

Impact of COVID-19 on Adult Learning and Education (ALE)

UK case study

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Executive summary

The findings of this study in the UK suggest that those working in Adult Learning and Education (ALE) in Islington feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a higher impact on ALE than other education sectors. Within ALE, the impact of the pandemic has been disproportionately high on the most marginalised ALE learners.

The pandemic has highlighted the role of ALE as a frontline community service, strengthening the sense of community and providing valuable links between service providers and some of the most marginalised in the community.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a considerable challenge to ALE provision in the UK, disrupting the service and presenting a steep learning curve to tutors, coordinators and managers. Providers of ALE responded quickly with provision in Islington converting to online delivery within a couple of weeks.

The Adult and Community Learning (ACL) curriculum was adapted rapidly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to address the immediate challenges faced by learners in their lives and livelihoods. On-going reflection and dialogue about the appropriate curriculum and mode(s) of delivery continue.

In the post-pandemic climate, Information Technology (IT) is no longer seen as a discrete topic to be studied, but as an essential component of ALE and as a cross-cutting theme, similar to literacy and numeracy, embedded into all provision from entry level onwards.

All of these changes need to be seen in the light of the finding that the pandemic disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable ALE learners and those in the community who had least access to support and resources. Further research is required to explore ways of ensuring continued access to support and learning services by the most vulnerable adult groups in future crises.

1. Introduction

This case study is part of a comparative scoping research, undertaken by [BALID](#)¹, into the impact of COVID-19 on adult learning and education (ALE) programmes in Afghanistan, the Philippines and the UK. Current debates around COVID-19 and education have predominantly focused on mitigating the impacts on compulsory schooling. Less attention has been given to ALE provision despite current statistics which categorise 773 million adults as ‘illiterate’², most of whom are women. The scoping research aims to fill these gaps by exploring the perceptions of ALE learners, educators and managers on the ongoing and potential effects of the pandemic on various aspects of the sector such as programming, finance, participation, pedagogy, curriculum and innovation.

The UK research explores these questions through the case study of an Adult and Community Learning (ACL) provision in the London Borough of Islington, a state-funded ALE provision that caters mostly for diverse groups, often called ‘marginalised’ and ‘hard-to-reach’; these include those on low incomes, people in long-term unemployment and people with health issues/disabilities. The case study, with its focus on state ALE provisions and the importance of inclusive and relevant programming, offers a unique insight into issues around funding and resourcing, leadership and inclusion.

2. Methodology

The UK case study was developed using a combination of a literature review of the context of ALE in the UK and a series of 8 in-depth interviews with learners (2), tutors (3) and coordinators/managers

¹ BALID, the British Association for Literacy in Development

² UNESCO Institute of Statistics <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/literacy>

(3) from ACL, Islington. This is a scoping study and so caution should be exercised in its interpretation.

A detailed literature review was undertaken using key terms such as COVID, UK, date range, and educational level/sector to search academic databases (231 abstracts), online government publications (2 documents), FE Week and the RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacies) digital journal (4 articles). The key themes from the literature review are summarised in Section 3.

The interviews explored interviewees' experience of the impact of COVID-19 on the provision, identifying the initial response to the pandemic, the challenges, positive developments and the aspirations for the future provision of ACL and ALE in general.

The interviewees were women and men involved in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses in community-based settings and also provision in partnership with Hillside Clubhouse, a resource for people with mental health problems that makes social inclusion and participation in everyday life a reality. Interviewees were identified through open invitation from ACL Islington. Expressions of interest were handled by the BALID team. The interviews took place remotely, at mutually convenient times through virtual communications platforms such as Zoom or WhatsApp. The consent process included both written information about the project, which was sent, where appropriate, to interviewees in advance by email, and verbal consent with all interviewees at the beginning of the interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured, using a framework of topic areas and prompt questions (see Appendix A). All interviews were recorded and lasted between 35 and 56 minutes. Semi-transcripts were produced, emerging themes identified by the interviewers, and then critiqued and clarified through a peer review process involving the UK BALID team and Islington ACL representative.

3. Literature review

Overview Adult Learning and Education Programmes

Due to its size, scope and diversity, the adult learning and education sector in the UK is notoriously difficult to define (Orr, 2016; Kennedy, 1997). While the largest proportion of adult learning and education in receipt of public funding is vocational training for 16-18 year olds in Further Education (FE) colleges (DfE, 2019; DfE, 2020:4), the sector encompasses adult basic skills and other personal development courses either in colleges or out in the community. In total, 'FE staff and students create a large network (2.6% of UK population)' (14-19LSB, 2020:23), to which local government, third and private sector adult learning provision can be added.

Policy responses to COVID

The first national lockdown began on 23rd March 2020 with accompanying guidance provided by the Department for Education (DfE, 2020b). The UK moved in and out of degrees of lockdown for over a year.

... reducing in-person interaction is an effective way to limit transmission and so delivery of activities online, especially for larger groups, is a key mitigation... However, remote learning is not feasible for many FE courses which rely on practical training and hands-on learning, and hence adapting these courses in a COVID-secure way is essential.

14-19LSB, 2020:21

The 16-19 age group became prioritised for continued provision at a minimum of 50% face-to-face contact (DfE, 2020b; AoC, 2020).

Risk assessments and changes to daily practice were undertaken, with each provider producing its own policies. Due to age, socio-economic and health factors, a high proportion of individuals who

participate in FE, including staff, were identified as particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. As such, it was noted that,

There need to be specific strategies to consider the wider physical and mental health of students and staff beyond COVID-19... (not least)... negative impacts to students and business if access to education is limited which may disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable or marginalised students.

14-19LSB, 2020:22-3

The financial stability impacts on institutions and students were raised in Parliament to reassurances that grant funding was protected and that additional targeted support would be provided, including access to ICT and protection from homelessness (BWSB, 2020:9; DfE, 2020b). Overall participation was anticipated to increase due to disruption to employment, which would exacerbate financial strains (c.f. EJ, 2020c).

Impact on ALE programmes across the UK

Participation across FE appears to have halved during lockdown, with implications for clawback of funding for some institutions (Camden, 2020e). Workplace learning via initiatives such as apprenticeships and T-levels have been badly affected with reductions of two thirds to three quarters in some reports (Camden, 2020a, b, d, f).

Significant adaptations to pedagogy and curriculum due to COVID-19 relate to increased reliance on remote technology and paper-based materials (Clarke, 2020; Moore, 2020; Gardner, 2020). Organisations such as the Education and Training Foundation made online training available to teachers to support migration to online learning provision. Organisations such as JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) made online curriculum content available (DfE, 2020).

Some learners find online education more convenient and easier than face-to-face communication. Indeed, some learners who were previously anxious about attending college have re-engaged... Generally speaking, learners at levels 1 and 2 have engaged less well than those at level 3.

OFSTED, 2020c

Adult and community learning (ACL) providers were recognised for the 'social return' offered during lockdown, for example phoning vulnerable learners, checking on unpaid carers, delivering food boxes, and creating content for 'reducing isolation, improving mental health and wellbeing, whilst increasing support for people affected by job insecurity' (Mims, 2020; see also Moore, 2020:49).

Learners' experiences of, and feelings about, the help they received from providers about remote learning varied. Some learners missed the socialisation that face-to-face learning brought them and found it challenging to engage with learning remotely. Other learners said that they liked the additional flexibility and independence that remote learning gave them.

OFSTED, 2020b

Improving literacy and numeracy skills, and improving digital access, was emphasised by Mims (2020) as potentially life-changing for those most vulnerable and at risk of exclusion due to the social upheaval of pending economic recession. The significance of overcoming 'shame' was highlighted. Meanwhile, prison education was 'largely suspended' during lockdown, though some providers distributed reading materials, printed learning packs or utilised technology to enable independent study (Mersinoglu, 2020; see also Gardner, 2020).

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation cancelled formal exams early in lockdown, replacing them with a short-term system of teacher-calculated assessment (see also Sceeny, 2020; Clarke, 2020:46; Gardner, 2020:54). Despite being relatively effective, there were significant negative political repercussions in respect of confidence in results without an exam (Taylor, 2020;

OFQUAL, 2020). Assessment has been particularly problematic in workplace learning (Camden, 2020c). The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills focussed on provision in struggling colleges (DfE, 2020b).

Across the country, the pandemic has had varying impacts on ALE participation, teaching and learning approaches (particularly the shift to online and blended learning), assessment, and funding provisions. The literature review has also revealed that ALE tutors and facilitators played an important role in maintaining community relationships which has been effective in combating social exclusion, mental health issues and challenges of access.

Critical Questions

Four overarching critical questions and areas of further research arose from the literature review.

1. How have less visible, less funded and more diverse areas of adult learning and education, such as adult literacy or other personal development, experienced the impact of COVID-19?
2. What have the impacts been on participation, inclusion and curriculum – enabling factors, gains and losses? This includes digital, health and socio-economic access.
3. What wider potential policy implications are there, for example in quality control mechanisms, finances, loss of contact with employers and implications for central versus local autonomy and devolution?
4. What temporary and what potentially permanent impacts has lockdown had on adult learning and education?

4. Context of Islington Adult Community Learning (ACL)

4.1 The pre-COVID19 provision

Islington Adult Community Learning (ACL) is the directly-delivered adult learning service of the London Borough of Islington, grant-funded by the Greater London Authority with a small top-up grant from the London Borough of Islington.

The aim of the service is to ensure that adults (aged 19 years upwards) are given the help they need to develop the right skills to get the job and career they want. Adults who may be long-term unemployed, affected by welfare reform, or have long term health issues and/or disabilities are engaged and supported in ways that meet their needs.

As one of the manager interviewees explained, ACL works with the “hardest to reach learners, furthest from employment”. The social support and mental health aspects of the provision are important for many learners. The informal nature of the venues adds to the intimate and personal provision. Class-sizes are kept small and “kind of comfortable, on your doorstep in non-threatening settings, with strong engagement and strong relationships”.

Pre-COVID19, apart from three small sub-contracting partners all the delivery took place in a range of community venues such as libraries, schools, children’s centres, community centres, places of work, job centres and community-based partners. Delivery was almost entirely in classroom-based sessions, by FE standards small groups (approx. 10) mainly because of limited room sizes but also in acknowledgement that the hardest to reach learners have complex needs that are best met in small groups. Some delivery took place through drop-in sessions, where tutors were available at set times every week at a venue and learners could go if they need help. The majority of courses have accreditation attached; non-exam courses are accredited through the RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement).

The service sits at the heart of the council’s Fairness Agenda which drives the work of Islington Council and which includes promoting equality and diversity throughout all levels of the organisation.

ACL did not proactively address the digital divide prior to COVID19. It instead provided learning opportunities to those who did not use technology greatly. The provision was therefore vulnerable when circumstances forced it online.

4.2 The challenge of COVID19

Moving to online provision was a unique challenge to community education, unlike anything undertaken before. ACL was far from being alone in this and the support of colleagues from other colleges and services was invaluable. The challenges faced were:

- **Learners** – many had limited previous online experience, little access to technology or the internet, pressures on their lives from home schooling, financial issues and health concerns, and/or low levels of language skills.

Tutors/provision – adult learning has traditionally had limited exposure to technology compared to other education areas such as HE or General FE Colleges.

- **Venues** – historically tended to be community-based with limited access or facilities for online learning and partner organisations whose poor funding and infrastructure had left them vulnerable to emergencies.

However, ACL also had positive characteristics, such as:

- **Learners** – really valued ACL courses and were generally open to trying new things, trusting of the tutors and willing to work together as a community
- **Tutors / ACL / Council** – the nomadic nature of the provision meant that almost all tutors had council-issued mobile phones and laptops. Those that didn't were able to be issued with them quickly and efficiently; this allowed ACL to maintain contact with the learners and pivot online quickly. Some tutors pioneered the use of communication technology, such as Zoom very early and ACL then cascaded that knowledge in informal peer teaching CPD sessions and supported their colleagues. The council provided very clear early guidance about ACL's role as a social support network and gave a defined purpose in those early days to ensure ACL stayed in contact and then developed their online provision. Several tutors also worked at other organisations and shared experiences and practice between organisations.
- **Venues** – ACL's strong bonds with the community meant that they trusted ACL to support them through the difficult early stages. Many of the organisations pivoted their premises and purpose to become food banks, support centres and later testing venues. ACL stayed in touch with them throughout the process.

5. Emerging themes

5.1 The ACL response

The response of ACL Islington to the COVID-19 pandemic was a swift whole team response, with strong communication and a high degree of collaboration. Team members faced many of the same challenges as learners, including the need to self-isolate, home schooling their own children, uncertainty about family members, employment and security, and fear about the future.

When the government advised against all non-essential contact, classes closed initially, but within about 2 weeks were reopened with the emergence of online provision. At this stage, there was a

feeling of rapid change, of an intense commitment to continue to support learners and maintain the provision.

“We all kind of crashed in, you know, at the beginning of April. We just literally kind of shifted everything online. It was horribly hard work. And obviously as we went online we lost some people.... We were able to adapt, you know. We learnt how to adapt resources, how to Zoom. Looking back over the year, we have basically transferred everything online.” (Tutor 1)

“I’m very proud of my colleagues that we’ve managed to do it fairly quickly! Some of these classes never stopped... especially some of the higher level classes. There was never a gap. So the moment we went to lockdown, there might have been a one-week gap then we delivered online!” (Manager 1)

“It was just round the clock! I felt that there was no more distinction between my personal life and my work life. Although it was a double-edged sword - for one I appreciate that I can keep myself busy during the lockdown, but then, when do I rest?” (Tutor 3)

Local authority and government support

The local authority and national government responses were perceived differently by interviewees. Tutors and managers felt that the level of support locally from the Greater London Authority (GLA) was strong. The GLA maintained the level of funding for ACL and increased the flexibility in how funds could be spent. They also provided valuable opportunities for senior personnel to share experiences and collaborate on responding to the pandemic.

“The GLA have been very supportive. The council has incurred some massive costs [as a result of the lockdowns].” (Manager 2)

ACL was regarded and treated by the local authority as a front line service in the pandemic. It was recognised that ACL already had well-established relationships and were in direct personal contact with some of the most vulnerable people in society. Consequently, ACL staff, including tutors, felt secure in their roles and were able to focus on adapting the provision without threat of redeployment or redundancy. As one manager explained,

“our delivery, it formed part of a coherent response of the council to a global pandemic affecting our residents on our doorstep. I was able to go to council meetings and say how grateful our learners were that we were still in touch ...and that they hadn’t been forgotten.....[ACL] was at the forefront of the response – it framed us as more than just adult community learning – we are small but we are a really important part of the recovery.” (Manager 2)

In contrast, when invited to talk about the support available nationally, none of the interviewees thought that the government response had been particularly relevant to ACL.

“With the government, it’s hard not to feel that adult learning is an afterthought. I felt we [ACL] were forgotten. I relied on the HOLEX³ forum, an adult community learning forum. The government advice wasn’t useful or relevant to us. It didn’t always feel like it was for us....” (Manager 2)

Tutors as lynchpins

The commitment of tutors and their personal relationship with learners has been central to the continuation of ACL provision and the changes it has undergone. There are numerous examples of how tutors have reached out to learners, contacting them by phone, email and post; they have provided advice and guidance on a wide range of issues including staying safe, accessing services, home schooling, and understanding government advice and restrictions.

³ HOLEX is the leading professional body for Adult Community Education and Learning.

The move to remote online learning was a significant challenge for most learners and tutors found themselves needing to provide guidance in online learning.

“for others older than me it [online learning] was more difficult. For me I am used to technology so it was easy. [My tutor] was explaining everything all of the time. This definitely made a difference to the speed of the classes. The whole class had to move more slowly.”
(Learner 2)

Tutors have undergone a rapid change in their roles during the pandemic, which has required personal and professional development. Prior to the pandemic, tutors were expected to have expertise in their subject and also in teaching and learning. This has now been extended to include the third dimension of managing online learning.

“[The pandemic has] forced tutors to develop pedagogy, there’s a real new pedagogy as a result of online learning. There’s an old notion of tutors needing to be dual-professionals, that’s outdated now and there’s a baseline expectation for them to be tri-professionals: subject, pedagogical, and now expert users in technology to leverage and develop learning.”
(Manager 2)

“From tutors who never delivered online, from a team who never delivered online, we moved into a team that delivered everything online. That was amazing. A lot of work was done outside the working hours, lots of practising, no one knew what Zoom was at that time. It was a very steep learning curve. So I just had to try it with my colleagues, we say, okay, you’ll be my learner and tell me what you see. Hours of testing and trying and then immediately piloting sessions with learners, getting them in the most engaged way.” (Manager 1)

“Internet connection has been a big thing. In light of COVID, I had to increase my internet connection with my provider because everything is done online so I need to have good internet. So it has impacted me financially too because I have to invest in good internet.”
(Tutor 3)

Tutors have valued the range of support provided by ACL

“...there has been an awareness that tutors need support, the mental health aspect and so on, and the hardware aspect to make sure people had the right equipment, a bigger screen.”
(Tutor 1)

Tutors have accessed a wide range of webinars on facilitating online learning, some referred to them by ACL and others self-sourced and circulated through peer support networks. These peer support networks were immensely important during the pandemic, with tutors often responding to new challenges by reaching out through the tutor networks to draw on each other’s experiences and support. For some tutors, much of their learning, particularly on navigating online spaces, came from experiences shared with their learners.

“We have been supporting each other, not just within our ESOL tutor group but in the wider service....I realised that when I was finding it hard to get motivated at home and struggling to prepare for this term’s teaching that as soon as I got in touch with the other ESOL teachers that everyone was feeling the same way and we immediately organised a meeting to talk about it and share resources, this also happened last year so that has been good.” (Tutor 2)

“We’ve been quite good at getting in touch with people, we’ve got our own WhatsApp group. I’ve worked quite hard to make sure we did that. There’s a new tutor I was asked to buddy up with.” (Tutor 1)

“We were very honest with the learners that we’ve not done these before... so I learned most from my learners! I was lucky enough to have a couple of highly ‘educated’ people in my

group and they would spend hours with me....after the class, as to what works and doesn't work and what could have been done better!" (Manager 1)

Manager support

Overall, tutors appreciated the support they received during the pandemic which included ensuring that tutors had adequate hardware to move to online learning, and signposting training and teaching resources so they could enhance their skills in online learning.

"From above we've had lots of support, our quality manager has been directing us to training." (Tutor 2)

Tutors particularly valued the support of those managers who were also teaching. They felt that they were able to discuss the challenges and the different models of delivery, knowing that they were facing similar challenges to themselves. These conversations have been instrumental in revisiting the value of individual sessions, which were not funded under the previous contract but may become a more regular feature of ACL provision in the future (see 5.4).

"I think because [manager's name]'s been prepared to think outside the box. [They've] been teaching the same level, so we've been having really informed discussions. What [their] work has demonstrated is that if you invest some time in 1-2-1 it reaps benefits. [They've] suggested we go back to twice a week, one is 1-2-1, and one is in a group, 'cos some of our students come mainly for the social aspect.'" (Tutor 2)

Whilst all tutors interviewed appreciated the support from management, some felt that it was slow to be provided.

"I think there has been an awareness that tutors need support, the mental health aspect and so on, and the hardware aspect to make sure people had the right equipment, a bigger screen. It took a bit of time, eventually they realised it. After all, they must be saving hundreds of pounds on not photocopying so they should be able to give us something." (Tutor 1)

COVID caused a great deal of reflectivity on the ALE process.5.2 Digital divide, digital poverty

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK, people were at first encouraged, and then instructed, to reduce direct contact. Education and training services were required to close all face-to-face provision and rapidly move to remote forms of contact.

As in most UK-based teaching and learning provision, online learning became the norm in Islington ACL. This transfer exposed the digital divide between those with knowledge and experience of using social media and IT, and those for whom online learning represented a significant challenge requiring new skills. This digital divide was not limited to ACL learners, but was evident among tutors and managers; staff faced a steep learning curve, up-skilling themselves, whilst at the same time trying to support ACL learners in making the same transition.

The digital divide was further widened by poverty. Those with relatively secure incomes and the resources to acquire digital hardware (laptops, smartphones etc), and pay for a strong internet connection, were able to remain in contact with others. They were able to access information, stay up-to-date with changes and were able to at least attempt to access services, including ACL provision.

However, those whose income was less secure and whose resources were limited were more restricted in their options. Their immediate priorities were securing basic support for their families. They were not aware of what they required in order to make the transfer to online learning, and

often were dependent on being provided with hardware. Even once they had smartphones, tablets or laptops, they often needed to share these with other family members working from home.

ACL was able to offer some support to reduce the challenges in getting online, including acquiring and distributing laptops to some learners.

“At the beginning we contacted people all the time, giving them a chance to practise using Zoom. We did actually give out laptops to quite a lot of learners.” (Tutor 1)

There were also comments around how the lack of digital skills, competency and confidence could further impact on the digital divide.

“If you’ve never used a computer, even if I give you a Chromebook, you’re not going to use it, you need to be trained and taught how to use the devices. Some learners need support... we were able to offer this to a small number of learners, sending them materials... but not to all.” (Manager 1)

“For those who are not able to use the computer, etc. I would use other modes, like WhatsApp has been very helpful for many learners I work with” (Tutor 3)

However, there was considerable frustration at not being able to offer more to learners. The key factors were lack of previous experience of using IT, inability to pay for hardware or internet access, the need for ACL learners to share any access to online learning with their children and other family members and also the confidence to use IT.

“Really, very few have gained skills from the pandemic. It has been a big divide. It’s something I was never as aware of, we take for granted IT, we use it in our daily life. I find people who are older are less able to use IT...our older members are scared of it and the financial side as well, most of our members are on benefits, so they can’t afford it either.” (Manager 3)

Internet providers made significant donations to support learners in schools and colleges, however, ACL found this support was not available for their learners.

“Vodafone and other providers are able to offer chips and support to youth learners but when I asked from ACL we were told we were not eligible. And that hurts, these are some of the most vulnerable people in our society.....” (Manager 2)

ACL was able to provide a limited amount of internet access via dongles but this needed to be supplemented by learners, who were not always able to do so.

“We’ve offered dongles, we buy dongles and put some credit on, but that’s not a bottle of spit, it’s only the start, they still need to find more. I’ve never used so much WhatsApp, cos that’s free.” (Manager 3)

Entry level learners were less likely to be able to get online and access remote learning independently, and more likely to be using workbooks, perhaps receiving a call each week from their tutor to check on their home-learning progress. However, even these calls were difficult and many entry level learners dropped out of the provision.

During the course of the pandemic, the importance of IT skills and digital competency has changed in the minds of the ACL tutors, from a topic to be acquired after basic literacy and language skills, to an essential building block for all ACL provision.

“Everybody’s got to be connected. Everybody massively underestimates how everybody is NOT digitally connected. We already had [IT] classes but they tended to be for the higher level learners. You were meant to have the language skills before you did the digital but that’s changed now, the digital needs to come first.” (Tutor 1)

“... it’s very noticeable you can’t really do anything with the students until they are competent, so let’s just forget about English and maths and let’s just invest time in getting them online, get them confident and then move into the curriculum. That’ll be our long term strategy.” (Tutor 3)

“I would like for us to focus more on how to engage the lower level learners more with technology. If I had my time again.....that’s what I would have liked to have done more of.....” (Tutor 2)

5.3 The learners’ experience

ACL provision as more than just acquiring skills

The relationships between tutors and ACL learners, and between learners are often strong and there was a sense of loss at not being able to meet face-to-face, as explained by one tutor.

“We’ve missed each other. I’ve missed them, but they’ve missed each other as well. I think that’s equally important..... I really really miss the social interaction with the learners.” (Tutor 2)

The Islington ACL provision offers courses in Digital Skills, Employability and Vocational Skills as well as literacy, numeracy and ESOL. However, the provision has always been about more than just acquiring skills. For many it was the first step into a learning environment and enabled people to gain skills for everyday life and employment. For others, the social element of being part of a group contributes to their well-being. Exchanging experiences and providing mutual support can be as important as acquiring literacy, numeracy, ESOL or other skills.

“I miss going to class and meeting other people and my tutors” (Learner 1)

Another tutor described her concerns about the health and well-being of the family of one of her learners and how this aspect of her role has increased due to the pandemic.

“.....she was in a flat, trying to home school, she was shielding so got deliveries and didn’t go out. She was worried about her children. I was worried about the whole vitamin D thing. I was worried, I said, ‘Is there someone else who could take the children out?’ She somehow made an arrangement with her ex-husband to take the children out.... So we’ve always done this but now it’s been magnified, we do even more of this.” (Tutor 1)

One tutor shared how the solidarity she receives from the learners was very significant as she navigates the complex and challenging world of online learning (which, as has already been described, was a huge learning curve).

“I am building up on my skills delivering online. Throughout the most difficult time of the lockdown, being online with the learners really helped me, it put things in perspective and also taught me humility. After class I would receive messages like ‘Thank you for the lesson this morning, with the pandemic around us, having online lessons take away, even for a short time, the worries and anxieties. Thank you for your help in many ways.’ Messages like these remind me how important these sessions are for the learners” (Tutor 3)

Challenges and advantages of online learning

The pandemic triggered a significant move away from face-to-face, classroom learning and towards remote, online learning.

Some tutors have demonstrated considerable creativity and commitment trying to make online learning as engaging, fun and interactive as pre-pandemic learning. Some learners and tutors have found significant advantages to this shift to online learning, including not needing to commute to classes and being able to fit online learning around other commitments, including childcare. There

are also examples of learners transferring their newly acquired or enhanced IT skills to other aspects of their life, including home schooling and work.

“A lot of our learners are mothers with kids at school age. They need to take children to school, bring them back... so sometimes we have learners who would want to join our classes for a couple of hours when their kids are in school... but the time it takes for them to go to our centre and then back to fetch their kids... there’s just not enough time! But because things have moved online, these mothers are just able to get in Zoom, there’s no travel, so we have increased participation from them. People who have different disabilities are now able to participate more actively” (Manager 1)

“I never did Zoom before and it was, like, new to me. So when he [tutor] says do you wanna have a listen on Zoom, I would say, I don’t know about that...but I tried it and it worked! I was scared to use Zoom before...in my work, he used to phone me and now we could Zoom.” (Learner 1)

One of the greatest challenges of the move to online learning was the high dropout rate of entry level learners from the provision. Many tutors tried to maintain contact by phone and post with learners who did not have the skills or access to technology. Tutors even tried arranging for one-to-one teaching when the restrictions permitted. Despite this commitment, in many classes more than half entry level learners lost contact with their tutors and withdrew from the provision.

The overall feeling, from both tutors and learners who engaged with online learning, was that online learning has been harder work, less engaging and less interactive than pre-pandemic learning.

“Hmmm, well, the rhythm of the class, for me it was not quite the same. Yeah, engagement to teach online is not so good.....I’m just feeling that.....It’s not just her [the tutor] we are all getting super tired of being in front of the screen all day.....you don’t have the same engagement; you don’t commit the same [for online classes].” (Learner 2)

“The classes are shorter...everyone realised teaching online is much harder, quite demanding, there’s no respite, there’s no breathing spaces, and we’re not allowed to use the breakout rooms, because we’d have to have another person in each room.... And of course, the preparation takes longer, it literally takes twice as long, instead of just photocopying a spreadsheet and passing it round the room, you’ve got people on their phones and tablets and so on” (Tutor 2)

“It was very important to ensure that the kinds of dynamics we had in class, the jovialness -- that these are reflected on the online medium. I try to make the lesson more interactive and making the learners responsible for participating, I gave them tasks that held them to account like a treasure hunt in their home and have a show and tell in class” (Tutor 3)

The anxiety and trauma felt across the UK as a result of COVID-19 was mirrored in the ACL sessions among tutors and learners.

“One of the downsides [of online learning] is it is really difficult to have 1-2-1 conversations, we’ve gone through births, deaths and marriages with them.” (Tutor 2)

“A lot of them are anxious, we’ve had a lot more anxiety, people who are really stressed, struggling with children competing for devices, one of my students sits on her stairs and her fire alarm has been beeping for over a year.” (Tutor 2)

One strategy adopted to reduce the anxiety and re-create the informal support in ACL groups that existed prior to the pandemic has been to organise ‘chats with a cup of tea’. They were able to engage with each other informally as they would have done before and after classes before the pandemic. Another strategy adopted by a tutor was putting up photos on Zoom at the beginning of sessions to stimulate learners to chat among themselves.

“I’ve set up what we call hang-outs so anyone can come at lunch time or have a cup of tea. They have the option to talk about anything! I learned so much about the learners and their families and suddenly we stopped being teachers and learners - we were all in this together! I was learning a lot - I remember when there was no flour anywhere and there was one Italian learner who taught us how to make bread without flour!” (Manager 1)

“Simple things, learners would continue to help each other as when we were doing these face to face. During our informal chats, one learner offered to look after another’s kids in the park, or people would suggest hairdressers! Learners were supporting each other in ways that you could not think of!” (Manager 1)

Teaching mixed level classes has been particularly challenging online for tutors and learners alike. Tutors were instructed that they could only use breakout rooms on Zoom if they had a tutor in each breakout room. This was due to an assumption that learning only takes place in tutor-mediated spaces. As a result, teaching tended to be more whole group teaching with less differentiation between learners. This led to some frustration, as explained by one learner who felt she was working at a higher level than others in the class

“The issue in the classes, there were people with very different levels, I know for the teacher it is kind of hard to teach different levels. I had a bit more level...the people without the level, they worked more slowly, it was a little bit annoying.” (Learner 2)

However, tutors became more creative and adept at using technology and many tutors now use multiple devices to be ‘present’ in breakout rooms, hence enabling small groupwork to take place.

Curriculum changes

Tutors report that over the course of the pandemic there has been a shift in the type of topics which learners want to learn about. There has been an increase in the interest in the following topics:

- understanding COVID-19-related information on staying safe, understanding the government restrictions,
- accessing government support and guidance on COVID-19
- gaining new employment skills
- home schooling.

There were also areas of delivery, specifically Family Learning and Digital Skills, which were suspended from the first lockdown in March 2020. ACL would normally expect to engage with hundreds of learners and their families at Family Learning events in the community over the summer but these events did not take place in 2020 and are only just, over a year later, starting up again. One tutor described how she was able to share a wider variety of resources with her learners.

“One positive aspect that was brought on by the online platform was being able to share interesting websites, share things with the learners online that I couldn't do on certain venues in the classroom. Having an online platform we were able to go on virtual tours like the British Library, British Museum, we went to Surrey - virtual trips through the internet.” (Tutor 3)

Prior to the pandemic, almost all ACL teaching took place in small groups. There were drop in sessions, however GLA and ESFA funding did not allow for one-to-one sessions, except for additional support sessions with specific learners. It was felt that the added value of one-to-one sessions did not justify the additional investment. Within the group setting tutors did provide individual support and some classes had volunteer classroom assistants who were able to provide individual support. When restrictions were eased, a limited number of individual, face-to-face sessions took place, primarily for learners who had not been able to access on-line sessions. These sessions were found to be highly successful in building the skills and confidence of hard-to-reach learners, so they could join and gain from online provision.

Assessment

Learners, tutors and managers have been disappointed and frustrated at the lack of assessment opportunities for learners during the pandemic.

Attempts early in the pandemic to enable the exams to take place with learners in their homes proved difficult to moderate and grades had to be given based on the available data. The annual ceremony celebrating the achievement of ACL learners was not able to take place.

The exams were valued by some learners not only for the certificate but also as a motivation to learn, as explained by one learner

"If you have an exam, you prepare yourself much more. Cos you do your homework but to be honest you do your homework but you don't go back and look at what you've learnt later... It's not about the mark, you have right there, in the exam, an obligation to study." (Learner 2)

The lost and gained learners / divide between entry level and levels 1 & 2

The profile of ACL learners has changed dramatically over the course of the pandemic, with a greater proportion of learners in entry level dropping out than levels 1 and 2. In addition, the majority of the new learners to join the ACL provision have been at levels 1 & 2. This has resulted in a different balance of levels in classes now compared to before the pandemic - previously there were more entry level learners than level 1 & 2, whereas this balance has now shifted to more level 1 & 2 learners.

"I think we lost perhaps as much as half, less able isn't the term, but those who are harder to reach, harder to teach..... I think that's a loss, we used to have a party at the end of term bringing food and gifts and so on. What we do in ACL is so much more than just teach the subject, it's so much more holistic, you're helping people improve their lives, help their children get jobs, it's harder to do that online." (Tutor 1)

"Our entry level learners have lost out massively. Many of them don't have technology, don't have the skills to use technology or their children are using their technology. Whereas at level 1 and level 2, some of them have some of those difficulties, but for others, they've actually really enjoyed going online because they don't need to leave the house. That's really a big divide." (Tutor 2)

However, the lockdowns have also garnered interest from other groups of learners that took the opportunity to be involved in online classes. The online presence of the ACL might have also contributed to this.

"We were attracting new learners too! Normally we would struggle with Level 2 classes and never run to full capacity. With COVID and lockdown, we faced the opposite. We got a lot of learners whose skills are much higher. So they go straight to Level 2! We are getting learners who have more educational backgrounds...I think that people when they are furloughed or have lost their job, they want to do something...so I think they are coming to us" (Manager 1)

5.4 Future aspirations of interviewees

There is a growing recognition that those furthest from society and furthest from employment have been hit hardest by the pandemic and that local authority services, including ACL, have found these groups particularly challenging to reach.

The way managers and tutors talked about the aspects of the ACL Islington provision which they most regretted losing during the COVID-19 lockdowns emphasises the focus on informal learning, well-being and the health of the family unit, not just the ACL learner.

“But with those struggling with domestic violence, facing food poverty, digital poverty, those complex problems, with my hand on my heart, our ability to engage with them is impaired, and that’s really sad.” (Manager 2)

“My fear is that the new class of unemployed, those who are far from the workplace, are not getting to us, and the higher level learners are accessing the classes. Those with low levels of literacy, including digital literacy, those without access to the internet, not just digital hardware, very complex situations - kids are at home, there’s food poverty, it might not be the right time - they might be facing.” (Manager 2)

There is a strong commitment from managers, coordinators and tutors to extend the reach of ACL to these groups, recognising that this will most likely require the development of new courses and possibly further changes in provision.

“I’m convinced there’s a layer in society who aren’t reaching us, without going to their doorsteps we really don’t know, we’ll have some work to do, we’ll need to hear their stories and only then we’ll be able to give them what they need.” (Manager 2)

“So many people have died, it’s affected mental health, domestic violence, now might not be the time. But then those who have accessed it have found it to be therapeutic, we’re definitely hearing this from those with us.” (Manager 2)

The value of individual sessions

One of the features of the provision during the pandemic was the way in which tutors and managers found opportunities for individual support. In most cases this involved phone calls and individual online support, however, it also included some face-to-face individual sessions for learners who were not able to get online.

Significant progress was made during these individual sessions both in terms of supporting the individual and their well-being, but also in gaining the skills and confidence to then be able to access the group learning sessions.

“When it was one to one, it was more focused on me instead of people in class and he needs to go to one person and then another... but this time, he was focusing on me so I would get more of it. It was better for me, I learned more, I soak in more things.” (Learner 1)

Consequently, ACL Islington hopes to incorporate individual sessions into their future contracts for provision.

Blended learning

There is a strong desire from tutors, learners and managers for a return to face-to-face contact and classroom-based learning. However, this is matched by a desire not to lose the benefits of remote learning. Online learning began during the pandemic as a necessity due to the restrictions on face-to-face meeting. However, it has become clear that, for those who have been able to access it, remote learning brings benefits for both learners and tutors not only in terms of reducing overheads and commuting but also in providing opportunities for people to engage with technology and develop IT skills valued for employment or connected with individual learning aspirations.

The solution has been a range of blended learning options, with a wide range of provision including some entirely online and others using a combination of remote and classroom learning.

“So, for example if I am at work and I cannot make it to meet [Name of Tutor], then it would be great, like, if I’m given the option to do the class on Zoom” (Learner 1)

Embedding basic IT skills

There is widespread agreement that all ACL learners would benefit from developing basic IT skills. This is partly so that if a similar situation arose in the future, they would be equipped to take

advantage of online learning, but more importantly, to recognise the increasing day-to-day reliance on online access.

“Our provision will change to ensure people have some basic IT skills and we will be wanting to front load this. Our clients need to fill their journals, universal credit log, I think they call it, but how can they do this without the IT skills?” (Manager 3)

There has been progress on this aspect with the development of some ESOL Essential Digital skills resources. These materials were incorporated into ESOL teaching from March/April 2021, with a planned roll out to English and maths learners in September 2021.

6. Conclusions

This scoping research began with two questions

How, and to what extent, is COVID-19 affecting ALE programmes in Afghanistan, the Philippines and the UK?

What role might ALE have in responding to challenges presented by the pandemic in these contexts?

The findings of this study in the UK suggest that those working in ALE feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a higher impact on ALE than other education sectors. Within ALE, the impact of the pandemic has been disproportionately high on the most marginalised ALE learners.

Education policy relating to the pandemic was focused on formal education provision with those in ALE feeling that their sector was less well supported by government policy. ALE provision was perceived as a lower priority than formal education, with ALE provision not qualifying for many of the resources available, including IT hardware and support in accessing the internet.

Overall participation in ACL Islington reduced by approximately half as a result of the lockdowns. Those traditionally described as most marginalised, or left behind (i.e. from low income households, with unstable employment, or with disability or mental health backgrounds or with larger families), were disproportionately impacted upon compared to those with more stable incomes and employment.

The pandemic increased the digital divide between those with and without access to technology, which in turn affected people’s ability to take advantage of ALE learning as it moved online. Many of those on low incomes had very limited access to smartphones, laptops or other devices to access online learning. They frequently struggled to afford internet time, or were sharing devices with other household members. They were also less likely to have a quiet place in which to study and had competing responsibilities for their time and resources.

The overall result has been a shift in the composition of ACL provision with a smaller proportion of entry level learners accessing provision in 2021, than at the beginning of the pandemic. This change was seen by many involved in the delivery of ACL Islington as a failure to meet the needs of those most in need of support. Further research is required on how to ensure that the needs of the most disadvantaged continue to be met in future crises.

The pandemic has highlighted the role of ALE as a frontline community service, strengthening the sense of community and providing valuable links between service providers and some of the most marginalised in the community.

The COVID pandemic with its lockdowns has consolidated the position of ACL within the GLA provision as one of the frontline services, directly engaging with some of those furthest from employment and most in need of support. ACL is recognised as having strong links, built over many years, with many of the most vulnerable adults in Islington. These links into the community could greatly enhance the reach of other essential services in the future. For example, ACL provision might

be a safe place for discussions about the uptake of COVID-19 vaccination, enabling learners to air their reservations and consider the pros and cons, which might then inform their decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a considerable challenge to ALE provision in the UK, disrupting the service and presenting a steep learning curve to tutors, coordinators and managers. Providers of ALE responded quickly with provision converting to online delivery within a couple of weeks.

Changes to the provision were driven by creative and flexible responses at all levels, supported by the flexibility of the GLA and partners. Full-time ALE managers were highly active in using the strengths of ALE to support the implementation of other services and in some cases in direct delivery of ACL provision, acting as valuable role models for tutors. Tutors used their personal connections, and in many cases their own resources, to reach out to learners to support them pastorally, in gaining access to essential services and, where possible, in continuing learning. The role of tutors was extended to include supporting the development of IT skills, despite these skills being very new for many tutors. Peer support was an invaluable part of the response to the pandemic. Remote support groups and buddying systems were established.

The ACL curriculum was adapted rapidly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to address the immediate challenges faced by learners in their lives and livelihoods. Tutors rapidly developed materials and supported learners in home-schooling, accessing essential services, understanding health information, staying safe, following government guidelines, upskilling learners to meet the changing requirements of employment. The requirements of ACL tutors have been extended, requiring upskilling to include technological skills to support online learning, as well as expertise in their topic, and in the pedagogy of learning. Peer-to-peer learning between tutor, and between tutors and learners has also been an emerging feature, especially where learners have previous IT experience.

However, the assessment procedures were less flexible and so most learners have not been able to acquire accreditation for the learning during the pandemic.

The UK faces a skills and employment challenge as it emerges from the pandemic and ACL is well-positioned to respond to this through employment-related provision.

In the post-pandemic climate, IT is no longer seen as a discrete topic to be studied, but as an essential component of ALE and as a cross-cutting theme, embedded into all provision from entry level onwards.

As a result of the pandemic the ACL curriculum now includes accessing and using technology as a core skill. The lockdowns have demonstrated the place of IT skills and digital competency as essential skills, alongside literacy, language and numeracy, at the heart of all adult learning, and increasingly central to life in the UK, rather than an additional skill set to be acquired at a later stage. Yet these considerations need to be discussed in light of persistent issues of digital poverty and the digital divide. While online provisions have increased access for certain groups, they have also resulted in the exclusion of many entry level learners.

Whilst there is a strong call for a 'return' to face-to-face learning from all interviewees, the pandemic has demonstrated that remote learning has some benefits, including reducing the need for travel, enabling people to fit learning around their lives in more flexible ways, enabling people to meet together to learn from a wider range of locations and developing IT competencies which are applicable, and indeed possibly essential, in a wide range of contexts.

The pandemic provided a forum for experimentation with different models of the delivery of ACL provision, including individual support. As the UK emerges from the pandemic a return to entirely pre-pandemic delivery would be a retrograde step. There is a need to explore a range of learning modalities and approaches of distance learning such as blended learning and modular curricula using different face-to-face and online spaces. It is likely that all ACL provision in the future will include

blended learning and that individual sessions will be used in specific contexts, as a means of supporting learners as they gain the skills and confidence to engage fully with group-based learning.

However, all of these changes need to be seen in the light of the finding that the pandemic disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable ALE learners and those in the community who had least access to support and resources. Further research is required to explore ways of ensuring continued access to support and learning services by the most vulnerable groups in future crises.

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Acronyms

ACL	Adult and Community Learning
ALE	Adult Learning and Education
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
FE	Further Education
GLA	Greater London Authority
IT	Information Technology

Appendix A Interview Guides

Interviewees: Service providers / managers / coordinators	
Theme (opening question)	Prompt questions
<p><i>Background (pre COVID-19)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can you tell us about your organisation and the kind of provision you provide? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How long has the organisation been working in this field? Who are the learners, facilitators? What kind of outcomes have you traditionally seen as a result of learners engaging in your provision? How have these outcomes changed?
<p><i>Funding</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How has the pandemic affected the financial position of your service? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What were your existing sources of funding and how have these been affected by the pandemic? In what ways has your financial position been influenced by the current pandemic? What sort of mechanisms/strategies have you put in place to mitigate them? What, if any, new opportunities have there been and might there be?

<p><i>Responses</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How did the various stakeholders/ actors respond to the challenges faced by ALE as a result of COVID-19? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What, if any, were the government strategies relevant to ALE? · How did coordinators, tutors/ facilitators of ALE respond? · How have existing learners responded? · What other organisations, if any, contributed to the response, and how?
<p><i>Participation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · In what ways has your ALE programme/ provisions changed because of the pandemic? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What have been the major challenges? · How has the pandemic affected learners' participation in the programmes? New learners? · Which of your learners have gained and which have lost from the changes in provision? · How has delivery / curriculum changed? Have the outcomes changed, if so how? · How have you responded to these changes? What haven't you been able to do (any longer)? · Which of these changes would you like to see continue in the future?
<p><i>Recommendations for the future</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How do you see the role of ALE in the future as the country recovers and rebuilds? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What positive strategies which have been developed over the last year will be key in the future? · What else needs to happen? What support would be required to achieve this? · What recommendations would you make to the government?

Interviewees: ALE tutors	
Theme (opening question)	Prompt questions
<p><i>Background (pre COVID-19)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What is your role in relation to ALE? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How long have you been working in the field? · What kind of provision are you engaged in delivering? · What is the profile of your learners? What has triggered their engagement in ALE? · What kind of outcomes have you traditionally seen as a result of learners engaging in your classes?
<p><i>Pedagogy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How has the pandemic affected teaching and learning? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How has delivery / curriculum changed? What were the resourcing implications? · What sort of mechanisms/ strategies have you put in place to mitigate challenges? · What advantages and disadvantages have these changes brought for STAFF and for LEARNERS? · What, if any, teaching and learning challenges do you see into the future? · Have the outcomes for learners changed, if so how?

<p><i>Support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How has the pandemic affected you as an ALE tutor? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What have been the biggest challenges? · How have you managed work/life commitments? · What support / resources were made available to manage the challenges? · What additional support / resources would have been useful? · What support / resources would be useful as you look forward?
<p><i>Impact on learners</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · In what ways has the pandemic impacted on the learners you work with? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How has the pandemic affected learners' participation in the programmes? · Have you had new learners join your classes? If so, who, why? · Which of your learners have gained and which have lost from the changes in provision? · How have you responded to these changes? · What have learners said about the provision during the pandemic?
<p><i>Recommendations for the future</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How do you see the role of ALE in the future as the country recovers and rebuilds? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What positive strategies which have developed over the last year will be key in the future? · What support would be required to achieve this? · What recommendations would you make to the government?

Interviewees: ALE learners	
Theme (opening question)	Prompt questions
<p><i>Background (pre COVID-19)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Can you tell me about yourself and why you joined these classes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What was it like participating in the classes before C-19? · What course were/are you doing? How long for? Any others? · Why did you choose to participate in these programmes? What were/are your aspirations?
<p><i>Response (of Islington)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How did your course, the CLASSES change when COVID-19 started? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How did organisers, tutors/facilitators respond? · Did the content of the classes change? If so, how? How did you feel about these changes? · Did the way the classes were facilitated change? If so, how? How did you feel about these changes? · What has happened to the courses / classes as COVID-19 has gone on? · Has COVID-19 resulted in any positive changes to the COURSES / CLASSES? If so, say more.....

<p><i>Participation/Attendance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How has COVID-19 affected YOUR experience /participation in these programmes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How did COVID-19 make things harder or easier for YOUR learning / participation? If so, please say more.... · Has COVID-19 changed what you want out of your course / the classes? · Which, if any, of these changes would you like to see continue in the future? · What, if any, effect have the classes had on your life (or livelihoods/relationships/community) during the lockdown etc?
<p><i>Support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What kind of support have you received from Adult Learning Islington through the COVID lockdown? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What support have you received? If yes, has it been helpful? If so, how? If not, why not? · What other support might have been helpful? And how? · What particular challenges do you continue to face? What support from ALE might be helpful?
<p><i>Looking to the future / future role of ALE</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What are you looking forward to in your future learning, and why? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What positive strategies which have developed over the last year will be key in the future? · What support would be required to achieve this? · What recommendations would you make to the government?

Appendix B Bibliography

These publications are not directly referenced in the Literature Review, but influenced the report.

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- OFSTED (2020) *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2018/19* London: OFSTED