

Making an impact through the Citizens' Curriculum

'Adult learning is like the B&Q of learning, providing a tool for every personal building project.' -

Richard Thickpenny

The impact of adult learning was the central theme of last week's European Agenda for the Adult Learning Conference. It was a very good couple of days with inspiration, insight and energy which stimulated efforts to increase the collection and reporting of impact data. It highlighted that the one area where adult learning can – and must – have an impact is in improving adults' life skills. The pace of social change, across public services, work, technology, health and society requires all adults have core digital, health, financial and civic capabilities to be able to respond and adapt to the changes around them.

So how can we ensure that the limited resources available to adult learning have an impact in this essential area? **NIACE** have been working on answers to this question and reported back to the conference on work around their impact forums and the **Citizens' Curriculum**. As a contributor to the Citizens' Curriculum pilot, Ashley Community Housing were keen to find out how this work was informing the adult learning agenda and the recommendations going forward.

It was clear from the presentations that to inform policy, those in the adult learning sector must be able to demonstrate impact. In stating this methodology were put forward, such as random controlled testing (**RCT**), which highlighted if nothing else that the current level of research into the effects of adult learning are not sufficient to win a funding argument. This is exacerbated by the competitive funding environment which pitches providers against each other rather than supporting collaboration. However, without joint data collection, all that government departments/funders have is a giant jigsaw puzzle and no idea of the overall picture.

For stage 2 of the Citizens' Curriculum project a **RCT** approach is being taken to look at the longitudinal effects of adult learning across control groups, which will go some way to addressing this evidence gap. It is hoped that this will go some way to provide the evidence of impact needed to ensure that the Citizens' Curriculum becomes a widely adopted model for literacy, numeracy and life skills delivery across the learning and skills sector, and one in which increasing numbers of adult learners choose to participate.

For ACH, who are already advanced in their own longitudinal research as part of their own social impact reporting, the conference confirmed we are working in the right direction and highlighted

the need to become an Action Platform for change. Taking from David Hughes' (**Chief Executive of NIACE**) response we will take away four key lessons and one big dose of energy and enthusiasm to do more to promote our work.

Lesson 1: We need to do more research in adult learning

This is true across the board and particularly true when it comes to research which moves beyond describing what is happening. We need more analysis and insight into what works, why it works, how it works and what the most conducive circumstances are for it to work.

Lesson 2: We need to use this intelligence at the front-line

That means more space for teachers, tutors and lecturers to be able to experiment, to trial, to test and to innovate. We all know that learning is very personal, social, builds on self-motivation and no two learners are really alike. That means we need to provide the flexibility for personalising and for co-creation, but we need to do that within the bounds of what works best.

Lesson 3: We need a variety of evidence types in order to influence

We tend to think about influencing in terms of persuading governments to spend more on what we do. That's part of it, but equally important is the need to influence people to get into learning in the first place, to take the plunge. We also need to persuade employers to invest better in their staff and other agencies, such as in health, to invest through learning to deliver their outcomes.

Lesson 4: We need to be more self-critical, questioning and inquiring about the work we do

This might just be the most controversial lesson, and of course we are all committed and passionate, but that's not enough. We need to pursue a better understanding of the impact we have in order to do our best, to truly maximise the outcomes of the work we do with the scarce resources we have. This would be easier if lessons 1 and 2 were followed up by policy makers, of course, but we can still do more with the resources we have.