

# *Adult Education in Scotland – a Critical Analysis of Strategic and Policy*

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**Abstract:** The extent to which local governments attach importance, and implement relevant policies relating to, adult Learning can be understood as an integral part of the learning quality and living standard of human communities. Based on existing research on adult education, this study will use classic policy analysis to provide a perspective on the background, perceptions and challenges of adult Learning facing the Scottish Government. Secondary research shows that Scotland has a commitment to improving the right of everyone to high-quality learning to meet their lifelong needs. Because adult education provides formal learning opportunities for those who have completed compulsory schooling, it can equip adults with the necessary knowledge, skills and confidence to play a positive and productive role in personal, work, family and community life.

**Keywords:** Adult learning, adult education, lifelong learning, continuing education, policy analysis, scottish adult education policy.

## **1. Introduction**

A proud tradition of Scotland is a commitment to excellence in education for all its citizens [39]. However, vocational or adult educational provision does not receive the same attention as the school and university sectors. Young people and children have always been the primary concern of policy-makers [26]. Nevertheless, the development of adult learning has a pervasive influence on Scottish society. Scotland has a population of about 5.2 million. Its economy has changed in the past 50 years, with the growing service industry making up for the sharp decline in manufacturing and mining [17]; consequently, more skilled adults are needed to serve the society. After the Second World War, compared with England, Scotland's legislative development of adult education developed slowly and unevenly, until the 1970s. The Department of Education expanded its remit to support various organizations providing post-compulsory educational provision. The Alexander Report on adult education aimed to strengthen adult education by making this a priority of Scottish local government [33]. However, Tett pointed out that, although the Alexander Report called for a significant increase in the number of qualified teachers in community education and adult teaching, its recommendations specifying exactly who could be employed in youth work and social development to work collaboratively with other professionals was never met. In 2011, local government spending on community learning and development was estimated to be around £150 million per year [38]. The development of adult education is inevitably determined by the extent of governmental and societal

investment. However, after the economic recession in 2008, public funding for adult learning also decreased significantly [17]. For example, in 2011/2012, the Glasgow Conference noted that budget cuts had resulted in fewer learners and lower achievement rates, even with the goal of improving adult literacy and numeracy skills [21]. As a result, adult learning policy in Scotland remains largely marginal. In order to further understand the development and impact of adult learning in Scottish society, the Scottish Adult Learning Strategy for 2021-2026 is worth analysing. This framework, hereafter referred to as SALS, is a blueprint for the creation of conditions that empower and improve the life chances of adults in Scotland. This study intends to use ontological constructivism and epistemological interpretivism to analyze ALSS and to explore the research problems of adult education in Scotland. Adult education refers to the learning needs of adults, while lifelong learning refers to the learning needs from birth to life. Although the definitions of the two terms are different, there is conceptual overlap between them, so the bibliography for this study includes both terms.

## 2. Research Questions

Given the close links between adult education and social development, adult learning may play a key role in changing demographics. The main purpose of this study is to explore what adult learning is and what it means for social development through an analysis of adult learning strategy and policy in Scotland. The secondary purpose is to further discuss the challenges and barriers to adult learning in Scotland. To this end, the study will address the following questions:

- (1) What is adult learning? Why did the Scottish Government encourage its development?
- (2) What is the historical background to adult learning in Scotland? How does the Scottish Government promote or incentivise adult education?
- (3) What benefits can adult learning bring to individuals and society?
- (4) Who are the participants in adult learning? What are their motives?
- (5) What are the challenges facing adult learning? How can the Scottish Government overcome these challenges?

## 3. Literature Review

This section will define the concept of adult learning before exploring the social and historical context of adult learning in Scotland. In addition, the reasons for the expansion and promotion of adult learning will be identified and many of the obstacles to adult learning will also be detailed.

### 3.1 Concepts of Adult Learning

Learning in adulthood is known as adult learning and occurs after the end of compulsory education, which also includes higher education and adult learning is learner-centered and closely related to their motivation, attitudes and expectations [4]. "Lifelong learning" is more widely used than "lifelong education" or "constant education" or "permanent education" indicated that lifelong education not only refers to learning from birth to death, but also focuses on learning inside and outside the education system, that is, learning in a wide range of environments and disciplines[3][4]. The classification of lifelong learning, which can be divided into formal and informal learning activities, has been widely used in adult lifelong field learning [47]. Learning activities conducted in settings, such as the school education system, are considered formal learning and confer certificates, diplomas, degrees and other qualifications on participants. In contrast, informal learning does not confer formally recognized qualifications upon completion of learning activities [4]. Nevertheless, Colley et al. believed that since the factors of formal and informal learning exist in almost all learning situations, there is an obvious overlap between learning types of learning.

### 3.2 The History of Scottish Adult Learning

Scotland has a tradition of radical adult education. Awakening learners to the realities of their contemporary situation, and demonstrating how they might assert their political rights, has been a key strand of the tradition of activism that has historically underpinned adult learning in Scotland. Since the late 18th century, Scotland has experienced rapid economic growth, agricultural transformation, population mobility, urbanization and industrialization [8]. Society needed more adults to acquire new skills and knowledge. The First World War transformed Scotland into a national arsenal of mass-produced ships, shells, guns and ammunition [12]. The impact of the war on Scotland was not only economic; it also, arguably, heralded an era of educational enlightenment. In the late 1920s, mass unemployment plagued every sector of the Scottish economy, including coal, steel, shipbuilding and heavy engineering, and textiles [19]. Under these circumstances, the working class organized learning opportunities, outside of the existing educational institutions, which gained the grassroots support of the workers' educational associations, such as the Glasgow Commoners' League, which ran 19 classes that attracted about 1,000 participants believed that cultivating the leaders of a capitalist society serving the interests of the rich was the goal of universities and other institutions of higher education, and that independent colleges, funded and controlled by the working class, could train workers to fight[27][13]. Education has therefore acted not only as a response to societal needs; it has also been an agent of social change. Adult education has been influenced by various external drivers, such as technology, economic development and social structure. This means that workers have sometimes relied upon adult education to improve their knowledge and skills [36].

Youth work, community development and adult education all fall under the umbrella of 'Scottish community education', which is community-based informal education that brings learning to those whom the formal education system finds hard to reach, thereby increasing and widening access to opportunities for more intensive education and training [43].

### 3.3 Adult Learning and Immigration in Scotland

In the 18th and 19th centuries, many Scots relied on self-education and mutual guidance because of the limited availability of educational opportunities mentioned that since the end of the 20th century and the middle of the 1990s [8][9], not only has adult interest in lifelong learning re-emerged, but the academic field has also considerably advanced. Slade and Dickson showed that Scotland's response to the current immigration crisis in Europe is to promote the tolerance of immigrants through various coordinated policies. While the National Record of Scotland stated that Scotland may be entirely dependent on immigration for future population growth, the majority of immigrants to Scotland are young and active, with the qualifications and potential to supplement the human capital of host countries [42]. Adult educators promote the integration of migrants and strengthen the role of society, and adopt a student-centred approach to meeting the overall needs of these refugees and asylum seekers [44]. Therefore, immigrants in Scotland promote the unique concepts of popular education, self-help and self-perfection in society[8]. Because adult education in Scotland is geared towards self-help and self-actualisation to ensure social cohesion, the immigrant population is able to contribute to its social and economic role and social cohesion. However, it is difficult for Scottish immigrants to obtain university courses, due to the availability of course costs and the serious problem of insufficient funding even if Scotland's policies are sound and integrated[20].

### 3.4 Reasons for the Promotion and Development of Adult Learning

Governments around the world are promoting lifelong learning [16]. For example, a widespread belief in the importance of continuous learning is reflected in the Member States of the European Union [14]. The improvement of personal growth and social cohesion among members of society can be

promoted by paying more attention to the need for lifelong learning[4]. As Torres pointed out, adult learning plays an important role in creating people's identities and building social relationships. Moreover, Field believed that adult learning plays an important role in promoting social cohesion. For instance, the view that adult learning and active citizenship are positively correlated is supported by many case studies and cross-sectional investigations [18]. A survey on literacy, numeracy and host language education of British adults found that the most important curriculum outcome was that participants identified social and personal confidence[2]. Moreover, the development of social capital management ability, the expansion of social networks, the promotion of common norms and tolerance of others are often realized through participatory learning [32]. Therefore, the Scottish Government put forward the development of a person-centred and cohesive lifelong learning system that is not only responsive to the needs of employers, but also, in the broader policy context, concerned with building a "Scotsman". As Field indicated, promoting lifelong learning is regarded by the Scottish Government as a way to promote economic growth and social inclusion. Boeren pointed out that democracy and sociality have been replaced by a strong economic perspective in the humanistic view of adult lifelong learning participation. Although its impact on social cohesion is positive, the extent to which lifelong learning can redress demographic inequalities is perhaps limited; adult learning, on the other hand, can potentially enhance social cohesion and thereby have a positive impact on citizens [16]. Community learning policies have tended to focus on equity and social justice as part of a broader integrated service offering of youth work and community building [37]. The reason for lifelong learning is not only that adults need to live together to make society a better place if there is a higher level of social cohesion and a strong sense of active citizenship, but that the main purpose of lifelong learning is that society needs to have a strong level of human capital, that is to say, to survive in a knowledge economy, it is necessary to maintain competitiveness and highly skilled labor force in the global market [23]. However, Jenkins et al. proved that higher wages did not result from participation in vocational learning activities in adulthood. On the contrary, in most cases, adult participation in lifelong learning may have a positive impact on income[4]. On the other hand, a very important determinant of adult learning is a person's place of residence and personal background because not all adults have access to adult learning opportunities, Boeren also indicated that not investing, or underinvesting, in adult lifelong learning is also a national problem, which leads to widening social disparities. Indeed, Cooke stated that mass educators in Scotland in the 20th century suggested that education plays an important role in social integration and alleviating the tension between classes; this rationale underpinned the formation and expansion of both the adult education movement and school system.

### 3.5 The Benefits of Adult Learning

According to the longitudinal analysis conducted by Hammond and Feinstein, compared with non-learners, learners are more likely to improve their confidence in the perception and control of important life choices. Manninen and Merilainen also suggested that, with the help of social capital and educational experience, people will improve their level of control over their lives. For example, Sabates and Hammond proposed in their report "The Impact of Lifelong Learning on Happiness and Well-being" that adult learning can bring happiness to learners and accrue specific benefits associated with self-esteem and self-efficacy. However, Field suggests that participation in adult learning activities may cause high levels of stress. In contrast, Schuller et al. found that participation in adult lifelong learning activities helped participants combat some mental disorders.

Consequently, although the development of adult learning still has its shortcomings, it nevertheless makes significant contributions to human communities and individuals. Social cohesion and the knowledge need of citizens are inseparable from the development of adult learning.

### 3.6 Barriers to Adult Learning

Although adult learning can be beneficial for both social and personal development, there are many obstacles. Insufficient time and funding are major barriers to adult lifelong learning participation [3]. First of all, there are structural institutional impediments, such as tuition fees and the availability of adult learning organisations[4]. Second, the low profile of these courses inevitably means that people may not even be aware of the existence of specific adult courses; this poor promotion of existing learning opportunities can be regarded as an information barrier [11]. Obstacles to adult learning originate not only from external factors, but also from the participants themselves. For example, Valentine and Darkenwald suggested that participants' adult learning may be hampered by their personality, situational barriers arising from personal problems, lack of confidence, the prohibitive costs of education, as well as by a generic disinterest in education and /or the specific curriculum. In general, barriers to adult education are related to personal, social, financial, geographical and managerial factors, as well as to vision, mission and identity [6].

## 4. Research Methods

This study will discuss the research issues related to adult education in Scotland through a critical analysis of the Adult Learning Strategy (SALS) in Scotland. This paper will adopt the classical social research method of policy analysis. Not only can new information be extracted through document analysis (O'Leary), but using documents as data sources is an efficient information-gathering technique [5]. Creswell mentioned that, when using qualitative research methods, researchers can collect non-data data through observation, description and setting and researchers' views on the surrounding world can be reflected through qualitative research methods.

As Weimer and Vining have observed, policy analysis is intended to inform certain decisions, either implicitly or explicitly, that will potentially benefit the electorate or the country. Policy analysis can reveal the extent, and possible causes, of social inequalities; it can also highlight the limitations and strengths of current policies and Policy analysis can be explanatory - concerned with the detailed exploration of the origins, content and impact of existing policies and strategies - or prescriptive, which aims to scrutinise current policies in order to formulate new, improved ones. Good policy analysis is based upon a comprehensive understanding of societal conditions and social values [49]. In addition, policy analysis informs customer-facing advice related to public decisions and influenced by social values [49].

Although all information and secondary data collected in this study were sourced from the open government website and the University of Glasgow library, and there was no human interaction involved in this study, ethical issues still need to be considered. For example, the researcher will ensure that the sources discussed are carefully and accurately reported and that arguments are faithfully represented and not misconstrued. Additionally, sources will be fairly selected, without personal bias, and the conclusions reached will be substantiated by a large body of existing literature.

On the other hand, the moral responsibility of policy analysts cannot be ignored. When analyzing a policy or strategy, the analyst's values play an important role. Policy analysis, like life, presents conflicts between competing values[49]. In the process of reviewing substantive issues, the seeming advantages and disadvantages of policies or strategies for the society, as well as the role of cost-efficiency and the realization of equity, are bound to differ according to the values of various analysts. It is the responsibility of the analyst to ensure that they attempt to perform this task in a balanced way, making transparent any pre-existing interest or stake in the topic. Weimer and Vining argued that analytical integrity, responsibility to client, and adherence to a personal concept of a good society are three crucial values for any researcher. The potential conflict of values provides analysts with ethical considerations. Additionally, the impact of stakeholders with policies or strategies should also be



considered at the ethical level because stakeholder analysis as a unique activity is instrumental rather than normative and the focus of this method is on the realization of certain policies rather than the social value effects that policies are intended to produce[49]. In addition, BERA has argued that it is important for researchers to operate transparently. For policy analysts, this means ensuring that they are not working for commercial gain and that there is no conflict of interest underpinning their research. If their work is sponsored or commissioned, they must therefore disclose this to stakeholders. Furthermore, policy analysts have a particular responsibility to present their findings in a clear, jargon-free way to ensure they are accessible not only to academics but also to other policy makers and the wider public.

## **5. Research Study and Analysis**

### **5.1 What Is SALS?**

SALS was developed by the Scottish Adult Learning Strategy Forum (ALSFS) in 2019. SALS is a strategy designed to create more learning opportunities for those aged 16 and over. The rationale behind its creation was to redress the need for a more inclusive learning system to facilitate access to learner-centred adult learning opportunities. For example, the Adult Strategic Forum of Scotland identified the following five themes: expanding adult learning, connecting adult learning journey, communication, access and inclusion, and workforce development respectively to further advance the provision of adult education.

### **5.2 The Visions and Principles of SALS**

The vision set out by the Adult Strategic Forum of Scotland is that adults in Scotland will not only gain better skills, confidence and competence through adult learning, but also contribute to building a connected and inclusive community. Adult learning can help to establish people's individual identities and improve social relationships[46]. Because a good strategy or policy is designed to lead citizens and society in a positive direction, adult education will pay particular attention to improving the skills of the most vulnerable groups in the society [4]. This strategy, as mentioned in SALS, aims to create connected adult learning opportunities for Scottish communities, local authorities, third sector organisations, colleges and universities, and to provide learning opportunities for adults, particularly those who are disadvantaged, socially excluded or marginalized (Strategic Forum of Scotland). Therefore, the strategic vision of SALS is not only to enable adult learning to play a role in promoting social cohesion [16], but also to ease the tension between social classes in order to create a society founded upon principles of social stability and fairness[8].

The main principle underpinning SALS is community-based adult learning. Because community-based learning is flexible, it can meet the learning needs of participants within their living environment. The Adult Strategic Forum of Scotland pointed out that the first step for many adult learners seeking to return to formal education is through community-based learning. SED suggested that adult education should be included in community education and that community education services should be combined with youth and community services. Further, community-based education can increase different forms of education and training opportunities [43]. This will open up more options for those who need adult learning.

### **5.3 The Limitations of SALS**

The Scottish Government's commitment to creating a fairer and more inclusive social environment is therefore essential for the development of adult learning. Field points out that it considers promoting lifelong learning as a key means of fostering economic growth and social inclusion. In

addition, community learning policies often focus on equity and social justice [37]. SALS also highlights the need to strengthen community-based adult learning to ensure that adults have adequate opportunities to learn and progress (Strategic Forum of Scotland). Although the strategic vision is for more Scots to attend adult education as a way of achieving social cohesion, reality sometimes diverges from this plan. The obstacles to the development of strategies may arise from the adult's willingness to learn and funding. For example, it may arise from the adult's willingness to learn; lack of time, poor self-confidence, underdeveloped study skills, undiagnosed specific learning difficulties (such as dyslexia), weak literacy and numeracy skills and negative experiences of formal schooling may also deter adults from availing themselves of learning opportunities. Underinvestment in adult learning can lead to widening social disparities [6]. Even if the benefits of adult learning are well understood, the lack of investment by individuals and society will make it difficult to realize adult learning plans and increase social conflicts and inequities.

According to the feedback of many learners, local course availability and accessibility, as well as funding, remain entrenched systemic, rather than personal, obstacles, to course uptake (Strategic Forum of Scotland). Moreover, there are technological barriers - many older adults lack IT skills and this also presents a barrier to engagement. As Ormston et al. believed, although Scotland was committed to establishing a fair education system, there were still inequalities caused by widespread societal deprivation and disadvantage. SALS reports that the adverse economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was likely to increase inequality in wealth and, it was therefore observed, the need for adult learning services was greater for the more economically marginalized in Scotland. This issue is compounded by linguistic and cultural barriers to education faced by migrant populations. Census data indeed revealed that 0.15% of the population did not speak English, 0.92% speak poor English (Strategic Forum of Scotland). It is clear that the problem of youth employment will also exacerbate the current socio-economic difficulties. The Scottish Government (2014b) stated that vocational education in Scotland was of lower quality than higher education and needed to be reformed. Adult learning, while meeting the learning needs of participants, also includes work-based learning. Mitigating or overcoming the current barriers to adult learning in Scotland requires the government to consider individual employment needs and diverse social circumstances in order to determine policy directions and allocate funding for applicable costs. To be specific, young working-class men in Scotland, with poor literacy and numeracy skills and no formal qualifications, are often at risk of falling through the cracks of the education system because of high levels of drug use, addiction and gang violence, particularly in central and western Scotland. In a broader attempt, education and opportunity may play a role in correcting the problem.

On the other hand, some individual learners face entrenched barriers to adult education, such as, lack time to study, lack of power, low self-esteem, negative experience at school, fear of failure, self-limiting beliefs, health conditions (some of which may be due to their advance age, such as hearing/vision impairment), the lack of linguistic competence or underdeveloped reading and writing skills (even those who was born in Scotland), disability and undiagnosed defect, dyslexia, situational disorders, lack of childcare/leave time should not be ignored. Falasca indicated that adult education needs to eliminate these long-standing barriers to learning, especially those related to the circumstances of individual lives. Although the feedback of SALS to scholars and practitioners acknowledges the need to address many of the obstacles they may face when participating in learning, there is no clear or detailed plan to tackle many of these interlocking socio-economic issues in order to overcome social exclusion and marginalization. Adults are motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors (Meriam & Cafarella) because their motivation to learn comes from their internal needs. For example, they may decide to acquire new skills in order to increase their salary and raise their living conditions or to improve their prospects of internal promotion: these are all internal motivations. Because their motivation to learn comes from their own internal needs. For example,

they learn new skills to raise wages and improve living conditions due to the promotion conditions of the company, which is their internal motivation factor. Therefore, these solutions, developed to address the participants' internal resistance to education, contribute to the development of adult learning in Scotland. The SALS strategy is ambitious. Its value and potential benefits for adult learning, garnered from the insights of current learner feedback, lie in its acknowledgement of the limitations of current unequal social conditions, combined with the circumstances imposed by Covid-19, and its overarching vision for the future development of adult learning in Scotland; this somewhat vague, yet predictive and inspired, strategy devised to promote the social cohesion and inclusion in Scotland, however makes no real attempt to overcome individual situational, circumstantial socio-economic barriers to engagement with adult learning. This strategy therefore offers no detailed and systematic solution.

## 6. Conclusion

People are well aware that adult learning offers many potential benefits to themselves and society. The development of adult learning plays an indispensable role in the development of human society, whether it is to achieve personal physical and mental health and economic conditions, or to promote social equity and community cohesion. The Scottish tradition of radical adult education has evolved to meet the needs of society, with learners upholding political rights and pursuing social justice through community-based adult learning. However, the investment of time and money has always been the main obstacle to developing adult learning. This study believes that the formation of these obstacles from the social background factors and adult learning system. The Scottish Government (2014a) pointed out that lifelong learning can be regarded as an overall social right, which is a tool that can meet the needs and personal aspirations of learners. Therefore, empowering individuals and communities to meet participants' learning or employment needs, rather than restoring the goal of restoring socioeconomic and employment issues, may more effectively leverage the value of adult learning to achieve social equity and cohesion.

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