

# Community-Based Adult Learning: a Scottish Case Study in the Time of COVID-19

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## Abstract

Community-based adult learning (CBAL) focuses on improving the quality of life for the most disadvantaged and has a different ideology, methods, and curriculum from mainstream education. This Scottish case-study investigated the main changes that had impacted on CBAL provision in the preceding three years. These were: a reduction in funding for CBAL and its undervaluing by other professions; the impact of COVID-19 on learning and teaching; the importance of CBAL in promoting wellbeing. It is argued that these Scottish issues are similar in their impact to other Western countries; negatively because COVID-19 has exacerbated inequalities in the education available to the least advantaged, and positively in that CBAL practitioners have demonstrated the value of their work especially in addressing digital inequalities and mental health issues.

**Keywords:** wellbeing; digital inequalities; empowerment

This article focuses on community-based adult learning (CBAL) to examine the changes that have affected practitioners especially in the time of COVID-19. Although it is set in Scotland, it illuminates the impact of the reduction of resources for CBAL experienced by many Western countries. CBAL has a different focus from mainstream education in its underpinning ideology, its methods, and its curriculum. Its ideology is based on empowering participants and aims to deepen democracy and improve the quality of life for those that are the most disadvantaged in society (Kane, 2013). Its methods are to encourage and engage people in learning that is relevant to them, so it is responsive to community priorities identified *with* people rather than *for* them. Rather than having a pre-set curriculum it uses people's

experience and interests to build the learning program because the acknowledgement of learners' lived experiences provides rich resources for their emotional and social development (Baquedano-López et al., 2013).

CBAL's roots lie in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and come from the Swedish tradition of *Folkbildning*, which focused on the relationship between lifelong learning, power, and democracy in society (Laginder et al., 2013), as well as UK radical working-class organizations that acted and educated against the *status quo* to develop "knowledge calculated to make you free" (Johnson, 1988). In the United States, CBAL was developed in the 1900s based on "Dewey's (1916) educational philosophy, which emphasized the critical role of a well-educated and engaged populace for community development

and the proper functioning of democratic forms of governance at all levels” (Zhang & Perkins, 2022, p.4). This underpinning philosophy, together with the influence of the Danish folk high schools, led to the establishment of the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee in 1932. Since then, this Center has created strong social movement infrastructure in the South and Appalachia, and its current organizing efforts focus on environmental, economic, and racial justice. This focus is common amongst the many other organizations in the United States that offer empowerment-orientated CBAL programs.

Currently, it appears that CBAL is experiencing “scattered and unsteady progress in many Western countries” (Zhang & Perkins, 2022, p.15) despite research showing it is an effective way of engaging disadvantaged learners (Smyth, 2015), can positively change the educational practices of families (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2010) and contribute to economic, educational, and personal progression by supporting learners towards the achievement of their goals (Macintyre, 2012). CBAL has a positive impact on adults’ health and well-being (Hammond, 2004) as well as contributing to national economies through updating the skills base (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). Despite this strong evidence of its effectiveness, funding for the work appears to have declined considerably in recent years (Webb et al., 2019).

To examine the consequences of this decline further I provide a case-study of CBAL in Scotland, but first I explain the context.

## The Scottish Context

Scotland provides an interesting site to study CBAL because of its differences from, and commonalties

with, other countries. A significant difference is that practitioners in Scotland come from a unique profession, community learning and development (CLD), whose key role is to address the learning needs of disadvantaged individuals and communities. Here, CBAL is defined as:

Learning opportunities (mainly targeted at excluded/disadvantaged groups and individuals) provided in local communities, developed substantially in negotiation with participants (both in terms of content and delivery), and which empower them to address relevant issues in their lives, and that of their community. (Communities Scotland, 2003, p. 9)

This means it is focused on responding to adults in ways that prioritize their own needs and desires. Most provision involves creating and enacting learner-centered curricula that arise from issues in the community (Jones, 2021). Provision currently is focused on adult literacy and numeracy (ALN) and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) because learners of these subjects are most likely to be excluded and disadvantaged.

Another difference arising from this separate profession is that its graduates have a shared community of practice through their membership of the national professional association and are also involved in several national policy networks including Education Scotland. These shared networks have resulted in a common set of values that place the learner at the center of practice. The values have been influenced by Freire (1972) who used a “problem-posing” method of identifying and exploring social issues that were relevant to the community, leading to programs of learning and cultural action. This underpinning ideology means that the educator is regarded as an agent of social change, who makes purposeful educational interventions in the interests of change towards more justice, equality, and democracy (Tett, 2010).

A third difference is that the provision of CBAL is spread throughout Scotland and practitioners

are mainly employed by local government (LA) whereas in other countries, especially the United States, this provision tends to be mostly delivered by non-state organizations and to be patchy in its reach (Perkins et al., 2007). A final difference is that the work of CBAL practitioners is recognized in Government policy through the “Fairer Scotland” legislation (<https://www.gov.scot/education/>). This recognition means that CBAL is seen as helping to create a more equal Scotland through improving the life chances of refugees and asylum seekers and people living in disadvantaged communities.

Scottish providers have also experienced many of the same difficulties that research shows exist in other Western countries. These commonalities include public budget reductions in funding across the Western world that arise from the turn to an educational market that prioritizes efficiency over other social values such as equity (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Another commonality is that CBAL often exists in an educational silo that is separated from mainstream education (Zhang & Perkins, 2022) and so these different services may neither understand the common contributions they can make to improving services nor see the value of collaborating (Tett, 2005). Another pressure on educational providers is to provide more education that is focused on work readiness. This has meant that developing a negotiated curriculum based on participants’ desires is difficult because of the focus on employability skills.

All these difficulties are linked by an underpinning ideology, operating both internationally and locally, that views the purpose of education systems as developing efficient, problem-solving workers for a globally competitive economy leading to the neglect of education’s social and developmental responsibilities (Olssen, 2009). This means that

few governments prioritize provision targeted at the disadvantaged because their driving metric of ‘value for money’ is often interpreted as educational interventions that quickly lead to skilled employment (Theriault, 2019).

Scotland therefore provides a useful lens through which to view CBAL in terms of its commonalities and differences from other Western countries. To explore this further I now turn to research that arose from reports to the author from Scottish practitioners that the focus of CBAL provision was changing, driven by a reduction in funding for Local Government.

## Methodology

My methodological perspective is critical theory which emphasizes subjective interpretations of phenomena and rejects the proposition that there are universal truths (Archer, 1995). This means that I use dialogic methods, designed to foster conversation and reflection and so qualitative, rather than quantitative, methods are used to gather data. I also need to be critically reflexive in ways that mediate “between the social context, structure and human agency” (Dyke et al., 2012, p. 835) leading to a clear view of my positionality. In this research my position is of a person committed to CBAL that seeks to understand how its values are enacted in practice.

The overall aim of the research was to investigate what changes have impacted practitioners working in CBAL and what the causes and consequences of these changes were. This led to the following research questions:

- What were the changes experienced by practitioners and how did they respond?
- What were the positive and negative consequences of these responses?

The project was approved by the host University's ethics committee and BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines were followed to ensure "an ethic of respect" (p.5). Particular attention was made to ensuring; anonymity, informed consent, the right to withdraw, transparency, privacy.

Participants were contacted by email and asked to complete an informed consent form. Following this a questionnaire was sent that asked about: changes in the focus of participants' work in the preceding three years, what had caused these changes, the opportunities and constraints these changes offered, and any changes they had resisted. This questionnaire was followed by an online interview lasting around 40 minutes. The interviews took place between May and July 2021, so the participants were reflecting on a time when the COVID-19 pandemic had had a significant impact on practice.

The sample of participants was purposive (Patton, 2002) because it involved selecting individuals. Three criteria were identified for participants: they had to be knowledgeable about CBAL projects that took a learner-focused approach to practice; they had responsibility for delivering CBAL in one or more organizations in their geographical area; they had five years or more experience of working in CBAL. The author used her knowledge of the provision of CBAL in Scotland as well as several key informants to identify individuals working in locations that would meet these criteria. Thirty-five individuals were approached and sixteen agreed to participate. They were drawn from eight different Local Authority (LA) areas including the three largest cities. Twelve of these participants were practitioners (having a direct role in working with learners) and four were managers of CBAL services. These managers were able to provide an overview across the whole LA and, because at an earlier stage of their careers

they had been practitioners, they were also able to contribute insights from practice. Twelve people were employed by local authorities and 4 by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Whilst the sample is small, I am using the data to illuminate, rather than validate, the findings.

Table 1 provides their pseudonyms and key characteristics. The participants were very experienced and well qualified with all having at least an undergraduate degree.

The questionnaires and recorded interviews were analyzed thematically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the analysis, each data-item was given equal attention in the coding process; themes were checked against each other and back to the literature on CBAL. This method of analysis has the advantage of giving a holistic picture rather than a fragmented view of individual variables. In addition, the analysis fitted with findings from the literature and therefore evidences analytic generalizability (Yin, 2014).

Four main themes emerged:

1. Reduction in funding for CBAL
2. Recognizing the value of CBAL and its approach to learning
3. Impact of COVID-19
4. Importance of health and wellbeing

I took two further measures to verify these themes. First, a report of the analysis and themes was sent to participants so that they could check them for resonance with their experiences. All confirmed that the findings were accurate. In addition, I analyzed the teaching and learning plans for some of the programs and so was able to check, to some extent, that what participants said in their interviews was consistent with their practice.

**TABLE 1: Participants' characteristics****Practitioners**

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Location</b>                            | <b>Experience</b><br><i>(Years in CBAL/years in current post)</i> | <b>Qualifications</b>  |
|------------------|--|---|--|
| <b>Andy</b>      | Large city LA                              | 34/18   | Undergraduate professional degree                                |
| <b>Ann</b>       | Science focused NGO                        | 9/2   | Undergraduate professional degree, PG Diploma                    |
| <b>Audrey</b>    | large city LA                              | 19/12   | BA, PG Diploma, MSc  |
| <b>Faith</b>     | Medium mixed urban and rural LA            | 12/3.5  | MEd  |
| <b>Julie</b>     | Medium mixed urban and rural LA            | 33/8.5  | MA degree, MSc, PG Certificate                                   |
| <b>Jean</b>      | small mixed urban and rural LA             | 21/8  | MA, BSc, PG Certificate  |
| <b>Lucy</b>      | large city LA                              | 25/3  | MA degree, PG Certificate  |
| <b>Mary</b>      | Rural LA                                   | 32/17   | BA, PG Diploma   |
| <b>Nicholas</b>  | Large city LA                              | 12/1  | Undergraduate professional degree, SQA specialist qualifications |
| <b>Rory</b>      | large adult education NGO                  | 30/8  | BA, SQA specialist qualifications                                |
| <b>Sophie</b>    | medium NGO focused on social care          | 20/6  | MA, PG Diploma   |
| <b>Wayne</b>     | small NGO focused on health and well-being | 10/1  | BA, SQA specialist qualifications, MEd                           |

**Managers**

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Location</b>                 | <b>Experience</b> | <b>Qualifications</b>                            |
|------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|--|
| <b>Fiona</b>     | Large city LA                   | 30/9              | MA, MSc  |
| <b>Katherine</b> | Large city LA                   | 29/5              | BA, RSA specialist qualification, PG Certificate |
| <b>Melanie</b>   | Medium mixed urban and rural LA | 23/4              | Undergraduate professional degree                |
| <b>Olivia</b>    | Rural LA                        | 35/12             | PG Diploma                                       |

## Findings

### Reduction in Funding for CBAL

All participants reported that overall funding for LAs had been reduced over the preceding 3 years due to the UK government's decision to curtail state provision of services. This had strong consequences for CBAL because, as a non-statutory service, providing classes was not a requirement and so the service experienced major cuts. This was compounded by "structural difficulties and lack of knowledge [in the LA] about how [CBAL] can work best" (Katherine). Another reason that CBAL provision was easy to cut was that engaging participants is a key part of the process whereas in other services, such as care for the elderly, there is already a strong demand for provision that the LAs are under pressure to respond to. As Audrey argued "unless you get people that are articulate about their needs it's difficult for them to see that ALN is for them." Learner engagement is always a collaborative process that includes meaningful interactions with tutors and peers, requiring investment of time and resources (Beattie, 2022), but these funds were simply not available.

One consequence of reduced funding was that staff became involved in projects that had external funding or were a priority for the Scottish Government and the LA rather than arising from the needs of the learners. However, the funding brought in new staff that had "new skills and ...different ideas [and] made our team more dynamic and forward thinking" (Mary). Another issue was that "Government expectations of how we can use this money ... and communication about what may be available next year really hampers effective planning"(Olivia). Several participants, whilst welcoming the extra funding, found that it had consequences for existing groups especially ALN learners. This included "ESOL learners being more likely

to come forward than ALN learners" (Audrey) because the latter group needed to be actively engaged in provision that met their interests. Another found that "ALN work is more difficult due to the reduction in resources and a shift to working with schools and family learning"(Lucy) so negotiating the curriculum was difficult.

Another consequence of the funding reduction was a greater focus on measurable targets, particularly for those working for NGOs. One reason was "because more funding is coming via foundations with specific targets" [and this] "creates competition amongst organizations [as well as leading to] more precarious work for tutors ... and lower wages" (Wayne). Within the LAs, the lack of funding led to more targeting because "otherwise staff are overstretched" (Olivia). Targeting could be positive, however, because it meant that CBAL was focused on those with the greatest needs and, in some LAs, led to "improved links with health visitors, schools and social work staff" (Mary) especially in family learning work with parents.

Applying for external funding and then reporting on the outcomes also took time away from teaching and learning. One said, "it is harder to focus on the educational role when there is more reporting, more funding to write, ... and a fragmented field across many charities" (Wayne). Another, however, suggested that the key in applying for external funding was to ensure that "it fits with the work we do ... that the outcomes are the same ... [and reflect our] priorities... so it's clear how [this new funding stream] fits into the wider picture" (Sophie). Several people argued that health and social care organizations had fewer specific outcomes that enabled organizations to respond to the needs of learners whereas LAs "had specific narrow expectations [that required you] to prove that the funding was helping people to become more employable" (Wayne).

## Recognizing the Value of CBAL and its Approach to Learning

The reduction in funding was strongly linked to the lack of recognition of the value of the CBAL approach to learning by other organizations and services. This was partly because learner-centered approaches were an unfamiliar way of working – “we are always fighting our corner to say what [CBAL] is” (Andy). Some LA managers were “champions for adult learning [and tried to get] national coverage of our work” (Faith) and this led to a positive working environment, but many practitioners had to demonstrate to other professions the effectiveness of learner-centered approaches. Several reported that they had resisted the training-for-employability type of courses advocated by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and that the persistence they had shown in convincing these professionals that “our curriculum isn’t pre-set but is based on negotiating what the learners want” (Rory) had eventually been recognized as an effective way of working. Others commented on the need to demonstrate to schools the efficacy of the Social Practice approach, where “The focus shifts from literacy as deficit ... to the many ways that people engage with literacy, recognizing difference and diversity and challenging how these differences are valued within our society” (Hamilton, 2000, p. 1). One argued that to achieve this “we need to develop a common language that goes across the different professions, especially schools, so we are seen as another spoke in the wheel of learning” (Mary).

Several reported that they had to provide professional development (CPD) about CBAL for staff in their organizations and in the LAs this was concentrated on staff from libraries and leisure provision. Two people employed by NGOs had a role in providing in-house CPD for staff

on delivering CBAL to adults. This meant that, “we want to move away [in our community-based workshops] from banking education which seems to work in schools but if communities don’t feel that it’s for them, they aren’t going to come along” (Ann). Another had implemented a community development approach in her NGO and argued that “positive change comes from working alongside people ... to understand their aspirations and challenges and create practical, supportive ways for them to achieve ... [but] this takes time” (Sophie).

Working in partnership with other services provided opportunities to show the value of CBAL. In several LAs new partnerships, focused on adult health and social care and Social Work, had been developed because these professionals had “recognized [our] skillset when they saw how we build relationships, identify common goals, problem solve and build community capacity” (Olivia). These partnerships could enable staff to overcome some financial constraints “by working collaboratively through linking to partners’ plans, greater participation in cross sector working groups, and greater clarity about the role of CBAL” (Melanie). However, some people argued that when organizations were struggling then “partnerships are more difficult because there is a lack of time to develop them and ... sometimes we are unsure about what others do” (Katherine).

Several participants emphasized being clear about the values underpinning their work when they were developing partnerships because the “value base is so critical [in enabling] you to respond to learners” (Jean). Partnerships always required negotiation and compromise (Tett, 2010) but participants argued that when partnerships were based on their values then other services were more likely to respect the CBAL way of working. This meant that “we need to show what we do in

ways that other professions can understand [so that we experience] professional equity” (Mary).

Clearly, other professions were convinced about CBAL’s effectiveness when they had opportunities to work collaboratively, but the onus of proof fell on CBAL practitioners meaning that they bore the entire cost of demonstrating their competence.

### Impact of COVID-19 on Learning

The previous two sections have provided concrete examples of the combined impact of funding constraints and lack of recognition on CBAL. In this section these issues are explored through the unprecedented situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The restrictions on face-to-face meetings caused by the pandemic meant that classes had to be moved online and almost all participants experienced difficulties because of their limited knowledge about digital learning. One manager had organized “lots of CPD to support online learning and give tutors interesting work to keep them going” [during the lockdown] (Fiona). She found, however, that it was “difficult to provide [CPD] for people with few contact hours” (Fiona). Others highlighted these difficulties and their impact especially where the majority of the ALN tutors were working limited hours.

There were also problems with equipment and digital platforms. A manager reported that her “organization was not able to quickly flip services from face-to-face to online as many staff did not have the necessary devices to effectively work from home” (Fiona). For a few participants this situation had continued with one using a “very old computer that doesn’t have Office on it, so I must make screen-shared documents at home and then email them over so it’s very time-consuming. We don’t have the teaching version of Teams so that limits what you can do” (Jean). On the other hand,

one participant found that “the pandemic has increased the opportunities to work in a different way through digital platforms” (Nicholas) and another said “I know what I want to do so I just find ways of doing it. Digital learning is good but is not the only way forward because ... people want the human touch” (Rory).

Near the beginning of online learning practitioners in the LAs found the delay in being able to contact learners frustrating. As one put it, “the bureaucracy is too top-heavy, and the bosses don’t know anything about teaching. It took months for them to do anything whereas the small charities just got on with it” (Jean). From the managers’ perspectives, however, supporting tutors so they understood online safeguarding procedures was essential before classes could start and this involved “lots of sorting out across different LA departments” (Fiona). Working across the different sections of the LA was also important because, “everyone brought different things to the table and came out of their professional silos” (Melanie). Eventually, practitioners found safe ways in which they could support learners through, for example, meeting “people in gardens or outside to provide 1-1 support to help set up devices” (Julie).

Several technical and pedagogical issues had to be overcome to switch to online learning. Practitioners reported that there were problems about access for learners because the preferred digital platform for the LAs was Teams due to its strong security. One pointed out that “Communities have been demanding access to Facebook, WhatsApp etc. that they are familiar with, but this hasn’t been allowed so we must use Teams which people find difficult to access” (Audrey). The Teams platform did not operate intuitively for learners who were used to these other platforms and it used lots of data that was



problematic for those with limited allowances. One practitioner solved the difficulties an older people's group experienced with the *Teams* platform by "making a case to the LA for the group to use *Google Meet* at first and then get people ready to transfer to *Teams* once they were more confident" (Nicholas). While this was effective for the learners it did take up many hours of the practitioner's time.

Supporting learners to get online and then adjusting teaching and learning approaches so that they were still at the center of provision was often a struggle. One reason was the lack of teaching materials – "we have had to make our own materials and that has been very time-consuming" (Jean). Several pointed out that online meetings limited the interactions between learners and made small group discussion difficult unless learners had good technology. Some found, however, that if they focused on the learners and offered a person-centered service then it was possible to "navigate a suitable path" (Julie). One had "been able to support learners on a 1-1 basis because if they don't get into a group then they lose confidence, and you need warm-up support" (Nicholas). In another LA it was reported that, "Learners have had a lot of input from the team to encourage and support them to go online. ... The staff just give it the time it takes. We now have learners helping other learners and it may have really taken off" (Julie).

ESOL learners were reported to be "more digitally savvy because they are used to keeping in touch with their friends and relatives through digital devices" (Faith). Some, however, only had smart phones that were not effective for online learning and that meant that staff had to "find suitable equipment" (often by applying for external funding) ... "because going online is partly about confidence but also having the right equipment

and getting on-going support" (Rory). Others pointed out that the experience for many ESOL learners "of the horrific problems in their home countries means that they prefer online learning ...[because] they are all worried about safety" (Jane). The effectiveness of online learning depended on the stage that people had reached since with beginners "contacting them by phone doesn't work as they can't understand you and you need the face-to-face interaction" (Lucy).

While online methods had disadvantages, they enabled people to go on learning during the pandemic. One result of this was that participants thought that blended learning might become embedded in CBAL after the pandemic was over. Those working in rural areas found online learning was particularly useful where there were small numbers "because we operate on language levels, [online learning] means we can get viable groups together" (Julie). Others were concerned, however, that if online learning became the main means of engaging with learners, then they would miss out on "the opportunity to try out other things that might not have occurred to them as well as engaging in the informal learning that happens through peer support" (Rory). The benefits of face-to-face groups, particularly for ALN learners, were summarized by one tutor as "offering participants an opportunity to meet with others, combat isolation and share experiences as they learn together in a multi-faceted way" (Katherine).

There was a consensus that online learning for staff was very useful as it allowed them to "participate in meetings, training, and networking more easily" (Olivia). These opportunities were available locally through self-organized groups within LAs and nationally through CPD sessions hosted by Education Scotland. The participants reported that they found all these forms of support helpful in

enhancing their confidence “that they were doing the right things” (Faith) especially because of the opportunities to learn from their peers. One commented that being part of a group that you trusted made it possible to “share your failures because you knew that this community would help you to do better next time” (Mary).

### **Importance of Health and Wellbeing**

Nearly all the participants identified the importance of health and wellbeing and pointed out how the pandemic had increased isolation and loneliness. The closure of community centers meant that many learners had no means of meeting each other resulting in “a growing number of people who have found themselves left behind ... [so] staff have done amazing things to keep in touch with learners” (Melanie). There were a number of ways in which participants considered that they promoted wellbeing as defined by the New Economics Foundation (Aked et al., 2008): connecting with others, being active, being curious, keeping on learning, and giving to others.

First, CBAL helped learners to *connect* especially “because many people weren’t seeing anyone” (Katherine) during lockdown and so “people kept on coming to the groups despite many difficulties” (Julie). Mental health issues were described as: “like a tsunami now and we are carrying on classes because it gives people a connection, especially when people are living on their own and there aren’t a lot of other places open to them” (Jean). The *being active* area was addressed by involving learners in small walking groups and this was especially important for ESOL learners that found it difficult to engage digitally. In one LA a manager reported that “we were able to involve our outdoor education colleagues and they trained our tutors as pastoral walkers and we saw this as a way of connecting with learners in safe outdoor spaces” (Fiona).

One aspect of *being curious* is reflecting on your experiences and several participants said they built their programs “from the lives, experiences, interests and conditions of people involved in CBAL” (Nicholas). Practitioners were concerned about the challenges that learners faced and this meant that “you have to be compassionate and genuinely interested in people and find ways of engaging them” (Rory). Working to people’s own agendas took time but could be very rewarding because “when people realize that they can achieve things it can be quite addictive” (Melanie). Encouraging learners to be critically reflexive was important because “it is a key task for us to be able to help learners develop skills about recognizing accurate information especially in relation to vaccines” (Fiona). Others talked about challenging learners as well as supporting them because, as one argued, “our role should be as development workers acting as agents of change” (Andy) rather than simply accepting the existing situation.

*Learning* is the key aim of CBAL, and tutors tried to ensure that the approach reflected the pressures that learners experienced. This was an issue for ESOL learners that had experienced high levels of anxiety because of trauma and life circumstances. As a result, one manager reported that “CBAL staff have an increased awareness of the importance of reducing any learning-related stress while retaining a degree of challenge in activities” (Fiona). A practitioner in another LA reported that “instead of putting on the same ALN classes we did confidence-building, cookery and walking groups because the learners said that they wanted to do more practical things” (Julie). These approaches arose from the recognition of the challenges that most learners faced, particularly in the light of increased levels of poverty in Scotland (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2020). This meant for some that the focus of learning needed to be on helping people to get the financial support they were

entitled to because “when you meet people that are vulnerable you want to make sure that you are helping them with all of their lives otherwise they can’t find the space to learn” (Jean).

*Giving to others* is a key aspect of CBAL especially in relation to seeing yourself as linked to the wider community. Many felt that the pandemic had made the camaraderie that developed amongst face-to-face groups, which was an important part of looking outward, harder to achieve. Nevertheless, some aspects of online learning such as seeing where people were connecting from, enabled participants to react to each other in a more rounded way. Pre-pandemic, many learners ended up as volunteers in ways that connected them with the people around them. One tutor, working in job clubs, reported that former participants often came back to help current learners, and this had led to lots of peer support within the group. He also pointed out that “increasing social integration is part of the holistic program that I offer to learners” (Rory). Until the restrictions of the pandemic were lifted, however, this aspect of giving to others was difficult to achieve.

Many participants said that learners had seen their online classes as an important contribution to their wellbeing. For example, one tutor reported that a learner had said “just coming to the group has helped him survive” (Rory), and another learner (in a different LA) said on a feedback form that “it gives me something to get up for on a Friday” (Julie). A practitioner argued that “what we do makes a difference to learners who inspire you to keep going. If they didn’t come along to the group, they would flounder” (Jean). Helping to overcome loneliness and isolation is key to improving people’s health and wellbeing (Marmot et al., 2020) and participants provided many examples of how CBAL achieved this. One was the experience of equality of decision-making that

learners had in their groups. This ability to take more control helped to reduce stress and anxiety at the individual level and increased a sense of trust and belonging at the community level. Being part of a cooperative group also reduced isolation and loneliness because people’s strengths, rather than their deficits, were recognized. The wide curricula that learners were offered, that reflected the interests, strengths, and needs of each participant, also contributed to their wellbeing especially where time was created for reflection.

## Discussion

These findings show the negative consequences of reduced funding and the lack of recognition of CBAL. These include having to apply for external funding to address gaps in services that took staff away from teaching, taking time to explain CBAL’s contribution to other services (including schools and health and social care), the lack of suitable equipment and digital learning platforms for both staff and learners, and difficulties in providing training and support in digital technologies for part-time tutoring staff. The first two were reported to be long-standing issues but they provide the context in which many of the difficulties experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic have been exacerbated. ALN provision was particularly impacted because it was difficult to proactively engage learners in programs and similar issues have been reported by Beattie (2022) in the United States. Peer learning was also adversely affected because the digital platforms did not allow easy interaction. All these issues have been replicated across many Western countries and show the ‘systemic fragility of lifelong learning’ (Milana et al., 2021) when resources are scarce.

The impact of pre-existing digital inequalities on adult education programs was also a shared commonality. For example, Housel (2021) reported

that many students in the United States “had to rely on mobile phones with limited data plans that obstructed their abilities to engage in distance learning productively” (p.1). What the findings from Scotland contribute is the concrete action that practitioners took to respond to and mitigate these difficulties. By keeping learner-centered solutions to the forefront, this study’s participants have shown how they created imaginative responses by developing resources and providing one-to-one support that enabled learners to participate in ways they were comfortable with. Practitioners also secured computing equipment for those that needed it and provided learning in safe outdoor spaces for learners that could not manage online. The activities that were negotiated with learners were also changed and included adjustments to the pace of learning in ways that gave learners a space to think as well as using activities such as cooking or digital skills that promoted confidence building.

Findings from the UK and Canada (James & Thériault, 2020) and the United States (Babb et al., 2021) show that the pandemic requirements to socially distance and shift from in-person classes to online learning, meant that learners received less social and emotional support from friends, family, peers, and staff leading to an increase in mental ill-health. This Scottish research has been able to illuminate the practices that help to alleviate some of these issues. Of particular importance were the myriad ways in which adults were engaged in education and practitioners continued to reach the most vulnerable groups through adjusting the curriculum, caring for the whole person, and recognizing their strengths. The effectiveness of CBAL in promoting good mental health is clear from the examples provided by participants and, in addition, Hammond’s (2004) research demonstrates that “providing challenges that learners can meet is important in

terms of building self-esteem... [and enhances] all health outcomes through enabling individuals to see their lives in a broader context” (p.566). This broader context starts from a negotiated curriculum, based on the learners’ needs, that emphasizes the knowledge that participants bring and leads to increasing skills, confidence, and self-respect (Tett, 2019).

In this research, CBAL’s effectiveness in promoting health and wellbeing was recognized by other professions that had direct experience of partnerships with practitioners. Although such partnerships took time, the investment was worthwhile in improving targeted support for learners. Working in silos is a common experience across educational systems (Zhang & Perkins, 2022) so this is an interesting finding. It appeared to work because practitioners invested time in developing these partnerships since it resulted in better services for learners. In several cases this was helped by the provision of CPD for colleagues from other services so that the benefits of the learner-centered way of working in CBAL were clear.

Despite the intense pressure from the increased workloads caused by having to find new ways of working with learners, as well as not always having the equipment necessary to enable high quality teaching and learning to take place, practitioners persisted. What kept them going was being part of a professional learning community that supported them to stay true to their values and commitment to adult learning. This professional culture of being open and responsive to learners and making use of their wider experience, enabled them to focus on engaging learners and respecting the knowledge that they brought with them. Practitioners were able to support each other through online CPD sessions at both the local and national levels and

these spaces enabled them to continue to work in the ways that they valued based on empathy and committed engagement with learners. These shared understandings of “good practice” were developed through interactions with colleagues that reinforced a collective understanding of what were fundamental principles for delivering CBAL programs.

The resilience that the Scottish practitioners showed has also been displayed by people working in adult education in other countries who have gone above and beyond their duties in supporting students and their communities (James & Thériault, 2020). As Housel (2021) argues, to be effective, practitioners “must be approachable and accessible and be mindful of each student’s unique learning needs” (p. 2) and it appears that practitioners in empowerment-focused CBAL have striven to do exactly this even in the difficult situations generated by COVID-19.

## Conclusion

This article has used a case-study from Scotland to illustrate both the impact of the undervaluing and underfunding of CBAL and the important role it played during the COVID-19 pandemic in reducing digital inequalities and mental health issues. It has shown that the issues experienced in Scotland are also present in other Western countries and therefore this article has contributed to research by detailing the concrete actions of Scottish practitioners in alleviating some of these inequalities.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in education, health, and income especially in the UK and the United States (Bambra et al., 2020; Milana et al., 2021) and this research has illustrated how low income and educational and digital inequalities all interact to multiply disadvantages. So, at a time of increasing inequality, it is heartening to see that the most disadvantaged learners have strong advocates in CBAL practitioners. However, social justice requires that the impact of broader social and economic inequalities on access to education should be addressed through structural changes rather than individual effort. Leading surveys like the OECD’s Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) show that adults with lower levels of education, lower paying jobs, and lack of or insufficient employment are least likely to participate in adult learning and the impact of COVID-19 has further exposed the inequalities in the education that is accessible to the most and least advantaged. As Boeren and colleagues argue: “Adult education should be at the forefront of providing everyone with a fair chance to develop their abilities and to put them to valuable use. This can be done both in the community and in the workplace and needs to be supported by governments across the world in a bid to heal economic and social wounds” (2000, p.203). As researchers we all have a responsibility to help to make the case to our governments about CBAL’s role in helping to address inequalities and the concrete examples from Scotland of effective interventions have illuminated how a more equitable education might be provided.

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