

Written evidence submitted by the WEA (SPEB02)

Skills and Post-16 Education Bill Committee stage Response to call for evidence

Introduction

1. The WEA is the largest national adult education charity supporting community adult learning across England and Scotland. In the last academic year we reached nearly 30,000 students, despite the Covid-19 pandemic. We work with over 1000 community partners across the UK, to reach those who need us most. And deliver over 7,000 different courses to meet the diverse needs and interests of our learners, supported by nearly 1,000 tutors.
2. This submission focuses on the implications for community adult learning arising from the Skills & Post-16 Education Bill which has its Committee stage in the House of Commons from Tuesday 30th November.
3. The Bill has significant implications for community learning. Community learning providers such as the WEA provide important pathways for adult learners to progress towards further education and into work. The success of reforms aimed at improving access to L3 and above will be dependent on effective pathways at lower levels. Often adult learners in community provision are those with low or no qualifications, who require the most support in order to progress to higher level qualifications.
4. The Bill has relevance for community adult learning providers in terms of:
 - how they fit into local planning processes;
 - how they relate to accountability frameworks which focus on outcomes and local need; and
 - how they are treated within the overall funding system.
5. There is little in the Bill which **directly** supports learners who want to study below Level 3, which is where adult community learning can be very effective. Without support for community learning below Level 3, there will be limited pathways for the most disadvantaged learners to

progress into further education and/or work. The addition of Clause 25 to the Bill is a welcome exception as it directly promotes the importance of funding adult education at lower levels.

6. It is important that the Act and the reforms emerging from the Skills for Jobs White Paper create opportunities for adult learners with low or no qualifications. This means continuing to support community adult learning which is primarily supported through the Adult Education Budget.
7. This submission is in two parts:
 - (1) Commentary on specific parts of the Bill of immediate relevance to adult community learning providers
 - (2) Background information and statistics

Adult Community Learning – Bill specific

8. The Bill introduces a wide range of measures. Those which are most applicable to community learning are:
 - measures which strengthen the role of employer representative bodies in preparing Local Skills Improvement Plans;
 - introduction of a duty on providers to review how they meet local need; and
 - enabling the introduction of a lifelong learning entitlement which includes a new Lifelong Loan
9. While we do not see an immediate need to introduce new clauses or amendments to the Bill to support community learning, we believe that some of the clauses introduced during the House of Lords stages should be retained. In particular Clause 17 (supporting students on Universal Credit), Clause 18 (Lifelong learning review) and Clause 25 (supporting the right to free education at all levels).
10. **Local Skills Improvement Plans** (Chapter 1) - The Bill strengthens the role of employer groups who will lead Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). In order to have the biggest impact in local communities it will be important for employer groups to speak with all kinds of community providers so that LSIPs support a wide range of provision at all levels (including below Level 3). This will ensure that the Plans meet the needs of the most disadvantaged communities.
11. We are pleased that the Bill includes a clause which says that LSIPs should “draw on the views of”, amongst others, further education institutions, community learning providers, and specialist designated institutions. We hope to see this retained and strengthened in the published Act. Introduction of a **duty** on employer groups leading LSIPs to consult with local

providers and others (rather than simply “draw on the views of”) would be more powerful and would ensure that the full range of local needs are understood.

Local Needs

12. The Bill introduces a new duty on institutions within the further education sector to “review how well the education or training provided by the institution meets local needs” and to take actions to meet those needs better. This duty becomes part of the reporting and accountability framework for post-16 providers.
13. The average distance travelled by WEA students to attend their courses is approximately 2 miles. Even though the WEA is a national organisation, operating in all English regions, the focus of our work is at local level and we welcome this part of the Bill, which sets education providers firmly within a community context.
14. The Bill and Skills for Jobs White Paper tends to regard local need as essentially employment related which is a crucial indicator of impact but not the only one. It would be better to include a broader range of indicators of how well local need is being met by including other measures which have an economic impact. The WEA's Impact Report (Creating Opportunities) offers a template for the sorts of themes which could be included alongside employment indicators, such as health & wellbeing, community participation and essential skills (such as communications, critical thinking and teamwork) which are relevant in work contexts and beyond.

Lifelong Loan Entitlement

15. **The Lifelong Loan Entitlement** (chapter 3) - is very welcome but it only supports learners studying at Level 4 and above. There are a number of financial (and other barriers) which impact learners wanting to take Level 2 qualifications in particular.
16. Ideally the Lifelong Loan Entitlement would be extended to learners studying at Level 3 and Level 2 (where courses are not fully funded through other means). The National Skills Fund is already fully funding first Level 3 qualifications in certain subjects but for second L3 qualifications and for many Level 2 qualifications students are also currently expected to pay.
17. Extending the Loan Entitlement would rely on Treasury support to finance the expected take up, which could be considerable. The Loan would also need to be administered in such a way that it did not create barriers for low income learners who would not otherwise find taking out a Loan either feasible or advisable
18. As an alternative to extending the Loan Entitlement to levels below L4, an initiative which would increase participation is the continuation of the Adult Education Budget (AEB) low-wage trial, which ran from 2018 to 2020. This enabled adult learners who earned just above the usual threshold for eligibility for fully funded Level 2 courses to have their courses supported. The threshold at the last trial was just over £16,000.

19. The National Skills Fund has introduced a new offer of a fully funded Level 3 qualification for adults who do not already have one. Without financial support to open up Level 2 courses to more low-income learners, take up of the new Level 3 offer may be affected. Some learners may not be able to afford to take the Level 2 qualification which would enable them to progress on to Level 3.
20. Extension of the low-wage trial would not require fresh legislation so may not need to be written into the Bill. But it should be kept in mind when debating the importance of financial support for lifelong learning, alongside the Lifelong Loan Entitlement.

Other entitlements to funding

21. The WEA also welcomes the addition to the Bill of clause 18 (**Lifelong Learning Review**) which confers a duty on the Secretary of State to review the impact of restricting funding on students wishing to take an equivalent or lower qualification. Adult learners may need to take such qualifications in order to move into other sectors or to be more agile in their work options. Any measure which opens up the possibility of second equivalent qualifications being available to adult learners would be welcome.
22. Clause 25 - **Provision of opportunities for education and skills development** – is also a welcome addition as it enshrines the importance of the Adult Education Budget to supporting lower level qualifications. This is the most prominent and direct mention of adult education at lower levels and would provide a strong commitment to lifelong learning in all parts of the community if the enacted.
23. For reference, Clause 25 reads:
 - (1) *Any person of any age has the right to free education on an approved course up to Level 3 supplied by an approved provider of further or technical education, if he or she has not already studied at that level.*
 - (2) *Any approved provider must receive automatic in-year funding for any student covered by subsection (1), and supported by the Adult Education Budget, at a tariff rate set by the Secretary of State.*
24. The two clauses potentially affect each other. If Clause 18 leads to a change in eligibility allowing students to take a second fully funded qualification at the same level then the wording in Clause 25 (“if he or she has not already studied at this level”) would also need to change. We would encourage more flexibility to allow students to take equivalent or lower qualifications, fully funded, especially where this assists employment opportunities in new sectors.

Specialist Designated Institutions

25. The White Paper and the Bill tend to refer to Colleges as the main focus of the reforms. There are many other types of provider as well as Colleges operating in the post-16 sector. The

WEA, for example, is one of the Specialist Designated Institutions which – since the 1992 Further & Higher Education Act – have been eligible for grant funding on the same basis as FE Colleges.

26. The Department for Education has given some reassurance that the new Bill, when enacted, will not alter the status of Specialist Designated Institutions in any way, including current eligibility for grant funding. Nevertheless, it would be helpful to have this reiterated in the debate and carried into the guidance for the new Act.

Adult Community Learning - background

Level of funding for adult skills

27. While the Bill does not directly relate to the overall level of funding it is important to recognise that the debate is happening against a backdrop of long-term underfunding for adult education. The recent Budget has gone some way to redressing the balance but falls short when looked at longer term.
28. The Learning & Work Institute has calculated that adult skills funding might still be £750m lower in 2024/25 than in 2010/11. The real terms increase promised in the Budget is very welcome but still has a lot of ground to catch up to overturn previous underfunding.
29. The Budget proposes an increase in adult skills funding by 29% in real terms compared to 2019-20 – this funding will go towards a range of policies in England such as continuing the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to offer free Level 3 courses for adults, and quadruple the current scale of Skills Bootcamps.
30. It is not yet clear, however, what support will be available for provision which supports learners below Level 3, which will include some of the most disadvantaged adults and those furthest from the workforce.

The Adult Education Budget

31. There is no clarity yet on the future of the Adult Education Budget, which has been the main source of grant funding for community learning and provision for those studying **below** Level 3. The Budget announcements did not provide any detail and at the time of writing, the Department for Education has not released any figures.
32. It is vitally important that the level of funding for community learning is at least maintained at current levels to ensure continuity of important provision.

33. There are also plans to merge the AEB and the National Skills Fund. This risks de-prioritising funding for learners who are taking courses for Level 1 & 2 qualifications, including basic essential skills. The emphasis on qualifications at Level 3 and above in the National Skills Fund (and in recent Budget announcements) needs to be balanced with support for pathways at lower levels, otherwise the funding system will be “top-heavy” and ultimately will exclude learners who need most support.
34. In order to ensure support for adult learners below Level 3 it is better to maintain a distinct Essential Skills Fund alongside the National Skills Fund rather than merge the two with no ring-fencing.

Supporting Essential Skills

35. The Chancellor announced funding for Multiply, a programme to support numeracy for adult learners. The programme will be £560 million of new funding through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Support for essential skills is always welcome, but clarity is needed on how the new Multiply programme will complement funding for essential skills (maths as well as English and digital skills) through the Adult Education Budget. The funding through Multiply should be additional to AEB not replacing it.

If you have any questions or require further information please contact:

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The Impact of Community Adult Learning

Figures on the right taken from WEA's Creating Opportunities [report](#) (October 2021)



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