

## Ep.3: Community learning: how adult education benefits people and places

**Adult education has been called “the jewel in the crown” of the education sector. In this episode, we discuss the huge range of benefits that adult education has, not just for individuals but places and communities too.**

Our guests are two powerful advocates for lifelong learning: Dr Sue Pember CBE, Policy Director for [HOLEX](#), and Simon Parkinson, Chief Executive and General Secretary of the [Workers Educational Association](#). Through their work, they have seen countless examples of how adult education positively impacts lives and communities.

In this conversation, Simon and Dr Sue put forward a passionate case for adult education deserving more recognition and more support from policymakers.

### About Dr Sue Pember CBE

Dr Sue started her career as a teacher and is one of the few people in the FE sector who has had senior leadership roles in colleges, local authorities and government. Dr Sue is now the Policy Director for [HOLEX](#), the professional body for adult education services, centres and institutions. Her work concentrates on ensuring the voice of adult learners is heard and she is a keen advocate of lifelong learning

### About Simon Parkinson

Simon Parkinson is the Chief Executive and General Secretary of the [WEA](#) - Adult Learning, Within Reach, the leading adult education charity.

Simon joined the WEA from Co-operative College where he was Principle and CEO for 4 years and previously worked for 19 years at the [Royal Mencap Society](#), including as Director of Education, Learning and Work.

Passionate about education and its ability to empower and inspire, Simon believes that through working together, individuals can have a hugely positive impact on their own lives and the wider community.

## 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 bring communities together to reach out to those who might otherwise be left behind, and even to support people's health and wellbeing. Joining me are Dr. Dr Sue Pember and Simon Parkinson. Dr Sue is the Director of Policy and External Relationships at Holesx, the leading professional membership body for Adult Community Education and Learning. Well, Simon is the CEO and General Secretary of the Workers Educational Association, a charity that has been empowering adults across England and Scotland by bringing teaching to local communities for the last 120 years. So I'd like to start with some quite striking figures from work produced by your respective organisations. 90% of the UK workforce will need to reskill by 2030, in some capacity, and over 7 million adults do not have a GCSE equivalent qualification. Simon, do we have a bit of a crisis on our hands?

### Simon Parkinson 1:16

Yeah, thanks, Joe. I think those figures were pulled together from across the sector, government and business. So they're not just the WEA figures. Crisis, yes, alongside a cost of living crisis, probably a crisis around economic inactivity with people not returning to the workforce, but also an opportunity because those numbers are well understood. So actually, we know from our work with adults that, you know, the vast majority of adults with the right support want to reskill, you know, look forward to re skilling. And have got that aspiration to, you know, to progress at work. So there's a real opportunity there as well, I think, where there is another crisis looming for us, and I think this, this may have been exasperated by the PM's speech yesterday, is in retaining and attracting a community, Adult Community Education Workforce. You know, it's, you know, the funding for Adult Community Education compared to the funding for schools and colleges is a real isDr Sue for us at the moment. So a big job to do but actually, I always remain glass half full, and we'll just carry on, we've been doing it for 120 years. So we'll carry on for the next 120.

### Joe Mcloughlin 2:27

So just picking up there. So I mean, that was the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's speech to close out the Conservative conference, wasn't it?

### Simon Parkinson 2:34

Yeah it was, yeah, some big announcements around Advanced British Standards, you know, to be to, you would need to understand that, but also some big announcements about financial incentives for college lecturers, and for school teachers. And that comes on the back of an increase for college lecturers and

school teachers of 6.5% earlier in the summer. If you're a tutor in an adult community education provider a public sector provider like the WEA. So same legal status as colleges, we got 0%. And it's not clear yet whether the £30,000 bonus will also be available to adult community educators. So we'll work with government, you know, I've got a lot of respect for DFE, Robert Halfon, Gillian Keegan, we'll work with them. Hopefully, it's just a little bit of an oversight. And we can, we can smooth out.

**Joe Mcloughlin 3:27**

And Dr Sue, so in other episodes this year, we've spoken about the economic drag and the financial challenges that are caused by the skills gap caused by this kind of need to reskill and retrain, just putting them to one side for the moment. What other effects does the kind of need to reskill and the awareness of a lack of skills have on individuals?

**Dr Sue Pember 3:49**

Yeah, it was a sort of double or triple whammy on individuals. So if they're already in a low paid low skilled job, it's very difficult to get out of that unless they are reskilled. So there's a role for employers and it's a role for the individuals. And in this country, we are at the middle of the tables on productivity. We don't do well against the other G7 nations. And mainly you know it can be shown that we have a nation of people, many, as you've just said about the stats have got poor literacy, poor numeracy skills. And now those same people have got poor digital skills, they will be frightened to death about artificial intelligence, and what's that going to do to their jobs. So the point that Simon and I are making really is that if we want to be pulling our weight in the world and increasing productivity, and increasing people's well being we have to do something about the skills of the nation, and it is a crisis point because you know technology is moving fast. Jobs are changing. Nobody's probably job is that safe, because of artificial intelligence, and people are beginning to worry about it. So we need to be doing something now.

**Joe Mcloughlin 5:03**

So in that context, then Dr Sue, what can adult education offer specifically? And I'd like first yourself and then Simon, to come in with some examples from your work kind of some positives that you've seen.

**Dr Sue Pember 5:15**

I'm a representative of adult education. So I'm bound to be absolutely positive. But they are fantastic. You know, they there's 15,000 at least staff in the system. In the Adult Community Education world, they work out of 10,000 settings, and they educate, you know, around 500,000 adults annually, and even through COVID, they kept on going by turning themselves into online providers. And what did they do? Well, as we speak, now, they will be out there in the community, working with people to improve their language skills their literacy and numeracy. Through the new Multiply Maths initiative, they'll be helping

adults to improve their maths, they will be doing employability courses and working with DWP. And there is something for everybody, and the other side of that. So over the last 10 years, many have shifted their provision into like employability or doing best in the workplace. They're also there for your personal wellbeing. And we often see people you know, in a crisis, whether that's because of health, or because of divorce, or loss or bereavement, they will turn to adult ed to help them get through it. And you will again, see in nearly every community, some sort of provision that brings people together, which increases integration and supports people's well being, you know, we're also collectively, even in Ofsted terms, you know, 96% are good or outstanding, we're the best sector. And we need more investment because we need to be doing more of this

### **Simon Parkinson 6:49**

I think Dr Sue's right, she's clearly passionate about it. And a real strong advocate for the sector. I'll give you some examples from our work, Joe. Dr Sue's right. There's something for everybody at the WEA we try not to turn anybody away. So all of those cultural programmes which we know improve health and well being our learners tell us that they on average visit their GP one time a year less, which saves the NHS £1.6 million just for WEA provision, but I'll give you a real example about employability as Dr Sue mentioned, because it's sometimes forgotten that adult community education plays a real vital role here, we worked with the Bilstein Group, a big automotive employer in the East Midlands. They were doing health and safety briefings, and thought that their multinational workforce, some of them weren't quite understanding the sort of technical language of those health and safety briefings. So it started off as a real employability course, what happened and what they tell us happened is the not only the impact on health and safety and productivity, but the impact on culture in that workplace, you now had your national groups coming together at lunchtime, speaking in English to each other, you know, and really sort of combined into it into a team ethic. And then what we also heard from one of our learners was, it was the first time she'd felt confident enough to speak to the other moms at the school gate. So actually she'd taken those skills, which had started off as quite narrow, let's just make sure that we're keeping people safe at work, and went on to have massive community effects and they are not isolated examples there are...every provider across the sector could give you 1000s of examples, because that's happening on a daily basis.

### **Joe Mcloughlin 7:03**

So recognising those different effects then and how they ripple out and one affects the other and it keeps growing and growing. I'm just wondering, is there something in particular about how adult education works? That brings these benefits to the kind of to the fore?

### **Simon Parkinson 8:45**

Yeah, yeah, Dr Sue's right it was a real challenge through COVID. You know, for 117 years, our model has been hyperlocal in community venues that people know and trust with other people that they know and trust. And then for two years, we were an online provider. And now we're this 120 year old, weird hybrid startup organisation almost. But what was common across both of those learning

methods, and now the hybrid method is small group sizes, so that people can learn with each other. So this isn't necessarily just about individual learning. This is small class sizes, learning with each other with an inspirational tutor, you know, at the front of the class that isn't chalk and talk isn't trying to be just the expert in the room. Clearly they've got their subject matter, expertise, but that way of facilitating group conversations, that way of supporting adult learners, I think is distinct. I think, you know, those small class sizes, in groups increasingly back in venues that people know and trust is important because it is a massive step. You know, for a 25 year old returning to education, maybe after a you know, five to 10 year gap. They're not just going to go straight to the big shiny college in the centre of town, they want to cut their teeth somewhere that's a little bit closer to home a little bit safer, possibly, as they view it in terms of their own sort of confidence levels, and then progress from there. So I don't know Dr Sue is that... you see, you've seen this for years and years.

### **Dr Sue Pember 10:17**

And that's a good description of the sector. However, there are different parts of the sector. So we do in adult community education, we do some level four, and the class sizes will be similar to those that you would get in college or even University. So we do a whole range of activity, and we do vocational work as well. But the big differences are, when we looked at this a few years ago, is that the teachers are normally qualified teachers, which is important. Plus, they have often a degree in their own discipline. So they're experts in the room, however, they're working with adults, and they really respect that. And like Simon said, you know, being in a group with adults, you want the other adults to talk about their experience, and bring that into the learning. And that's why they do so well in Ofsted, that, you know, they know what their intent is. They know why they deliver it. And they do know where their students score. And that's why you know, like I said, 96% of the of the learning organisations are good or outstanding. But as Simon really said it is about the teacher in the classroom, whenever we've done any feedback is that, Oh, I love my teacher, I get on really well. And my teacher really respects me, my teacher understands what I need. And it's that good feel. And if you ever get a chance to go into an adult ed class, you will come out with a smile on your face. I think as a sector, they really are special, we would love them to get more in the limelight. You know, the announcements were about the adult ed sector, that would be fantastic in the future.

### **Joe Mcloughlin 11:52**

So just picking up there Dr Sue on what you've said about limelight, in different pieces of yours that I've read to kind of prepare for today, you've talked about adult education operating below the policy radar just sort of chugging along, and no one can see it, hearing the positives that you've discussed and all the different ways that it benefits people and the effectiveness of its methods. How do we how do we counter that? How do we get above the policy radar? How do we get spotted? And then and then also, how do we improve funding levels do you think?



**Dr Sue Pember 12:21**

Being under the policy radar isn't a bad thing. Because of having one policy written in 2012 constant for 10 years made learning organisations know what they had to deliver and how they delivered it, allowed Ofsted to inspect to a framework knowing what was should be expected by those learning organisations. And I think that's one of the reasons that they've done well, is because they have managed to keep to the policy, like I said, written in 2012, which they were part of developing, and then taking it through you know, we can sustain it and improving it, year in year out. It's only last year that they had a change of policy which is coming in this year. And we now need to make sure that quality doesn't drop because of that change and the different directives that that government want adult education to do. But what I do think we do need to make more people understand is that this is a really good value for money sector. It offers good quality, it does what local residents want, and those local residents are voters it does what voters want. They think favourably of it. I mean, this sector also got the Best Employer Award from businesses. So you know, sometimes I can't work out why it's not seen as that perfect educational system. And in fact Robert Halfon when he was a select committee called adult community education, the jewel in the education crown. And I think we should be reminding him of that Simon every time we meet him.

**Simon Parkinson 14:03**

We all know, you know, the real positive benefits that it creates, you know, not just around skills and employability but combatting isolation and loneliness improving mental health and well being not only are we value for money, but increasingly, you know, as operating costs are going up. And as funding's staying flat. As a charitable provider, we're having to use some of our own charity reserves to make you know, to hold the quality to where we want it to be. And that can't be right. That can't be right that you know we're relying on charitable reserves to educate adults in 2023. It's where we started 120 years ago and I'm desperate that we don't go all the way back to having to do it through charitable activities. So we'll see where we get to.

**Joe Mcloughlin 14:46**

We are heading into an election year. How would you both make the case to policymakers then that adult education is the jewel in the crown that it does deserve a bit more polish or a bit more attention?

**Simon Parkinson 14:58**

I think we're realistic enough to know that there's no magic money tree, so actually, as Dr Sue said, you know, in a previous answer, giving us some stability, you know, actually just keeping that stability in the system, even if there's not, you know, oodles more money, but actually stability and flexibility for us to really deliver the type of provision that we really understand makes the biggest impact, the biggest difference to people, and to keep it wider than a very narrow, technical level three and above education offer. So if we can hold on to the diversity of provision, if either party or both parties can give us a, you know, a period, an extended period of stability, and actually just trust us to get on and deliver, you know, in the way that we've successfully been doing over the many,

many, many years, then actually, I think we can help them with the policy agenda, which is re skilling, and upskilling you know, our adults, you know, we know how to do it. We're good at it as Dr Sue said, on all measures, we're good at it...you know, regulation measures, employer measures, staff surveys, we know how to do this. So support us by giving us the you know, the confidence, freedom and space to do what we're good at?

**Dr Sue Pember 16:16**

Well, what we haven't talked about much yet at the moment is devolution. So, you know, there's nine areas of the country that have got elected mayors. And if you look at the Greater London Authority, and you'll see that the London mayor has got an amazing skill strategy, and which they consult about and transparent about, and they have found ways to put money into Adult and Community Education. Not originally, but once you see it, and feel it, and you can see what he does for the community, you realise that you can probably get sort of more of your pound, if you actually invest in adult and community education. And we're also seeing that, you know, in Liverpool and in Bristol, and we're seeing changes in the West Midlands, where these mayors and their staff are working very much with the learning organisations to provide for the learner. I feel quite confident that, you know, all three parties do understand adult and community education. But the isDr Sue that we've got at the moment is yes, we do get funding from DFE. But we have to be clever in sourcing funding from other departments as well. And what you know, we would have loved is a lifelong learning strategy across government that brought these different funding mechanisms together. So what we have a plea for is some system stability, at least a three year window of funding, so we know where we are, and a lifelong learning strategy that brings all the bits of government together, that are funding post 19 skills into a coherent strategy.

**Joe Mcloughlin 17:50**

Listening to what you're saying, and trying to get away from the politics or explicit policies. It seems that you're pitching adult educators in a mixed role as educator, social support, would be health worker. And I'm curious what the ideal skill set for an adult educator would be.

**Simon Parkinson 18:07**

There's obviously that subject matter expertise. And that qualification in your chosen field, which is important these are, you know, qualified teachers. Also, though, it's ironic, really, because it's not just us that say this, people like the Confederation of British Industry, the CBI, say that the skills needed for the world of work going forward, aren't so much the technical skills but they're communication skills, empathy, resilience, teamwork, and actually, as you said, that that rounded skill set, they used to be wrongly labelled soft skills, these are essential skills, and actually, we need those and we have them in abundance in our in our tutor workforce as well. The other thing is that they are rooted in their communities. You know, we are not we are not helicopter providers, we don't just fly in, deliver for two years fly out again, these are these are, you know, community educators in and of their own community. So there's a, there's a trust, there's an understanding, there's a bond, you know, and Dr Sue's right, whenever we ask our learners, all of the praise goes to the tutors,

understandably and rightly, and my job as a CEO is to stay as far out of the way of that as possible and just really support the tutors and the learners to have that experience. So it is a fantastic thing to see. And they are highly skilled individuals, and that's why we get so I guess, disappointed or frustrated when we don't feel they're rewarded and recognised the same as other professional colleagues in public sector education like college lecturers and school teachers. So, just asking for parity, just asking you know, for people to recognise, you know, just how, you know, skilled and passionate, you know, this adult, you know, community workforce is.

**Dr Sue Pember 19:59**

The being in the community is incredibly important to their success, but so is the heads of service and leaders like Simon so if you're a head of service working out of a local authority, you are working with other services like those who are caring for vulnerable families, those who are managing housing, those who are looking at the care industry and the care workers in that area. So they're very much within the mix of what is needed for that particular geographical patch and therefore that that then feeds down into the tutors so the tutors you know, what where to feed people onto. So you're absolutely right, you know, a tutor and adult ed class often will have a an adult stay behind after the class saying, um, you know, I really struggled today with getting here, I've got this problem, and the adult ed teacher will know where to direct them to, either they will signpost them to somebody within the service themselves, or, you know, to Citizens Advice, or within the local authority, their home local authority,

**Joe Mcloughlin 21:07**

Simon, the WEA's Impact Report for 2022 put your mission as, quote, fighting inequality and promoting social justice. And in our first episode, Professor John Holford, of the University of Nottingham said in a similar vein, one of the roles of adult education is that it brings community together and it kind of improves and helps nurture democracy. Given all the challenges that we're seeing in the country at the moment, whether it's austerity policies, or the fallout from Brexit or the comeback from COVID. What do you see as the role of adult education in kind of holding communities together and establishing that social contract in the in the 21st century in the next, you know, 10, 20, 50 years?

**Simon Parkinson 21:50**

Yeah, no, it's a good question, Joe. And I know, John Holford and the work of the Centenary Commission really well, you know, we were part of that work. And, and that is, that remains our mission. You know, we do believe that the power of adult community education to build communities, you know, it is a social justice and fighting inequality is Dr Sue, Dr Sue mentioned Multiply earlier, which is a government funded programme to improve numeracy. But for adults, so don't call it maths, don't go anywhere near calling it maths. Well, the way we use that money across both England and Scotland, is bringing groups of people together to learn how to cook on a budget. So answering some of those is Dr Sues about rising food prices, and how they understand you know, how to buy the right ingredients, you know, what is a what is a good buying decision, and then how to do that, we help people understand their gas and electric bills, you know, so we improve their numeracy through real life and relevant pieces of work with



them. So it's not theoretical, it's not just learning, certainly not just learning maths, it's actually you know, upskilling. And when you do that, and when you do that, in those small group settings that we were talking about, it has an immediate impact, particularly that back now that we're in venue based centres, again, it brings those communities together, it might be the only touch point that they would have ever had with each other. And because of the nature of that learning, because of the enjoyment, because of the skill of those tutors, again, create those friendships that create those bonds, which means they then go out together into their community and have a real impact. You know, we see people taking their learning out of the classroom, and immediately into the community and extending that reach to say, 'actually, I did this, it wasn't scary' it's a great group of people come across every part of the country, anybody that's involved in, in adult community education, you know, just gets that understands that that is core to what we do, it is building those communities and it is helping people with the, you know, the real inequalities that that they face at the moment.

**Dr Sue Pember 23:59**

The community enhancement and development and integration is still very much part of the purpose of adult ed and that's recognised in the new policy of DFE, as it was in the old policy. And it is really important when you have a disaster, whether it was you know, the Grenfell fire or something like that, you know, that does bring communities together. And one of the things that we found in that area was that they wanted to turn to adult education, they wanted their adult education centre, to reopen quickly and to be there for them. And that happens you know, after, you know, in, in my old world, you know, for quite a while, time ago now, but in Edmonton when there was the riots, and these were just young men and women who were dissatisfied with life. Again, one of the you know, solutions to that not the solution, but one of the platforms there was to provide more adult education in that area, so that they could see that there was another alternative. And if you think about when people do learning, they go with one purpose, but it ends up being for another purpose. And we've got lots of really good stories where, you know, people have learned English because they wanted to get a job and be more effective in their job. But they end up feeling really more confident now to work with their own children. And they go to family learning, which brings families together, intergenerational learning, and then they end up not just being you know, on the school governing body, they end up tutoring themselves, and they end up you know, with jobs in the school. So there's always multi outcomes through an adult ed course. And they always they even surprise me that you can start something and end something somewhere else. But it's always fantastic.

**Joe Mcloughlin 25:48**

If each of you could make one positive change to try and ensure that adult education is both lifelong and life wide. What would it be?

**Dr Sue Pember 25:57**

This country absolutely needs a lifelong learning strategy that is all age, all levels and in all settings. So at the moment, we've got something called the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, but it's just an entitlement to a loan, and it stops at 60. So it's really important that new initiatives are brought together under the banner of lifelong learning. And we have a definition that we all like, and why would that make a difference on the ground? Because I think it would bring people together it would galvanise it, we'd form a form of crusade that people could sign themselves up for, and everybody in the sector that is involved in adult education, and those in DWP, and health will understand how we're all working together. So that the learner gets a much better experience much more relevant to their life and isn't having to fight bureaucracy about attending classes or the Health Authority hasn't had to worry about doing social prescribing. Because it's seen as part of a national strategy.

**Simon Parkinson 27:00**

I think Dr Sue's right about, you know, the need for a national strategy. But we need to underpin it with and it's a challenge for all of us, you know, the sector, government, business communities, trade unions that would have a big role to play in this is how do we create a culture in the country that says that education doesn't stop at 19 or 21? You know, when you've finished school or university, how do we create that culture that says, actually, I'm going to be a lifelong learner, I can feel the benefits of that for myself individually. And actually, I can see the positive impact it has on people around me, be those my family members or my community members. You know how do we.... I would build if you know that one magic wish I would build a culture in this country that values lifelong learning as a fundamental human right, and almost a responsibility to ourselves, and to those around us to say, I'm going to carry on learning and I'm going to do something really positive, with that learning for my friends, families and communities. So I'd do that Joe if I had a magic wand I'd build that culture of lifelong learning.

**Joe Mcloughlin 28:10**

Thank you to my guests, Dr. Dr Sue Pember and Simon Parkinson, 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.