

## **Adult skills and lifelong learning**

*House of Lords - Committee Summary - Education Select Committee*

**23<sup>rd</sup> October 2019**

### **Witnesses:**

- Alison Wolf, The Baroness Wolf of Dulwich CBE)
- John Holford, Robert Peers professor of adult education, University of Nottingham
- Lyn Tett, professor emerita, University of Edinburgh and professor of community education, University of Huddersfield

(\*N.B no video on feed, the identity of some committee members asking questions was not able to be identified)

### **Overview**

The committee spoke to witnesses regarding the state of the UK adult education sector, focusing on identifying means of tackling the growing lack of provision which had developed over the last twenty years.

### **Adult learning in the UK**

Chair Robert Halfon (Con, Harlow) asked for comment on the state of adult learning in the UK today.

In response, Lyn Tett, professor emerita, University of Edinburgh and professor of community education, University of Huddersfield, said it was in decline, with reductions in numbers and difficulties in funding.

John Holford, Robert Peers professor of adult education, University of Nottingham, said there had been a radical decline in both the provision and breadth of adult education over the last twenty years.

The focus since the 1990s on 'lifelong learning' had focused mainly on learning for young adults and vocational skills rather than on a broader framework of adult education provision, Peers added.

Peers pointed to the almost total eradication of adult education departments in universities.

Alison Wolf, The Baroness Wolf of Dulwich CBE, noted the combination of declining funding and narrow objectives set by government. She added that the vocational skills part of provision was not working either.

## **Purpose of adult skills and lifelong learning**

Ian Mearns (Lab, Gateshead) asked what the main purpose of adult skills and lifelong learning should be.

In response, Wolf said she felt this was to produce a 'whole citizen' who was productive and politically active.

Tett said it should be able to do something to reduce entrenched disadvantage.

Holford noted the recent work done by the Centenary Commission on Adult Education, which had said adult education was fundamental to democratic life.

## **Further education - English and maths**

Asked by Halfon what should happen when a child left school not having done well in English and Maths, Wolf said there was a need for a clear set of alternative curricula going up to age 18, which was determined by how they had performed before they had left.

There was some disagreement between Wolf and Tett on the importance of retesting on English and maths skills, with Tett saying she felt this put people off education and that they should be allowed to learn other things.

A (female) committee member asked for comment on whether there was a need for more focus on functional post-16 numeracy skills.

Wolf said the fact Ofqual said you could only have one Maths GCSE when adults came back into further education, they were faced with a single curriculum which might be inappropriate.

Mearns said there should be some form of functional adult maths qualification.

In response, Wolf said doing this was more difficult than might be expected, was hugely expensive and also faced recognition issues.

## **Adult Community learning**

Halfon said in his home town of Harlow there was an adult community learning centre, which had extraordinary impacts for adults using it.

He said he had asked the Department for Education how many of these there were in the country and surprisingly they did not know.

Tett replied that there was lots of evidence for the value of adult and community learning, and said whilst these centres had once been pervasive, it was now up to the local authority whether they were kept as there was no statutory authority to provide them. She talked

further about various studies that existed which showed their efficacy.

Holford noted schools now found it too complicated to allow adult education to be run from their infrastructures.

### **Wider benefits**

Thelma Walker (Lab, Colne Valley) asked for comment on the wider benefits of adult education on the economy and productivity, health and wellbeing, and social justice. In response, Wolf said education was clearly tied to better health.

On productivity, she said that whilst it seemed logical to assume that more adult education would lead to higher productivity, doing this in a top-down fashion was not so simple: training people did not lead directly to more jobs.

Wolf said whilst education could thus not solve specific economic problems, nevertheless it appeared to be correlated to higher pay and a general uplift in personal outcomes.

Holford said there was an enormous amount of evidence regarding health and wellbeing benefits from lifelong learning. He said this had been due in large part to the efforts of the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre at the University of London, which had been set up by the Labour government in the late 1990s.

### **Back into work programmes**

Lucy Powell (Lab, Manchester Central) asked whether government back-into-work programmes such as the Work Programme had any use in getting people into work, noting they appeared to funnel people into cheaper courses.

In response, Wolf said she agreed, saying it wasted money by making people go on cheap courses to ensure they obtained their benefits.

She noted a situation where somebody wanted to be an HGV driver, but could only obtain funding for a forklift truck driver course.

### **Encouraging more adult education**

Asked by Powell what could be done to increase the efficacy of adult education provision, Wolf said she did not think devolution did much, and that a better approach would be to eradicate the separate 'pots' that constituted adult education funding.

Tett said she felt a sum of money should be allocated to everybody so they could spend it as they wanted.

Holford said the voluntary sector needed to rebuild its capacity to be able to provide

education, which had been eroded due to austerity. He added that grant-funding for these organisations should not be surrounded with preconditions.

Asked by Mearns how the adult education infrastructure could be rebuilt, Wolf said colleges needed to be used to act as centres for adult education, and that universities should also revive their roles in this.

### **National Retraining Scheme**

Asked by Mearns how effective the National Retraining Scheme would be.

In response, Wolf said she was unsure another specialised funding pot was needed, with its own regulations.

She said it would work fine if there was a large employer, it could not help the population as a whole access the opportunities they needed.

Wolf said the existing system made to be made much more available and properly-funded.

Tott said the online-learning element was problematic for poorer people and people with basic skills issues, due to lack of access to computers (as oppose to smartphones).

### **Funding balance**

Asked by Walker what the funding balance for adult education should be between government and employers, Wolf said there was no hard figure, but both should make contributions (as well as should the learner by taking loans, especially with the more expensive forms of training).

She said funding source should vary by type of education. Employers should definitely be encouraged to underwriting the cost of a national apprenticeship scheme, she added.

Holford said legislation as necessary to place obligations on employers to change their roles to provide a responsibility to the community in terms of training the workforce.

### **Lessons from abroad**

Powell asked for comment on key learning from other countries on adult education provision.

In response, Telford said almost any other European country had a better approach (he particularly mentioned Scandinavia), especially given the negative effects of austerity in the UK over the last ten years on adult education provision.

Wolf said the Canadian system tended to use universities and colleges to get out to

unreached areas, rather than relying on the voluntary sector.

Tett said Germany's system of state, industry and employee collaboration as a good model to look at.