

Ep.2: Mind the gap – rethinking skills in adult education

The skills gap. It's a phrase you're likely to hear whenever adult education is discussed. But do we focus on gaps and deficiencies too much?

Giving adults the skills they need to adapt to the rapidly changing economy is important. However, Dr Fiona Aldridge says lifelong learning shouldn't only exist to fill gaps but should be something positive that all of us do.

Fiona has pursued her interest in lifelong learning throughout her education and career, studying the subject at the Open University and working at the Learning and Work Institute for 18 years before her current role at the West Midlands Combined Authority.

Informed by her extensive knowledge in this field, Fiona gives her own suggestions for making adult education more accessible for all and, ahead of the 2024 general election, calls for a long-term national strategy.

About Dr. Fiona Aldridge

Dr Fiona Aldridge is Head of Skills Insight at [West Midlands Combined Authority](#). Previously, she was Director of Policy and Research at [Learning and Work Institute](#).

Fiona has more than 20 years of experience in undertaking research to support the development of policy and practice across adult learning, skills and employment. Her current role involves shaping devolved policy on employment and skills for the West Midlands region.

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 power of adult education to shrink the skills gap and support adults into work. Joining me to discuss this is Dr Fiona Aldridge, Head of Insight - Economic Delivery, Skills and Communities at West Midlands Combined Authority, and a member of

the advisory board to the Lifelong Education Institute. Fiona, thank you for joining me.

Dr Fiona Aldridge 0:43

It's a pleasure. Thanks for involving me.

Joe Mcloughlin 0:45

I just wanted to start with a really basic question. The skills gap - is it as simple as the bit between the skills we might have and the skills we need, or is there more to it than that?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 0:54

Well I think that certainly - yes, simplification, of course - adult learning is much more than a skills gap as well. It's about curiosity, interest, personal development, confidence. I mean, there'll always be a need for us to develop new skills, new attributes, new ways of working throughout our lives, but but adult learning is much more than that. And I think probably even more relevant than 100 years ago, as you say, given the pace of change in our economy and in our society, and need to respond to that and even shape that change, I think, for work, and for our wider lives, it's absolutely more important than ever.

Joe Mcloughlin 1:32

So thinking about that change then and how things have, you know, developed over the last 5, 10, 15, 20 years, what skills are we particularly struggling for, whether it's regionally or nationally?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 1:44

Well, I think we want to make sure that every adult has a really solid grounding in those basic and fundamental skills, so really good English, maths, digital skills that they need for work and everyday life. But are also really critical to build on whether for work or wider life. I'm involved in a research project called the Skills Imperative 2035. And as well as those hard skills that we know we need in our economy, there's a growing recognition that some of those softer skills are really important. So communication, collaboration, creativity, and planning and problem solving, they're going to be really important in our future working lives. So we need to make sure that there are opportunities to develop those as well as the technical skills. And you'll have heard of local skills improvement plans, and we've had one for the West Midlands, and again, when we think about future skills, and really growing demand from employers for digital skills, and also technical skills for specific industries in the West Midlands, lots of that is about engineering. But also a growing need for leadership and management capabilities. And lots of that is about change management and performance management. In a rapidly changing world, we need to be able to manage that and lead that and make sure that the people working with us and for us are also supported to do that, too.

Joe Mcloughlin 3:05

Just...so you mentioned there a kind of rapidly changing world - are the skill shortages, whether they're technical or softer skills, or managerial or leadership skills, are they specific to the UK? I know, I know, you mentioned the West Midlands. But are there other countries in similar positions? Or do you notice patterns of skills gaps differing around the world?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 3:27

Yeah, I think in my experience, other countries, and indeed other parts of our own country face some really quite similar challenges. And similar needs. I think there are, of course, different emphasis according to where you live. So in the West Midlands, where, you know, a really strong automotive industry, we're thinking a lot about the skills that you need for electric vehicles, for example, we've got a strong manufacturing base, we're thinking about advanced manufacturing, but across employers, thinking specifically about skills for work, time and time again, it's those broader skills, those basic skills, those digital skills, those leadership and management skills, those transferable skills, which are really important wherever you are in the economy. And therefore I think lots of these things are common across countries and within it as well.

Joe Mcloughlin 4:18

Why then do you think we have these these shortcomings? Or why do we face these challenges? I mean, just focusing on the UK is one example. Education is compulsory to 18. We have vocational and academic pathways, in further education and higher education. We have a number of local government agencies and charitable bodies providing adult education in communities. So where do you think we're going wrong? Where do you think the shortcomings are? Or the problems are?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 4:46

Yeah, I guess first of all, I just challenge that assumption that skills needs are about things going wrong, but I suppose what I'd say is that skills needs change over time. If you think about, you know, having to work say a 50 year-old career, I think it's just unfeasible that however good your education is up to 18 that it could meet all your skills needs. And actually we need to, to move from thinking that a skills need is something wrong with you to creating that appetite and culture and confidence for people to recognise that lifelong learning is something we all need to do. And we're building on what we have rather than making up for what we don't have. I do think that will also help us engage more people in learning, I think lots of adults don't learn because they've been told they've got a gap or something wrong with them, actually, if we recognise that, that we all have got a need to continue to develop throughout our lives then I think it's much more of a, a positive experience that we'll get more people engaged with. I think having said that, there are obviously some challenges we

have in our system at the minute. So far too many adults don't have those basic skills that we would expect adults to leave our school system and initial education system with. And a lot of what we spend money on in the publicly funded adult learning system is around English and maths and language and digital that we might have reasonably expected children to leave the school system with. And I think some of that is that we don't have a long term strategy, we have reduced funding, and we've had so much chopping and changing on policy and infrastructure, and qualifications, you know, we do a lot of tinkering with our system. And that's really problematic because we lose those good things that we have. And we confuse people who we're trying to work with. So there's absolutely some good things we can do there. But but let's make lifelong learning and adult learning something we've all got to do. And something that is positive and not just about filling, and correcting things that are wrong.

Joe Mcloughlin 6:53

It sounds like you hold adult education or apprenticeships for adults, as kind of a highly important very important when it comes to not just addressing the skills gap but generally addressing social challenges or communal challenges.

Dr Fiona Aldridge 7:07

Oh, absolutely, you know, I'm really passionate about adult learning. I think, if you have ever spent any time with an adult learner and talk to them about their experience and the benefits that they've got out of it for themselves, their families, their communities, their workplace, it can be absolutely transformational. And I'd love to see more adults get many more opportunities to learn throughout their lives, I think we really do pitch it as have to pitch it as something that is positive, and something that has broad benefits and something that all of us do. I think it is really, really important that we do that. Apprenticeships, they're one part of the system. But there are many other ways to learn as well. So you might do that online or in an FE college or in your community or at university or in your workplace is where many people get opportunities to learn as an adult. And I think we want to make sure that we've got this really good, stable, well funded system full of really great opportunities for adults to learn throughout all their lives. And I think that'd be a really exciting vision to pursue.

Joe Mcloughlin 8:09

And thinking about that vision, then where are we at the moment would you say when it comes to sort of buy in and support from policymakers or business leaders?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 8:18

Well I suppose what we are seeing is that policymakers of all parties are starting to talk about this more than I think we have seen and we do have great

examples of businesses who invest in their workforce. We're seeing you know growing number of businesses talk about how they're using apprenticeships, for example, to meet their workforce development issues. I think the challenge is on businesses, we have seen a reduction and employer investment in skills. And actually as a, as a country, our employers only invest half the EU average, there are still too...far fewer opportunities than we need and that we would need for our economic growth and for boosting productivity and creating opportunities for individuals. So there's some there, but I think we do miss a national strategy and a long term well resourced vision for how we're going to tackle this there is far too much chop and change in the system which is really destabilising and means that we spend a lot of time moving around the structures rather than really focusing on the ambitions that we have.

Joe Mcloughlin 9:30

So given that lack of long term planning, then does that leave our approach as a country or our approach to adult education open to shocks? So I'm just wondering, has Brexit had a particularly negative effect or has the response to COVID or the return from COVID had a particularly negative effect like what have you seen happen?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 9:52

So I think Brexit and COVID as the examples that you cite, I mean, they've been big shocks to all of us, haven't they? And to our ways of working and, and they have been...the impact has been massive. And some of the impact there've been some positives as well, if you think about how COVID led for some to hybrid working, which has opened up access for some people to be involved in learning or in employment that they haven't been able to previously. But it has also had a negative impact on opportunities that some people have had thinking particularly about young people their opportunities to train and develop at work, I think what we need to make sure is we do have a responsive system so that as big events come along, hopefully, there's not going to be some others like Brexit or COVID, that kind of have such an impact. But the world is changing and will continue to change. And we need to make sure that we've got a flexible, responsive system that takes each one of those changing contexts, and enables us to respond and indeed to shape not just react to the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

Joe Mcloughlin 11:01

And just stepping back for a second thinking about the learners in particular. Often when I've spoken with colleagues or spoken at conferences, when people talk about the skills gap, or the talk about upskilling or they talk about the pathways from education to work, those conversations are often framed with 16 to 19 year olds or younger people in mind. But as you know, there's still a significant number of people pursuing training, pursuing education who are adults. And I was just wondering kind of typically who are those adult learners

kind of what's their profile almost what's their, their kind of what would they look like if you saw them in the street almost?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 11:37

In my previous job, I worked for Learning and Work Institute, and they do an annual survey of adult participation in learning to look at who is taking part in learning and why and what the benefits are and what the barriers are. And it's a really, really good piece of research that's been taking place for many decades now. It absolutely demonstrates the transformational impact of adult learning. But what it shows is that access to adult learning is really dependent upon who you are. So if you have done well in your initial education, if you're in a higher social class, if you earn more, if you've got higher qualifications, if you're closer to the labour market, then you are more likely to get good opportunities to carry on learning as an adult. Now, I would like to see everybody have those opportunities. But what the figures show is that those who have benefited most get to go on benefiting and those who have benefited least from their initial education, and therefore for whom adult learning could be most transformational, are less likely to take part. And some of that is about their own experience of and attitude towards learning as an adult, if you didn't do very well at school, why would you want to voluntarily do that as an adult, but it's also because they have less access to really good opportunities. Now, there are some great opportunities with brilliant employers. But if you're in insecure work, or if you're not in work, then you don't get those opportunities as well. So adult learning should be for everybody. It can be absolutely transformational for people who aren't typically there. But generally, it's the people who've benefited most get to benefit again, as an adult. And I think what we're doing as a combined authority - and I know people all over the country are trying to think about how to engage and create really good opportunities for people who might not think adult learning is for them, using perhaps some really good stories of previous adult learners to say, look, this person's like you look at the difference it's made, maybe it's something you want to take part in as well. And I think helping with those stories to make adult learning relevant and feel like it's for you, it's a really important thing that we can all do.

Joe Mcloughlin 13:46

Do you think that modelling of similar candidates or that or that telling of similar stories is the key way of rectifying this?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 13:53

I mean people connect with human interest stories of other people, don't they? And if you read a story, watch a story hear a story of someone for whom adult learning has transformed their lives, I think it's easier to say, well, if they can do it, I can do it or they're a bit like me or you know I thought I couldn't do it for that reason, but I can. I think it makes a massive difference. And we have an adult learning awards process every year with some great winners. And we use

those on social media and with our residents to be able to really encourage more people to take part in adult learning. We've also then used a set of personas. So some of the sorts of people we'd like to attract and engage into adult learning. Part of a campaign that we're having in the West Midlands to get more people engaged with a particular focus on adults who are in sort of low paid insecure work for whom engaging in training can really enhance their prospects maybe get a better job or a more secure job or a more interesting career. And we're really hoping those people-focused stories will make a difference.

Joe Mcloughlin 14:58

The need for stories and the need for kind of a person to person connection is absolutely key in overcoming barriers. But are there are there other barriers that might impede someone from getting involved in adult education or apprenticeships and re-skilling? And I'm thinking in terms of, you know, is it about infrastructure? Or is it about digital poverty? Kind of what are the what are the things that you're seeing?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 15:19

There are lots of barriers, when in the participation survey that I mentioned earlier, the two things that adults say, are the biggest barriers are time and money. You know, adult lives are very busy, lots of commitments, lots of financial commitments, lots of other things to do lots of responsibilities, and they are major barriers. But what's always struck me from that survey is that more than the people who say time and money, there's a group of people who say, it's just not relevant to me. And I think one of the biggest barriers is not those kind of very practical things. But that sense of, it's not for me, I don't see the point, I don't see how it's relevant. And therefore I think one of the things that we can do most and make the most difference, is really being able to think about what and when our training offer is and how it will be beneficial for people. So instead of just saying, here is a course, this is what you can do, let's really share the stories of what difference it can make, how it can help you how it can support you. So as well as making things accessible and affordable, I think we really have to work harder on making adult learning relevant and attractive, because it is and it can be but I don't think we tell that story well enough always,

Joe Mcloughlin 16:34

With the learners that you have worked with, with the adults that you do engage with, what do you think that older people and adults bring to education that maybe younger people don't?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 16:44

First of all, they just have much more life experience. And they have a set of ambitions and aspirations for themselves. And often for their families, the number of adults we see who say, you know, I don't think I can do this, or I don't think I can do anything better. But I really want something better for my

children. I think that is a massive, massive driver, I think it's easy as well, when you're younger, to feel that just getting a job would be great, I really want to get out of education. But the longer you spend at work, I think the quality of your work, and what you do at work can matter more, because you're going to be doing this for a really long time. And what we find, therefore, is that lots of adults who are just trying to get something better for them and their family or to have a different sort of work arrangement or earn more money or get a more secure contract. They're really big drivers. And therefore one of the challenges back to us as a FE and skills system is are we designing and delivering provision that helps people get those jobs. Now, now, adults learn for a whole range of reasons. But we must make sure that we are helping them achieve those goals and ambitions through our provision. We want to give people qualifications. We want them to finish their course. But we want them to achieve their ambitions and aspirations. And we really have to think about how the provision we're offering will help them do that.

Joe Mcloughlin 18:05

And so it's almost like a, there's a there's a stronger sense of drive or a clearer purpose for why for why they're there almost.

Dr Fiona Aldridge 18:13

I think so. And it's voluntary, isn't it, there's always a cost, whether that's the money or the time, or the other things they might do, it's...we've really got to make sure that it's worth it. And that it's seen to be worth it. We have on our courses, lots of adults for whom they wouldn't have seen adult learning as something that was relevant for them or for people like them. We've got some brilliant provision that they say, 'Well, my mate went on this course. And he finished on the Friday and the next week, he got this really good job. And I want that.' And I think there is absolutely something about the story that we tell and the outcomes that we deliver for residents, for businesses, for our wider communities, that makes engaging in adult learning really compelling. And we've got to tell the story better. But we've also got to deliver those outcomes better.

Joe Mcloughlin 19:02

So recognising that need then that need to drive forward and deliver outcomes. And also recognising that we have...at some point next year there will be an election and a new government. What would you like to see any new government do on this subject kind of what would be some policy changes that you'd like to see to help improve the sector?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 19:22

Yes, so a couple of things. So I'm from the West Midlands Combined Authority, we've had devolution of skills budgets of the Adult Education Budget since 2019. And I think we've been able to transform with our colleges and our local authority partners, what the offer is for the for the residents of the West

Midlands. And so I'd really like to see any new government continue to commit to devolution of skills funding, so that we have the maximum flexibility in order to really align our offer to the aspirations of our residents, to the needs of our businesses and to the challenges and opportunities within the region so that that devolution is really important. But then more broadly, I've been involved in some of the party conferences as part of something called the Future Skills Coalition, where quite a few organisations in the FE sector have all come together to say, what are the central policy asks that we can all come around and really advocate for, for a new government. And I think there are three things that that we've all focused on, firstly, about getting a national strategy that will support local growth and have regional flexibility on it, but have that kind of vision together that we can all sign up to work towards, and has that kind of long term ambition. The second is about having a right to lifelong learning free from kind of constraints about particular ages or particular sectors or particular achievements, you know, we need to make this something that we all do, if we're not just going to make it or not just give it the perception that it's for people who haven't done very well, or people for whom something is wrong with them, actually a right to lifelong learning, it's your entitlement for you to respond to and shape all the opportunities you've got in your future. And then the third one, and it's really critical, given what we've said about kind of funding and opportunities, we do need to make sure that lifelong learning has a fair, accessible and effective funding settlement so that we can create really good high quality offers for all of our residents that's accessible and affordable. And I think those three things together, and we all come at it from different angles. But those three things together, would really provide a firm basis in which we could go into the next period of government.

Joe Mcloughlin 21:38

Finally, just thinking about where you are now, and kind of the work you're doing day to day, if you could make one positive change to ensure that adult education is sort of both lifelong and lifewide. What would it be?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 21:52

It's really hard to pick a single change, what I want to see is system change, and a system change that means that as we go into the next government, or as we go in to the next few years that what we are seeing is the availability of a high quality, lifelong learning offer that's accessible and affordable for all. And that adults feel that this is something they're entitled to and that everybody does and is really attracted that they want to do it, I'd love to see more adults taking part in really great learning, talking to one another about it so it just becomes something that we accept that we all do. And we all joy, all enjoy, as we go through life.

Joe Mcloughlin 22:33

So we've spoken a little throughout the episode about the kind of political context and the recent Conservative Party Conference. And the Prime Minister's sort of proposed changes to post 16 education, whether it's moving from A Levels and T Levels to Advanced British Standards, stronger financial incentives in key subject areas at 16 to 19, or placing more pressure on low value degrees. But as you've mentioned, there isn't a strategy for kind of adult education. And so this kind of policy churn isn't new. I was just wondering what impact you think it will have on the skills gap? And then if I can push on a little further, why do you think we struggle to settle on a model that works and is stable?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 23:19

Well we've had so much churn haven't we? And I think we don't seem to give things long enough, we don't have an overall strategy, and therefore really understand how things fit together. So we have had announcements, and there have been some longer term ambition on those announcements, but they still tend to be in parts of the system. What I would say, and I think it applies to both parties is that there is an amazing further education, skills and adult learning sector. And we have loads of experience and are really up for working with government to make this work. So don't go away and come up with policy ideas and launch them at us, but really work with us to say how do we make this work, what do you know works? How can we work together to achieve something and let's stick at it for the long term? I think that would make such a difference. If we had a bit of stability, some security, some well funded approach to lifelong learning, and I'm sure if we work at it together, we can make that happen.

Joe Mcloughlin 24:25

Almost because it's all of your effort and energy is going into keeping upright or re-briefing or getting or getting new contacts up to speed or...?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 24:34

I think there are lots of reasons we've done it. But just to illustrate in the last year when we've been negotiating a devolution deal, which includes skills for the West Midlands Combined Authority. We have worked with five Secretaries of State in that one year. When there is so much change, and when there isn't an overarching strategy, it is just really hard to be able to consistently and incrementally improve what you are trying to do. Some stability will be really, really helpful.

Joe Mcloughlin 25:07

And so ultimately then just to kind of close off the conversation and ultimately end on a positive, do you see, do you see the development of a national strategy

and the shrinking of a skills gap as going hand in hand or being necessarily related?

Dr Fiona Aldridge 25:23

Absolutely. I think us having a shared vision, and working together to make it happen is really critical. But I guess I'd come back to that point at the start. I think we need to stop talking about skills as being things we don't have. But things that we all need to develop throughout our life and that there are benefits for work for our wider lives for our families in doing it. And I think changing the narrative is just as helpful and it is something we need to get right and have a responsibility to do ourselves.

Joe Mcloughlin 25:56

Thank you to my guest Dr Fiona Aldridge 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 of Let's Go Further.