make the ‘right’ choice. Testing courses was also seen as a way that people could get to grips more with their talents and interests, and be exposed to subjects they might not have previously considered studying. The focus on employment in the opinion of some interviewees had led to the creation of tick box exercises within adult education to rush people through to qualifications, rather than nurturing connections and a love of learning.

5. Recommendations

Throughout the interview process there was a strong sense that more could be done to make adult education more accessible in the capital. In general, the most frequent recommendations from interviewees focused on making it clear that adult education was for everyone and wasn't just restricted to those looking to enter the workplace or change career. Changes to enable funding and support applications to be smoother and quicker were the other most frequent focus of interviewees, who often had experienced – or knew others who had experienced – difficulties in receiving support they were entitled to.

For most of the people we spoke with there was a feeling that if some of the recommendations below were implemented, their ability and desire to participate in adult education would be increased and that others in their communities would also be more likely to participate as well.





Reframing adult education as a top priority

“Adult education is not only education, it’s lots of things ... Sharing your views. Keeping your mind fresh. Communication. [Meeting] different kinds of people and getting together.”

“It’s good for the community as well, and your children, and for the future, and the environment. Good for your health, for mental health, for everything.”

Our main priority recommendation that comes out of this project is that the GLA and education providers need to focus on reframing adult education so that the promotion of adult education highlights its wider benefits rather than primarily focusing on career progress.

Throughout our interviews many people we spoke to wanted a more radical and forward looking vision of education where adult education is not just focused on employment but is about supporting people to thrive and improve their confidence and wellbeing. As a result, a priority should be de-centring qualifications for employment and instead highlighting the many other benefits that individuals can receive from getting involved with adult education, such as:

- improving confidence;
- building life skills;
- maintaining active physical lives;
- improving mental health;
- integrating with society and community.

Promotion of adult education needs to be multi-channel, with clear offline communication to Londoners about what is available to them

One of the most essential areas for education providers, local authorities and the GLA to work together on is ensuring that knowledge of adult education and funding entitlements is disseminated amongst the community. A key recommendation from this project is that there is a priority on proactive offline communication with an emphasis on going to where people are to share information (such as via schools and faith groups).

By and large most knowledge of adult education courses that people receive is through word of mouth, which was seen as reassuring individuals that a course was good and that in navigating funding, they could seek advice. Additionally for many people they were unsure of exactly what they wanted to do so there was hesitation around committing time and money to something untested.

Ideas for how to best promote adult education in the capital include:

- Any promotion of adult education needs to come with clear guidance on how to access funding.
- Popular suggestions for where to connect with people were through schools and faith groups, with the possibility of having stalls on certain days so those passing through could ask questions. These were highlighted as places with a degree of inbuilt trust which would make people feel more comfortable taking a chance on starting a course.
- Leaflets and posters were seen as the best ways to reach people, particularly when placed in schools and on social housing noticeboards.
- Advertising in local magazines, both in print and online is another way to reach people who could then pass on information through word of mouth. The framing of advertising should focus on the holistic benefits of adult education. Many interviewees suggested formulating questions such as “Are you confused by modern CV techniques? Do you want to feel more confident with online applications?” to make people think if they begin adult education, they will become better at these life skills.

- Images and testimonies of real people saying “I did this course and then I...” were seen as a way to get people engaged, particularly if the focus was not just on work but on connecting with others.



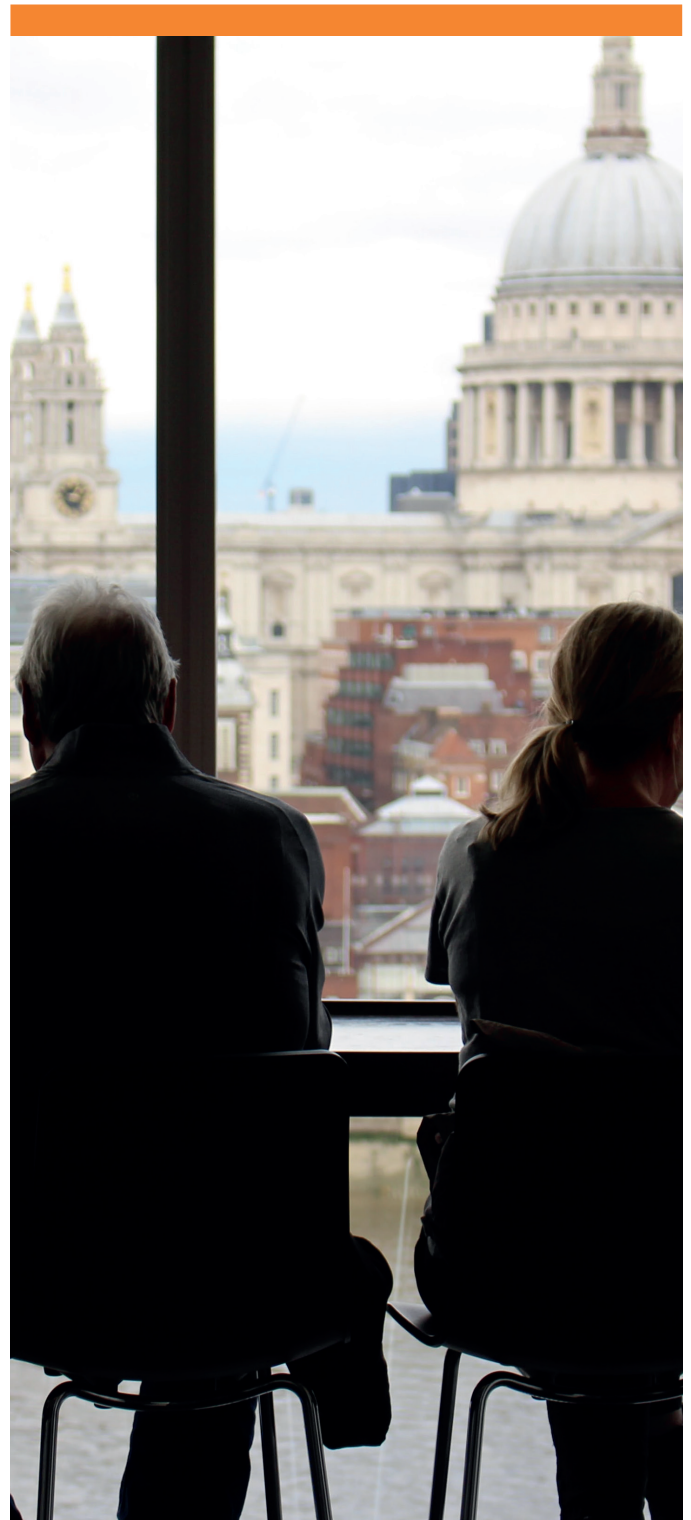
Addressing past damaging experiences is key to enabling marginalised groups to return to adult education

Addressing the past is essential in winning many disadvantaged people back to education. A key priority for education providers should be to engage with disabled students to co-produce a new way forward for adult education that is centred around their needs. Doing so would also demonstrate an active inclusion effort that would help dispel some of the scepticism we heard towards providers' intentions over the course of this project.

A real reckoning needs to be made with the long term consequences of the system of “**educationally subnormal**” and the lack of appropriate support that many people experienced within their childhood learning. Without acknowledging how they have been let down officially, and a demonstration of how the system will be different, it will remain difficult to attract them back.

Suggestions on how this could be achieved included:

- Centring lived experience of those who had negative experiences and would be the hardest to win back. Co-production of curriculum and environmental design was seen as especially important. As one interviewee said, “**students who have been offrolled or excluded or sent to a PRU or deemed ‘unfit’ to be integrated into formal education - those are the people to start with who should be building the curriculum**”.
- For disabled students, many want a central pan-London unit hosted at the GLA and staffed with disabled people who would be available to educational institutions to work with on improving their accessibility and educating staff on the social model of disability. This was seen as something that could work alongside assessments so that the focus would always be on improvement over punishment.
- Access to support to be based on needs and not on holding a formal diagnosis, with an acknowledgement of the issues that have been created and compounded in the past with centring diagnosis as the only route to educational support.



Increasing accessibility for a wide range of people through funding and proactive support to improve participation

Accessibility for our interviewees was viewed in a broad way, geared towards not only those traditionally thought of as disadvantaged by the system itself but also those who had pressures in their day-to-day lives which might make learning harder for them.

Education providers, local authorities and the GLA should work together to take more proactive steps in ensuring all adult education students are helped to succeed. A key recommendation for the GLA from our participants was that funding is prioritised for providers who can demonstrate creating more inclusive accommodations for their learners beyond those legally required, particularly those who may have limited time outside of class or who may have support needs such as around language.

As part of this, ideas for helping a broad range of people access adult education include:

- Providers need to work with Jobcentre Plus to ensure that adult education is properly promoted and that there is a clear understanding regarding supporting claimants who want to get involved with adult education. Additionally, more information needs to be shared with claimants about how they can access funding for adult education, and where possible the process of approval should be streamlined and encompass a wider range of courses.
- Tying funding to a clear demonstration from providers of their thought processes and steps in place to make things actively inclusive and using this as an opportunity for collaborative learning between providers.
- Being proactive rather than reactive - in other words having access built in as a default where possible rather than having to be asked. Simple changes such as frequent breaks, the ability for people to move around during class, a selection of different types of chairs available, captions for online lectures would go a long way to making courses more inclusive.
- When registering for a course there should also be an accessibility questionnaire as standard with a checklist of access support that people can tick to request. This would move away from the current system where

students - particularly disabled students - have to advocate for themselves and take on the work of co-ordinating their educational support.

- Within course descriptions there should be a clear description of what knowledge and resources (particularly regarding technology and digital skills) are needed to complete the class. For those who may struggle there should also be clear descriptions of what support is available.
- Where possible, mentors should be provided by educational institutions in the form of experienced learners to help students navigate course content, signpost to support where needed, and provide advice on what other steps a student could take into adult education. Mentors can also be tied into part of an evaluation system by feeding back common challenges and concerns.
- Rights education for both students and staff is important for ensuring the best outcomes, and there should be a central pool of funded support workers (peer workers where possible) that individuals are able to contact for advice on their rights and support on navigating access requests.
- A small section after class should be reserved for specific follow ups with learners with English as a second or foreign language to check if there were things hard for them to understand within the course to ensure they do not fall behind. There also needs to be a movement away from complex language, or where such language cannot be avoided a clear description of what it is referring to.



Increased financial support for vulnerable and low-income people

Across our conversations one of the main ways that our respondents wanted the GLA to help is to create an increased and more varied funding support structure and a widened eligibility criteria for adult learners in London. In particular, it is important that funding enables low-income people and others who are struggling to know they have guaranteed financing should they need to retake a course, travel to classes, arrange care, or access packages of multi-level training.

Funding remains a huge barrier to many people accessing adult education, particularly those whose social networks are unable to make up the financial shortfall or provide support in other ways (such as lifts to classes or care cover).

Suggestions for improving financial support include:

- For people seeking courses to progress within their career or to change careers funding needs to be available as a package to cover multiple levels (for instance covering a level 1 to a level 3 diploma) rather than on a per course basis to ensure that they are able to reach the qualification level necessary for finding work.

- Clear guidance needs to be given on how people can access financial support to cover the remainder of their fees should their financial circumstances change part-way through an adult education course, and this guidance should be shared in the same place as more general financial support guidance so that it is easy to find.
- There should be flexibility in the cap on the number of times an individual can retake a course with funding that considers the role of learning difficulties and life circumstances that may have contributed to the individual failing a course.
- Where appropriate, discounts or refunds could be provided to those students who were able and willing to volunteer in some capacity (potentially as mentors) within the adult education system.
- Transportation and care costs need to be provided to those who qualify for funding to ensure that there are no hidden costs within the provision of free courses, and to avoid penalising those without social networks that might be able to support them. One proposal for childcare costs was to provide a weekly amount to allow people to ask members of their social network or professionals to commit to long-term regular care for extended courses, the agreement for which would be signed by both the student and the proposed carer.
- Where possible, funding and other provisions should be applied automatically rather than requested.

A wider variety of more accessible and engaging venues and locations

For adult education providers, moving away from a traditional classroom environment is key to attracting a wider range of people, particularly those from marginalised groups. In particular, one of the most common recommendations in this category was a new style of classroom designed to encourage informal student collaboration and shared learning, and to make clear the difference from what many felt was a very stressful childhood schooling experience.

Across all interviews people wanted more informal and varied spaces in which to pursue adult education as part of a way to feel more engaged with the classes and to develop social bonds which helped with learning outcomes.

Ideas raised included:

- There is a need to re-design classroom environments. Classrooms for adult education should look very different from those of childhood education. Seating arrangements should be designed for collaborative learning, with sofas and armchairs along with flexibility for people to get up and walk around or stretch if they felt like it. Plants were also suggested as another way to differentiate from schools, along with places to make tea and coffee which encouraged the building of a social community of learning.

- A movement away from traditional adult education institutions was seen as important, with options of different locations to learn. Community centres were a popular suggestion, as was outdoor spaces. Community centres and libraries were considered to be trusted spaces that did not feel as institutional. It was especially important for many people who were in receipt of benefits that these spaces were clearly not linked with job centres as many raised their suspicions that attending courses would be used against them by the DWP punitively.
- Travel outside of London or to other parts of the capital was seen as a way to build social connections within the class and as a way of exposing people to different ways of living as part of their learning. Museums, for example, were frequently brought up as ideal spaces for learning. Interviewees also suggested that this could be done as part of an exchange scheme by linking with universities and adult education providers outside of London.
- Local bases were seen as ideal in order to avoid the cost of travel in both time and money, and also had the benefit of helping to build up local community networks which helped people in all areas of their lives. For interviewees local was seen as places generally within 15-20 minutes walking distance of or a short-bus ride away from their home, with most interviewees considering anything that required using a train to be too far and costly.



Course content should connect with the needs of each local area, being designed in collaboration with local people

Local councils and education providers should make sure to consult residents of the local area to find out what courses are needed in an area, and what types of courses would engage those residents who may never have experienced adult education before.

Low pressure entry-point classes are a simple way of involving people in the system and giving people a confidence boost to help them pursue more long-term learning. Soft entry points are particularly important in getting people to engage with adult education who may be hesitant.

Courses that were proposed to fulfil this function include:

- “Fill in the gaps” courses designed to cover areas missing from schooling, with particular focus on practical life skills such as “how to file a tax return”, “how to organise a pension”, basic financial literacy, and learning about legal rights.
- Local history lessons as a good entry point to get people into classes - interviewees were keen to know more about their local areas and the people in them.
- Basic technology courses that focused on a specific topic and walked people through how to make the most of the technology they had - for instance “how to use your smartphone” or “how to use social media”.

Once people engaged with adult education there was a desire for more student-led learning:

- Project-based learning as a way to encourage students to tackle more feared subjects such as English and Maths and develop social bonds. For instance, a class where students work together to make a short documentary film on the local area could incorporate English, history and software skills. Co-designing of curriculums and policy priorities with local people to make sure that subjects offered are locally relevant and respond to the specific needs of the community.





Better support for those who learn differently

A further area that adult education providers can benefit from investing in is creating structures that empower different learners – whether they have learning difficulties or other life stressors – to finish courses successfully, with one of the top recommendations being a move towards coursework assessment and more relaxed submission deadlines.

For many of those we interviewed, adult education replicates some of the same challenges they experienced within childhood education. In particular, much of the organisation of the system renders it inaccessible to many.

Suggestion to improve this include:

- Where possible coursework and teacher assessment over examinations should be implemented for courses, especially those leading to qualifications. For students with learning difficulties examinations did not allow them

to show their capability and for students with negative experiences of childhood education, exams made them particularly anxious.

- In recognition of the lack of time and resources many people have outside of classes, multiple deadlines should be implemented for submitting coursework or sitting exams. Having set points, including months after a course has finished, for an individual to complement assessed work would enable more people to feel confident about starting courses which lead to qualifications, and give them the best chance to succeed.
- Easily accessible study spaces should be available where possible to aid those living in overcrowded environments and/or those with limited access to the internet to study, complete coursework, or go to online classes.
- Options to sit a class twice without a funding penalty for students with learning difficulties or English as a second language who may need more teacher support in courses where timelines are short.

More holistic evaluation metrics which capture soft skills and social network growth

A key area discussed within our interviews was that of evaluation. For many interviewees it was important that evaluation by education providers, local authorities, and the GLA considered a more holistic view of the purpose of adult education as there was concern that the focus on employment meant valuable courses for local people such as sewing, which had helped them develop stronger social connections and greater self-esteem but which did not have an immediate impact on their work prospects, experienced funding cuts. As part of this it was seen as important that evaluation included assessing how an individual's confidence may have been impacted by a course, as well as how connected they felt with their local community.

It was suggested that where possible follow ups should be done after a year has passed to see how people are doing, what their perspectives are on the course they took and whether they are still engaging with adult education (and if not why). This would allow an opportunity to see if new barriers had arisen or if certain courses that may not lead to immediate employment outcomes still had a positive long-term effect from the soft skills and networks created.

The new London Learner Survey (LLS) from the GLA will help to measure some of the impacts seen as important by those we spoke with, however whilst it is a good first step, more needs to be done to capture the variety of ways people may benefit from adult education. It should be noted that the timeframe for follow ups in the LLS (5 months after course completion) is shorter than the timeframe suggested above. Additionally whilst the LLS asks if completing the course helped the respondent to get their current paid work (if any), improve their general wellbeing, and/or increase the amount of different people they have met, it does not offer the ability to discuss other benefits that may be directly attributed to the course such as securing a stronger social support network or developing specific skills they have found helpful in life and work for instance.

It was also seen as important by interviewees that evaluations along these lines were carried out by adult education providers for their own records as well as the GLA, so that providers could better advocate for funding on behalf of courses whose value may not necessarily be immediately apparent.



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