

Guest Foreword

Adult learning, Upskilling Pathways, and the Adult Learner

DAVID MALLOWS, EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBER

Introduction

The *European Agenda for Adult Learning* (EAAL) highlights the need to increase participation in adult learning of all kinds (formal, non-formal and informal learning) whether to acquire new work skills, for active citizenship, or for personal development and fulfilment. And yet, in many European countries, adult education is being more and more narrowly defined, with skills acquisition as its primary driver. This is, it is argued, in response to the financial difficulties of recent years. However, I would suggest that the current focus on producing skilled workers, rather than well-educated adults, can lead to policy that undervalues adult education, missing the benefits that it can bring to individuals, communities and society.

Upskilling Pathways

The European Commission's *Upskilling Pathways* initiative incorporates two dominant views of adult learning. It is both liberal and compensatory. The term liberal adult education, largely used in the United States of America, refers to adult education initiatives developed to meet the needs of adults in changing circumstances. In the case of the USA these changing circumstances included examples like cowboys and others travelling to the New World who required new skills to be able to survive and then prosper in their new and challenging environment. In Europe the focus was on compensation, providing a second chance for adults who had not completed their basic education, due to failings of the compulsory education system, or issues in their personal life.

The *Upskilling Pathways* initiative is compensatory in that it recognises that many adults lack basic skills and need support in order to access a pathway to higher level professional skills. However, its main focus is on meeting the

economic challenges that face the European Union, and to do this it proposes a more liberal form of adult education. The initiative was initially termed the Skills Agenda and has a particular focus on professional learning, workforce development, and is largely focused on equipping adults with the new skills to meet the demands of one particular domain of their lives, the workplace.

Indeed, the major imperative of European policy in adult education is the development of human capital – the acquisition of skills in order to drive economic competitiveness. Much adult education policy is designed with that goal in mind. It is supply-driven, with formal courses leading to recognised qualifications, nationally agreed standards, and progression routes through the system. Of course, there is nothing wrong with that and many people will benefit, as will our economies, if people improve their skills and knowledge in order to help Europe to prosper. However, adult education is about so much more than equipping people with the Skills that are needed for employment. My fear is that we sometimes forget that.

The Wider Benefits of Adult Education

A recent review of the wider benefits of learning undertaken by Tom Schuller in 2017 as part of the UK government's Foresight Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning project, suggests that firstly we should be aware that adult education has both direct and indirect impacts. The former is much easier to measure, particularly the concrete outcomes of formal learning such as qualifications, new skills etc. However, adult education also has indirect impacts, such as greater confidence and improved social networks which are more difficult to measure, but perhaps no less significant.

Schuller also suggests that adult education has an impact at various different levels: individual, household, community, society. And that these levels overlap – what benefits the community will also potentially benefit the individual. He presents evidence of the impact of participation in adult education, in three specific domains: health, work, and community.

He suggests that adult learning can have a positive impact on physical health (smoking cessation, amount of exercise taken, nutrition lower risk of coronary heart disease, reduction in drug abuse); and mental health (identity, coping, a sense of purpose in life; wellbeing; life satisfaction; onset and management of dementia). It also has an impact on children's health and wellbeing as adult learners are more likely to engage in their children's education, leading to better outcomes for the child.

Adult learning can have a positive impact on the individual's working life (job-seeking, job retention, earnings, aspirations, job satisfaction) and also for the organisation (productivity, employee commitment, labour turnover, output, employment levels, tax revenues, acceptance of innovation). In terms of community, Schuller demonstrates that participation in adult learning can have a positive impact on social capital (interpersonal and social trust, social connections, community engagement); social cohesion and integration: (tolerance of diversity, higher degree of trust in people of different religions and nationalities); community involvement (civic participation, volunteering); crime (reduction in reoffending rates); democratic participation (political understanding, feelings of empowerment and levels of political participation).

Not only does adult education equip adults with skills that they need to be productive in the workplace, it also has multiple wider benefits for health and community. It generates social capital and supports social inclusion, it increases community and civic participation and should be a central element in policy responses across a range of different government departments, not just in education. Adult education has never been more important, particularly in times of Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism. In many EU Member states, the sense of exclusion and disillusion felt by large groups of people in society can, and has, lead to support for populist parties. Adult education can support adults in being informed, critical and engaged with the issues, both local and global that impact on their lives.

Understanding Adult Learners

Adult Education is a good, a positive force in these troubled times and we should be supporting its development and demanding attention. However, participation in Lifelong Learning in many European countries, including Ireland, currently falls well below the EU benchmark for 2020 of 15%. And so we need to ensure that policy makers, and the wider society, know about these benefits. For that we require good evidence and we need to craft messages from that evidence to enable adult education to compete with all of the other demands on the very stretched public purse. In crafting those messages, we should be very aware of the power of language to shape perceptions. We all know that language is important and that it can shape our attitudes.

A great strength of the European Commission's *Upskilling Pathways* initiative is the recognition that for many adults gaining vocational qualifications at Level 3 or 4 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a distant possibility

and one that requires significant investment in their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. However, I am concerned with some of the language used in policy documents and in discussions around implementation. Language is important, as it shapes attitudes and we should ensure that the terms we use are appropriate. I will pick up on the use of one particular term, but there are others. However, this one I think is a helpful example.

It has become common to hear the term ‘low-skilled’ used to describe the target group of the Commission’s Adult Skills policies. Of central concern is that this term ‘low-skilled adults’ is simply inaccurate. No adult lacks skills, but certain skills (usually those that are easy to measure), are more valued than others in policy rhetoric. The definition of low-skilled is usually based on two sources of data: educational outcomes and/or standardised assessments of reading and numeracy and so it recognises only a very narrow set of skills. These so-called ‘low-skilled’ adults might speak several languages; drive a range of vehicles; be experts in agriculture, astronomy or athletics; they may hold down jobs, raise families, manage budgets, take part in civic life, including voting, or contribute to the work of trade unions, housing and faith communities. They might be good listeners or tell a really good joke. In short, they are skilled in many ways.

Not only is the term ‘low-skilled’ inaccurate, it is of course disrespectful and it also betrays ignorance of the reality of adults’ lives. With the consequence that it is likely to lead to adult education policies that fail to address the challenge set as part of the European Commission’s *Upskilling Pathways* Agenda. By characterising this group of adults by what they cannot do rather than what they can and want to do, (a deficit approach) there is a real danger that the *Upskilling Pathways* initiative designed by Member States will alienate rather than inspire adults. Adult learning theory teaches us that adults will only engage in learning that they find meaningful and that is of immediate relevance and use to them. If we design adult learning with a predefined, inaccurate, and disrespectful understanding of the ‘low-skilled’ we should not be surprised if they fail to engage. If instead we listen carefully to adults and design programmes that build on their interests and their skills, we may have a chance of creating *Upskilling Pathways* that are meaningful, engaging and successful.

Policy Coherence in Adult Education

One further thought on what is needed to meet the challenge set by the European Commission is to create effective pathways for adult learning. Adult education in many countries is seen as a policy Cinderella, with scant resources

and a lack of effective long-term planning and coordination between its players. A lack of policy coherence can have a debilitating impact on the development of adult education.

Policy coherence means ensuring that policy objectives and processes in one area do not contradict or jeopardise those in another. Policy coherence can only be achieved if policy makers - and we are all policy makers at some level, in the classroom, in our relations with others and in our approach to the work we do and the way we live our lives - look beyond our own narrow areas of responsibility, or frames of reference.

Within national governments, we should seek cross-organisational policy coherence: coordination between different types of public policies, between different levels of government, and between different stakeholders within and outside government. We can think about cross-organisational policy coherence in both vertical and horizontal terms.

Vertical coherence requires that the different levels of government – national, regional, and local – follow common policy objectives and align systems of funding, accreditation and quality assurance. This can be complicated, particularly if responsibility for adult education is distributed or devolved, leading to uncertainty about which layer of government is responsible.

We can also think of vertical coherence within a learning provider. Do leaders within learning providers effectively communicate and implement policy all the way down to the classroom? And do classroom teachers communicate effectively up the system? Within learning providers, the involvement of curriculum managers and teachers in formulation of policy is often limited. However, they are central to implementation of policy and there is no guarantee that the various levels of the organisation are working coherently to the same priorities.

Horizontal coherence implies that there is understanding and coordination across policy areas within national or regional or local government – for example, that the Ministry for Education and the Ministry for Employment share concepts, processes and outcomes related to adult education. Horizontal coherence can also be sought in the learning offer in a particular region – do providers A, B and C offer complementary courses with pathways between them?

The concept of a Learner Journey is helpful in conceptualising policy coherence. At each point of the learner journey, the adult learner interacts with the system. Each of these points is, in turn, influenced by policy made at national, regional or local level within the system and by leaders and curriculum managers and teachers within the learning provider. For this we should consider how an adult engages with the adult education system and ask whether it meets his or her needs in a coherent way across the life course. We should ask if there are stepping stones from one educational stage to the next, and are these established and functioning, providing a route to higher levels of qualifications for those who want this? Filling the gap between institutional levels of education and ensuring local access to and progression through these levels is key to policy coherence in adult education. At a national level, qualifications and entry requirements of adult education should be closely aligned. And at a local level the offer of providers should be aligned in such a way as to provide a coherent and explicit learner journey.

Conclusion

There are many factors that appear to be significant in designing effective, coherent policy. However, above all, effective cooperation between all stakeholders is key and for that to happen stakeholders need to be clear about their own responsibilities and what they stand to gain and there needs to be trust between them. Trust is built through successful joint working and the consequent increases in shared knowledge and understanding. Organisations such as AONTAS have a huge role to play in building that trust and shared understanding. Adult learning at its best is contingent and responsive. It helps adults to meet the challenges that they face. And it should be driven by the needs of adults. For that to happen we have to place learner voice at the centre of our discussions and ensure that their voices are not just heard but heeded.