

Ep.1: Learn, learn and learn again: why adult education matters

Adult education has been described as a permanent national necessity that should be both universal and lifelong. So, why does it matter so much?

John Holford, Robert Peers Professor of Adult Education Emeritus at the University of Nottingham, was Joint Secretary to the [Centenary Commission on Adult Education](#), which marked 100 years since the publication of the 1919 Report on Adult Education. Having published a range of books, papers and articles on the subject of adult education over the last 40 years, John is the ideal guest to set the scene for the new series of Let's Go Further.

In this episode, John talks about the last 100 years of adult education, the current policy landscape, and his hopes for the future.

The successes of adult education are best shown by the inspiring stories of adult learners. And so what better way to start the new series than by revisiting the thoughts of Mamello Atisa – a previous guest in series one – about why she is passionate about learning.

Join us for the first episode of series 3 as we begin our focus on adult education.

About Professor John Holborn

John Holford, has worked in adult education since the 1970s, as a teacher, researcher and manager, and edited the International Journal of Lifelong Education for two decades. He currently edits a book series, [Palgrave Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning](#).

Over the last 25 years he has led several major research projects and written or edited many books and articles including, most recently, [Lifelong Learning, Young Adults and the Challenges of Disadvantage in Europe](#).

Who is Mamello Atisa?

Mamello Atisa is a committed adult learner, with a passion for sustainable and socially engaged fashion, Mamello has had a wide variety of work and learning experiences including training as a counsellor, working as a teacher in media and serving as a trainer at [Citizens Advice](#).

Mamello is also a [Skills and Education Group Foundation grant recipient](#), and was Learner of the Year finalist in the [FAB Awards 2022](#).

Revisit series one to listen to Mamello share her passion for learning, her love of fashion, and her experience of being an adult learner.

Transcript

Joe Mcloughlin 0:01

Hello, and welcome to series three of Let's Go Further, a podcast from the Skills and Education Group that challenges the way we think about skills and education. I'm your host, Joe Mcloughlin. And in this series we're discussing adult education and asking is it as relevant today, as it was more than 100 years ago when it was first established? In this episode, we're reflecting on the findings of the Centenary Commission on Adult Education, which describes it as a permanent national necessity that should be both universal and lifelong. In a moment, we'll hear from John Holford, Emeritus Robert Peers Professor of Adult Education at the University of Nottingham, and Joint Secretary to the Commission. But first, we want to take you back to series one of our podcast, and an inspiring conversation we had with adult learner Mamello Atisa, she spoke to us about her lifelong passion for learning, and why it's meant so much to her.

Mamello Atisa 0:52

Probably when I was 18. I had always thought I didn't like school. I never made the distinction until then, that liking school and liking learning were two very different things. I hadn't enjoyed the environment of school and algebra and geometry, I didn't understand the point of it. And I didn't like the social aspect of school, I was just an invisible character. After 18, I realised that actually, I really liked learning. And I liked learning in different aspects, not necessarily just in a classroom environment. But I, I was very curious about a lot of things. And I did better at college than I had at school. That defining moment was quite important, because that's what kind of has spurred me after that, to do short courses, to study to take up longer courses, and continue to develop myself, almost like a road of self discovery, because I wasn't really sure what I was good at. So for me, education was, I guess, a therapy of some sort, and trying to figure out how I can engage in this world and what my place was. And yeah, by discovering what my skills are, what my interests are, and what my capabilities are.

Joe Mcloughlin 2:21

Mamello Atisa talking to me for series one of Let's Go Further. Now, John Holford has published a range of books, papers and articles on the subject of adult education over the last 40 years, no better person then to help us kick off this important new series, and establish where adult education has come from and to, and what the future holds. So John, from reading some of your impressive

body of work on adult education, I know it actually has its roots as far back as medieval times. But can we start our conversation a little later, at the beginning of the 20th century, when it starts to really become a more established part of the education and skills landscape.

John Holford 2:58

One of the big things about the First World War was a feeling that we had to build something much better for after the war. And this led to the formation of a Ministry of Reconstruction, the Ministry of Reconstruction set up various committees, and one of them was an adult education committee. And they made recommendations, which said in effect that every, for example, every university should have a department of extramural adult education, extramural being outside its own...the walls of the university. It also said that local authorities, local education authorities should offer education for adults, not just for schools. And in particular, it emphasised that education should be not just vocational education, but it should be a liberal education, an education across the whole breadth of the needs of individuals for making their own lives and making their own lives better. That was one of the profound contributions of what's called the 1919 Report. And it was that report that the Centenary Commission, which was which reported in 2019, was designed to bring up to date if I can put it that way.

Joe Mcloughlin 4:13

So just taking all that into consideration - and it seems that there's a move in adult education a mixture of movements really of...whether it's the women's movement, whether it's industrialization, whether it's kind of burgeoning trade union movements, or workers' rights movements, all building up to where things start to become codified or the beginnings of policy as we sort of recognise it now I suppose, if I'm understanding you correctly - just jumping forward 100 years as with the Centenary Commission, where does that leave us now kind of what's the state of things in the sector now?

John Holford 4:43

We get these recommendations after the 1919 report. They were taken up by different kinds of institutions, by and large universities set up departments of extramural adult education. By and large, local education authorities began to provide adult education, a lot of voluntary bodies, organisations like the Workers Educational Association, the YMCA, the Working Men's College, organisations like that began to set up adult education. Technical colleges began to see the advantage particularly of liberal education, gradually that grew and it grew further after 1944-1945 in the Second World War, when the Education Act encouraged local authorities to provide adult education for the community. Following that, you've got quite a large provision growing across the country of non-vocational adult education, I mean, there was there was also of course, a

large provision of vocational adult education, particularly through technical colleges and apprenticeships and so on. But the provision of non-vocational adult education grew and continued to grow through most of the 20th century up until I suppose about the 1980s. What then happened is that there was a very strong emphasis on the need for - from the 1970s-80s onwards - on the need for adult education to meet the needs of the economy. And really only to meet the needs of the economy. This led to a reduction in the provision of non-vocational or liberal adult education over the 1980s and 1990s-2000s. There were a number of trends which really supported that. So firstly, there was a growth in a strong sense that education was only valuable if it led to qualifications. Another was that everything had to be assessed. Further things were the trend to make post compulsory education at least something which people had to pay for, it was seen as a kind of a leisure activity. So as a result, the costs became much greater the cost of what one had to pay to go to attend these things became much greater.

Joe Mcloughlin 7:15

So recognising then that kind of that more instrumental turn, right throughout the throughout the 70s-80s. And then, did that continue through the 90s and the 00s?

John Holford 7:24

Oh, yeah, I mean, look, it really got a grip of the policy world in the 1990s-2000s and since. It's very much associated with a view that the policy centre, if I can put it that way, knows best. In other words, government centrally knows what needs to be done. And it provides mechanisms which require all the partner organisations, the colleges, the local authorities, etc, etc, etc. And the voluntary organisations indeed, either to provide what the government wants them to provide or not to be in the business at all. And this, this led to a real set of revolutions, I suppose, in the adult educational world. So for example, it would say to universities, well they did say to universities, your business is providing higher education for people leaving school. And as a result of that, it discouraged universities from doing adult education, and it removed the money from universities to do adult education. So immediately, a whole world of provision through universities and university departments of adult education were closed all over the country.

Joe Mcloughlin 8:40

When you say that the kind of university provision was closed off that avenue was closed off, because government decided, or the policy centre rather decided to go a different way, or go a different route, what's the effect been on adult education over the last sort of 10,15, 20 years, kind of what was the what were the main takeaways from your work at the commission?

John Holford 8:59

It's very, it's very difficult, isn't it to pull out exact effects, but what we see is that the participation rates in adult education declined very, very significantly from around 2003-2004. And, you know, I mean, my take on that is that that's linked to the destruction of the institutional structure of the breadth of institutions, which would provide adult education previously.

Joe Mcloughlin 9:31

We've spoken there, John, about the the movement towards adult education coming out of women's rights movements, trade union movements, workers rights movements, people pushing for better opportunities for their children, alongside the kind of educational aspects of it and the kind of just in terms of getting qualified getting more learning, is there a social side of adult education that you think is important or played a big part in that journey?

John Holford 9:56

Yeah there are two really important aspects which I'd call social. One is the importance of adult education for people's sense of community and identity and community engagement and so on. Adult education through the 20th century, has really provided profoundly important ways of communities talking to each other learning things that they need to learn. So it's not only about individual progress, and individuals getting better qualifications and that sort of thing. It's also about communities, working together, strengthening themselves, discussing problems dealing with internal debates and disputes and so on, and doing that in a civilised and thoughtful and reflective way. And that's something which adult education has been very good at, and very good at encouraging. So for example, the through through the 20th century, the WEA - Workers Educational Association - and universities and so on would have organised things like you had a big problem around... a big social problem, they would have organised day schools or conferences or courses, to discuss those and to draw in different sections of the community to engage in and debate those in towns and cities, and so on and villages. And the second one is just to remember that the 1919 report's recommendations come at the same time as the extension of the electorate. So up till 1918, the electorate was confined to only some men and no women. From 1918, it becomes all men, all adult men, and most women and from 1928 becomes all women, all adult women. And so what the 1919 committee report really saw was that providing education for adults was essential for making a democracy work, making a democratic community work, and making the institutions of our democratic society work. So it's all that adult education is really essential to the workings of democracy. And I think that my my view at any rate, is that the crises of democracy that we see in recent decades, are not not solely connected with or caused by the decay of adult education. But I think that is a significant contributor to it. But if you if you don't have the grassroots institutions in a democratic society, which enable dialogue to take place in a civilised way between different sections of the community, at low levels, as well as high levels, then you have a community or a democracy

rather, which responds to enormous prejudice and Kant and the the rubbish that you get through a lot of popular mass movements of populism and so on.

Joe Mcloughlin 13:01

Bringing all of that together, then John, it seems that adult education is doing or has the potential to do a fair amount of heavy lifting right in that it allows for education allows for qualification development, community meetings, the beginnings of democracy. What I'm curious about is recognising that recently, we've had a kind of a change in government rhetoric around levelling up around plugging the skills gap around the value of lifelong learning. Do you see a return to the kind of heady old days the lofty goals or is it do you think that the recent policy turn is not as effective as it might be?

John Holford 13:36

A return to those goals, those original broad goals is essential. I think it's it's remarkable how, how widespread the acceptance of that has become across the political spectrum, we can talk about the Centenary Commission Report that I was involved with. But there have been several other reports over recent years, including reports from the right of politics, and also one from the House of Commons Committee on Education, Select Committee on Education, which really came to broadly comparable positions about the importance of adult education, not just for work, but for other things, things like community democracy, creativity, and the community and wellbeing of individuals. What we don't have, however, is a kind of acceptance of that in the policy world that is in the world of people who actually make policy, because they seem to be driven by this view that the only thing that really matters in adult learning is that the economy should become more efficient. And the way...and that implies that the whole of the education and skills system - certainly the post-compulsory education and skills system - has to be directed at making the workplace more efficient and effective. And that has led to a great narrowing of the nature of adult education and to a diminution of the richness of education in the community.

Joe Mcloughlin 15:21

So acknowledging that narrowing then that kind of blinkering of policy in purely economic, or not purely but overwhelmingly economic terms, would you say that the work and recommendations of your commission haven't been followed or haven't been put into effect as they might be?

John Holford 15:37

Certainly, they haven't been as yet. I mean we live in hope. And there are, well, look, I mean, we may be wrong. But I mean, that the kind of current view is that we will be going into a change in government in in, you know, the next general election, will that have a different effect? I'm not convinced that we shall see very much radical and creative thinking from a change of government.

Joe Mcloughlin 16:08

What, what would you like to see? And I appreciate that might be optimistic, or it might be naive, but what would you like to see a new government do whether whether it's Labour or Conservative or Lib Dem, kind of what would be big positive changes for you?

John Holford 16:21

I think the main...look, the main thing I would argue for is for government, trying to reestablish partnership working with different organisations in society, on the basis of, of equality, what we have had in recent years is, you know, many organisations are told that they're partners of government but actually they're partners providing they do exactly what the government wants them to do. And that assumes that government knows best. And broadly speaking, if you're going to get a proper functioning adult education system, you have to draw adult people into shaping that system, and not just tell them what to do. And all the all the evidence from decades of adult education in this country and abroad, and from research and so on and so forth, is that adult education systems work better, where you have a democratic shaping of those systems, rather than just providing, telling people what to what they have to learn. The government at the moment is is - and this is not not one party this has been over the last 20 or 30 years - government is is very much of the mind that it has to say exactly what is good for people.

Joe Mcloughlin 17:44

So if I'm understanding you rightly, then it's not it's not necessarily a case of we can fix adult education by by funding more, or by recruiting more. It's not just a financial or a practical issue. It's much more of a an entire kind of cultural shift or a renegotiation of the relationship almost.

John Holford 18:02

That's that's what I would be encouraging. I mean, I think your word, not just financial is important, because it is partly financial, we do need a massively greater investment in adult learning than we have had in recent years. There was a report about 15 years ago, which recommended a reshaping of the finance of education to some extent in relation to people's ages. And what what it pointed to was that the massive majority of educational funding goes to children and young people and very, very little to people over about 25. And there needs to be some recalibration of that it's a minor recalibration, but even smaller shifts would would add much to the possibilities that could could be done.

Joe Mcloughlin 18:57

But recognising all of that then recognising that it's about changing a culture and a theory behind it all as much as it is about increasing funding, having sat on the 2019 Commission - itself a review or a look back on the 1919 Commission - what would you like to see? Or where would you like to see adult education in another 100 years?

John Holford 19:18

What I would like to see is something in the spirit of the 1919 report, and that would be that adult education is universal. That is it's available to everybody. And we've got to remember that at the moment one of the weaknesses of adult education in this country, but actually in every country, is that it goes massively more to people who are well educated, the people who have degrees or A Levels take part much more in adult education than the people who have not done well at school. And that of course, translates into social class divisions in participation in adult education. I'd like it to be available for people on a lifelong basis. That is that it doesn't, it isn't seen as something which is principally useful in early life. One of the things clearly we've learned with the speed of change in economy and society in recent decades is that people have got to learn and learn and learn again throughout their lives, partly to, to keep up with the pace of change, and so on, partly to understand themselves, and their communities as they change, partly to be able to get a grip of their, their communities and societies, because it's very easy for them to get alienated from those those institutions of society, and to feel left out, and so on. And I think the third thing I'd like to see is that it be not only universal and lifelong, but life-wide, that is not just focused on what people can learn at work, and what people can learn for their jobs, and so forth and so on, but also about the breadth of their lives, about, you know, making their lives better, as well as making them more efficient. There's got to be an enormous, enormous amount of effort to make adult learning more equal, or rather, participation and access to adult education more equal. And in terms of what...of the society we have now, it means an enormous investment in well, what used to be called outreach, that is institutions like colleges and universities and learning providers and so on, not just offering things, but going out into communities and working with people who are having difficulty getting there. But one of the brilliant contributions of the 20th century adult education movement, was seeing adult education as a collective exercise not just by the teacher, as it were, but also by...with knowledge being produced by the students and learners participating in that. And we need to see that as becoming really central to to adult learning as well.

Joe Mcloughlin 22:19

Taking those key points and keeping them in mind, John, about what you'd like to see and what how it might be progressive, or how it might be hopeful for the future, just to end - and not to end on a on a negative note or a critical note - but where do you think we actually will be in a 100 years?

John Holford 22:34

I think if you if you went to the people who were involved in making the report in 1919, I think they would be amazed at what was achieved very proud of what what had been achieved for the following 60 or 70 years. That's tremendous achievement. And I think we can be optimistic that enormous things can be can be done. There is a profound sense in which if we don't do this, we aren't going to be able to meet the requirements of the climate catastrophe that's going on and so on. So we're, we're going to have enormous pressures on societies. Over the next century, we need to have much stronger mechanisms of enabling different peoples to meet in society to mix in societies. And I think that there are limited grounds but some grounds for optimism that that may be achieved, partly because if we don't achieve it, things are going to be really dire.

Joe Mcloughlin 23:35

Thank you to my guest John Holford and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation and that it's got you thinking about adult education, its potential to change lives, and in turn the opportunities for us to make it work better for individuals and society. If you have a question for us, or a comment on what you've heard, please join in the conversation on social media. And remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts to access earlier and forthcoming episodes. We're going to leave the final word to Mamello Atisa.

Mamello Atisa 24:04

Education is there for all of us, the classroom environment, and the taught environment is a really helpful foundation for us to find expression to reinvent ourselves in whichever way we want.