Workers’ Educational Association - written evidence (CCE0257)

Introduction and background

1. The Workers’ Educational Association is the UK’s largest voluntary sector provider of adult education in England and Scotland. We deliver almost 9,000 part-time courses to nearly 60,000 adult students each year.

2. Our mission and vision are entirely pertinent to the subject of this Inquiry.

3. Our vision is for “A better world - equal, democratic and just; through adult education the WEA challenges and inspires individuals, communities and society”

4. Our mission is made up of the following elements:
   - Raising educational aspirations
   - Bringing great teaching and learning to local communities
   - Ensuring there is always an opportunity for adults to return to learning
   - Developing educational opportunities for the most disadvantaged
   - Involving students and supporters as members to build an education movement for social purpose
   - Inspiring students, teachers and members to become active citizens

5. To those ends, Citizenship and Civic Engagement are at the centre of what we do:
   - Underpinning our values as an organisation
   - Informing our course content
   - Influencing our style of education provision
   - Determining our structure and governance – how we behave as an employer and how we organise our provision through the involvement of staff, trustees and volunteers
   - Facilitating our partnerships and who we work with
   - Setting pathways for our students, volunteers and staff so that they become more active citizens beyond their involvement with the WEA

6. In order to illustrate and expand on this, we have arranged our submission around the questions in the Call For Evidence. We would be happy to expand on any of the points either through providing oral evidence to a session of the Committee or through further written submissions.

Answers to specific questions

1. What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?
The Committee’s Terms of Reference take as a starting point a level of uncertainty – crisis even – in contemporary society, referencing terrorism, declining trust in politics and politicians, inequality and disenfranchisement.

As the question puts it, the implication is that we need to take stock – as individuals and as communities – to determine what citizenship and civic engagement mean.

As adult education providers we see ourselves as facilitators - helping our students to answer this question for themselves based on factual information, informed debate and rational argument. We do not have a prescriptive or simplistic approach but recognise that by providing a safe and supported environment in which our students can explore these questions in the company of others from their local community, they will begin to form their own complex response which may in turn lead to them becoming more active and engaged as well as more confident in their own sense of identity.

Some of our courses address issues of citizenship and identity directly. Even where the course content is not specifically about these issues, the community-based style of our provision and the values which all of our teaching adheres to, often leads our students to be more engaged in their communities simply through the process of developing critical thinking skills and being more confident in their interaction with others.

We conduct an annual survey of our students' views on what difference their course has made to them. They report that:

- They become more self-confident (77%)
- More able to cope with mental health (36%) or physical health (28%) conditions
- More understanding of other cultures (50%)
- More respectful to those different from themselves (44%)
- Feeling more of a sense of belonging to Britain (35%)
- More interested in making their local area a better place to live (40%)
- More interested in local or national affairs (31%)
- They took part in a campaigning activity (20%), contacted local or national authorities (15%) or joined a political party or trade union (4%)
- More likely to volunteer (19%)

These figures are for all WEA students, there are also variations which show that the benefits are even greater for certain groups of students. For example 88% of students studying English as another language reported that they had become more understanding of other cultures through their studies (considerably more than the 50% for all students combined).

We believe that it is essential that issues relating to citizenship and identity are explored and debated in a tolerant, informed and constructive way and that no simplistic conclusions are drawn but that individuals and communities are able to navigate their own way through the complexity. Adult education provision, of the type that WEA delivers, can equip people with the skills and knowledge required to achieve this.
2. Citizenship is partly about membership and belonging. Are there ways we could strengthen people’s identity as citizens, whether they are citizens by birth or naturalisation? Could citizenship ceremonies or events throughout the educational process play a role? Should pride in being or becoming British be encouraged?

Participation in adult learning is one way by which people can interact with a range of people from different sections of their local community. Through this they may achieve a greater understanding of other cultures and an impetus to be more actively involved in the community at large. Adult education can tackle isolation and provide students with new language and communication skills. It also boosts confidence and self-worth.

Citizenship ceremonies and formal “events” within the education process can help to reinforce belonging for some participants but there may also be a role for less formal processes – including non-accredited learning of the sort that the WEA provides. Students on WEA courses often develop strong connections with their community though their course does not require them to sit exams, participate in formal ceremonies or even follow a course structure specifically about “citizenship”. This suggests that different routes to the same outcome – a greater sense of belonging – can work depending on the student’s needs and preferences. A narrow focus on citizenship ceremonies or similar “events” may not be best for all students.

3. Civic engagement can be seen as both a responsibility and a right of citizenship. Beyond the existing legal framework, should citizens have additional formal rights and responsibilities? How do you see the relationship between the two? Should they have the force of law individually or be presented as reciprocal duties between citizen and state? How should they be monitored and/or enforced?

Behind this question is an assumption that people know what their rights (and responsibilities) are as citizens, which may not always be the case. Adult education is not only a means by which people can gain this knowledge but, as our research has shown, it can also increase levels of participation in voting, volunteering and other forms of civic engagement.

4. Do current laws encourage active political engagement? What are your views on changes to the franchise for national or local elections, including lowering the voting age? Should changes be made to the voting process or the voting registration process?

As with the previous answer, it is important that people have access to the knowledge and information they require in order to take full advantage of the rights already available to them. Adult education can be a means of developing the confidence and critical thinking skills to enable people to participate fully. Even a small step, such as getting involved in a local project through participation in community-based adult learning, can heighten
awareness of the wider civic context and lead to more active participation such as voting, volunteering and, for some, becoming local representatives.

5. What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship? At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?

As our answers so far have already shown, education has a huge role to play in encouraging good citizenship but the question is incomplete if it does not also recognise that adult education has a vital role to play. Adults who are beyond compulsory school age and outside the FE/HE system may still want support in engaging with the political process or the best means of being active and included within their communities. It is clear that compulsory and formal education is not alone sufficient to equip all adults with a full understanding of their rights as citizens or knowledge of how best to engage with politics at a national or community level.

Adult education gives people a second or third chance at any stage in their life to re-engage with learning and through this to be more active citizens. Adult education often encourages students who have not done well in formal education but who still have an interest in acquiring knowledge and skills, as well as adults who wish to refresh or update their skills and knowledge from previous study.

The style of teaching in adult education encourages listening, participation, equality and respect for others (and their views), in a safe environment. Students are enabled to explore complex and personal issues freely, including issues relating to citizenship and political participation. Developing critical thinking skills and confidence can be achieved through adult education courses on many different topics (not only topics directly related to politics or society) so it appears that the process and style of learning is key, not only the course content. This means that outcomes such as increased participation in volunteering or voting can be encouraged in many different learning environments.

The question focuses solely on statutory and formal learning (school to university) but many of those who come to adult education courses have few or no qualifications and have not always had positive experiences of education previously. Some of those who feel most disenfranchised and most isolated may also be those for whom informal learning as an adult could be an important first step towards being more engaged, as well as (potentially) a first step towards gaining formal qualifications later in life.

6. Do voluntary citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service do a good job of creating active citizens? Are they the right length? Should they be compulsory, and if so, when? Should they include a greater political element? Should they lead to a more public
citizenship ceremony? Are they good value for money? What other routes exist for creating active citizens?

The WEA has no comment on the NCS as such but - as previous answers have shown - the flexibility and relative informality of adult education and the outcomes it achieves in terms of active citizenship suggests that it can be a powerful alternative or complement to other programmes such as the NCS.

7. How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

We can only answer from our own perspective but the evidence suggests that adult education contributes to higher levels of civic engagement so increased investment in adult education from central, regional and local government would make a difference. We hope to have shown that adult education provision can complement and enhance other forms of support for civic engagement so adult education should fit within a wider strategy for civic engagement.

As a voluntary sector organisation which encourages civic engagement through our ethos and values as well as through our volunteer and branch structure and in the content of many of our courses, we strive to make our own contribution to supporting civic engagement.

8. What are the values that all of us who live in Britain should share and support? Can you identify any threats to these values, which affect the citizenship of, for instance, women or various minority groups? If so, how can their citizenship be strengthened?

As a charity, we have our own mission and vision which shapes all of our work. This includes “inspiring students, teachers and members to become active citizens”. It would be presumptuous to conclude that those values should be shared by everyone in Britain but it is notable that our 68,000 strong student population is very diverse with 74% women and 27% identifying as Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic or Refugee, suggesting that our values are sufficiently inclusive to encourage groups under-represented in other settings. Our impact surveys show that 50% of our students reported that they had more understanding of other cultures and 44% were more respectful to those different from themselves (percentages which increase for students who go on to take more than one course). This suggests that ongoing participation in adult education can help to consolidate understanding and tolerance amongst a diverse group of students.
9. Why do so many communities and groups feel “left behind”? Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups - white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might these barriers be overcome?

There is an increasing body of evidence and analysis looking at the links between educational attainment and opportunity and social inequality or social mobility. Others, such as the Social Mobility Commission, are better placed than us to provide the detail of why this is. On the second part of the question – how might barriers be overcome – we point to the contribution of adult education in offering opportunities, providing a second or third chance for people who have not fully benefited from formal education system and who may be feeling marginalised or isolated within their communities.

10. How do you see the relationship between citizenship and civic engagement on the one hand and social cohesion and integration on the other? What effect does the level of diversity in schools and workplaces have on integration in society as a whole? How can diversity and integration be increased concurrently?

Our student population is diverse in many ways and the range of provision reaches out to many different groups. In previous answers we have shown how greater understanding, tolerance and social interaction can be outcomes of taking part in adult education classes. Increasing the opportunity for adults to study and share experiences together is an effective way of encouraging integration in a diverse environment. That this also enables increased levels of volunteering, voting and other active manifestations of civic engagement suggests that where the right support is offered, it is possible to address issues of engagement and integration in the same setting.

11. How important are levels of English proficiency for first and second generation immigrants and what could be done to increase them, including through support for ESOL classes? Are there particular barriers faced by newcomers to Britain? Could the naturalisation process, including the citizenship test, be improved and if so, how?

ESOL is the biggest part of our provision and around a fifth of our students are non-native English language speakers. ESOL provision has been particularly badly hit by reductions in funding across the board in adult education in recent years and the urgency in rectifying this is acknowledged in several recent reports (including the APPG for Social Integration’s recent report on integration and immigration).

Obviously our provision is entirely voluntary and we work with community partner organisations to make our language courses accessible and worthwhile, overcoming the barriers which could otherwise discourage students from attending our courses. Sharing good practice from within the adult education sector about what encourages students to take up courses and what the positive impacts are at an individual and community level could help to increase the levels of language proficiency in other settings (such as workplace learning, more formal education settings and other forms of community engagement).

12. Can you give examples of initiatives and role models that have helped promote a positive vision of British Citizenship within a tolerant and cohesive society?
There are many examples of adult learners whose lives have been transformed by the experience of taking part in adult education courses and often the biggest difference which students talk about is how they have become more active and connected within their communities. Tutors and students within the adult education sector often act as role models for each other, supporting development and community involvement in a tolerant and inclusive setting.

The following example illustrates all of these elements: peer support, accessibility and encouragement, feelings of isolation turning to confidence in being more active in the community, leading to volunteering and other examples of civic engagement.

Adult students come to learning for a variety of different reasons and their subsequent paths are equally varied. What they tend to have in common, however, is a recognition that adult education can provide the inspiration and confidence to be more active citizens.

WEA student case study – Lisa Birch

Lisa's learning journey started several years ago with the WEA in Oxford. A full-time mum since she was 16, Lisa had not even considered further education until she met WEA Development Worker Emma Carney one morning at her children's school.

"Emma asked if anyone was interested in doing a free Level 1 course which could help them get back into work. My self-esteem and confidence was pretty low so the course sounded like a great idea. A few of us signed up and went shopping for new folders and pens; we felt like kids going back to school, excited at the thought of re-entering the learning environment."

"I was quite nervous on the first day, but Emma did a great job of immediately making us feel welcome and comfortable. This was crucial, as it made the experience much less stressful. The course itself was really beneficial and informative; it enabled me to realise that I did have goals and a purpose in life other than being a mum, and that helping others was really important in whatever path I chose."

With an interest in social care, Lisa's first project focused on Home-Start – a charity whose volunteers support struggling families with a child under five. Impressed by the work of the charity, Lisa signed up as a volunteer and began supporting a family herself. "This again was vital experience for me. I thoroughly enjoyed the WEA course and was genuinely sad when it finished, as it had been such a positive experience."

Lisa progressed to a Level 2 Helping in Schools course: "I thought this may be something I would like to do career-wise, and the practical experience of a placement would also help boost my skills and confidence. I knew level 2 would possibly be more challenging, and although I did find some elements of it difficult, the WEA supported me through it. The constant praise and encouragement of my tutor and other WEA staff gave me the determination to get this qualification."
Hungry to learn more, Lisa started a Take Part course which encouraged participants to get involved with decision-making in their local community. Lisa and two other mums decided to set up a Parent-Teacher Association at Barton Primary School, and she eventually became a School Governor - a post which she has now held for 3 years. She and a friend went on to speak at the Take Part conference in London, as their community work was selected as an example of good practice for others. "This was a huge experience for me, and I felt very privileged to be asked to participate. Again, this WEA course was life-changing and empowering."

Lisa became a community champion with the Barton Learning Partnership, encouraging others to improve their skills through learning. "Being a mum was still my priority, but I did not want to stop learning! This led me to apply to Ruskin College to study a Social and Political Studies degree, which I completed this summer."

"My learning journey has been a fantastic experience; I have become empowered, gained confidence and above all developed a lifelong love of learning. The WEA has helped me tremendously and is a truly valuable organisation. Its ability to reach out to people who may not otherwise have the opportunity or motivation to return to education is unique. It has inspired me to follow my passion, to help others and gain the knowledge and experience to be able to do so."

Chris Butcher, Research & Policy Officer, The WEA