



Workers'
Educational
Association

Impact of WEA Adult Education 2014



Preface

This report presents the summary findings from the 2014 impact assessment of WEA's adult education. It highlights the positive impact adult education makes to the lives of individuals all over the country. It reinforces wider research highlighting that community learning has broader impact than the individual alone, which cascades through into communities. For example:

- WEA courses achieve positive impacts for some of the most disadvantaged groups within society for example those on low incomes, older isolated people, BAMER and those with disabilities;
- WEA helps to transform the lives of individuals by increasing confidence and building progression that is relevant to the students, whether that be gaining skills for employment or improving their health;
- adult education acts as a catalyst to building stronger, self-sufficient and more connected communities by helping to increase volunteering, improving health and well-being, enhancing social integration and supporting parents and families;
- adult education helps to build the foundations for a flourishing community made up of confident, skilled, tolerant and active citizens who are in control of their destinies.



Impact of WEA Adult Education

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Introduction

Background to the Workers' Educational Association

The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) is the UK's largest voluntary sector provider of adult education which is committed to widening participation and education with a social purpose. It is a community learning provider that works in over 2,000 community based venues and in local networks with partners, providers and services, supporting students to take their next steps. The WEA also has over 3,000 volunteers working in a range of roles. The courses offered by the WEA include subject areas such as Art and Culture, Humanities,

Health and Wellbeing, Crafts, Politics, Numeracy, Literacy and ESOL, ICT and many others. The organisation engages with a diverse range of adults in terms of age, ethnicity, disability and previous educational experience, with nearly half of students returning to education after more than three years. During 2013-14, the WEA recruited over 70,000 students on 9,700 courses in England. In line with the organisation's mission, 68 percent of the funding is allocated to disadvantaged students.



“

Attending the WEA class gives you an anchor and purpose to do something and moves you to do more.

”

Community Learning

Increasing emphasis is being placed by the Government on the need to assess the value of adult learning and the impact it makes in people's lives. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2012)¹ has highlighted that adult learning can empower people to interact with family, community and the wider society. The Government has safeguarded investment for informal adult and community

learning, which, it claims, 'makes society a happier and healthier place' (BIS, 2011)². Following a nationwide consultation, objectives and significant policy proposals for community learning were outlined in New Challenges, New Chances Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan: Building a World Class Skills System³.

¹ BIS (2012). BIS Research Paper number 90, Review and Update of Research into the Wider Benefits of Adult Learning.

² BIS (2011). New Challenges, New Chances. Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan: Building a World Class Skills System.

³ BIS (2011). New Challenges, New Chances. Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan: Building a World Class Skills System.

Government policy directions for informal adult community learning consist of two main goals of:

- enabling progression, including to further learning, training and employment and
- focusing public funding on people who would not otherwise have access to learning and maximising income from students who can afford to pay (BIS, 2011)⁴.

However, at the same time the Government recognises that informal adult learning contributes to other Government policies by improving people's (especially older population's) health and wellbeing, introduction to digital technologies, cultural development and active citizenship, all of which can potentially decrease

burden on public finances (ibid).

This aligns with the WEA's mission to develop educational opportunities for the most disadvantaged in society and to:

- raise educational aspirations;
- ensure opportunities exist for adults to return to learning;
- bring great teaching and education to local communities;
- involve students and WEA supporters as active members to build an educational movement for social purpose;
- and inspire students, teachers and members to become active citizens.



Without doing this course I would not have done any volunteering which I'm doing at the moment.



Methodology

This research investigated the impact of WEA courses in the four areas of WEA's work (employability and skills, health and wellbeing, community engagement and cultural education). It also investigated student motivations for taking up courses. The data was gathered using a quantitative survey adapted on the main from the Community Learning Student Survey⁵ undertaken by BIS. 659 WEA students, who completed courses in the Autumn term of 2013, were interviewed in Spring 2014 (about half a year after their WEA courses finished).

The sample was representative of the entire WEA student population. Telephone interviewing was outsourced to a private research company who ensured random sampling by contacting respondents at all times during the day and on weekends. The analysis was carried out using design weights and non-response weights to correct the data for stratification. This report provides a summary of the findings.

⁴ BIS (2011). *New Challenges, New Chances: Next Steps in Implementing the Further Education Reform Programme*.

⁵ BIS (2013). *Community Learning Learner Survey*.

Key Findings

Profile of respondents

A typical WEA student is female (76 percent of all respondents), White British (75 percent) over 60 years of age (54 percent) who is retired (51 percent), married or cohabiting (53 percent), claiming state benefits or tax credits (53 percent) and does not have children under the age of 18 (77 percent). The majority of the students who specified their income (72 percent) have a household income lower than £20,000. The WEA has students in every English region with a quarter of students coming from the Yorkshire and Humber region.

A quarter of the students identify themselves as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) and for about 18 percent English is not their first language. Fourteen percent have a mental health condition or illness and 32 percent have a physical health condition or illness expected to last for more than 12 months. A quarter regularly care for people who are ill, have disabilities or are elderly. Sixty-seven percent

claimed their health was 'good' or 'very good'. About 14 percent of students are in employment, with about 10 percent being unemployed and looking for work. The same percentage are temporarily or permanently sick and disabled. In addition, 11 percent are looking after their family or home. Thirteen percent of students hold no qualifications and approximately 40 percent have some sort of qualifications below degree level.

Of the students claiming state benefits (who make up 53 percent of all students), the common benefits are Housing Benefit (33 percent), Council Tax Reduction (32 percent) and Pension Guarantee Credit (28 percent). Students claiming benefits are more likely to be temporarily or permanently sick or disabled (18 percent), have a child under 18 years of age (33 percent), have a mental or a physical disability (22 percent and 38 percent respectively) and be carers (32 percent). They are also less likely to hold a degree (30 percent).

Patterns of Learning

Sixty-two percent of WEA students generally had positive feelings about education when they left school and 22 percent had negative feelings. On average, students finished full time education at the age of 20 but about 40 percent left school aged 16 years or younger. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) wish they had continued in education to a higher level. This was particularly emphasised among the unemployed (84 percent), among those with no qualifications and those without a degree⁶ (79 percent each).

Nearly all of the students (98 percent) agree that learning is something 'you do throughout your

life', with 81 percent seeing education as an investment and 94 percent claiming that they have the confidence to learn new things. Almost a third (30 percent) of the students did not feel confident enough with budgeting and managing money online and 35 percent did not feel confident managing new technology.

Sixty percent had also taken courses (excluding work-based ones) prior to the WEA and 63 percent of them attended these courses in the last 3 years.

⁶ Ten percent of students are unemployed, 13 percent have no qualifications and 40 percent do not have a degree

Student Motivations

The most often cited reasons for taking up a course were to improve knowledge or skill (81 percent), to keep mind and body healthy (69 percent) and to do something fun in their spare time (67 percent, rising to 84 percent among the retired⁷). Sixty-five percent of the unemployed and 43 percent of those looking after the family took up a course to improve their job prospects.

A significant proportion of the unemployed (42 percent) also wished to improve their numeracy, reading, writing, speaking or personal finance skills. Fifty-one percent of parents with children under 18⁸ took a course to become a better parent. In addition, 77 percent of retired and 70 percent of unemployed students attended courses to improve their confidence. Furthering one's education was also a commonly cited reason (42 percent of all respondents). From the many motivations to attend a WEA course, the main reason cited by more than a third of students (36 percent), was to improve knowledge and skills.

Out of students who are employed (14 percent of all students), more than half (57 percent) attended a course because they thought it would help them with work they were thinking of doing in the future. Sixty-nine percent of unemployed students and 64 percent of those looking after family also agreed with this statement⁹. For almost a third (31 percent) of the employed students, the course was related to work they were doing at the time. A fifth of students (21 percent) did a course to help them with voluntary work they were doing or were thinking of doing. Among those looking after family, this amounted to 42 percent.

For the majority of WEA students (84 percent) the course met or exceeded all of their expectations. Almost all students (97 percent) enjoyed all or most of the course and 99 percent of those paying for their course agreed it was good value for money.

“ If I hadn't taken these classes with the WEA I think I would've just been at home doing the same old thing. ”

Impact of courses

In line with the WEA themes relating to adult learning outcomes¹², the key impacts identified in this research are considered under the themes of employability, health and wellbeing, community engagement and cultural education.

WEA courses help to develop communication skills (mentioned by 71 percent of respondents), creative skills (64 percent), practical skills (49 percent), literacy skills (42 percent) and language skills (41 percent). Generally, the unemployed students reported higher improvements in these skills; for example, 81 percent reported improvements in communication skills, 70 percent in practical skills, 59 percent in language skills, 57 percent in literacy and 40 percent in

numeracy and digital skills. Twice as many ESOL students developed language skills (75 percent compared to 34 percent of native speakers). BAMER students reported significantly higher improvements than White British in all categories as well (for example 87 percent in communication skills). ESOL and BAMER students make up 18 percent and 25 percent of all students, respectively.

WEA courses also had value in terms of directing students to further learning. As a result of the course, a large majority of the students (78 percent) knew where to go to improve their English, Maths, ICT or vocational skills.

7 The retired make up 51 percent of all students.

8 Twenty three percent of all students are parents with children under 18 years of age.

9 Ten percent of students are unemployed, 11 percent are looking after home or family.

12 Caldwell, P. (2013). Curriculum Strategy 2013-15: a New Paradigm, WEA.

Employability

Sixty-five percent of students, if it was relevant to them¹³, claimed that as a result of the course they became more aware of the next steps to improve their employability. Of those to whom this was relevant¹⁴, 60 percent claimed to have become more aware of local work opportunities. Seventy percent are more likely to promote employability training as a positive route towards employment¹⁵.

Fourteen percent of WEA's students were employed and 10 percent were unemployed or looking for work. Sixty-four percent of them said the course gave them new skills they could use in a job. As a result of the course, 38 percent

of those in employment felt more confident in progressing in their career, 35 percent were able to do their job better and 11 percent got a new job or changed to a different type of work. Also, seven percent got a promotion or greater responsibilities at work, eight percent stayed in a job that they would have lost otherwise and four percent became self-employed. Of those unemployed and looking for work, 86 percent reported being more confident about finding a job in the future as a result of the WEA course and 67 percent have a better knowledge of support services provided to the unemployed.



There are so many ways in which the WEA has helped, boosting my confidence and helping with the new skills has been a major part, but also all of the staff have helped me in getting prepared for what lies ahead and what to expect. Having all of that support there makes it a lot easier and makes your dream a reality.



Health and Wellbeing

WEA courses had a significant impact on health and wellbeing. For 89 percent of students the courses helped to keep their body and mind active, whereas for 84 percent the courses helped students do something useful in their spare time. Seventy-nine percent said the courses gave them a break from daily stress and 77 percent said it gave them a routine or a reason to get out of the house.

Eighty-seven percent of students reported becoming more confident in their abilities as a result of the course. This result is higher for unemployed (93 percent), BAMER (94 percent) and ESOL students (95 percent), who make up 10 percent, 25 percent and 18 percent of WEA students respectively. Eighty-four percent of all students from all demographic groups reported improvements in their quality of life. Eighty-one percent of all students felt generally better about themselves as a result of the course.

Sixty-six percent of all students claimed the course gave them a better idea of what to do

with their lives. This increased to 78 percent among the unemployed and to 82 percent among BAMER students. It was also higher for younger students, for example, 86 percent in the under 29's age group¹⁶.

For a third of the students (34 percent) the course helped improve their health problems or disabilities. This increased to 57 percent for those with poor health¹⁷, to 66 percent among those with longstanding mental health conditions¹⁸ and to 49 percent for those with longstanding physical health conditions¹⁹. Sixty-six percent of students felt they had more opportunities as a result of the course and this percentage increased to 83 percent among the unemployed students. More than a third (38 percent) reported improvements in their family relationships. This applied to 55 percent of parents with children under 18 and 64 percent of students looking after a family²⁰.

¹³ About 44 percent of student would find this question applies to them.

¹⁴ About 40 percent of students would find this question applies to them.

¹⁵ About 74 percent of students would find this question applies to them.

¹⁶ Seven percent of all students are under the age of 29.

¹⁷ About 10 percent of students reported their health as 'poor' or 'very poor'.

¹⁸ Fourteen percent of WEA's students have a longstanding mental health condition.

¹⁹ About 32 percent of students had longstanding physical health conditions.

²⁰ Twenty three percent of students have underage children, eleven percent of students look after home or family.

With regards to health, 43 percent of all students (and 57 percent of parents) reported better knowledge of where to go for information on health and wellbeing. About a third of all students (35 percent) and nearly a half (47 percent) of the parents knew better how to access support for a health condition. A third (34 percent) of students had a better understanding of what impact physical activity has on their health (45 percent of parents). Thirty-one percent could understand medical advice better (45 percent of parents) and almost two-thirds (64 percent) were more likely to encourage others to get involved in learning to improve their health and wellbeing. Almost a third (32 percent) of the students had started living a

more sustainable life as a result of the course. A quarter (26 percent) had started exercising as a result of their course with those under the age of 50 more likely to do this; for example, 47 percent of students under 30 had started exercising more as a result of their course.

On the subjective wellbeing scale used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), WEA students rated their life satisfaction at 8.9, their 'wellbeing' at 9.3 and their 'happiness yesterday' at 8.9 and their 'anxiety yesterday' at 4.5²¹. According to these measurements, except for anxiety, the WEA students are more satisfied with their life than the national average for British people.

“ I love coming to classes, it stops me feeling sad and upset. ”

Community Engagement

Ninety-three percent of students claimed that the WEA courses helped them to make new friends and meet new people. Eighty-eight percent of students agreed that they met people on the course they would not normally mix with and almost all students (98 percent) enjoyed getting the chance to meet these people. While 54 percent became happy to put forward their opinion, 44 percent also became more likely to listen to people who think differently to them.

Nearly half of all students (45 percent) became more interested in making their community a better place to live as a result of the WEA course they attended. This rose to 60 percent among the BAMER students (who are 25 percent of students), 64 percent among the unemployed (10 percent) and 52 percent among those students claiming benefits (53 percent). An almost equal proportion (44 percent) of all students claimed they were able to play a more positive role in their community. A third (34 percent) of the students were more aware of how to get involved

in decision making. Thirty-one percent joined the WEA and a majority (76 percent) recommended the WEA to their friends or family in the community.

A large proportion of students (86 percent) also shared the knowledge from their course by discussing the course or the coursework with their community. More than a quarter (27 percent) also produced written material or exhibited coursework for their community.

In terms of civic engagement, 20 percent of students took more interest in local or national affairs as a result of their course. Twelve percent of students (15 percent of those claiming benefits) registered to vote as a result of the WEA course and 10 percent (13 percent of those claiming benefits) contacted the authorities for consultation or to discuss an issue. In addition, four percent joined a party or a union/association and eight percent took part in campaigning (for example demonstration, petition). BAMER students

21 ONS Subjective Wellbeing Scale [scoring from 0 – 10]. National average data from: Annual Population Survey [APS] ONS, 2011. Comparative figures: Life Satisfaction: 7.4, Wellbeing: 7.6, State Happiness: 7.3 and State Anxiety: 3.2 (ONS, 2011).

were much more likely to report an increase in these categories; for example, 22 percent registered to vote (an increase by approximately 10 percentage points compared to the White British students).

Fifteen percent of students also became involved in some voluntary activity as a result of their

course. Students were more likely to be involved if they were BAMER (27 percent), unemployed (29 percent) or claiming state benefits (18 percent). The most common activities were joining an organisation or group (56 percent), organising (42 percent) and mentoring (41 percent).

Cultural Education

In terms of independent learning, half of the students (50 percent) claimed they did independent learning following the WEA course (rising to 69 percent for those with no qualifications). These independent learning activities included reading materials (80 percent), using the internet (78 percent) and visiting museums or libraries (62 percent). Fifty-one percent of students claimed they read more often as a result of the course, 39 percent visited museums, galleries or other historic sites more often and 34 percent did arts or crafts more often.

WEA courses have also positively influenced students in terms of cultural understanding. Sixty percent of students (74 percent among BAMER students²²) reported having a greater understanding about other cultures because of their courses. Sixty-seven percent have learned about other people's lives and experiences, 64 percent appreciated that all sorts of people need

to be involved in building our cultural identity, 64 percent started feeling that cultural institutions should be accessible to all, 47 percent wish to explore information about a different culture and the same percentage know and understand more about their past as a result of WEA courses. Students also developed skills that would help them engage with others better: 39 percent of students knew how to approach a difficult question better, 48 percent knew how to support their case better and 30 percent felt more comfortable in changing their opinion.

Students also had a better appreciation of art: 69 percent started to value creative thinking more and 47 percent valued art better than before. Eighteen percent had become involved in a local cultural group of whom 35 percent identified as BAMER and 26 percent were parents with children under the age of 18.

“ I've just achieved an Open University Degree in English Literature. I also got a first! The support and confidence you gave me years ago as a mature student is where it all started and I'm so grateful to the WEA. ”

Parents and Families

Twenty-three percent of WEA students have children under the age of 18. The health and wellbeing section already details how the WEA impacts positively on parents' understanding of health topics. In addition, 56 percent of parents reported becoming more confident in helping their children with reading, 59 percent

with writing, 49 percent with Maths and 55 percent with other school subjects. These results were higher for BAMER and ESOL parents. Eighty-two percent of BAMER parents reported becoming more confident in helping their children with both reading and writing and 76 percent reported improvement with both

²² BAMER students make up 25 percent of all students.

Maths and other schools subjects. Among ESOL parents, these proportions were 76 percent, 84 percent, 69 percent and 68 percent, respectively. Overall, 42 percent of parents reported improved relationships with their children (77 percent of BAMER parents) as a result of their course. Over half of parents became more confident in

engaging in school activities (51 percent) rising to 82 percent among the BAMER parents. About a third of parents (35 percent) became more confident in dealing with teenage issues (63 percent of BAMER parents).

Further learning

WEA has also been successful in promoting further learning, which is important for people's wellbeing and welfare. Eighty-five percent of students agreed that as a result of the course they became more enthusiastic about learning. Most students were likely to undertake further learning and training and 87 percent feel that they could develop other skills by taking another WEA course. Forty-five percent of the students interviewed have already enrolled on other

courses after their WEA course (excluding work-based courses), of which 90 percent claimed WEA encouraged them to do this. Ninety-two percent would like to undertake learning activities or courses in the next two years and 95 percent agreed that this was because of the WEA. Ninety-eight percent of students said they are likely to undertake these learning activities in the next two years.



“

It's just terrific, it's opened up a whole new world of knowledge and it's been good to socialise. It's great to get out of the house and meet all sorts of like-minded people.

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Conclusions

The evidence from this research highlights the positive impact WEA adult education makes to the lives of individuals all over the country. It reinforces wider research underlining that community learning has broader impact than the individual alone, which cascades through into communities. WEA's adult education helps to build the foundations for a flourishing society made up of confident, skilled, tolerant and active citizens who are in control of their destinies, by:

- developing the employability of students through giving people the confidence, skills and knowledge to use in a job, to find a job or to progress their careers;
- helping to develop various skills relevant to students' needs, such as communication, creative, practical, literacy and language skills;
- impacting on the health and wellbeing of students; leading to healthier, happier and more self-sufficient communities who are able to contribute positively to society;
- broadening the horizons of students through personal development by encouraging and promoting independent learning and by nurturing tolerant, creative and critical minds;
- impacting positively on the lives of some of the most disadvantaged groups in society, including those on low incomes, BAMER, elderly isolated people as well as those with disabilities;
- supporting families to improve relationships and helping parents to better support their children with schooling and social issues; and
- acting as a catalyst to build stronger and more connected communities by increasing volunteering, social integration and active citizenship.

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