

## **Title**

Mapping adult education in Scotland – hills and glens, challenging roads and hidden pathways.

## **Authors**

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## **Introduction**

Adult education is a very diverse area of practice nationally and internationally, with educators across Europe employing a wide range of skills, knowledge and practices in their everyday activity (Buiskool, Van Lakerveld and Broek 2009, 2010; Wihak, van Kleef, & Harris 2014). There has been acknowledgement that adult education now happens in an environment of instability and unpredictability, where learning programmes are more often geared towards assisting learners to compete for employment within the globalised economy (Forster, 2015; Galloway, 2016; Wildemeerch, 2014). In 2014, the Scottish Government (SG) presented its vision document for adult education '*Adult Learning in Scotland: Statement of Ambition*', known colloquially as the '*Statement of Ambition*' (SG, 2014), setting set out an intention to achieve world leading adult education provision. In 2015 the Scottish Government initiated a consultation, taking forward this vision through the creation of National Working Groups to consult around four themes of 'learner voice', 'professional development', 'access and participation' and 'family learning'.

This paper describes some of the challenges of developing a consultation about the future of adult learning, the processes of consultation and the findings, particularly as they relate to the ongoing professional development of adult educators. The policy context for adult education in Scotland is described (e.g. Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012) as drawing upon community learning and social practice approaches (CLD, 2018; Scottish Executive, 2001; 2005) and the scope of the consultation is explained as being informed by the professional competencies for adult educators (Galloway, 2015). The consultation consisted of a desk based analysis of existing professional development opportunities for adult education professionals, an on-line survey to gather views of adult education practitioners and a series of three intensive day long consultations with adult education practitioners managers, learners and academics which explored professional development, family learning and prison education.

The findings from the desk based research and survey together with the notes of the focus group discussions confirm that adult learning continues as a vigorous, lively and important field of education across Scotland. However, there are challenges relating to capacity building and addressing community needs in a volatile environment where local authority budgets have decreased resulting in fewer opportunities for educators to network and exchange ideas. In the consultations practitioners' offered examples of current initiatives that were making important contributions to learner's lives, families, and communities across Scotland. Bringing adult educators together was valuable and we reflect upon how opportunities for collaboration might serve to enrich the adult education map of Scotland making the impact of adult education more visible.

There were challenges in developing a consultation largely accountable to consulting without funding in a sector of education with an indistinct identity. In response, face to face consultation took place through the financial support of a wide range of partners, including colleges, universities, government and voluntary organisations, each holding a unique perspective upon the terrain of adult learning in Scotland. Perspectives did not always converge, with impacts upon the consultation process itself, perhaps reflected amongst ourselves, the authors, within our different relationships to the consultation. Between us we hold two positions on abovementioned National Working Groups and varying perspectives on our roles within this government led initiative. As academics we lecturer in fields spanning adult, community and further education, with each sector driven by overlapping policy drivers and governed by differing professional standards and associated bodies. In this paper we offer some examples of challenges within the consultation process, focussing mainly on the adult education landscape in Scotland and high level findings.

## **Background**

Adult learning policy and practice in Scotland has a rich history (Cooke, 2006; Crowther & Martin, 2010). A significant development influencing contemporary practices was the publication of the Alexander Report (SED, 1975) which resulted in adult education being positioned within community learning services. Arguably this positioning has had the effect of diluting distinctive adult education traditions in programme development thus weakening the potential of adult learning to influence social action (Martin, 1996). Positioning adult education within community learning may also have served to isolate it from wider fields of adult and continuing education, making it less visible in the Scottish education context (ibid). This arrangement continues up to the present, so that most state funded adult education, including adult literacies learning, is delivered by local councils through Community Learning and Development (CLD) teams. CLD professionalism is governed by the CLD Standards Council Scotland, with its own set of professional standards and associated routes to qualification. However, there are overlaps between CLD and further education and Scotland's Colleges have many outreach links with community learning projects, as well as delivering adult literacies learning and teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Importantly, there are a large and diverse range of voluntary organisations which have adult education as part of their role. The upshot is that adult education in Scotland straddles Community Learning and Development (CLD), Colleges and voluntary organisations, an adult learning landscape that is acknowledged by the Scottish Government (2014, p4) who state that settings include 'among others, educational establishments, the workplace, communities and online learning at home'.

While there is a policy on Community Learning and Development, there is no specific formal policy on adult learning and adult education in Scotland. In March 2013, then Cabinet Secretary Mike Russell initiated a community consultation on adult learning involving over one hundred participants working in Local Councils, Colleges, Community Groups, Government and Universities. A National Strategic Adult Learning Forum was created and chaired by the then Cabinet Secretary to oversee the process. Over the period of a year the Strategic Forum produced a draft Statement of Ambition, gathering feedback from learners and practitioners at two large events at Newbattle Abbey College. The *Statement of Ambition* (SG, 2014) was officially launched on 21 May 2014, the product of a highly participatory process and serves as a formalised treatise on adult learning and a grounded aspiration for adult education in Scotland.

After the launch a Task Group involving National Working Groups was launched to take forward the themes set out in the community's vision. This paper focuses upon the consultation activity and findings of the National Working Group with responsibility for the professional development of adult educators.

Whilst related policy locates adult education within Community Learning and Development (CLD Standards Council, 2017), adult learning in Scotland has a wide contextual reach and an indistinct identity. The rich terrain of adult education is a strength, but it is a landscape that poses a challenge for those charged with mapping it. The *Statement of Ambition* (SG, 2014) describes the professional role of educators as a complex one, with the expectation to take up a social practice approach (Hamilton & Hillier, 2006) so that learners' values and perspectives are acknowledged, respected and embedded in learning that takes account of family, community and work life contexts. The *Statement of Ambition* recognises that educators 'are open about the power dimensions of learning and enable learners to exercise power themselves' recognising the need for skilled adult learning practitioners who are themselves lifelong learners (SG, 2014, p5). Perhaps this echoes Alexander's proposal that a 'strong, broadly based and *highly professional* system of education for adults is one of the best guarantees of a healthy democracy' (SED, 1975, p22 in Cooke, 2006, p157). The *Statement of Ambition*, however, says little about how adult educators develop skills in order to create safe, engaging, respectful and learner-centred adult education across the variety of adult education settings.

### **The Consultation on Professional Development of Adult Educators – scoping**

There were two central problems in scoping a consultation. Firstly, consulting in a field of education with an indistinct identity raised the danger of excluding potential participants, emphasising the necessity for face to face consultations. With no attached funding, this endeavour was taken forward through the commitment of Working Group members, partner associates and their respective organisations. The success in overcoming lack of funding may be attributable to what Amey (2014) refers to as the intentionality of partners in the project. The authors attempted to achieve funding for whole day consultation events, badged as 'knowledge exchange', from the Scottish Universities Insight Institute (SUII, 2018) which supports programmes developing insights into substantial societal issues. Though unsuccessful, a subset of the bidding partnership maintained momentum and the strength of this partnership allowed face to face consultation to take place via a range of small funding arrangements, but with strong limitations around what was achievable within the resourcing constraints. Significantly, this also created sometimes divergent relationships between National Working Groups and the academic led SUII partnership, with the latter committed to more critical approaches to engaging with practitioner participants, government organisations and policy.

Secondly, there are no nationally recognised standards mapping the role of the adult education professional in Scotland, with the exception of adult literacies learning (Education Scotland, 2013), with implications for how professional development issues might be identified and analysed. Though Scottish adult learning resides within the domain of Community Learning and Development, the CLD Standards Council's professional competencies (CLD, 2018) cover adult education only in the context of community development. Adult education that takes place in Colleges, Universities and the workplace are outside of the scope of the CLD Standards Council. The REAL Competencies for Adult Educators (Galloway, 2015) were developed from existing

national occupational standards and matched against the Scottish Qualifications and Credit Framework (SCQF, 2012), as part of a wider European project to further the recognition of prior learning (RPL) for adult educators (Galloway & Edwards, 2017). These competencies assisted in the identification and analysis of professional development opportunities across the range of adult education settings. In particular, both the REAL Competencies and the CLD Professional competencies highlighted the importance of developing and supporting collaborative working as integral to developing adult learning and also to professional development i.e. the learning of practitioners (CLD, 2018, Galloway, 2015).

For the purposes of scoping the consultation, it was assumed that adult learning was voluntary and aimed at furthering societal equality. Another central assumption was that adults, including prisoners and migrants, are already citizens, in line with the notion of education as active citizenship rather than learning for citizenship in the future (Biesta, 2013; Scottish Executive, 2004). There was acknowledgement that adult education included trade union learning, health education and learning in prisons and that learning supports the family, community, working and private lives of learners, coherent with a social practice approach. The adult educators' role was understood to be diverse, incorporating participatory programme development, mentoring, counselling and guidance activities in addition to practices associated with tutoring or teaching (Buiskool et al, 2009).

In the context of the restraints outlined above, the Working Group took forward a consultation strategy along three lines. Firstly, there was an analysis of existing professional development opportunities for adult education professionals, co-ordinated by the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) Partnership with support from National Working Group members. This involved filtering and analysing the SCQF's existing database to find accreditations relevant to an adult education practitioner. Follow up work was undertaken to establish which of the accreditations were currently delivered. Secondly, an on-line survey of adult educators was designed by Working Group members and overseen by Learning Link Scotland and the University of Stirling which is discussed further below. Finally a series of three full day consultation events were co-ordinated by a wider partnership, including City of Glasgow College and the Universities of Dundee, Glasgow and Stirling, between December 2016 and November 2017, with approximately 100 practitioners taking part. The focus of these events was to identify challenges faced by adult educators, respond to those challenges and develop practice that could be shared. The first consultation took place at City of Glasgow College in association with Glasgow University. A second event was held at the University of Dundee and attended predominantly by family learning practitioners and the final consultation, hosted by the Scottish Prison Service and Fife College, involved participants with prison learning or prison link work experience.

### **Summary of findings – Continuous professional development**

The abovementioned '*Statement of Ambition*' (SG, 2014) has been acknowledged as ambitious however in terms of its success it is dependent upon funding and political commitment (Crowther, 2014). The statement sets out the intention to create world leading adult education provision in Scotland, where programmes are created around learners' aspirations as part of a 'model of excellence' (SG, 2014, p10) that might be internationally recognised. In the same document, there is less acknowledgement that adult learning in Scotland, in line with a common European experience (Wildmeersch, 2014), is taking place within a period of resource challenges where programmes are

geared increasingly towards instrumental and employability led goals. This latter aspect was revealed to some extent through the consultations and on-line survey. Practitioners described changes to their roles or the communities where they work, perhaps related to unstable funding, as well as their learners' experiences of economic challenges where supporting mental health was of specific concern for some.

However, the face-to-face consultations in particular served to reveal how diverse adult learning projects continue to flourish in Scotland. Adult educators are actively engaged in overcoming the challenges of the current economic climate as it impacts communities and numerous examples were offered of practices that other educators could share and learn from. Themes of activity ranged from engaging communities, planning and evaluating learning with learners, celebrating diversity and developing social practice approaches to learning. In the context of family learning, examples included projects engaging schools with families through informal and non-formal learning, building bridges between community and family learning and working with families affected by the criminal justice system. There was also shared critique of experiences in addressing Government policy objectives aimed at 'closing the attainment gap' and discussion around how more integrated approaches might be developed where family support for learning operates in tandem with support for housing, employment and finances. There were opportunities to share practice of co-developing programmes, with learners and former learners contributing to capacity building through peer support and learning champion initiatives.

With regard to prison learning, professional learning opportunities were identified in relation to the innovative use of digital technology in learning environments with strict operational restrictions. There were many examples of co-developing programmes with learners, particularly in relation to the expressive arts and themes of social concern such as food poverty or war. This included designing learning projects that might foster productive relationships and make accredited learning explicit, for example where literacies are embedded in learning materials. There were initiatives that encouraged peer learning, mentoring and link-working between prisons, local council Community and Family Learning teams and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations.

Though the prospects seemed numerous and wide-reaching for non-formal learning through professional collaboration and the sharing of practices, there was a strong indication from the on-line survey and consultation events that practitioners have fewer opportunities to reflect socially upon their practice. Indeed, some participants indicated that a lack of accredited or non-formal professional learning opportunities was not an issue for them. Rather, the primary concern expressed was that resource and time restraints prevented participation in either accredited learning or collaborative partnerships where the sharing of and learning from practice is put to work in programme development and capacity building activity.

### **Findings - Accredited professional development opportunities.**

Outside of Higher Education, accredited professional development for adult education practitioners was identified at both volunteer and qualified tutor/teacher level<sup>1</sup>. Of sixteen identified courses for volunteer practitioners, four related to literacy and

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<sup>1</sup> Volunteer level qualifications were taken as SCQF Level 5 or 6 (European Qualifications Framework Level 4). Tutor Level qualifications were taken as SCQF Levels 7 – 8 (EQF Level 5)

numeracy, three in youth work, two in community education and one related to mentoring and coaching. The twenty eight accreditations identified for tutors encompassed a wider range of practices. Whilst eighteen of these courses were concerned with either community learning, youth work or literacy and numeracy, five courses related to disability and inclusion and a further two involved trade union learning. In terms of availability of the courses, half of the accreditations suitable for volunteer tutors were available via specific Colleges or named local local authorities, suggesting geographical unevenness across Scotland. From the on-line survey, accredited learning in adult literacy and numeracy had the highest levels of take up and was in most demand by managers, but the availability of accreditations for volunteer or tutor practitioners was unclear and would require further research to reveal. In terms of gaps in accredited professional learning at tutor level, there are currently no awards specific to adult guidance or mental health and omissions in courses orientated towards education in prisons and family learning.

Five Scottish Universities offer degree level courses in Community Education/Learning and three universities deliver a Teaching Qualification in Further Education. Even more numerous were post graduate qualifications, more than ninety in total, offered by eight different universities, though many of these could be either mothballed or no longer available. Forty-two out of one hundred and two respondents to the on-line survey had achieved a degree in community education or CLD, making it the most prevalent degree level qualification. As mentioned above, there is no recognised teaching qualification for adult educators. Survey responses from managers suggested that this qualification was not sought, though two practitioner respondents held a non-recognised qualification of this type. Discussions at the consultation event at HMP Low Moss raised the idea that adult learning in prison contexts might be best approached as a hybrid between further education and community learning, drawing upon professional practices from both sectors, perhaps indicating the type of territory where a teaching qualification in adult education might serve a purpose.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to discuss the challenges of organising a consultation of adult educators in a complex landscape of roads and pathways cutting across a diverse terrain of delivery. Challenges centred on consulting within a field of education with an indistinct identity where funding restraints necessitated the commitment of diverse partners each with a range of perspectives upon the adult learning terrain, traversing variances in policy drivers and purposes. The challenges were addressed only in part through the consultation process with examples offered in the high level analysis presented above.

What was partially revealed by the consultation were the creative responses of adult educators and learners within a shifting landscape impacted by changing communities, roles and funding constraints. There are wide-ranging adult education projects taking place across Scotland alongside learners with diverse aspirations and scope for practitioners to learn from their experiences. In this context, adult education practitioners are also lifelong learners and the sharing and exchanging of experiential learning might strengthen professional development. As with other sectors of education, engagement with professional learning is integral to the role of the practitioner as set out within professional standards and competencies. Perhaps for adult educators the necessity for professional development is more pronounced, as the co-development of

programmes with learners has greater emphasis and rests upon collaboration between learners, practitioners with associated professional learning. This suggests that further attention should be given to ensuring that resources restraints do not prevent adult educators from engaging with this type of activity, not least because there will be implications for the future capacity and development of adult education provision in Scotland.

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