

Ep.4: Adult education and funding - where are we going wrong?

No money, no trust and the decimation of adult education

Adult education can have a hugely positive impact on people's lives and on the communities where they live. But funding cuts in recent years have left education providers less able to offer the learning that people want and need. So, where are we going wrong?

In this episode, Janet Smith, is Chief Executive Officer and Principal of [Nottingham College](#), and Shane Chowen, Editor of [FE Week](#), try to get to grips with this question. Their conversation provides plenty of food for thought on the purpose of education, the flaws in the current system, and what needs to change.

About Janet Smith

Janet Smith is Chief Executive Officer and Principal of [Nottingham College](#), having [joined](#) the college in July 2022.

Her career in education has spanned more than 35 years, mostly in further education, with nine years as a university lecturer and two years in a strategic regional role within the FE sector.

As a teacher and manager Janet has developed, delivered and led a wide range of programmes, including apprenticeships, academic and vocational learning, degrees and masters programmes, and research projects. Over the course of her career, she has worked in eight very different FE colleges and has been the senior lead for curriculum and quality in three, securing significant improvement in performance. She has been a CEO since 2015.

As someone who has benefited from a college education herself, Janet is a passionate advocate for further education, the opportunities it creates for learners of all backgrounds and the improved life chances on offer through education and training in a college environment.

About Shane Chowen

Shane took an interest in further education policy while studying A levels at his local FE college 18 years ago, and worked in a range of policy, campaigning and representative roles ever since. He was the vice president (further education) at

the [National Union of Students](#) during the 2010 general election and helped lead the largest mobilisation of students seen in a generation. Since then he's led on public affairs for adult education body [Learning and Work Institute](#) and worked closely with around 50 colleges as the Midlands area director at the [Association of Colleges](#).

Outside of work, Shane served on the board at [Capital City College Group](#), overseeing two mergers to form one of the country's largest college groups and chaired by the board's quality and standards committee.

He is now editor of [FE Week](#), a weekly newspaper and online news service, where he leads a team of reporters covering further education, skills and apprenticeships.

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 how adult education is funded. And joining me are Shane Chown and Janet Smith. Shane is the Editor of FE Week and has extensive experience in strategic and governing roles in the sector. Whilst Janet is the CEO and Principal of one of the largest colleges in the country, Nottingham College. She has over 35 years of experience working and leading in the sector across seven different colleges, providing both FE and Adult Education courses. Welcome to you both. So Janet, I'd like to start with you. Can you kick us off by telling a little bit about your connections to FE and adult education both personally and professionally?

Janet Smith 1:00

To start with, I suppose I've been an adult education learner in Further Education, and valued the opportunity to build my skills through evening classes. And I'm going back a good few decades for that. But certainly, in the past, and during my time in FE as a tutor and a manager, what I've seen is colleges literally changing the lives of millions of students, I can I can certainly remember a time in FE when colleges would be a hive of activity, every single evening, car parks full of people and using FE for a huge range of different purposes, changing jobs, just out of the sheer interest of wanting to learn, genuinely levelling up their lives, gaining social mobility, improving their life chances, maybe building their salaries, you know, so many different things that were happening through adult education in further

education. And I think a lot of that has been lost. And to me, that's a very sad thing and a real loss for the country.

Joe Mcloughlin 2:13

And so Shane the same question to you what's your connections to FE and Adult Education?

Shane Chowen 2:18

You know, just before we started recording, I was just trying to think of what my earliest memory of having, you know, any recollection of adult education was, and it struck me that I was very, very young, I was in like Primary School sort of age. And I remember my mum doing a manicure and pedicure course at Plymouth College of Further Education, it brings back all those memories and feelings of being you know, inspired by somebody who's got a lot on and a lot to do already but is still taking active steps in their life to get ahead and to progress in life and work. And for me, that's really what adult education is all about. And I've seen that all throughout my working career as well. I've been so so lucky in this job and in previous jobs, to be involved in things like the Adult Learning Awards, the Festival of Learning Awards, and you get to read all these fantastic and inspiring stories about, you know, the sorts of adults that Janet was talking about. And so therefore, I've sort of dedicated a lot of my career to, you know, campaigning and speaking up for a sector that, as we'll probably discuss often gets spoken over by noisier voices.

Joe Mcloughlin 3:17

I know that you've worked in strategic roles around funding with the Greater London Authority and, and similar bodies. Just as a beginning what what sort of struck you most about funding in that situation in that context?

Shane Chowen 3:32

Yeah. So that was when I was a governor at what was originally just Westminster, Kingsway College, people might remember we had a whole process of area reviews in the last decade, which, you know, is one of the defining sort of moments of reform, I think around adult education and also devolution of adult skills budgets to local authorities to combined authorities and mayors. So I was a governor of what was one college, but then we merged with another one. And then we merged with another one to form what's now Capital City College Group. So I was I was a governor at that time working with the Greater London Authority throughout that time when adult education funding was essentially being decentralised from central government out to mayors in the city regions and

regions across England. So that was a really interesting time, because at that time, mayors were still quite nervous about flexing their muscles when it came to their new adult education powers. So a lot of them were just really doing the same thing that the National Education and Skills Funding Agency were doing. But what we've seen over the last few years in particular, as devolution has become more established, is people like, you know, Fiona in the West Midlands, who you've spoken to before on this podcast, and all of the other mayors and combined authorities really starting to do things differently, really starting to move away from the national model, and trying out new things, taking more risks with their funding approach with their accountability approach. And that's been, I think, really, really fascinating. And I think has had a massive difference in terms of accessing adult education, but it's also highlighted the fact that the national system is really now I think starting to struggle to keep up.

Janet Smith 5:04

I've also been part of a college that sat within a Mayoral Combined Authority and it took two or three years. And then the authority started to really think differently. And it was definitely a much more fleet of foot response to emerging needs. So for example, when we had a shortage of qualified lorry drivers, we were able to move very quickly as a college because we were working with the Combined Authority that shrugged off some of the national rules around it. But what I do think is interesting is the government is clearly working to clip the wings of MCAs a little bit now, they're just about to publish a new accountability dashboard for MCAs, and I think there will be flexibility for combined authorities, but not too much

Joe Mcloughlin 5:50

Is that flexibility that you have, and that kind of devolved local power helpful to you when it comes to balancing budgets and, and responding to crises or responding to local challenges?

Janet Smith 6:01

It is to a point and the example I've just given you is a perfect one, in terms of being able to respond very quickly to an urgent skills need. But what combined authorities still have to do with their adult education budget is meet the national entitlements, all of the funding rules and framework around it, where they're enshrined in law still passed down to the Combined Authority. So they have freedom and flexibility yes, but only to a certain extent

Joe Mcloughlin 6:31

Funding generally from the state and levels of support from the public purse is an issue across the whole public sector at the moment. So, you know, over the last year, 18 months, we've seen strikes in health services, transport services, legal services, amongst others. And that's always kept the issue of funding in the public eye. At the moment, what's the state of things in in Further Education generally?

Janet Smith 6:54

We are at a bit of a pivot point, I think, we've had, in my experience, 14 years of austerity, even though funding rates have gone up slightly over the last couple of years, it's been a relatively low increase relative to inflation. And we've had actual and real term cuts to deal with. And huge limitations really, I think, for adult education, I know different figures get bandied about the Institute for Fiscal Studies have just confirmed that adult education funding decreased by 27%, since 2011. But in actual fact, the cuts go back further than that, they go back to the days of the Labour government, where we had some swinging cuts, and then further cuts when the coalition government came in. So actual cuts to funding coupled with static rates for more than a decade, and you get, I think, something closer to 50% of cuts when you look at the absolute value of the adult education funding budget, and it's just totally decimated what we're able to offer for students. And if we want to be quite emotive about it, it's taking life chances away from those people as well, which is not what adult education should be doing.

Shane Chowen 8:13

I would just add to that, as well as the decline in funding, I think we've had a complete shift in narrative around adult education and I think that's become much more acute in the last three to five years, since we had the Skills for Jobs, white paper, I've spent, you know, quite a few weeks, just following the summer, all of the political party conferences, for example. And you know, it was all about skills, skills, skills, anything that was college related, that was training related about adult education related, it was all about skills, you didn't hear the term further education, you didn't hear the term adult education in any speech made by a shadow education minister or an education minister, we've now got a system that's very utilitarian, that's very transactional, that's very "in return for this funding college X, you will deliver all of these outcomes and we're going to measure you on them. And if you don't deliver them, the government are going to intervene and make you, essentially." So the system has become very prescriptive, I think, and we've lost, we've lost a lot of the social mission behind adult education, which is a, which is a huge shame. And you'd expect to perhaps

hear some of that coming from the Labour Party. But as Janet just mentioned, the Labour Party didn't leave adult education in a great state when they left office in 2010. We had remarks from education ministers, like you know, they want to fund plumbing, not Pilates, which was a you know, direct attack on learning for leisure, on lifelong learning and on and on Adult and Community Learning. And we've seen that like I said more acutely in the last three to five years. There was a huge row when the government responded to its recent funding and accountability consultation where it wanted to essentially eliminate any of the good definitions of adult education that weren't to do with direct employment outcomes. So things like learning for good health, learning for good community outcomes, all of those things were going to be wiped out of the landscape. But there was a huge backlash from the adult education community led by Sue Pember at HOLEX, and they were successful in getting those outcomes added back into the to the rulebook. But that was a fight that I don't think we really should have had. So we it feels like we've got a system now, which is very transactional. And I think that comes with some real significant dangers.

Joe Mcloughlin 8:13

Just drawing those points together then so that the long term sustained pressure on budgets and cuts, and then the more kind of the rhetoric around education as a very utilitarian, transactional instrumental thing. Do you think that all this language around skills will translate into improved funding or improved settlements? Or do you get the sense that it's a 'doing more with less' so we'll...there's a lot of rhetoric, but it might not lead to a lot of practical change.

There's absolutely a gulf between the rhetoric and the reality, right, we see that in all sorts of areas of the public sector. But I think in adult education in particular, we've got a system that's very keen to throw in a, you know, a 12 month contract for X outcomes and a 12 month project for Y outcomes. You know, we don't know the long term future of things like Local Skills Improvement Plans, you know, this whole idea of local leadership around determining skills needs has been through so many iterations over the past decade. When we started with regional development agencies, they then became Local Enterprise Partnerships we had, we had those LEPs for a while. And now we've got these employer representative bodies doing these Local Skills Improvement Plans, the Labour Party have said they want to fiddle around with them if they get in power after the next election. We've got things like Multiply, the adult maths scheme, which local authorities are massively underspending on - those are short term initiatives without a sense of longevity. So I was really interested to hear the Labour Party, for example, talk about a 10 year settlement for research and development. So universities, research bodies, research councils, know where they're going over a 10 year period. They know what their strategy is, over that long term. We could really do

with that, I think in adult education as well imagine what the system could look like, if colleges like Nottingham, where Janet is, if Janet as a college CEO could plan over a 10 year period with the local authority with the employers in Nottingham. Imagine what the system could look like if we were able to do that.

Janet Smith 12:28

I think there's no focus on longitudinal outcomes from adult funding at all. I think of one person who came to my college who was a hairdresser. And she did a part time business qualification, got herself really interested in studying in education realised that actually she had real potential, used that business qualification to go to a university and she did a business degree. In her first year, she discovered she had an absolute aptitude for numbers, swapped to an accountancy qualification. And long story short, she's now a fully qualified accountant in the private sector, overseeing a budget of nearly £2 billion. Now, that's the power of FE and that's the power of adult education. But it would never feature in any of the accountability measures that we're talking about, where everything that gets measured on adult education is short term, it's always "has the learner progressed to a good job within their six months of finishing the course?". Adult education plants seeds, and you never know exactly what is going to bloom or where it's going to bloom. But it is often a long term win. And I just think we do not look at this properly at all. I think the social impact, the employment impact the prosperity impact, the personal impact. It's not measurable in the short term. But what I do know is that cutting education and making it transactional certainly has not resulted in greater productivity or lower levels of poverty, we've got the opposite. So what we're doing at the moment doesn't work. A longitudinal approach has got to be better.

Joe Mcloughlin 14:11

So recognising then, Janet, that we're missing out on all the different elements of the story. So we're missing out on the communal benefits, the social benefits, the personal benefits, with this very narrow focus on, you know, employment outcomes and economic benefits, aside from the funding cuts, which I know are part of it, but kind of culturally policy wise, why do you think we ended up here? How did we get here?

Janet Smith 14:38

I can only speculate but I think it's to do with when you pull the funding back, and I can say I think it's dropped back by about half, then you've got to try and get bang for your buck with what's left. And I think there's a recognition you've got to be able to sort out English and maths problems locally. So, you know, in the case of Nottingham College in the setting we're in which is relatively deprived, we tend to use around 46% of our adult education budget just on English, maths, and English for Speakers of Other Languages. And then another 20 odd percent on level one qualifications because we're addressing a certain need locally. And that really does narrow down the potential and the punch from the funding that we get.

Shane Chown 15:26

We got here, consciously and deliberately, we've got a system at the moment which the government itself describes as unapologetically employer led, so immediately, that eliminates the agency of colleges, training providers, local authority, adult education providers, and also immediately eliminates the agency of individual learners. We don't trust learners, to make their own decisions about what's best for them, their lives and their careers. We don't trust training providers and colleges, we've got an employer-led system. So we've seen the consequences of that now in not just the adult education space, but also the apprenticeship space. And it's not like employers, which I don't usually like to refer to as a homogenous group that all believe and think in the same things, but we've got employers saying, hang on, we want a want a say, of course, we want an influence but we don't want to control the system necessarily. So I think that's how we've got here. We've got here by introducing a system where the government and policy makers will run miles and miles and miles with this employers first line, and therefore aren't taking that more strategic and partnership and more collaborative and more symbiotic approach, which would be bringing everybody that's got a say, and an interest around the table and coming up with a system that works for everyone, and really listening to the learners' voices and the providers' voices on...at the same level as they are.

Employers...we're sort of infantilising adult learners a little bit by saying here is an Argos book of courses, that's available to you locally, pick one to do, because that's going to get you a good job. People are able to make up their own minds about what they want to do. And they might not want to do something that's in the Argos book. They might want to do something that's a little bit more stimulating for them personally, in their own day to day life, that might not necessarily be anything to do with their professional expertise. But we know that those sorts of courses do have an impact on someone's economic wellbeing and economic output in the longer term. So I definitely think we need a we need a rebalance strategically around who it is that's involved in the decision making and who it is that policymakers listen to, when coming up with adult education policy in this country.

Janet Smith 17:31

I find it really interesting that a government that claims to be very market led actually won't let the market decide. Because I think we do get better outcomes when learners are free to choose. We work anywhere as a college with around 4000 learners every year in many, many different guises, apprenticeships, work placements, visits, trips, they come and speak to our students et cetera, et cetera. So it's not as if we're unconnected with employers. And I think the government line on this suggests that we are and that's simply not the case. But also I would I would question whether things like the Local Skills Improvement Plans really reflect employer voice. I definitely didn't see vast numbers of employers engaging with the process here in Nottinghamshire, and Derbyshire, there was some engagement, but it was by no means extensive. So the plan definitely doesn't reflect employers. And I can go back in time as well to initiatives such as the employer ownership of skills, where the government decided to put skills funding into the hands of employers, because it would lead to lead to far more creative answers and employer driven answers. And they literally buried the report on that project, because there was scant evidence of innovation and creativity. You know, I think there's a lack of trust in Further Education, and it's not warranted.

Joe Mcloughlin 18:59

So just picking up on things, you're both saying there about the kind of paternalism and the control from the centre and policymakers not understanding adult education or not trusting adult learners necessarily, how much of that do you think is to do with the background and experiences of the politicians and policymakers that we have? And I suppose what I'm asking is, do you think the policy process would be improved by bringing more voices more varied voices into the into the mix?

Shane Chowen 19:30

I think that's a really interesting thing to think about. I don't know the personal backgrounds of everyone that works in in DfE right. But I do remember in the early days of the coalition government when Vince Cable the Liberal Democrat was the Secretary of State with responsible for skills. He came in in 2010 at a time when DfE was able to protect its schools budget, but wasn't protecting the other education budgets, like further education. Further Education was, you know, a red flag in terms of risk at that point. And of course, since then we have seen budgets absolutely decimated. But he would always use personal stories about his own background and his own experience with adult education, and make the case

essentially that it would have been worse without me here in this job was the point he was trying to make. And I don't know whether that was just rhetoric or whether that was reality. But we certainly could do with more people with adult education experiences in positions of power, I can give you a list of people who I think for example, this might be unpopular, who should be in the House of Lords, for example, who are from the adult education community, every other person you see stand up in the House of Lords declares an interest as an Honorary Fellow or something from some university somewhere. But we absolutely should have more people from the FE and the adult education world making decisions and holding the government to account in the House of Lords, for example, and I would, I would very happily spend some time writing nominations for people if I knew if I thought it would make a difference. I think it would make a difference if we had more people coming through the civil service from more diverse backgrounds of course. Universities use it as a badge of honour don't they, how many people they get on the Civil Service Fast Stream, I'd like to see the civil service broaden its intake to include more people who are non-graduates and who retrained into those sorts of roles later in life. Of course, that would have a positive impact on the quality of policy. But like I said before, a lot of this, I fear is ideological, this employers first narrative, this economy first narrative, and this really narrow view on the purpose of education is fundamentally I think about ideology. So the only way you can change that is by the ballot box, electing people with a different set of values and a different set of ideologies, but also diversifying the people who were involved in making those decisions.

Janet Smith 21:35

I was about to use the same Vince Cable example, actually, because he did go on record when government officials wanted to axe adult education in Further Education, the quote he used was they said to him, "nobody will really notice", which does suggest a massive disconnect from the world of adult education to me.

Shane Chownen 21:57

There was a brilliant report by the Institute for Government quite a few years ago, it was a report about policy churn. So they were looking at the impact of policy churn on government departments and civil service. And there were two areas that they looked at. One of them was housing, and the other one was further education. And there was a quote in there from a special advisor that worked in number 10, under David Cameron, who said, there was nobody important to offend in FE, which is why they felt like they could get away with the constant policy churn in that sector. There was nobody important to offend, how offensive is that?!

Joe Mcloughlin 22:30

We've already acknowledged and, you know, discussed the fact that there's a gap between current political rhetoric and funding and all those sorts of things. In the real world day to day, Janet, who is it that you see that falls down that gap? Who are we losing?

Janet Smith 22:44

First of all students, because they're not getting the opportunities, chances and choice that they deserve and need. I think employers are losing out because we do have skills gaps, and they're not being closed. There's a you know, massive skills gap in engineering at the moment, and not enough new engineering students coming through. And that's to do with our inability to be able to attract enough staff, at a salary that will attract them to deliver engineering courses, colleges are shutting them. So there's, there's lots of bodies that are failing, I think communities are losing out. As soon as you start affecting communities and social mobility, then you're actually impacting more than one generation as well. So it's not something that is even just immediate, we have narrowed it down so much that we've taken away the real breadth of value that adult education can bring.

Shane Chowen 23:44

And when you look at the stats, and you look at the participation numbers, where you see declines in adult education participation, and I think this is the case in apprenticeships as well. It's generally the cuts have fallen on the lowest levels. So what we see in apprenticeships, for example is we see huge growth in higher level apprenticeships, level four plus apprenticeships, but we're seeing a decline in level two apprenticeships and we're seeing a decline in apprenticeships for young people. And it was the IFS Report that Janet mentioned earlier also highlighted that much of the decline in adult education participation is at those lower levels as well. So...and people like Learning and Work Institute have been talking about this for years, through their, through their research, that the generally well qualified, the generally well educated aren't feeling the brunt of the cuts to adult education. It's the people that arguably need it more and need it most that aren't getting access to those opportunities. So that again comes down to that need for a fundamental rethink and reshaping of the adult education system which has a focus on those lower level courses. It's often there you also find the most life changing most inspirational stories, when you look at refugees trying to access ESOL courses right now for example. It's really hard to get an ESOL course, to get...on to an ESOL course if you're a refugee from Afghanistan or from Ukraine, it's too hard. So you can't contribute to your local economy until you've got access

to that English for Speakers of Other Languages provision. So why isn't that a priority? Why isn't that more of a focus?

Janet Smith 25:17

There's another angle to this as well. And it's around the government's focus on loans, and people's willingness or ability to take a loan out to access further education. And I think that is ultimately restricting choice as well. And going back to an earlier question about whether officials and ministers with different backgrounds from your average FE learner are the right people to judge this or to shape policy, and should they listen more widely. I worked at Stamford College before coming over to Nottingham, and my local MP, at the time was Nick Balls, Minister for Skills. And he and I had many interesting debates about adult education and about politics more widely. But ultimately, we did get on very well. And we would have some quite interesting chats about all of this. And I remember him asking me one question about why won't adult learners take up adult loans? Look what they can get out of it? And I quoted him the example of the hairdresser that I used earlier. You know, I said, "Why would a hairdresser take out a loan for £5000 to do a BTEC in Business on the possibility that she might become a fully fledged accountant with a six figure salary in 10 years' time?" Why would she even envisage that would be possible? I said it's alright for people who start with a lot of wealth and support from their families behind them, they're more likely to be aspirational to already see where the path is through the educational landscape. But the further you are from that, the harder it is to get into it and to feel that you can succeed at it. And loans are just another barrier to people.

Joe Mcloughlin 27:08

Recognising that then recognising funding levels to the training providers and colleges directly have dropped and are challenging, recognising that support for students isn't necessarily as good or as kind of coherent, or well thought out as it might be, recognising that policymakers and thinking in the sector isn't as coherent or as long term as it might be. And then finally, recognising that we're heading into an election next year, what bit of advice would you give? Or what kind of what would you like to see policymakers or new ministers in the event of an election and a new government do to drive those figures up or develop more sort of stable, coherent long term policies?

Janet Smith 27:48

I would like government to think about education in the way that we think about education here at Nottingham College, we think of ourselves as having three purposes, we have to have a broad general Further Education offer so we can reach out to as many parts of our communities in all its forms as possible, and that there's lots of access points and lots of different types of learning. I would like to think that policy also thought about social mobility, as well as economic prosperity and the employment path. And if we think in the round like that, then adult education can be reshaped into something that's really genuinely life impacting and valuable for our country.

Shane Chown 28:35

Yeah, I would say, firstly, ditch this employers first narrative to begin with, I think we've seen, I think the evidence is there now to prove that it's, it's failed as a central, you know, ideology behind adult education policy and FE more broadly. And secondly, I'd want the next, the next government, the next Secretary of State to really put some effort into taking learning where learners are, we've got a huge opportunity through all of the technological advances we've seen in recent years around education and learning to reverse some of that really damaging decline in lower level entry level participation in adult education. I'd like to see some efforts go into, you know, looking at how do we actively recruit and encourage and entice people into learning? How do we as a society and as a culture, really value learning throughout our lives, not just something that happens when not just something that happens when something bad happens to you, like, we always talk about retraining in the context of something negative, right? So you're in an industry that's about to become automated, therefore, you're going to need retraining or there's a factory about to shut down in your local community. So we better have some adult education there. So it's always it's always discussed in a deficit model. And I'd like it I'd like as a society to move much more into a positive view of adult education and adult training. All of the evidence is there which says that if you participate in adult education, you will live a longer generally happier, work life and also there's health benefits in the long run. Also, it will help your children's attainment if you're a parent and you do learning, your children's attainment at school benefits, as well, there are intergenerational benefits to adult education, all of that has been lost through the employers first narrative. So if we bring that back, if we bring learning to where learners are, and if we change our culture, so that learning is celebrated and encouraged at every stage, everyone should be could be on a course you know, all of the time, it doesn't have to be work related, it could be something that interests you. It would put colleges and training providers and all of the providers that deliver adult education in really, really powerful influential communities and position in society. And I think that would be really exciting.

Janet Smith 30:41

And if we do that, we might actually see further education getting its proper time in the sun because we have an almost an invisibility issue next to other parts of the sector. You know, if I think about schools or universities, they are lauded. There's lots of column inches about them in the local press and in national press. They appear on the news and further education is almost buried. And I just think we should have our time in the sun.

Joe Mcloughlin 31:11

Thank you to my guests, Janet Smith and Shane Chowen 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.