

# Poverty Reduction and Lifelong Learning

IFLL Thematic Paper 6

Leisha Fullick



© 2009 National Institute of Adult Continuing Education  
(England and Wales)  
21 De Montfort Street  
Leicester  
LE1 7GE

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Leisha Fullick

## Foreword

This is the sixth Thematic Paper to be published from the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL). The Inquiry was established in September 2007 and will make its main report in September 2009. It is sponsored by NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, with an independent Board of Commissioners under the chairmanship of Sir David Watson. Full details of the IFLL can be found at: [www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry](http://www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry).

The overall goal of the Inquiry is to offer an authoritative and coherent strategic framework for lifelong learning in the UK. This involves:

- articulating a broad rationale for public and private investment in lifelong learning;
- a re-appraisal of the social and cultural value attached to it by policy-makers and the public;
- developing new perspectives on policy and practice.

### IFLL: supplementary papers

The Thematic Papers are complemented by several other strands of IFLL work:

- *Context Papers*. These will provide a broad overall picture of expenditure on all forms of lifelong learning: by government, across all departments; by employers, public and private; by the third sector; and by individuals and households. We shall provide, as a complement, a summary of overall participation. The two in combination should provide a benchmark for mapping future trends.
- *Sector Papers*. These discuss the implications of lifelong learning for each of the sectors involved in providing learning opportunities: pre-school, school, further education, higher education, private trainers, and local authorities. The goal here is to encourage innovation thinking on how these parts do or do not fit together, as part of a systemic approach to lifelong learning.
- *Public Value Papers*. These will look, from different angles and using a variety of techniques, at the 'social productivity' of lifelong learning; i.e. what effects it has on areas such as health, civic activity or crime. The goal is both to provide evidence on these effects, and to stimulate a broader debate on how such effects can be measured and analysed.
- *Learning Infrastructures*. Unlike the others this strand consists not of a series of papers but of a set of scenarios, designed to promote debate and imagination on what the infrastructure for learning might look like in the future. This challenges us to integrate the physical environments of learning, the virtual environments of learning technologies, and people's competences and behaviour.

We have also been consulting in the four UK nations and amongst learner groups and other stakeholders.

Published papers are available from the IFLL website:  
[www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry](http://www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry)

### Thematic Papers

The Thematic Papers form the core initial substance of the Inquiry's work. They cover the following:

|                                 |                            |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Prosperity, Employment and Work | Poverty Reduction          |
| Demography and Social Structure | Citizenship and Belonging  |
| Well-being and Happiness        | Crime and Social Exclusion |
| Migration and Communities       | Sustainable Development    |
| Technological Change            |                            |

Each of these themes has been tackled in the same way (except for the last, which will be treated separately): a call for evidence was issued; a day-long seminar was organised, with inputs from practitioners, policy-makers and researchers; and the results of these two stages, and subsequent discussions and contributions, were distilled into a Thematic Paper, written either by an IFLL Commissioner or a member of the IFLL Secretariat.

We have posted on the IFLL website the evidence submitted specifically to the Inquiry, along with the papers and presentations contributed to the thematic seminar.

### Next steps

This Thematic Paper represents the culmination of one stage in the Inquiry's work on this strand. We are very grateful to all those who responded to the call for evidence, and who contributed subsequently to the seminar. However, we are very well aware that the process of debate and consultation has been limited. Some people will not have been aware of the call for evidence, or not had time to make a submission. Others will have waited until there were some conclusions to respond to. Therefore, the publication of this Thematic Paper is also an invitation for a second round of comment, submission and debate. Are there important issues which are not covered here? What further evidence should be included?

Conclusions from this paper will be incorporated into the Inquiry's main report, to be published in September 2009. Please join the debate on this theme and the Inquiry as a whole by sending your comments to: [lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk](mailto:lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk)



Tom Schuller  
Director, IFLL



Sir David Watson  
Chair, IFLL Commissioners

## Executive summary

### Why is poverty important?

A large number of people are affected by poverty in our society: around 13 million people out of a population of 61 million are deemed to be living in relative poverty. Poverty has a disproportionate impact on some of the most vulnerable groups in our community, such as people with disabilities, pensioners, single parents and their children, and people from some ethnic minorities. People can also be more vulnerable to poverty at different times in their lives.

Poverty matters because it consumes a considerable proportion of public resources, both in welfare payments and in the costs arising from the social consequences of poverty. In addition, poverty affects the health of the economy through its impact on spending power. Poverty also matters because it is an important social justice issue. Because of poverty, a significant section of our community have less opportunity to live satisfying and productive lives, and that affects all of us.

Poverty contributes to:

- **Inequality.** Your life chances can be determined at birth. Children born into poor families have poorer outcomes than those born into more affluent families: their educational achievement levels are lower, they are less likely to obtain good jobs, and their chances of developing a range of problems in later life are much higher. Poverty also reduces opportunity and makes social mobility more difficult: children from poor families are less likely than children from better-off families to improve their social and economic position over that of their parents.
- **Social exclusion.** Poverty is associated with many problems such as poor health and worklessness that separate people from the mainstream of society. Poor people find it more difficult to access the services they need, and they are often marginalised and treated with less respect; this contributes to their exclusion, and to divisions in society that can undermine everyone.

### Tackling poverty, inequality and social exclusion

The Government has a wide range of strategies to tackle poverty and social exclusion. Strategies include tax and benefit measures to support people's incomes, investment in better public services such as health and education, and integrated strategies at local level to combat geographical concentrations of poverty. Some of the most important strategies are centred around education and employment because:

- poor basic skills in adults are associated with many social problems, such as unemployment, low income and poor physical and mental health;

- poor basic skills are also a major factor in intergenerational poverty: low education attainment levels in parents affect their children's development and progress at school; and
- poverty has an impact on children's attainment at key transition points such as GCSE.

Lack of employment and low-paid employment are among the main causes of poverty. Gaining work is an effective (although not a guaranteed) means to moving out of poverty. For these reasons, enabling more people to gain and sustain employment is central to anti-poverty strategy. Policies that focus on human capital development to increase labour market participation are seen as the best way to increase individual prosperity and to support the social fabric.

### **Issues for the future**

While employment-related strategies are important, they do not help everyone. For many people who live in poverty, employment is not an option because of where they are in the life course (employment now ceases for many beyond the age of 50), because of personal circumstances such as disability, or because they have caring responsibilities.

Poverty is caused by low-paid work as well as unemployment. High numbers of people in poverty receive very low wages, and poverty levels for many poor families where parents are working are almost as high as for families where parents are unemployed.

Poverty and inequality reduced in the first few years of the twentieth century as a result of a buoyant economy, high employment levels and increased levels of public investment in services that supported poor people. In more uncertain economic circumstances, sustained effort will be needed to continue to tackle many of the problems associated with poverty. It will be particularly important to find more mechanisms to bind people to society beyond employment.

### **The contribution of lifelong learning to poverty reduction**

Lifelong learning has the potential to make a significant contribution to poverty reduction. Research shows that individuals who engage in lifelong learning are more likely to have better employment opportunities, higher incomes, better health and greater ability to manage their money. Learning will be most effective in poverty reduction if it is integrated with other policy measures.

The balance of public funding for lifelong learning for disadvantaged people is significantly weighted towards the acquisition of skills and qualifications designed to help them gain and sustain employment; other means by which lifelong learning can contribute to poverty reduction receive much less emphasis in policy, despite the fact that there is evidence of the efficacy of a range of other approaches. If lifelong learning is to make a significant impact on poverty reduction, more approaches are required

that address the full range of needs that people who live in poverty may have. This calls for attention to be given to how learning can support, not just the development of human capital, but also social capital and a sense of identity and self-worth. We need approaches that provide:

- more opportunities that meet the full range of learning needs that disadvantaged adults may have across the lifespan;
- better integration with wider social strategies to combat disadvantage; and
- more learning opportunities that support change and development in our most deprived communities.

Currently, participation in lifelong learning by disadvantaged groups is low. Because low-income groups are more likely than others to rely on public sector provision, the way in which public sector lifelong learning is organised, what is offered, and how it integrates with other public sector services can all have an impact on increasing demand for learning. Currently, provision can be patchy, and funding regimes and structures do not make it easy for needs to be either identified or met. Providers do not have the autonomy and flexibility they need to respond to local needs and demands, and there are insufficient mechanisms to support more integrated approaches across public sector providers for assessing need and making consistent provision for disadvantaged groups.

## Conclusion

Lifelong learning has an important contribution to make to poverty reduction. To make lifelong learning more effective, we need to:

- **achieve a better balance in the use of public resources** available to support learning for disadvantaged adults, so that the need to support social and identity capital as well as human capital is recognised;
- **strengthen the local infrastructure of lifelong learning**, particularly through enhancing the leadership role of local authorities so that there is better identification of the learning needs of disadvantaged adults, and so that a defined social minimum of learning opportunities can be developed across all providers, using a wide range of teaching and delivery modes;
- **achieve better integration with other aspects of anti-poverty strategy**, at both local and national level; and
- **develop more learning opportunities** that go with the grain of people's lives, needs and concerns, and which give them the capabilities they need to develop their own solutions to individual and local issues arising from poverty and social exclusion.

All groups that are vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion have the right to have their learning needs met, and learning could have a very effective role to play in giving

support through life crises and transitions for those who live in poverty. In particular, there is a need for investment in learning which supports:

- **a comprehensive approach to family learning** that enables all family members to enhance their learning capabilities, and through which learning can be part of the architecture of support to families that are vulnerable to poverty;
- **learning for financial capability and economic well-being** which empowers people and communities, and keys into the wider social and financial aspirations that they may have;
- **growth in informal learning through the new digital technologies** which recognises that there is now huge potential for many disadvantaged adults who do not currently see themselves as learners to access and utilise knowledge and information that could be of considerable benefit to their lives; and
- **community learning, participation and change** which helps people to access the connections they need, create networks, become social innovators and entrepreneurs, and release individual and collective action that could achieve real change for individuals and areas.

Literacy, numeracy and language skills should be the foundation for an integrated strategy for lifelong learning and poverty reduction in which learning, and action to support learning, become an important part of a much wider range of social policy interventions and innovations.

## 1. Introduction

The Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning is seeking to articulate the rationale for public and private investment in learning across a number of key policy areas. Poverty is an obvious area to focus on: there is a strong economic, social and moral case for tackling poverty, which is widely recognised in public policy, and there is solid evidence, both in research and experience, about the value of the contribution that lifelong learning can make to poverty reduction.

However, the meanings of the terms 'poverty' and 'lifelong learning' are both complex, as are the links between the two – they change according to different social and economic circumstances and over time. Nowadays, poverty doesn't just mean absolute poverty, or even relative poverty, but it contains within it notions of social and cultural disadvantage of all kinds. While I have used the term poverty in this paper to encompass these wider aspects, it is important to remember that not everyone on low income experiences the social and cultural disadvantages described in this paper.

Strictly speaking, the term lifelong learning describes education across the lifespan, but in policy relatively little attention is paid to notions of lifelong learning that encompass schooling or the whole lifecycle. Instead, in the UK, lifelong learning is generally used to describe education and training for adults. The concept also encompasses the idea of recurrent learning – the importance of continually up-skilling and re-skilling throughout adult life in order to keep pace with the constantly changing economic and social environment of the twenty-first century.

Lifelong learning has come to be inextricably linked to modern attitudes to welfare. Worklessness and low income are seen as the major cause of poverty and are now closely associated with lack of knowledge and skills. By supporting the development of skills that enhance the capacity for earning a living, lifelong learning is seen as an important means of preventing people from falling into poverty in the first place, and of contributing to people's ability to move out of poverty. These aspects of lifelong learning now have centre stage in public policy.

Lifelong learning is generally seen as an individual and public good. But, as a system, it can reinforce inequalities. The explosion in training and education in recent times has itself contributed to the diminishing status of, and opportunities for, people who are poor, unskilled and unqualified. The explosion in learning as an aspect of consumption (for example, through health and fitness clubs and the new technologies) can become part of the complex patterns of inequality and exclusion that are based, not just on economic factors, but also on culture, behaviour and attitudes. Public policy has a particular responsibility to be sensitive to these issues: not only are people on low incomes more likely to be dependent on public sector provision than others, but these system-wide features of lifelong learning will be shaped by wider economic and social changes, which public policy can influence.

Language posed other problems when I was writing this paper. The top-down nature of many strategies both for lifelong learning and poverty reduction is reflected in the language used. I have struggled and failed to find terms other than 'poor people', 'people who live in poverty' and 'disadvantaged adults'. All of these contain a notion of stigma and 'otherness', which, in itself, can reinforce cultural and social inequalities. People who live in poverty are, and should be recognised as, equal citizens in our society, not victims. We will have made progress when we have language that better recognises this.

The paper largely focuses on English policy for lifelong learning. It is fully recognised that there are many differences in emphasis and approach to lifelong learning across the devolved administrations, but I believe that the thrust of my argument about current policy has general application, and that the issues discussed are relevant to the whole of the UK. I am also sorry that space did not allow discussion of approaches in other countries of the EU, some of which provide a different, and more effective, social partnership model for employment and training, which could be of benefit to disadvantaged groups in the UK.

## 2. Poverty in the UK

### 2.1 Why poverty is important

This paper does not seek to deal with poverty policy overall. However, understanding some of the detail of poverty is important in shaping the ways in which lifelong learning can contribute to its reduction. This section gives some headline indicators of current levels of poverty in the UK. It outlines some of the wider dimensions and consequences of poverty and discusses why they are important. It then discusses briefly some of the current approaches to poverty reduction as a backdrop to examining how lifelong learning relates to poverty reduction.

Poverty is a huge public policy issue, not only because of the costs that it represents to the public purse, but also because of the way in which the externalities of poverty have an impact on society as a whole. These externalities have been a particular preoccupation since the 1980s, when, partly as a result of global economic circumstances and partly as a result of public policy, the UK started to experience rising levels of inequality, accompanied by a burgeoning of social ills such as drug abuse, rises in recorded levels of crime and a decline in levels of trust.

In our diverse society, poverty has many different and complex features. Poverty has a negative impact on many different groups, and at different stages of the life course. Many, though not all, of the people and groups who experience poverty also experience inequality: their levels of income mean that they have less access than others to goods and services, and often have less status in society. Poverty also presents communal risks – to social cohesion and to a sense of well-being in society. For all these reasons, poverty is a major social justice issue.

Taking action to combat poverty and reduce inequalities is now seen as essential by all political parties and, to some extent, this is supported by public opinion. While surveys of social attitudes show hostility to high levels of welfare spending, people do think that the gap between those on high and low incomes is too wide, and there is support for opportunities to succeed to be made available to all, regardless of their income or social or ethnic background.<sup>1</sup> There is also acceptance of investment to reduce poverty that is indirectly distributive – for example, expenditure on health and education.<sup>2</sup> And current economic changes taking place at global level appear to raise new and important questions about how best people can lead satisfying and productive lives and what contributions that people make to society should have most value.

The nature of poverty in modern society raises fundamental questions about tackling poverty which go beyond issues of income support and traditional approaches to welfare. These questions include:

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<sup>1</sup> Fabian Society (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Hills, Sefton and Stewart (eds) (2009).

- In addition to money, what must people have in order to be able to live a decent life?
- What must be in place for people to be able to exercise their right to participate effectively?

Both of these questions are also relevant to the role of lifelong learning in our society.

## 2.2 The nature of poverty in the UK

Despite the fact that the UK is the fourth-richest country in the world, there are high levels of relative poverty and inequality in our society. In 2006–2007 in the UK there were nearly 13 million people out of a population of 61 million people living in households in poverty. The UK has a higher proportion of its population living in relative low income than most other EU countries. Of the 27 countries in the EU, only four have a higher relative poverty rate than the UK.<sup>3</sup>

### Definitions

Poverty can be defined in a number of ways:

- **Income:** poverty is most usually defined by level of income, and a relative measure is used. People who live in households whose incomes are equal to less than 60 per cent of median income – whether that is a wage, a pension or some other benefit – are deemed to be living in poverty. Sixty per cent of median income is regarded as the minimum required to cover the necessities of life. It is important to remember that, because poverty is relative, it will not disappear and is always likely to be an important social policy issue.
- **Assets:** most people on low income have few assets: they do not have savings or own a home or business. People without assets are vulnerable to falling into poverty, because they have no means to cushion themselves against shocks such as divorce or unemployment. Assets are also important as a means of transmitting advantage from one generation to the next. There are signs that increasing levels of wealth in the population are causing intergenerational disadvantage to become more deeply entrenched, and that the relative position of those without assets is worsening.<sup>4</sup>
- **Social goods:** services such as health, education and transport are seen as essential for people to live a decent life; nowadays, lack of access to these resources is also regarded as an indicator of poverty. People who live in poverty often find it more difficult than those better off to obtain quality services; they have less access to public and community facilities; and the quality of their physical environment is often poorer.

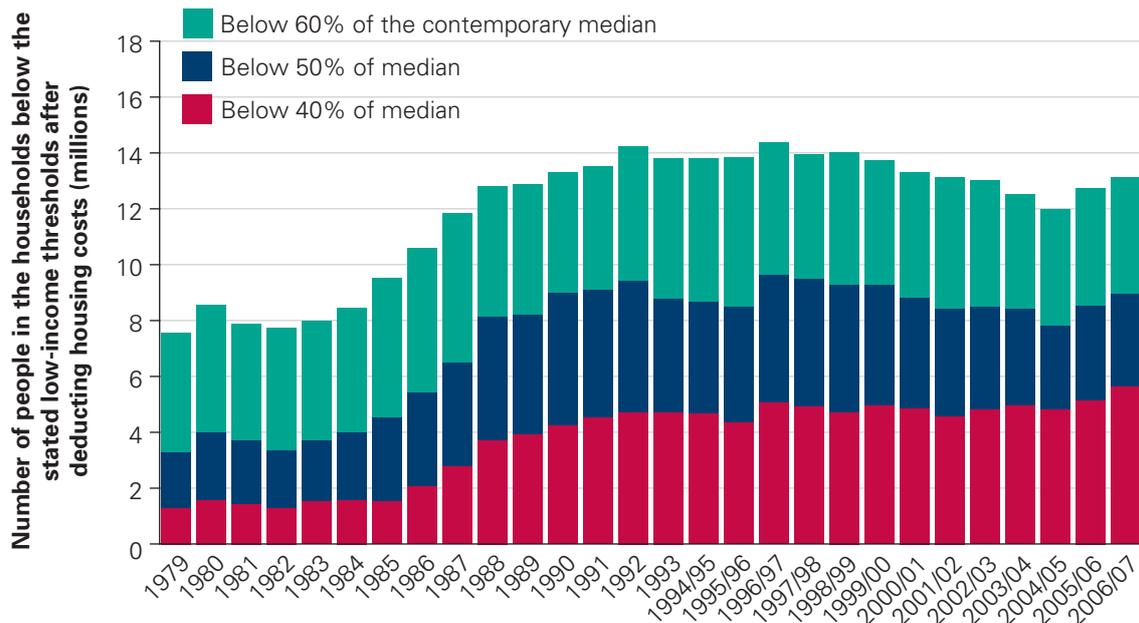
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<sup>3</sup> See [www.poverty.org.uk](http://www.poverty.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> Hills, Sefton and Stewart (eds) (2009).

Figure 1 shows the numbers of people living in relative poverty from the 1980s onwards.

Figure 1: Number of people living in relative poverty 1979–2007<sup>5</sup>



### Dimensions of poverty

There are many dimensions to poverty. Poverty affects particular groups more than others, people are more vulnerable to poverty at different times in their lives, and poverty causes a range of social ills. Poverty has strong associations with poor levels of educational attainment, unemployment and low income.

#### Groups at risk<sup>6</sup>

- **Children** are particularly vulnerable to poverty, and poverty has a serious impact on their life chances. While the number of children living in poverty declined by 0.5 million in the early years of the twenty-first century, there were 3.9 million children living in poor households in 2006–2007.
- **Single parents** are badly affected by poverty. Fifty per cent of all lone parents are on low incomes – this is two and a half times the rate for couples with children.
- **People from ethnic minorities.** Forty per cent of people from ethnic minorities live in low-income households. Certain ethnic minority groups are more vulnerable to poverty than others. Sixty per cent of people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin are in poverty, and 41 per cent of black or black British people are in poverty. Some

<sup>5</sup> UK households below average income (1994/95 onwards), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and (earlier years) the Institute for Fiscal Studies, updated September 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise referenced, all the data in this subsection come from Palmer, Maclnnes and Kenway (eds) (2008).

ethnic minority groups are also particularly vulnerable to social exclusion. Black Caribbean pupils are three times as likely as white pupils to be excluded from school. Young black adults are three times as likely as young white adults to be in prison.

- **People with disabilities.** Thirty per cent of disabled working-age adults are in poverty, compared with 18 per cent of their non-disabled counterparts. Thirty-five per cent of low-income households contain at least one disabled adult. Disabled working-age adults, whatever their levels of qualification, are likely to be living on low income, and 20 per cent of disabled adults who want to work are still unable to find a job. People who suffer from a temporary disability have a high likelihood of drifting into permanent worklessness.<sup>7</sup>
- **Older people.** While the proportion of older people living in low-income households has been falling for the last decade, it is still around 20 per cent, and older people account for one-sixth of all people living in poverty.
- **People without work.** Worklessness is a major cause of poverty: 77 per cent of workless households are in poverty, and worklessness is one of the major drivers of child poverty.
- **People on low income.** Low income is also a major cause of poverty. Low pay rates continue to be very common. Out of a working-age population of 30 million, around 4.5 million adults were paid less than £7 per hour in 2008, of which two-thirds were women and a half were part-time workers.
- **Women.** Around 20 per cent of women live in poverty, compared with 18 per cent of men. The work that women do is more likely to be low paid and part time. Women are more likely than men to be raising a family on their own. Ninety per cent of lone parents are women. Older women who do not have a contributory state pension are at risk of experiencing persistently low income.

## 2.3 Life stages and transitions

It is important when considering poverty to understand that it can have a different impact on people at different times of their lives. While there can be long-term negative consequences of poverty at every phase of life, there are times when poverty can create particularly high risks for individuals and society: when people are young and when they are aged over 50.

### Children and young people

The risks that poverty creates for children and young people present a major challenge for public policy. Poverty has an impact on children's health, education and personal development. Inequalities in the home environment are compounded by other

<sup>7</sup> Pearce and Paxton (eds) (2005).

inequalities such as in access to care and educational opportunities outside the home.<sup>8</sup> A low-income background is a significant predictor of leaving school at age 16 without qualifications. Even if the attainment levels of disadvantaged young people are similar to those of their more privileged peers, they are more likely to decide to leave education early.<sup>9</sup> Leaving education early contributes to a significant group of 18- to 25-year-olds, many of whom are young parents themselves, who have difficulty making the transition to adulthood and integrating into the labour market, even in times of high employment.<sup>10</sup>

### **People aged 50-plus**

In our society, we now have unprecedented numbers of people who face a substantial phase of life without paid work. From the age of 50, employment patterns change for many people. For many people in this group, increasing life expectancy and reasonable income mean this can be a time of opportunity during which they continue with a wide range of activities. For those on low incomes, the prospects are less rosy, because many are vulnerable to a range of social and health risks. While there are now policy efforts to reduce the numbers of people who retire early, to increase the employment rates of older people, and to lengthen the time they stay in work, many on low incomes in this age group are at high risk of social exclusion. Finding ways of supporting older people and enabling them to realise their potential in the next phase of their lives will be a significant issue for public policy for the future.

## **2.4 Social exclusion**

In public policy, considerable attention is now paid to the variety of problems associated with poverty. Poor mental and physical health is strongly associated with poverty.<sup>11</sup> So are difficulties in accessing the structures and resources essential to a decent standard of life – for example, health services, decent schools, adequate housing and good transport facilities. Difficulties in accessing resources can be made worse as a result of conscious or unconscious discrimination by both public and private providers of goods and services. People in poverty may experience financial exclusion: they are much less likely to have a bank account, which can increase the costs of utilities and make it harder to get a job. They may also be more vulnerable to crime. Half the people on low income do not have household insurance, and people without insurance are three times as likely as those with insurance to be burgled.<sup>12</sup> The term ‘social exclusion’ is now widely used to describe these dimensions of poverty.

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<sup>8</sup> Fabian Society (2006).

<sup>9</sup> HM Government (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Hills and Stewart (eds) (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Department of Health (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Palmer, McInnes and Kenway (2008).

As well as individuals, places can experience social exclusion. Neighbourhoods that have concentrations of people living in poverty are likely to experience other social problems, and such neighbourhoods often suffer from poor facilities and a degraded local environment. Education inequality – failing schools and high levels of young people leaving school without qualifications – is a powerful feature of such areas. Young people in areas of concentrated disadvantage are less likely to develop ambitious, achievable aspirations.<sup>13</sup> Geographical concentrations of disadvantage serve to reinforce and make worse problems of low confidence and aspiration.

## 2.5 Inequality

Poverty is also closely linked with inequality. In the UK, levels of income inequality are relatively high. Out of 15 EU countries, the UK ranked 12th in terms of income equality in 2006. Despite growth in real incomes for all social groups from 1997 to 2007, if you compare the richest fifth and the poorest fifth in our society, there has been little reduction in income inequality in recent times. Wealth is more unequally distributed than income, and transmission of wealth and assets between the generations remains a significant means of reproducing inequalities in society.<sup>14</sup>

High levels of income inequality matter for three reasons:

- **Poorer life chances.** Many people born into different income groups have their life chances determined not by merit but by accident of birth. Children growing up in the poorest families have poorer educational outcomes, are less successful in the labour market and are at higher risk of ill health, benefit dependency and homelessness in later life.<sup>15</sup> There are also more limited life chances for adults who live in poverty. Adults who live in poverty are vulnerable to falling further behind. The longer you are in income poverty the more difficult it is to move out of it and experience a decent standard of life.
- **Lack of social mobility.** High levels of inequality are linked to a lack of social mobility. Social mobility is usually measured by the extent to which individuals are able to achieve an improvement in occupational status and earnings over that of their parents. Social mobility declined in the last quarter of the twentieth century: children born in 1970 improved their position relative to that of their parents less than did those born in 1958.<sup>16</sup> Currently there is debate about whether social mobility is improving in the UK, but we do know that social mobility continues to be limited for children in low-income families.<sup>17</sup> People in the UK have less social mobility than in many other countries where income gaps are less marked, for example Scandinavia, Germany, France and Canada.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> HM Government (2009).

<sup>14</sup> Hills, Sefton and Stewart (eds) (2009).

<sup>15</sup> Fabian Society (2006).

<sup>16</sup> The Strategy Unit (2008).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.; Palmer, MacInnes and Kenway (eds) (2008).

<sup>18</sup> Timmins (2004); Wilkinson and Pickett (2009).

- **Damage to the social fabric.** There is evidence that high levels of income inequality damage the social fabric more widely. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's recent book *The Spirit Level*<sup>19</sup> compares societies across the world and demonstrates how modern social problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, violence and obesity are more likely to occur in less equal societies. While the poor are most likely to suffer from these social ills, in a more unequal society these ills have a corrosive effect on the quality of life enjoyed by everyone. The most unequal societies have the lowest levels of trust and highest levels of anxiety, isolation and unhappiness, and are likely to have lower levels of civic and political participation.

## 2.6 Education, employment and poverty

### The circle of disadvantage

There is a circular relationship between poverty and social exclusion, education, employment and income, and the effects are felt from one generation to the next:

- **Low levels of education can transmit disadvantage.** There is a strong association between parents' levels of literacy and numeracy and the cognitive outcomes of young children, even when other factors are taken into account. These effects are especially strong for the lowest qualified parents.<sup>20</sup>
- **Low income can have an impact on educational performance.** GCSEs are also an important predictor for future life chances, and performance outcomes at GCSE level are strongly linked with the income levels of parents. In 2007, there was a 27.3 percentage point gap between the number of pupils gaining five GCSEs at A\*–C who were not in receipt of free school meals and those who were. Geographical concentrations of poverty can also affect educational outcomes. Area-level data for 2007 showed that while 68.4 per cent of young people in the 10 per cent of most advantaged areas gained five grade A\*–C GCSEs, only 25.3 per cent of young people in the poorest areas did so.<sup>21</sup>
- **Poor levels of literacy and numeracy in adults are associated with disadvantage.** People who are on low incomes or unemployed, teenage parents and people with poor physical and mental health often have poor levels of literacy and numeracy.<sup>22</sup> Employability is further weakened if a lack of literacy skills is compounded by a lack of ICT skills.<sup>23</sup> Isolation and the inability to participate in political or community life are also closely associated with low literacy and numeracy skills.

The impact that low educational attainment has on opportunity means that improving educational attainment is central to policies for poverty reduction. While the emphasis

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<sup>19</sup> Wilkinson and Pickett (2009).

<sup>20</sup> Hills, Sefton and Stewart (eds) (2009).

<sup>21</sup> Bynner et al (2001).

<sup>22</sup> Bynner et al (2008).

<sup>23</sup> The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2004).

is on schooling, in recent years these policies have increasingly focused on improving adult skills as a means of gaining and progressing in employment.

### The importance of employment

Being without work is a major cause of poverty. Working-age adults living in workless households or where the head of the household is unemployed are the most likely to be living in poverty. Gaining work is an effective (though not a guaranteed) means to move out of poverty,<sup>24</sup> and work has a significant impact on well-being and on objective measures of physical and mental health.<sup>25</sup> Employment enables people to look after themselves and others; it gives people dignity and independence and the ability to make a contribution to society – it enables them to be full citizens.

Employment is at the heart of current anti-poverty strategy. Government policy to increase the employment rates among people in poverty combines measures to ‘make work pay’, through the introduction of the national minimum wage, and reforms in the tax and benefit regime designed to incentivise work, with ‘New Deal’ programmes focused on specific groups such as lone parents and the young unemployed to enable them to become more employable, to search for work and to remain in the labour market.

However, work in itself is not a guaranteed route out of poverty for the following reasons:

- **Low pay.** The underlying problem of work providing insufficient income remains a constant feature of the UK labour market. By EU definitions, about 22 per cent of the UK workforce is low paid. For women, 31.3 per cent are low paid.<sup>26</sup> Despite the introduction of tax credits for the working poor, in-work poverty rates have not fallen in recent years. Recent statistics show that among children in poverty in the UK, at least as many belong to working families as to workless ones.<sup>27</sup>
- **Insecurity.** Job insecurity is a particular feature of the low end of the labour market, which is characterised by a merry-go-round of low-skilled people constantly moving into low-paid insecure jobs with no prospects and then back into unemployment again.
- **Inability to work.** Labour market participation cannot provide a route out of poverty for groups for which work is not an option, such as chronically sick or disabled people, people with caring responsibilities and older people. Even when people with disabilities and older workers are able and willing to work, there is evidence that discrimination still represents a significant barrier, as it does for some ethnic minority groups;<sup>28</sup> these groups represent a significant proportion of those likely to be vulnerable to poverty.

<sup>24</sup> Pearce and Paxton (eds) (2005).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Kenway (2008).

<sup>27</sup> Hills, Sefton and Stewart (eds) (2009).

<sup>28</sup> Hills and Stewart (2009).

## 2.7 The present situation and future challenges

Public policy efforts to tackle poverty have had some success in recent years. The big rise in poverty and inequality that occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s was halted in the early years of the twenty-first century. However, most progress in reducing poverty levels occurred in the context of economic growth. We cannot predict the long-term impact on poverty levels of the global financial upheavals which began in 2008, but progress has recently stalled, and it is likely that levels of poverty will continue to be a big public policy issue.

In many areas, significant problems remain. Some of the problems that are likely to be most significant to lifelong learning policy include the following:

- Education and health inequalities in relation to socio-economic position remain high.
- Employment has not reduced poverty for many people; the problem of low pay remains significant.
- Despite progress in neighbourhood-based strategies, the differences in opportunity between the poorest areas and the rest remain.

At the moment, with rising levels of unemployment, the risks attached to according most priority to employment strategies are more obvious. But there has always been a risk in regarding employment, or even income, as the overwhelmingly important means to enable people to achieve personal and social well-being and be full citizens. More people who live in poverty would be helped if there was a broader conception of employment that placed more value on other kinds of engagement, such as learning, unpaid work, voluntary activities and caring. There are examples of this broader view already: poorer families are rewarded through benefits and tax credits for bringing up children, and attendance at education and training courses is now recognised as a valid activity for unemployed people, through the relaxation of the 16-hour rule. Other groups could benefit from an extension of this principle. This approach would also help to keep people closer to the world of employment in times of job loss and economic uncertainty; it would create immense personal benefit in terms of dignity and status for those groups for whom paid work is always less likely to be an option.

A definitive review of recent progress in reducing poverty and inequality, *Towards a More Equal Society*, produced by John Hills and colleagues at the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, concluded that 'many things were tried and a lot worked'.<sup>29</sup> Poverty has many dimensions, and we need a variety of methods to tackle poverty. The review demonstrates that the challenges for the future are not simply about sustaining public investment, important though that is. They are about learning from the interventions that have been made and embedding this learning in policy for the long term.

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<sup>29</sup> Hills, Sefton and Stewart (eds) (2009).

## 3. Evaluating the impact of learning on poverty reduction

### 3.1 Introduction

Lifelong learning has had an important part to play in policies to reduce poverty and social exclusion. In particular, education and training have been central to employment-related policies. Strategies to reduce social exclusion, programmes through the NHS to tackle poor physical or mental health, and place-based programmes have also often had a learning dimension. The Skills for Life strategy, designed to raise attainment in literacy, numeracy and ESOL (English for speakers of other languages), was originally underpinned by a focus on social inclusion, and maintains the drive for integrated working across all areas of public policy. Improving child development has been seen as essential to reducing child poverty and has led to the many innovative community-based programmes, such as Sure Start and Children's Centres, which have sought to support children but have also aimed to improve skills for parents through parenting education, employment advice and a variety of adult learning opportunities. It is worth noting, however, that in other areas such as tackling economic and social disadvantage for older people, lifelong learning has largely been ignored.

The variety of ways in which learning and anti-poverty strategies interconnect illustrates how difficult it is to estimate which interventions to tackle poverty through lifelong learning are most effective. Overall, it is not easy to identify causal links between learning and poverty reduction: many of the benefits of learning are indirect or difficult to isolate from other outcomes arising from policy interventions, or indeed wider social and economic changes. The impact of learning can often depend on other factors.

Another problem is the status accorded to the different kinds of evaluations and the different knowledge we have about what works or is likely to work. There is a long tradition and wealth of experience associated with developing and delivering learning for disadvantaged adults. Successful practice has been described in personal autobiographies, countless testimonies of teachers and other practitioners, in anecdotes and in qualitative evaluations. At the moment, this type of evidence from practice holds less value for policy-makers. Evaluations of much of this work would benefit from a higher profile as well as from being backed up by quantitative analyses. At the same time, a number of currently significant premises (for example, regarding the importance of qualifications to everyone living in poverty) would also benefit from further research and more rigorous cost-benefit analysis.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ewart Keep, submission to the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, 2007.

## 3.2 The Inquiry's research review

Despite the complexities surrounding evaluation, there is much solid evidence of the contribution that lifelong learning can make to improve the life chances of disadvantaged people. The Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning has published a research review of the impact of lifelong learning on poverty reduction which shows that adult learning has the capacity to positively affect many dimensions of poverty.<sup>31</sup> From large-scale quantitative evidence, the review demonstrates:

- the positive effects of improved basic skills during adulthood on earnings potential;
- the further participation by basic skills learners in vocational education and training;
- the association between the acquisition of vocational qualifications at whatever level and an increase in employment for those individuals who left school with no qualifications;
- that learning leading to qualifications supports the transition of women into employment;
- the link between a lack of basic skills and qualifications and unemployment;
- the importance of learning to the financial capability of adults;
- the impact of family learning on children's resilience; and
- the impact of improved maternal education levels on children's achievement.

## 3.3 Individual, family and wider benefits

A key aspect of our review is the way in which it shows how learning can produce many indirect benefits. Learning can help to improve people's ability to manage their health and finances and support their family life. The benefits of learning to families matter because of the way that poverty can be passed on through the generations. Children and adults learning together, for example, can contribute to children's resilience and communication skills, and can help to reduce children's psychological and behavioural disorders. The acquisition of skills by parents can also help children's performance at school. Children's achievement in early life remains the best indicator of their living successful lives as adults. In this context, lifelong learning has an important contribution to make to reducing poverty in the long run.

There is also considerable evidence of the wider social benefits of learning, which is relevant to some of the broader consequences of poverty.<sup>32</sup> Participation in learning has been shown to encourage civic participation and a willingness to engage in sport and exercise; it also improves racial tolerance and, in certain contexts, is also likely to have a positive influence on societal cohesion through promoting trust and civic co-operation.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Sabates (2008).

<sup>32</sup> Feinstein et al. (2008).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

### 3.4 Empowerment

Lifelong learning is particularly associated with behaviours that could have an indirect benefit in supporting people to find routes out of poverty. This is because learning is a means for change. Adult learners consistently identify that the main benefit they have gained from learning is a change in self-perception and an increase in confidence. They also cite the ability to interact socially and to achieve better focus and self-organisation as important benefits of learning. These important 'soft' attributes are the ones that enable people to engage with the world and to take more control over their lives. Confidence and efficacy of this kind is particularly important for disadvantaged people, as poverty is often correlated with vulnerability and lack of empowerment.<sup>34</sup>

Research shows that many kinds of learning opportunities, including informal learning, can have these same benefits. Traditionally, there have been other links between learning and empowerment through the association of some kinds of learning with political activity. Trades union education is an obvious example, and community campaigns over issues such as housing and schools have often arisen through engagement with adult education.

### 3.5 Evaluating key policy areas

In order to strengthen the impact that learning has on poverty reduction, we need to know more about the efficacy of some current policies and approaches. For example, the evidence we have on the impact that qualifications make on income levels is mixed. Our review shows solid evidence of wage returns on higher education, and this applies to mature students also – some of whom will be from low-income groups. While our research review also identifies evidence of the economic returns of basic skills, this is more contestable and has been challenged in a recent study.<sup>35</sup> Overall, the evidence of the impact of qualifications or training on earnings is variable – it can depend on the sector and the types of jobs available.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, national surveys have produced a lot of self-reported evidence of the positive impact that training and qualifications can have on earnings for those with intermediate skills, and many small-scale studies testify to the efficacy of learning in supporting progression into employment or further education for disadvantaged individuals.<sup>37</sup>

On other aspects of poverty, reviews of social interventions to combat the wider negative consequences of poverty abound, but generally do not seek to isolate education effects from other effects of interventions.<sup>38</sup> However, the call for submissions to the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning in preparation for this

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<sup>34</sup> Sabates (2008).

<sup>35</sup> Anna Vignoles, presentation to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2 April 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Meschi, Vignoles and De Coulin (2008).

<sup>37</sup> Sabates (2008).

<sup>38</sup> Griggs et al. (2008).

paper produced a mass of evidence from experience, and this is replicated in studies undertaken by NIACE and other bodies.<sup>39</sup>

The scope of evaluations would benefit from being broadened. Our review points out the lack of empirical evidence that demonstrates the overall impact of the investment in adult learning strategies for poverty reduction, or that evaluates the ‘multiplier effect’ of the interaction between learning and other interventions. Some more ambitious studies would assist all sides of the debate about which strategies are most effective – and this is as true for learning for employment-related outcomes as for learning that can support other means to tackle disadvantage.

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example: Mayo and Thompson (eds) (1995); Thompson (1997); Thompson (2002).

## 4. Disadvantaged adults and learning: the current situation

### 4.1 The implications of poverty for learning

People who live in poverty have the same needs as everyone else: they want to work, have an income which will provide for the necessities of life, and engage with their families and the wider social world, and they want to have a sense of well-being and feel in control of their lives. A number of other Inquiry papers have used the notion of human, social and identity capital as a means of framing how the lifelong learning system could more effectively respond to meeting the needs of people in poverty.<sup>40</sup> Whoever we are, we need to have the resources that enable us to function as effective and fulfilled people; these resources can be financial, but we also need resources that come from within ourselves and from other people. These resources are now often referred to as **capital**. The three kinds of capital are:

- **human capital:** the skills and knowledge needed to effectively engage in activity that is of benefit to us – usually paid work, but also other kinds of activity such as voluntary and community work;
- **social capital:** the ability of individuals and communities to create and maintain structures which help to preserve and strengthen a decent standard of life; such structures can include neighbourhoods, religious, political and community groupings, and family and kinship networks; and
- **identity capital:** the ability of individuals to develop and maintain a sense of self-worth and control over their lives. A sense of identity is critical to well-being and mental health.

Disadvantaged groups often lack these capitals. People in poverty tend to lack human capital – their qualifications and skills are low. Their networks are often restricted, particularly if they live in areas of concentrated disadvantage. They are more likely to live in communities that lack some of the building blocks of social support, such as good schools and other communal facilities, and where levels of participation in a variety of activities, including political activities, may be low. Poverty can also be linked to a lack of identity capital: people in poverty can experience shame and vulnerability and have low self-esteem.<sup>41</sup>

Learning can have a significant part to play in developing all three dimensions of capital for disadvantaged groups; it can therefore enhance employability, build confidence and self-esteem and increase personal efficacy. Learning can help communities

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, McNair (2009).

<sup>41</sup> Hills et al. (2002).

and families build social capital by increasing capability, trust and tolerance and by encouraging communal activities and engagement.

Framing learning needs in this way raises questions about how effective our current system is in responding to people who live in poverty. There is currently a huge commitment to engage disadvantaged adults in learning and to maximise the benefits of learning for disadvantaged adults – particularly in relation to improving their levels of income. However, levels of participation continue to be low, and the way that learning is organised may not be maximising its effectiveness in supporting poverty reduction for disadvantaged adults. In this context, the following subsections analyse:

- levels of participation in learning by disadvantaged adults;
- issues that are relevant to participation;
- the nature of learning provision available to disadvantaged adults;
- the balance of investment in lifelong learning and how this has an impact on opportunities for disadvantaged adults; and
- how current models for leadership and strategy in lifelong learning have an impact on meeting the needs of disadvantaged adults.

### 4.2 Participation is low

Participation in post-compulsory learning by adults who suffer the most economic and social disadvantage has always been much lower than for other groups. Surveys of adult participation in learning undertaken by NIACE show that unskilled workers and people on limited incomes have the lowest level of participation (around 26 per cent) in learning activity of whatever kind. The 2008 survey by NIACE shows that:

- adults in the highest socio-economic groups, as classified by the Registrar General (groups AB), are around twice as likely to participate in learning than are those in the lowest groups (DE);
- over half of those in social groups DE have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education;
- the age at which people leave full-time education is a key predictor of adults' engagement in learning – again, in 2008, the NIACE survey showed that only 26 per cent of those who left school as early as possible are current or recent learners.

Participation in learning by the most disadvantaged groups has not changed significantly over many years (see Table 1).

Table 1: Recent participation in learning by socio-economic class, 1996–2009<sup>42</sup>

|               | 1996<br>% | 1999<br>% | 2002<br>% | 2005<br>% | 2008<br>% | 2009<br>% |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Total sample  | 40        | 40        | 42        | 42        | 38        | 39        |
| AB            | 53        | 58        | 60        | 56        | 51        | 53        |
| C1            | 52        | 51        | 54        | 51        | 46        | 48        |
| C2            | 33        | 36        | 37        | 40        | 33        | 33        |
| DE            | 26        | 24        | 25        | 26        | 26        | 24        |
| Weighted base | 4,755     | 5,205     | 5,885     | 5,053     | 4,932     | 4,917     |

Base: all respondents

While the Government's Labour Force Survey data shows more working adults participating in learning overall than the NIACE surveys show, the data confirm that low-skilled and low-income groups have less access to education and training. The National Employers Skills Survey in 2007 showed that 52 per cent of professional employees said they had received off-the-job training in the last year, while only 24 per cent of staff engaged in production said they had been given access to training.<sup>43</sup>

Higher education is particularly good at developing all three kinds of capital, but its expansion during the last 20 years has only marginally benefited disadvantaged groups. While there has been some increase in participation in higher education by students from the poorest socio-economic neighbourhoods, most of the new full-time places in higher education have gone to students from better-off areas.<sup>44</sup> Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds represented just 29 per cent of new young entrants in 2008. Older low-income adults are more likely to study part time, and their needs have been particularly neglected in policy.<sup>45</sup>

### 4.3 Issues that affect participation

Nobody can make us learn: we learn because we want to. Despite the importance attached in public policy to learning, people who live in poverty do not necessarily want to learn or see it as useful: they may not enjoy it or understand its benefits.

#### Attitudes and experience

Our attitude to learning is bound up with our experience – many adults who live in poverty are likely to have had a poor experience of education. Generations of children, especially from working class backgrounds, leave school believing that education is irrelevant to their lives. Family background, a poor experience of education, and lack of confidence can all contribute to an attitude to learning 'which does not view current opportunities as appropriate, interesting or useful'.<sup>46</sup> There can also be scepticism

<sup>42</sup> Aldridge and Tuckett (2009).

<sup>43</sup> Learning and Skills Council in partnership with the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Sector Skills Development Agency (2008).

<sup>44</sup> Hills, Sefton and Stewart (eds) (2009).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> See Gorard (2000).

about the value of education and training. Investment of time and money in learning may not be attractive to disadvantaged adults if there is no obvious guaranteed pay-off at the end through a better job or other opportunities.

### Practical barriers

For many, there are also practical barriers to learning. Many people do not have the money to pay for learning, or they may be in poor health. Time can be a huge factor: people who live in poverty may suffer from time constraints because of family responsibilities or because they have to work very long hours to maintain their incomes. People who live in poverty may live in neighbourhoods with limited lifelong learning opportunities – local facilities are often important to people on low incomes, as they may not be able to travel far. Such people may work in industries where it is difficult to access any training that is appropriate to their needs.

Access to the Internet is also important. While the pattern of use of new technologies is changing, there is evidence that Internet use is closely linked to household income – low-income groups are less likely than the better off to have access to the Internet – and that there are large regional differences in use. Currently, there is a strong correlation between use of the Internet and people’s willingness to engage in learning (see Table 2).

Table 2: Participation in learning 2009, by access to the Internet<sup>47</sup>

|   | Total % | No Internet access % | Any Internet access % |
|---|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Current learning                                  | 18      | 6                    | 22                    |
| Recent learning (in the last three years)         | 21      | 9                    | 26                    |
| All current or recent learning                    | 39      | 15                   | 48                    |
| Past learning (more than three years ago)         | 24      | 25                   | 24                    |
| None since leaving full-time education/don't know | 37      | 55                   | 26                    |
| Weighted base                                     | 4,917   | 1,367                | 3,549                 |

Base: all respondents

## 4.4 The importance of public sector policy and provision

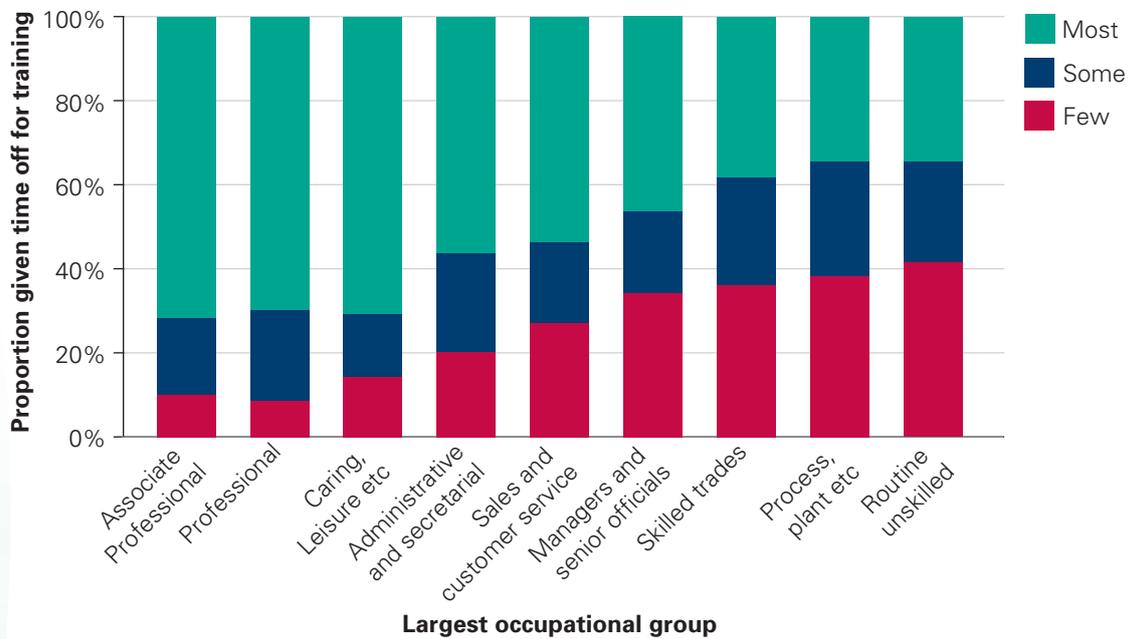
Disadvantaged adults are likely to have more limited access than others to different types of provision. Adult learning is available in many different contexts: it can be publicly funded, organised and funded by employers, or delivered through private companies or voluntary organisations.

Currently, employment-related learning, and learning provided through voluntary means and through the private sector is less likely to be available to disadvantaged

<sup>47</sup> Aldridge and Tuckett (2009).

adults than to other groups. Access to training and development at work is likely to be limited if you are low paid and unskilled. Training budgets are still heavily skewed towards those with the most education and skills, and those in more senior positions. Government policy is seeking to address this bias, but the fact that much learning at work for low-skilled, low-income groups is dependent on state subsidy shows that such training is not embedded in the system and is likely to be vulnerable to cuts in public expenditure. Figure 2 shows that there is still a long way to go before learning at work is accessible to significant numbers of adults in low-skilled or low-paid work.

Figure 2: Links between job and time off for training<sup>48</sup>



Outside work, the range of opportunities for learning has changed. Adult education, as traditionally conceived, was rooted in progressive social movements in the nineteenth century which sought to reach those who had been denied educational opportunity. Informal learning for working class adults was available through clubs and societies, trades unions and political parties, and religious groups. In recent times, voluntary participatory activities in working class communities have declined, as have the learning opportunities associated with them. Informal learning today is closely related to modern patterns of consumption: leisure activities, sports and health clubs, cultural activities and holidays, the Internet and other media are now major drivers of participation in learning. Different patterns of consumption by low-income groups will affect demand for informal learning;<sup>49</sup> many will not be able to afford the opportunities that are available, or will not think that the opportunities are relevant to their needs.

<sup>48</sup> Source: Gosling (2009).

<sup>49</sup> Field (2006).

We need to recognise that most affordable provision for disadvantaged learners now depends on the public sector. To some extent, this is inevitable, and not necessarily a bad thing. In the interests of equity, the public sector gives low-income groups access to learning which otherwise would only be available to the more affluent. Locally based learning is likely to be more important to disadvantaged adults, and provision is likely to require more planning and to depend on outreach work and liaison with other agencies. The market is unlikely to be able to meet these requirements. However, dependence on the public sector does mean that disadvantaged learners are particularly vulnerable to policies that have the indirect consequence of reducing choice, such as the priority now given to qualification outcomes, or changes in the role of further education, where much provision below Level 2 is no longer funded. If reaching qualifications targets determines funding, a perverse effect develops whereby the most disadvantaged may be excluded by providers because they are less likely to succeed or more likely to drop out. Disadvantaged adults will also exclude themselves if what is on offer does not seem to match their motivations or interests. Policy-makers need to be sensitive to the fact that many disadvantaged adults may be totally excluded from learning if public sector provision does not meet a diverse range of needs.

#### **4.5 Government priorities shape the opportunities available to disadvantaged adults**

Today, the context, size and shape of lifelong learning for disadvantaged groups is dominated by state action: government-funded national agencies have most of the responsibility for shaping and funding lifelong learning; government subsidies to employers also shape lifelong learning opportunities. Analyses and policies designed to improve productivity, achieve economic growth and maintain competitiveness in a changing global economy drive the lifelong learning system. Within this strategy there is a strong commitment to achieving more and better skills as ‘the most important lever within our control to create wealth and reduce social deprivation’.<sup>50</sup> As a result, a considerable proportion of public investment for lifelong learning is directed towards disadvantaged adults, particularly those with the fewest skills and qualifications. Qualifications are a strong predictor of the ability to gain and retain jobs. The employment rate for those with no qualifications has been falling steadily since the 1980s. In 2007, of the 4.5 million working-age adults with no qualifications, 2 million were workless and 300,000 were unemployed.<sup>51</sup> Government believes that investing in qualifications will not only bring employment benefits but will also be an important means to achieve social mobility and a more equal society.<sup>52</sup>

While there is much debate about which levels of skills carry greatest economic premium for employers and employees, the Government estimates that the highest

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<sup>50</sup> Leitch (2006).

<sup>51</sup> Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2007).

<sup>52</sup> HM Government (2009).

social and economic premium will come from investment in lower level skills – basic skills and Level 2 skills (a full Level 2 qualification is deemed to be any qualification equivalent to five GCSEs at A\*–C) – because this will provide the best means to get more people onto a basic platform for employability and progression at work. Currently, the state invests in free basic skills training and in free training and financial support to enable those without qualifications to achieve a full Level 2 qualification. Public subsidy is available to employers to identify staff with no qualifications and poor basic skills and to provide them with access to learning and qualifications up to Level 2.

Disadvantaged adults also benefit from national support mechanisms such as UK Online and the new adult careers service, and there is additional funding for support in further and higher education for students from the most deprived postcode areas. Some informal learning is also available for disadvantaged adults through policies and initiatives across government – for example, for improving public health, for supporting older people, and for participation and citizenship – and there are moves to co-ordinate these better. There is now a high-profile policy commitment to encourage a variety of public, private and voluntary bodies to provide more learning opportunities for individuals and communities which can promote creativity, personal fulfilment and health and well-being.<sup>53</sup> However, as we discuss in the next section, the balance of funding is such that the pattern of opportunity for disadvantaged adults, outside of those who are attending higher education, is largely determined by the government funding for learning for qualifications to achieve a threshold of employability and improve the skills levels of the least skilled in the workplace.

#### **4.6 Is the balance of public investment right for disadvantaged learners?**

A big issue for future policy is whether the current nature and balance of public investment is the right one to realise lifelong learning's potential in poverty reduction.

The Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning has undertaken a major review of all aspects of expenditure on lifelong learning. The Inquiry sought to estimate the pattern of investment in lifelong learning by the public sector, private employers (for profit and not for profit), the third (voluntary) sector and individuals. It also estimated the relative expenditure on learning for members of the general public and for employees. The review looked at how expenditure on lifelong learning for the general public is divided between learning for economic purposes and learning for wider purposes; in this context, it reviewed expenditure on learning across all government departments, not just the education departments. The review shows that approximately 95 per cent of public expenditure (£25.5 billion) goes into improving national performance, into public sector employee training or into tax relief for employers to undertake training. Estimating how much, within these proportions, goes on expenditure for

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<sup>53</sup> Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2009a).

disadvantaged adults is more difficult, but from what we have seen of learning participation by disadvantaged adults, either within or beyond the workplace, it is clear that within these overall totals the relative proportions of expenditure for disadvantaged adults are likely to be very similar. There are two key exceptions to this. Firstly, the investment in literacy and numeracy in the last ten years has focused precious resources on disadvantaged adults; this investment continues to be a crucial platform for wider engagement in life and learning and is a central plank of the Inquiry's proposals for a new framework of lifelong learning entitlements. Secondly, the £1.2 billion public expenditure on learning for wider purposes provides informal learning, and, because this is often the mode that adults with less successful experiences of initial education favour, it is likely that disadvantaged adults are benefiting from a reasonable high proportion of this expenditure. The balance of expenditure by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC, the main public funding body for adult learning) follows a similar pattern (see Table 3).

Table 3: LSC budget 2009–10<sup>54</sup>

| Budget line                                      | 2008–09<br>£000s | 2009–10<br>£000s |
|--|------------------|------------------|
| <b>Adult learner responsive</b>                  | <b>1,735,508</b> | <b>1,699,888</b> |
| of which for planning purposes:                  |                  |                  |
| Foundation Learning Tier                         | 220,652          | 222,481          |
| Skills for Life                                  | 562,219          | 608,899          |
| Full Level 2                                     | 237,212          | 259,172          |
| Full Level 3                                     | 339,084          | 378,889          |
| Developmental learning                           | 376,340          | 230,447          |
| <b>Employer responsive</b>                       |                  |                  |
| Apprenticeships                                  | 328,323          | 366,514          |
| Train to Gain (including further education NVQs) | 797,281          | 925,661          |
| <b>Employer responsive sub total</b>             | <b>1,125,604</b> | <b>1,292,175</b> |
| of which for planning purposes:                  |                  |                  |
| Foundation Learning Tier                         | 9,229            | 6,818            |
| Skills for Life                                  | 35,410           | 57,688           |
| Full Level 2                                     | 525,673          | 625,737          |
| Full Level 3                                     | 119,275          | 161,496          |
| Apprenticeships                                  | 328,323          | 366,514          |
| Developmental learning                           | 19,769           | 14,921           |
| <b>Adult safeguarded learning</b>                | <b>210,000</b>   | <b>210,000</b>   |
| Offender Learning and Skills Service             | 122,203          | 124,770          |
| <b>Total adult participation (DIUS)</b>          | <b>3,193,315</b> | <b>3,326,833</b> |

<sup>54</sup> Source: DCSF, DIUS and LSC (2008) *Government Investment Strategy 2009–10, LSC Grant Letter and LSC Statement of Priorities*

Both the Inquiry's data and the Learning and Skills Council's data clearly show that the balance of investment is overwhelmingly directed towards employment-related objectives. The outcomes of any investment in learning can be unpredictable, and for disadvantaged groups it is too early to say whether the emphasis on qualifications and employment-related learning will have a significant impact. Certainly, creating more workplace learning opportunities for the low skilled is a significant and much needed development: it is an important means of redressing the bias in education and training, which favoured the better educated. We can already see that workplace learning has proved effective in engaging some groups in learning. The national Skills for Life strategy, with ambitious targets linked to the number of qualifications gained, has substantially raised demand from some groups for literacy, numeracy and ESOL training, and qualifications in these areas have proved popular with large numbers of adult learners. Between 2001 and 2008, over 5.7 million people engaged in basic skills learning, and over 2 million adults gained a first literacy or numeracy qualification.<sup>55</sup>

### Some risks

However, significant groups of disadvantaged people with very low basic skills levels – for example, older learners, the long-term unemployed and workless people, and those in prison and on probation – are not yet engaging with basic skills learning.<sup>56</sup> This is also the case for adults with basic skills needs in the workplace.<sup>57</sup> These least visible and marginal groups are the ones less likely to be attracted to qualifications; this is a major issue for the longer term. Additional approaches may be necessary to key into the learning motivations of these groups, especially as there is evidence that the best chance of improving literacy in the next generation comes from working successfully with adults with the lowest levels of skills.

The nature of the UK labour market means there is a risk in relying solely on employment-based strategies, either to improve the numbers of low-skilled people with qualifications or to engage more disadvantaged groups in learning. Most poor working adults are living in poverty because they are in insecure, low-skilled, low-paid jobs, where employers do not see the benefit of qualifications. Many who work in this labour market have limited access to expanding opportunities, particularly in conditions of economic uncertainty. It may be difficult for such people to see any association between qualifications and pay levels and progression. For many, the value of Level 2 qualifications varies according to local, regional and sectoral employment conditions. In many sectors, there is a low demand for higher level qualifications, and low-skilled adults who seek to gain a Level 2 qualification will not be able to progress to Level 3.<sup>58</sup> While there is evidence that some Level 2 qualifications – particularly older, established

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<sup>55</sup> Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2009b).

<sup>56</sup> House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009).

<sup>57</sup> Ofsted (2008).

<sup>58</sup> Jenkins et al. (2007).

ones like BTEC – can yield sizeable wage returns, this is not true of all types of Level 2 qualifications.<sup>59</sup>

### **Loss of capacity and opportunity**

Most importantly, the current balance of investment takes insufficient account of the body of evidence, which, as we have seen, demonstrates the value of many kinds of learning to disadvantaged adults. People in poverty need learning that supports all aspects of their lives and develops capital that enhances personal identity and social solidarity as well as human capital. Traditionally, a diverse adult education offer was generally available through the public sector for disadvantaged groups, which provided opportunities that met these wider needs. Fee reductions were widely available, and these not only benefited those on low incomes but also served to maintain the supply of learning opportunities by attracting many who, while not on the lowest incomes, were not willing to pay substantial fees. While public sector provision was not perfect, and it could be argued that such provision gave a public subsidy to some who could afford to pay, it was also a means of planning for and supplying learning that could support disadvantaged adults. Public sector provision was an important resource to local communities, which, in the past, benefited from the flexibility available to providers to fund courses that were responsive to locally determined needs and to community context.

If the greater balance of public investment is put into human capital development for disadvantaged adults, there is the risk that the lifelong learning system will not have the capacity to support this type of provision in the future. Such provision needs to be properly planned for and consistently available. It requires time and commitment to build up, as well as partnership working and extensive engagement with learners themselves. If it goes, it can take a long time to replace. While many opportunities for personal and social development are available through the private and voluntary sectors, and more is being done to support the development of such opportunities, public sector capacity is likely to remain essential to making learning available to disadvantaged individuals and to supporting poverty-reduction strategies.

## **4.7 The importance of the local–national balance**

In the last two decades there has been a drift towards national leadership of lifelong learning. The growing importance of lifelong learning in public policy since the 1980s has led to successive governments paying considerable attention to shaping and controlling the lifelong learning system, particularly through:

- the creation of more nationally set policy objectives for learning, delivery and the curriculum; and

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<sup>59</sup> Jenkins et al. (2007).

- new structures, many of them also national, giving leadership to employers in the design and delivery of lifelong learning opportunities, as a means of promoting more learning directly linked to economic imperatives.

This drive towards national leadership and management has been accompanied in the public sector by the development of free-standing and more competitive institutional providers of lifelong learning. Leadership at intermediate level has become progressively less strong, with no firm regional or local authority base in many areas. While terms such as ‘employer led’ are frequently used and there is considerable engagement with employers at national level, many employers do not feel fully engaged locally, or that the system meets their needs.<sup>60</sup> The system is also very complex and there are a great many different lines of accountability and many different mechanisms, both formal and informal, for delivery.

Mechanisms for assessing and defining need at local level and for planning and brokering the right kind of provision have been given a lower priority, with these results, which affect disadvantaged learners:

- Those seeking to make locally appropriate provision for adult learners have to struggle with the complexities of national agendas driven by employers’ groups and government bodies, and with a plethora of national funding streams and social policy objectives, many of them uncoordinated at national level. While some funding streams do address the learning needs of deprived areas – for example, parent education programmes, economic regeneration initiatives and outreach programmes – funding is often short term, and the fit between local needs and national priorities can sometimes be difficult to achieve.
- Major providers of lifelong learning to their communities, such as further education colleges, are dominated by top-down policy directives which have eroded autonomy and local control. Providers are subject to compliance requirements, brokerage systems and intermediary bodies, which reduces responsiveness to local demand and makes local partnership work more difficult. This is particularly serious for further education because of the high-profile role it has in communities, and the important role it plays in creating opportunities for disadvantaged adults.

The efficacy of locally responsive leadership and delivery for combating disadvantage has been demonstrated through much of the work undertaken in recent years on social inclusion and neighbourhood renewal.<sup>61</sup> In lifelong learning too, a strong local focus has been shown to be one of the most effective ways of developing opportunities and chances to progress for disadvantaged adults. It is at local level that needs can be properly assessed and understood, both for lifelong learning and other areas of social policy intervention. Local frameworks for delivery in themselves can raise aspiration through enhancing autonomy and choice and creating models for participation. Research across social policy shows that both citizen engagement and

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<sup>60</sup> Hodgson and Spours (2008).

<sup>61</sup> Hills, Sefton and Stewart (eds) (2009).

the quality of delivery can be enhanced if control over how provision is developed and shaped is devolved, and local experiments and innovation can flourish.<sup>62</sup> This can be particularly true for disadvantaged areas. We know that citizens who are disadvantaged are more likely to have a stronger attachment to their local area and are more likely to feel engaged with opportunities to improve their quality of life locally.<sup>63</sup>

Currently, the mechanisms for ensuring a response when a need for learning that is of benefit or interest to disadvantaged individuals or groups emerges locally are not robust enough: funding and supply are both very fragmented and rarely effectively co-ordinated. This is despite the fact that there are many structures for partnership working at local authority level within which lifelong learning providers and related sectors such as health can engage. The strong national orientation of lifelong learning means that, despite this engagement, there is insufficient accountability at local level for ensuring key stakeholders, both in lifelong learning and in other organisations and agencies, consistently work together, both to meet the learning needs of disadvantaged adults and to integrate lifelong learning into strategies for combating poverty and social exclusion.

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<sup>62</sup> Pearce and Paxton (eds) (2005).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

## 5. Conclusion: a framework for the future

### 5.1 A more systemic response to the role of learning in tackling poverty

The learning needs of disadvantaged adults have not been neglected either by educators or policy-makers, but many of the strategies and mechanisms that have been adopted to meet the needs of disadvantaged adults have often served in practice to exclude many groups.

When we consider the nature of poverty outlined in Section 2 of this paper it is clear that current strategy is selective: it invests in a limited number of groups (most notably in working-age adults) and in particular kinds of learning needs (those largely designed to foster human capital). This investment is valuable and important, but it is not enough to realise the full potential for learning to support disadvantaged adults. Getting the right structures and the right balance and mix of lifelong learning provision that can engage more disadvantaged adults in learning remains a big challenge for the future.

In order to achieve a more systematic and holistic approach to developing the role of lifelong learning in poverty reduction it is necessary that:

- learning should address all three capitals: it should develop skills and knowledge for paid and unpaid work, it should enhance community cohesion and enable social and political participation skills, and it should support creativity and a sense of personal fulfilment;
- learning should be needs based, taking into account the diverse needs of all groups who are affected by poverty, and also taking into account the different needs that people may have at particular points in the lifespan; and
- learning should develop a range of capabilities that people who live in poverty may need and that are relevant to their lives – for example, capabilities to support them in the world of work, in family life, and in areas such as financial management and technology.

This calls for changes in the current framework, so that:

- we have a more equitable means of making learning available to all disadvantaged adults;
- we have a more extensive framework of relevant learning opportunities for disadvantaged adults; and
- we have better mechanisms and structures in place that enable us to assess need and to respond to it.

## 5.2 A social minimum of learning opportunity

We live in a society that, in principle, supports equal citizenship, and which has the aspiration to create more opportunity for people and a better future for everyone.<sup>64</sup> In some areas of social policy there have been attempts to realise this vision through defining a minimum baseline of services or outcomes that every citizen should have, and through giving people entitlements to particular services. Such universal or social minimums and entitlements are not new – they have long been part of democracy and the welfare state. In the past, such entitlements have fostered a sense of national culture and identity – for example, the right of every citizen to engage in the democratic process, or the entitlement to a social good such as a state pension, has supported the sense that people feel of having a stake in society. Probably the most important example of this approach is the universal minimum that we have for children: the expectation in policy that every child growing up in our society has the right to be supported, to be healthy, to stay safe, to enjoy and achieve, to make a positive contribution and to achieve economic well-being.<sup>65</sup> This is a particularly broad and ambitious example, but it links well with many of the approaches that are relevant to lifelong learning, including poverty reduction.

### A local minimum service guarantee

In this context, the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning is considering the variety of ways in which a social minimum might apply to lifelong learning. One of the ways is through a local minimum service guarantee, which would ensure that all citizens have access to a readily available core of education and training opportunities that address individual, economic and social needs for learning and that cover an agreed set of capabilities. Through promoting a more equal and inclusive approach to learning, such a guarantee would be of particular benefit to those disadvantaged adults who currently are not covered by existing guarantees and for whom learning opportunities are uncoordinated and patchy. The guarantee would provide an enabling framework which could be reworked and redefined to meet local needs and circumstances and the particular needs of people in poverty. It would serve to:

- achieve an equitable and consistent allocation of resources across the system;
- increase demand for learning among disadvantaged groups; the interactions between supply and demand are complex, but the ready availability of a minimum of provision that plays into a broader range of learning needs, including needs that arise at different points in the life course, could encourage participation from more disadvantaged groups; and

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<sup>64</sup> HM Government (2009).

<sup>65</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2004).

- increase the value attached to the contribution that adult learning makes to tackling poverty: the guarantee would create a more obvious link between learning and other national strategies for protection and welfare, and for social inclusion and participation, and it would give a higher profile to the contribution that adult learning pedagogies and perspectives can make to the range of initiatives and programmes designed to support disadvantaged groups.

### Entitlements

The Inquiry is also attaching importance to the development of a series of entitlements to learning as a way of signalling the value of lifelong learning overall, and as a means of shifting towards a more demand-led system.

Current entitlements take a variety of forms, including access to free training for those who lack literacy or numeracy skills, and Individual Learning Accounts, which have recently been revived in Scotland to enable low-income groups to choose the learning opportunities they need.

A minimum service guarantee could be combined with targeted entitlements that enhance the achievement of particular objectives, such as the continued need for free literacy and numeracy training or individual learning accounts for groups such as unemployed people over 50 who need support in changing their direction in life.

### What should underpin a social minimum of learning opportunity?

The analysis in this paper, supported by evidence submitted to the Inquiry by practitioners and others, has consistently highlighted two issues that are fundamental to addressing the learning needs of people who live in poverty:

- **All groups vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion have the right to have their learning needs met.**  
Currently, policy attention is paid only to some groups that are vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion, while the needs of others are neglected. Pensioners are perhaps the most obvious example: there has been virtually no investment in their learning needs. Learning opportunities are not consistently available to support people who have retired on low incomes, who are likely to need local activities that can reduce isolation, maintain mental and physical health and support creativity, or that can give them the skills to continue to make a contribution.
- **There needs to be more learning that can support people during life crises and transitions.**  
The Inquiry, as part of its argument for a better balance in resource allocation in lifelong learning, is proposing that the stages of the life course should be central to how we approach learning needs. As we have seen, for people vulnerable to poverty, learning needs may be particularly acute at particular moments – for example, on becoming a young parent or when illness or disability brings a sudden

loss of work. Learning opportunities that are readily available and enable personal review and development and access to relevant skills are an important way to avoid the long-term negative consequences that can arise from crises and transitions.

### 5.3 Areas for a baseline curriculum

It would be invidious to suggest that disadvantaged adults should confine themselves, or be confined, to a particular curriculum. However, it is worth highlighting a number of areas which our consultations have shown to be particularly relevant to combating poverty and disadvantage, and which could be part of the minimum baseline of learning opportunities for disadvantaged adults. These are discussed below.

#### Learning and the family

The family is important in all kinds of ways to learning for disadvantaged adults:

- Firstly, the family is important because an enormous amount of learning takes place in the home. One generation transmits skills and knowledge to another; learning is not all one way, as the ability of the young to master new technologies that defeat their elders shows. Our consumer-dominated society now creates even more opportunities for learning in the home – through books, media-based technology and through access to other kinds of leisure activities such as visiting museums and sightseeing. For many people, including those on low incomes, these kinds of self-directed and family-based activities are very satisfying and popular, and are an important means of engaging in learning.
- Secondly, supporting families is a major strategy for combating the worst effects of poverty, and has led to the establishment of an ever-increasing number of programmes and interventions. Some of these interventions are designed to support learning in its broadest sense – whether through programmes for family health or parental education, or just helping families to reflect on how they interact, or to do things together.
- Thirdly, the importance of the level of parental education to children’s educational outcomes has meant public investment in providing opportunities for parents to learn alongside their children through family literacy, language and numeracy programmes, and through programmes that enable parents and children to gain new experiences and acquire new skills and knowledge together, such as activities in museums and galleries.

All these aspects of learning and the family are rarely considered together. Currently, there is a risk that family learning will go no further than being treated as a rather isolated mechanism to enhance children’s attainment and improve adult literacy. There is also a risk that it can stigmatise low-income families. Public investment is small, and our evidence shows that its value to other interventions such as therapeutically based family interventions, school-based support, and family support programmes such as

Sure Start and Children's Centres, is not always recognised in practice. What is needed is a more solid architecture of learning support which underpins the whole range of family activities and interventions, and which enables families to develop capabilities and choices through learning.

### **Financial capability**

Giving people the ability to use and manage money is an important tool for poverty alleviation.<sup>66</sup> Much work on financial literacy for disadvantaged groups has been seen in terms of financial exclusion, 'the inability, or difficulty or reluctance of particular groups to access main stream services'.<sup>67</sup> This focus on financial exclusion has led to efforts to encourage financial institutions to engage more with low-income groups, and many programmes to enhance financial capability have focused on encouraging greater participation in the financial services market.

A wider definition of financial capability, going beyond the skills and behaviours needed to deal with financial services, is required. This is understood at school level where financial capability has become embedded in a wider curriculum and where one aspect of the defined 'social minimum' for all children is economic well-being. Lessons from the past (for example, in the 1980s) show that economic downturns can catastrophically disempower and marginalise low-income individuals and communities. In this context, there is a need for learning for economic well-being for adults too. Many people on low incomes have a particular need for commercial skills and knowledge that will enable them to make money and spend it wisely. Entrepreneurship is an important skill for disadvantaged groups, either for individual benefit or for the wider community. Individual and community asset building is another important area. Initiatives such as the Child Trust Fund, which encourages low-income families to invest in their children's futures, have the potential to engage low-income adults in financial planning and management, as do schemes for the ownership and management of local community facilities and businesses. These kinds of learning for financial capability and economic well-being can be important tools for wider social and individual empowerment for people living in poverty.

### **Technology and learning**

The capabilities of digital technologies for lifelong learning now go way beyond providing adults with the ICT skills they need. Technology is increasingly highlighting the fact that most learning does not take place in formal educational settings. People who do not currently see themselves as learners have, through the new technologies, considerable capability to access and utilise knowledge and information. Much learning now takes place through social networking and other kinds of connectivity. People

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<sup>66</sup> Sabates (2008).

<sup>67</sup> Mitton (2008).

are able to easily access knowledge that is relevant for them through technology, and to use it to find their own solutions to problems. And, although the digital divide may continue, many people on low incomes are just as likely as the more affluent to have access to a variety of mobile devices and technologies, and to use them in ways that promote learning and personal efficacy. The constant accessibility and high use of television and other visual media is also an important feature of these developments. Eighty-one per cent of us watch television for more than six hours per week, and 32 per cent watch it for more than 20 hours per week. Television plays a significant role in enabling citizens to understand the world and engage with it.

This growth in new kinds of informal learning has the potential to be a means of emancipation for many disadvantaged groups. For one thing, it calls into question lifelong learning that exclusively focuses on trying to bring adults into a world of formal learning and qualifications where many have failed in the past.

However, the benefits of access to all the new digital technologies, including television, will happen only if people are supported, through learning itself, to develop a range of critical understandings of how to analyse and utilise information that go beyond technical capability. This means new roles for lifelong learning and new ways of approaching lifelong learning, and a centrally important role for media literacy. Opportunities to develop the ability to access, analyse, respond to and benefit from a range of media are likely to become an increasingly important route into learning for disadvantaged adults.

### **Community learning, participation and change**

Participation in adult learning is closely correlated with involvement in wider networks and civic activity.<sup>68</sup> The impact of networks, both real and virtual, on social outcomes, and the importance of people-centric networks as a means of solving the problems of poverty are both attracting increased attention in public policy.<sup>69</sup>

Community-based learning can be effective in promoting networks in deprived areas. This is because community learning often arises from interests shared by groups of people – for example, in acquiring a particular practical skill, in supporting children’s learning, or in setting up a local business or enterprise. Community-based learning can help people to operate effectively in a group: it helps people to listen, reflect and share; it develops understanding and trust of others and the ability to gain support from others.<sup>70</sup> By developing confidence, as well as the ‘hard’ skills of contextual knowledge and practical competencies, such learning can be applied to the social contexts in which people find themselves, and enable them to see and seize opportunities for working together for change.

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<sup>68</sup> Field (2006).

<sup>69</sup> Broome (2009).

<sup>70</sup> McGivney (2001).

Surveys have shown that people in deprived areas are well aware that they often lack the connections, resources and skills to enable them to make a difference. The poorest people and the poorest communities will always come last unless they too learn how to have influence over the rules and institutions that govern their lives. One of the most important aspects of learning is that it can be democratic. Learning can help people to understand how current economic and social structures constrain their lives, and support them in challenging those structures. It enables the voices of the poor and excluded to be heard.

Titus Alexander, in *Learning Power*,<sup>71</sup> argues cogently for a new curriculum centred on community-based, practical educational opportunities that can help people to develop the essential skills of participation: how to identify the issues that need to be addressed, how to develop effective courses of action, and how to engage others and build consensus and support. Such skills would help people access the connections they need from outside their immediate circles, create networks, become social innovators and entrepreneurs, and release individual and collective action that could achieve real change for individuals and areas.

Increasing learning opportunities in deprived communities originally formed an important part of place-based strategies to combat poverty and social exclusion. It was understood that learning was essential for both professionals and local residents if deprived neighbourhoods were going to be given, or seize, the tools for change. There is evidence that much of this work was successful and there remains considerable potential for developing it further for the future benefit of deprived communities.<sup>72</sup>

### **Expanded workplace learning**

For everyone, learning at work plays a major role in the development of valuable skills and knowledge which goes far beyond formal work-related training and the acquisition of qualifications. The workplace is where many disadvantaged adults want to learn and are motivated to learn, and it can provide an easily accessible context in which they can learn. *Improving Working as Learning*, a recently published study by Alan Felstead and others,<sup>73</sup> has demonstrated in detail the significant amount of learning that occurs as part of, or is stimulated by, what happens in people's everyday working lives. The book shows how learning at work is a complex process which can only be understood in the context of the cultural and organisational norms of particular industries and working environments. The multi-faceted ways in which learning in the workplace needs to operate means that the prevailing model of periodic training courses is not effective for many employers and employees. Felstead and the other authors argue, therefore, that there should be a much more holistic perspective on workplace learning which harnesses the whole context of the workplace as a means of expanding

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<sup>71</sup> Alexander (2007).

<sup>72</sup> Hills, Sefton and Stewart (eds) (2009).

<sup>73</sup> Felstead et al. (2009).

people's capabilities. This perspective has more focus on developing institutional cultures that nurture all kinds of potential.

For disadvantaged adults whose needs are not met by current approaches to training, giving more attention to these wider aspects of workplace learning, and the kinds of institutional structures that support learning, could be particularly fruitful. One approach which could help to get more expansive notions of workplace learning accepted in policy would be the greater use of trades union learning representatives. Their role already is to understand contextual workplace needs and to negotiate a variety of learning opportunities. Trades union learning representatives could be supported in developing new approaches to learning that built on the skills and knowledge that low-skilled workers routinely create and acquire, and which they use in all aspects of their lives, to create new models for workplace learning that meet the needs of wider groups of employers and employees.

There is a strong case for the public sector to provide a lead in developing innovation in workplace learning, since it employs a large proportion of the low-paid workforce overall. While there have been examples of good practice in the public sector in providing more integrated workplace learning opportunities for low-paid workers, particularly around promoting literacy and numeracy skills,<sup>74</sup> to date these initiatives are neither extensive nor sufficiently embedded.

### **Developing the potential of Skills for Life**

The most far-reaching learning strategy currently to address disadvantage is the Skills for Life strategy. Its broad ambitions were to give opportunity to socially excluded adults, to enable them to acquire literacy, numeracy and language skills needed for active participation in society, and to engage their energy and commitment.<sup>75</sup> The strategy was backed up by an integrated approach that involved all parts of the public sector concerned with tackling poverty and disadvantage.

More recently, the Skills for Life strategy placed employability as its central aim, but its earlier vision is one that still has considerable potential to provide the foundation for a lifelong learning strategy to address poverty and social exclusion. By more effectively integrating literacy, language and numeracy learning into the areas that are most important to tackling poverty and social exclusion, Skills for Life could be positioned as the foundation for 'learning to learn', unlocking doors to further learning in the context of a social minimum of the capabilities that are most appropriate to disadvantaged adults' needs and lives. For example, such an approach could promote a broad curriculum for health improvement, going beyond the teaching of functional skills and addressing areas such as the ability to read information about medication dosages,

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<sup>74</sup> For example, the work undertaken by Chris Jude in the National Health Service University prior to its abolition in 2006.

<sup>75</sup> Foreword by David Blunkett to the first Skills for Life strategy (Department for Education and Employment, 2001).

and working with public health agencies to develop people's critical understanding of a range of health issues.

More recent policies for ESOL provide a good example of the way in which language learning has the potential to extend the contribution of Skills for Life in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion. Providers and agencies are being encouraged to identify non-English-speaking groups in their areas with the greatest social needs, and to analyse the range of barriers they face in engaging or progressing in learning. Wider strategies to tackle the issues identified will be developed, involving a range of services; learning, and action to support learning, will be treated as an integral part of a wider social inclusion strategy.<sup>76</sup>

#### 5.4 A locally responsive planning framework

As discussed, a strong local focus is necessary to develop provision that is responsive to the needs of disadvantaged adults. But developing a local orientation is not always easy for many involved in the current lifelong learning system. At local level, the public sector system is dominated by big education providers such as further education colleges and higher education institutions, and the regional arms of national education and training agencies and quangos. There are also employers, commercial interests and agencies such as health and social care, libraries and museums. Many of these stakeholders have regional, national and international roles.

We recommend the development of more mechanisms which, while respecting national priorities and the autonomy of institutions, can practically engage everyone in developing a core baseline offer that meets local needs and involves the widest possible range of partners in delivery. This could be done through:

- **funding regimes** that make a reasonable proportion of the budgets for providers available for locally determined priorities;
- **accountability mechanisms** that require a wide range of agencies, including learning providers, to take account of local area as well as institutional planning;
- **governance arrangements** that enhance the status accorded to lifelong learning; built-in accountabilities for lifelong learning across a range of agencies, such as libraries and primary care trusts, could be very effective in supporting the expansion of learning opportunities across a local area; and
- **structures** that empower local employers to influence the shape and nature of learning provision across an area. (An example of this is the London Skills and Employment Board.)

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<sup>76</sup> Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2009c).

### **Leadership – the role of local authorities and colleges**

Good leadership at local level is also fundamentally important to delivering responsive learning opportunities for disadvantaged groups. Defining what is meant by local is not easy and varies across regions and particular contexts, but whatever planning unit is defined, it is always likely to involve engagement with local authorities. There is a very strong argument for local authorities' leadership role in promoting community well-being to be enhanced to include lifelong learning. Local authorities already have many of the mechanisms needed for tuning in to local circumstances and needs. They have responsibilities and powers to improve the economic, social and environmental conditions in their areas, and are accountable overall for community well-being. They are also accountable for collaborative working and are required to work with other public services, local people, business, and the voluntary and community sectors. In addition, their current range of responsibilities is strongly aligned with many of the purposes of lifelong learning. For all these reasons, local authorities are best placed to be given accountability for co-ordinating the engagement of all appropriate agencies and providers in defining and making available an adequate baseline of lifelong learning opportunities in their areas, which can meet local needs and support agreed objectives for community well-being.

The leadership role of further education colleges is also crucial to achieving a more responsive local system for lifelong learning. In looking at the future contribution and role of further education colleges, the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning suggested that further education colleges are, and should be, first and foremost, local organisations. Further education colleges also have the strongest institutional and professional base in lifelong learning for disadvantaged adults. The experience of further education colleges, and the contribution they can make in lifelong learning for disadvantaged adults, could be recognised through establishing their leadership role in:

- leading federations of providers in their areas to promote progression and curriculum innovation; and
- leading partnership working with employers and other public agencies to develop appropriate adult pedagogies for workplace learning for low-income, low-skilled adults, and for initiatives and programmes relevant to poverty reduction, such as in health, family support and community development.

## Contributors

Association of Teachers and Lecturers

Blackpool Council

Business Support Kent CIC

Capacity Ltd

Cardiff Council – Schools and Lifelong Learning Service

Denaby Main Forum

Economic Development Service

Elizabeth Davey

Ingeus Centre for Policy and Research

Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)

Maximise-ICT

National Assembly for Wales

NIACE

Remploy

Silai for Skills

Skill

Sue Fleming

Suffolk County Council

Swansea University

The Pentalk Network

The Scarman Trust

Touch-type Read and Spell, Kent

University of Leeds

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

University of Wales, Newport

Warwickshire Children's Fund

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## Notes

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