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# “Life-changing things happen”

How residential adult education  
transforms learning and lives

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*I think what this place does is it encourages new thinking and it makes you question systems and how they work. And most people have grown in terms of thinking, there's still going to be people that aren't prepared to do that, but most people are politically engaged now. It's, I can't explain what it is about it, but it breeds a thing of openness and ... the confidence to be able to articulate yourself and not feel like an idiot ... It's like it really does allow free thinking.*

*(Female student, Northern College.)*

The research on which this report is based was commissioned by the residential Institutes of Adult Learning. The research was undertaken by Professor John Holford, Robert Peers Professor of Adult Education, and Dr Sharon Clancy, Senior Research Fellow in Adult Education, at the University of Nottingham. Rebecca Suart, who kindly acted as a volunteer interviewer at Northern College, is currently undertaking a PhD at the University of Nottingham, supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

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# Executive Summary

This research, commissioned by the residential Institutions for Adult Learning (IAL) in April 2017, aims to determine the value of the residential component in adult and lifelong education. Its particular focus is on the possibilities for an intensified and accelerated learning process, leading to personal transformation, which can result from engagement with both the short course and the Access course programmes within a residential context.

In May 2017, a series of interviews took place with current and former staff and students at Ruskin College, Northern College, Fircroft College and Hillcroft College. Of 41 interviews undertaken, most were one-to-one; however, each College also offered staff and student focus groups. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. The headline findings are:

- Residential education plays a powerful role in and accelerating and deepening learning experiences for adults.
- The experience is particularly valuable for those who have faced extraordinary personal and societal challenges. Many students come with specific barriers to learning – such as ADHD, epilepsy, dyslexia, mental health or anxiety issues. These have often gone undiagnosed at school. The second chance learning opportunities for such people are a unique and invaluable social resource.
- The college settings – their grounds and historic buildings – confer feelings of worth on students who have been subject to social exclusion. As one student commented, they are “usually heritage sites or for the 1%”.
- The colleges generate a sense of safety, security, retreat and refuge for people often stepping out of difficult home lives. Particularly important are the provision of quiet spaces for learning (such as libraries and computer suites), which should be open for 24 hours, and individual, private rooms with *en suite* facilities (except Hillcroft).
- Hillcroft College is a uniquely important learning space and sanctuary for women – especially those escaping domestic abuse or sexual violence. The space and support networks it provides create a feeling of trust and safety, which is crucial.

- In the residential setting, experiential learning from the group – ongoing discussion and debate after classes and in informal interactions – leads to an intensity of learning experience and real intimacy. The absence of rigid formality helps learning.
- Pastoral and academic support at the colleges is substantial, vital and highly valued by the students. It is provided not only by tutorial staff, but also informally by all categories of support and operational staff.
- The small size of the colleges means students can get to know tutors and feel they can approach them as equals.
- Access to Higher Education courses, leading to vocational qualifications in areas such as Health and Social Sciences, Social Work, Youth Work, etc., open up access to the job market, even for older learners.
- The college experience fosters critical thinking and understandings of politics and society which challenge mainstream and establishment views: it “changes the way we think about the world”.
- Seminar-style classes play an important role in encouraging debate and discussion – in turning the college into “a poor man’s Eton”. The education on offer provides adult students with “the tools to learn anything”, to test and experiment without “fear of failure”.
- The colleges’ ethos, curricula and traditions foster an “ethic of service” and social justice. Students and alumni take their compassion and understanding back to their own communities. They have a keen awareness of the contribution of “emotional labour” to community and solidarity. The dominant aspiration is to work in social care, the care sector or the voluntary sector, helping others access what they have had.
- The colleges’ educational outreach, community engagement and advocacy promote the colleges formally and informally, including through word of mouth, at job centres, community organisations, etc.

The financial cost of the residential colleges – an almost minute element of the educational budget – is nevertheless of overwhelming value both in the lives of individuals and communities across the country, and for maintaining a unique and constantly innovative tradition of second-chance education, particularly for the most vulnerable in society.

# “Life-changing things happen”

## How residential adult education transforms learning and lives

### Background

*Second chance education is about putting right what went wrong in schools; it is about acquiring the skills the nation needs, it is about confidence and personal well-being, which in turn leads to more fulfilled employees and citizens who are less reliant on state support and leads to the bonus of improved productivity and a more competitive and successful economy (LEA FEA highlights impact of further cuts in adult education in forthcoming spending review, 19 October 2015, Accessed 23 May 2017<sup>1</sup>).*

*Viewing adult education as the poor relation of schools and universities misses the point entirely. Rather than being a drain on the public purse, it is as an investment that leads to improved skills and greater productivity (Lola Okolosie, The Guardian, 26 March, 2015).*

Adult education, at its best, provides for new learning throughout life – not only improved professional skills, or better training to render people more employable, or better cultural habits, but also intellectual growth, transformation and change. It is not a veneer, to be offered – or not – by governmental whim, but an essential response to lifelong human ingenuity and mental and cognitive plasticity.

The education of adults has a long vital and complex history in England. It remains important to educational debate. In Britain, before the 1944 Education Act, many young people left school at 14, often to seek work, and to contribute to the economic needs of the

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<sup>1</sup> LEA FEA (Local Education Authorities' Forum for the Education of Adults) represents a network of 250-plus adult and community learning provider members and is a sector membership body for Local Authority Community Learning (ACL) services with local network membership groups in most areas of the country. There are more than 150 providers with membership of the organisation.

family. They might then have looked to gain an education later as 'second chance' learners. However, 'second chance' education is still necessary for many people in contemporary society. Despite the uplift in education and qualifications overall, some people do not fare well in primary and secondary education. The barriers to their learning are not primarily a failure of individual effort or agency but are connected with societal and familial issues which can disrupt compulsory schooling. These might include, for instance, growing up as a looked-after child where education is patchy or inconsistent, engaging in early drug use, family break up, having an undiagnosed mental health issue or learning disability.

Feedback from one of the colleges which forms part of the Institutes for Adult Learning (IAL) network suggests that mental health-related issues are becoming a growing concern for educators; this is supported by evidence across the further education sector.<sup>2</sup> There is a ruthlessness about the speed and pace of life today which many people feel leaves them behind. It is important to note that, at a time when many of its structures and institutions are coming under increasing financial pressure, adult learning remains a critical point of debate.

While much of the emphasis in current debate is on young adults, the picture is more complex, with a very diverse group of adult learners seeking to learn at different points in their lives. According to the Association of Colleges, in the year 2016/17:

- 1.9 million adults study or train in colleges;
- Students aged 19 and over in further education generate an additional £70bn for the economy over their lifetimes;
- 30% of adults in colleges are from an ethnic minority background;
- There are 200,000 adult apprentices;
- 106,000 college students are aged 60 and over.

Les Ebdon, Director of Fair Access to Higher Education at the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) recently argued that the dramatic (61%) decline in the numbers of mature part-time and full-time learners in Higher Education since 2010 (HESA) is evidence that many

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<sup>2</sup> An Association of Colleges survey (2015) found that in 66% of respondent colleges "the number of students with mental health difficulties had 'significantly increased' in the past three years with a further 20% saying they had 'slightly increased'". In addition, "75% felt that their college had 'significant numbers' of students who had undisclosed mental health difficulties", while all reported having students with depression, anxiety, or who were self-harming. 97% of respondent colleges reported having students with psychosis.

widening participation (WP) activities are not working – or are much better at reaching potential students of school-leaving age. As an Open University report points out, “Most current WP outreach activity focuses on interventions in schools, partly because policy makers can appear infatuated with getting 18 year-olds from under-represented groups into selective universities” (Open University, 2017, p.4).

Professor Ebdon also urges colleges and universities to “reach out to prospective adult learners”, who are more likely to be part-time learners and from specifically under-represented groups such as students from white working class backgrounds, from certain BME groups and students with disabilities:

*While we shouldn't be tempted to consider adult learners as one homogenous group, we do know that they are disproportionately more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds than those who enter higher education straight from school. We also know that adult learners are far more likely to study part-time. And with the dramatic decline in part-time numbers since 2010 showing no sign of levelling off, numbers of adult learners look set to continue dropping unless drastic action is taken (Offa, 2017, Foreword).*

The Offa report (2017) notes that the decline in part-time and mature learners “shows no sign of levelling off”. OFFA regards the increasing decline in the number of part-time students as “deeply worrying” and sees this issue as “hindering social mobility targets” (Offa, 2017, p.3). The report refers to part-time and mature learners as an “all-too invisible” disadvantaged group.

The current situation with adult learning is in flux. On 28 March 2017 the Government announced that the Education Funding Agency and the Skills Funding Agency would merge to form one body – the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) – from April 2017. The new body is responsible for the funding of education for 5-16 year olds, of education and training for 16-19 year olds, of apprenticeships and adult education, and for managing school building programmes.

Local Authority funding is no longer the main source of public funding for adult education provision. Local and newly Combined Authorities are now accountable for the allocation of funds, though the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), which are the voluntary partnerships established between local authorities and businesses, are to take a lead role. The LEPs were set up in 2011 by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Their objective is to help determine local economic priorities and lead economic growth and job



creation within the local area. Barnes, Hughes and Adriaanse (2016) point out that the critical role given to the enterprise and employability perspective raises the risk that the importance of the wider benefits of learning, including improving health and well-being, will be downplayed or lost under the new arrangements.

In 2016 the then Skills Funding Agency stated: “The government is seeking to transfer control of the Adult Education Budget to local government areas through devolution agreements. The intention is that the offer should align with other local arrangements and tackle the economic priorities and productivity challenges a high-performing skills system should meet”<sup>3</sup>.

According to the Association of Colleges, which represents 335 public further education colleges, in their briefing for MPs on *Night schools and adult education*, the current Adult Education Budget allocation differs considerably from how it was used in the early 2000s. At that time, they suggest, “the government spent around £3 billion a year ... on education and training for those over 19” (AoC, 2017, p. 1). In 2016/17 it allocated £3 billion to the Skills Funding Agency but this was to be split in “very different ways”: £260 million was allocated via FE loans (and “not all of it is being used”), with £1 billion going to apprenticeships for those over 19:

*This leaves £1.5 billion for the Adult Education Budget and £0.3 billion for a variety of national programmes (National Careers Service, financial support, data collection, SFA’s own costs). Given inflation over the last 15 years, this adds up to a cut in government spending on adult education of almost two-thirds (AoC, 2017, p.2).*

Effectively, this means that non-apprenticeship funding now comprises a considerably smaller proportion of a reduced adult education budget. Moreover, a refocusing of budgets towards apprenticeships means that adult education in terms of basic skills, school-level qualifications, vocational courses delivered by colleges and personal and social learning (community education and learning for interest) is becoming less widespread in England.

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<sup>3</sup> Adult education budget funding and performance management rules Version 3 - For the 2016 to 2017 funding year (1 August 2016 to 31 July 2017), Skills Funding Agency, p.3.

The AoC notes that the number of adult students in Regulated Qualifications Framework<sup>4</sup> Level 3 courses fell by 17.9 per cent between 2012/13 and 2013/14. The lack of provision for those over 19 causes particular concerns, as “the proportion of over-50s in the workforce is set to rise to a third of the workforce by 2020 (from 27 per cent at the moment) and 50 per cent of workers aged over 55 are proposing to work beyond the state pension age” (AoC 2017).

Although the primary focus of the adult education budget is on young people, changes to financial support for young learners has been an area of concern (ATL, 2013). The Education Maintenance Allowance, introduced by the Labour government to increase the financial viability of continuation in study for young people aged 16-19 from less well-off backgrounds, was abolished by the Coalition government in 2013, although loans were made available for further education for those aged over 24. However, as taking on a loan can be especially prohibitive for part-time and mature learners, it has in no way stemmed the decline.

### Institutes of Adult Learning

The Institutes of Adult Learning (IALs) are independent adult education organisations offering short and long-term courses, both non-vocational and skills-based. There are nine IALs. What distinguishes the nine IALs from other colleges of Further Education is that they are independently constituted charities, regulated by their own trust deeds.

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<sup>4</sup>The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) was introduced in 2015 to replace the Qualifications and Credit framework (QCF), which described levels of vocational qualifications, and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which described levels of general school qualifications. It ranges from Entry Level to Level 8, and covers learning in schools, colleges, and vocational training. It maps on to the Further & Higher Education Qualifications framework (FHEQ) and the European Qualifications Framework ([https://www.naric.org.uk/europass/documents/ds\\_chart.pdf](https://www.naric.org.uk/europass/documents/ds_chart.pdf)). Responsibility for the RQF lies with the Office of Qualifications and Examinations (Ofqual), and the FHEQ with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). There is therefore a mapping of equivalent levels in different forms of education, but not a single comprehensive framework.

The IALs comprise the Workers' Educational Association<sup>5</sup>, with regions and branches across the country, four colleges in London – the City Lit<sup>6</sup> in Covent Garden, with a remit covering all of London, Morley<sup>7</sup> College, which focuses on Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham, the Working Men's College (WMC)<sup>8</sup>, now branded as The Camden College, and the Mary Ward Centre<sup>9</sup>, serving Kings Cross and Holborn – and four residential colleges with a regional and/or national remit: Fircroft College, in Selly Oak, Birmingham; Hillcroft College, in Surbiton, Surrey; Ruskin College in Old Headington, Oxford; and Northern College, in Stainborough, Barnsley, South Yorkshire.

The focus of this research is on the four IAL residential colleges: Fircroft, Hillcroft, Ruskin and Northern colleges. The residential colleges are unique in the sphere of further and adult education. It is noteworthy that out of the Adult Skills Budget of £1.5 billion, only £13 million is allocated to residential education.

## Historical Context

All four IAL colleges have long and illustrious histories of educational experiment and innovation. Developing in the early and mid-twentieth century, they responded to social and political shifts which brought growing demands for emancipatory education for working people. Their ethos emphasised the whole person and the cultivation of individual well-

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<sup>5</sup> The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) was founded in 1903 by Albert Mansbridge (1876-1952), its Secretary until 1915. The son of a carpenter, he was largely self-taught and a passionate advocate of adult education. The WEA takes an approach which focuses on giving people the tools to improve their own circumstances, building capacity at a community level, tackling social and economic disadvantage and promoting values of citizenship and democratic engagement.

<sup>6</sup> City Lit opened in 1919 as part of London's literary institute movement, which came into being after the First World War, and of which City Lit is the sole survivor out of the 16 that once operated. The City Lit now claims to be Europe's largest provider of short courses for adults.

<sup>7</sup> Morley College, opened in 1889, is one of the country's oldest and largest specialist providers of adult education, with a particular focus on providing adult education in arts, culture and applied sciences to the communities of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham.

<sup>8</sup> The WMC was founded in 1854 and was associated with the Cooperative Movement and Christian Socialism. The Working Women's College, founded 10 years later in 1864, merged with WMC in 1967.

<sup>9</sup> The Mary Ward Centre was originally a Settlement House. Mary Ward campaigned vigorously for the construction of a new Settlement in the St Pancras-Holborn area. In 1897 the settlement moved to a new purpose-built Arts and Crafts building in Tavistock Place; it moved to Queen Square in 1982. It remains a settlement organization; its aim is to "promote public education and social service for the benefit of the community".

being, placing considerable emphasis on learning communally, and on understanding others and learning from them how to live a useful and productive life.

This approach developed from several sources. In Britain the labour and trade union movement, and the Quakers, were influential. But the residential colleges have been heavily influenced by the Danish Folk High School movement, originally conceived by Bishop Nikolai Frederik Grundtvig (1783-1872), the Danish educational thinker and writer. He was certain that being a productive human being was best achieved in a citizenship-based residential setting where the stimulus of conversation and the balm of kindness and community were at least as important as books. The emphasis at the Folk High Schools was on creating a microcosm of society, bringing together post-school age people from all walks of life on a residential basis to talk and debate important issues, as a critical part of the educational process. Key to the approach was the concept of 'enlivenment', or *animering* in the Danish (meaning 'to animate'). Enlivenment was a pedagogical approach in which the emphasis was placed on teachers speaking directly from the heart on subjects they found inspiring, creating opportunities for students to construct their own curriculum, based on subjects which interested and stimulated them, and which allowed for debate and discussion in small groups. It allowed for individuals to take charge of their own learning, building confidence through hands-on and experiential learning in atelier-style workshops. The distinction between teacher and learner was minimised, with the view that both tutor and student could learn from each other. Its primary objective was to support authenticity – a real love of the subject, an authentic connection between student and teacher and an intellectual freedom. Such experiments in “progressive, holistic education” foster an “engaged pedagogy” which, as bell hooks has described it, “emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved and committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (hooks, 1994, p. 15). In other words, the teacher/student relationship is based on mutual well-being and empowerment.

Thomas Hardy (1912) recorded that some of his readers had told him “Ruskin College... should have been called the College of Jude the Obscure” (p. xi). A major government report just after the First World War noted that Fircroft’s students were engaged in manual occupations; almost all had left school at or before 14, and “reside[d] at the college for periods varying from a few weeks to a year”. An inspector had noted the “stimulus” the

college offered students, “the wide variety of interests opened out to them” and the importance of “a common life and fellowship” (Ministry of Reconstruction 1919, p. 74).

Commenting on Ruskin, the report continued:

*The importance of the pioneer work done ... in proving that adult students can pass direct from their occupations into an academic atmosphere, derive much educational benefit from it, and return to apply their knowledge to practical affairs, can hardly be exaggerated. (p. 76)*

By the early 1970s, Fircroft, Hillcroft and Ruskin were well-established as “long-term residential colleges” for adults – long term in the sense that they offered courses of one or two years’ duration, and contrasting with the network of “short-term residential colleges”, which offered courses typically lasting a week or less, and generally under the aegis of local education authorities.

In the century since the Ministry of Reconstruction’s report in 1919, only one substantial government committee of inquiry has examined adult education: the Russell committee in 1973. It took the view that:

*It is essential to keep open an alternative route for the adult late developers, especially those from unpromising environments whose perceptions of the possibility of higher education come only in mature life. The long-term residential colleges have an impressive record in creating such opportunities, not only as an entry to university or college, but as a form of higher education in their own right. ... (p. 83)*

The colleges, it found, had

*a remarkable record of finding men and women from unpromising backgrounds and developing their intellectual capacities and personalities so that they have gone on to make important contributions to society. The colleges have done this by developing, each in its own way, an ethos which combines the traditions of liberal adult education with academically demanding courses and a strong community spirit. Several factors, all deriving from the fact of residence, have contributed to this ethos ... [including] the stimulus of cultural activities, and the close contract with other students sharing similar aspirations and problems but drawn from all parts of the country and many other parts of the world. Full-time study makes sustained intellectual demands and, when combined with individual tuition and the full life of the college, produces more rapid intellectual growth than is possible under conditions of part-time study. None of this would be within the reach of, for example, students from deprived backgrounds without the change in environment and the temporary release from voluntary activities that a residential course offers. (p. 84)*

The Russell committee recommended that “consideration should be given to the establishment of one further [long-term residential] college in the northern half of England”

(p. 85); Northern College, dubbed “the Ruskin of the North”, opened in 1978. Both Ruskin and Northern Colleges in particular had strong links with the trade union and labour movements: until the 1980s at least their focus was on “the promotion in a residential setting of liberal education for working class students, recruited mainly from the trade unions” (Pollins, 1984, p.63).

Since the 1980s, the terrain of residential adult education has changed radically. As public finances became increasingly tight, many “short-term” colleges were forced to close, while the “long-term” colleges have had to reposition themselves. At their height, in 1967, a booklet produced by NIAE (the then National Institute of Adult Education) outlining the courses available at the time, showed a list of 25 short-term adult education colleges, many based in stately homes or buildings of historic interest. The long-term residential colleges, such as Ruskin and Fircroft, have been forced to adapt in various ways: while maintaining a commitment to second-chance learning for adults, and to residence, their curricula have evolved in subject-matter and length and level of courses.<sup>10</sup> Short courses are often now offered, as well as longer courses. In this respect, one observation the Russell Report made in relation to the significance of residence in the short-term colleges should be noted. It pointed to the colleges’ capacity for a range of innovation. They had, it found, been able to

*experiment and to pioneer a wide variety of different courses for a range of adult students who do not usually attend classes .... The element common to this work is the exploitation of the appeal of and the advantages arising from a short period of residence, chiefly the concentration of effort and the opportunity for informal group discussion” (p.45)*

Extending residential adult education would support andragogical experimentation and innovation. What might appear as ephemerality was part of the appeal of the residential colleges, enabling them to attract students who would not normally attend adult education courses.

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<sup>10</sup> Though outside the remit of this report, it is worth noting that, despite diversifying, Coleg Harlech, opened in 1927 and for most of the twentieth century the only “long-term residential college” in Wales, closes as a site of adult education at the end of the 2016/17 academic year.

## The Changing Context of Educational Debate

As we now know, shortly after the Russell Report appeared, the political context changed radically. By 1976 the value of “liberal education” was being contested across all areas of education. On October 18<sup>th</sup> 1976, James Callaghan, the then Labour Prime Minister, spoke at Ruskin College.<sup>11</sup> This speech is regarded as an important milestone in 'the Great Debate' about the purpose and nature of public education. He referred to a university sector with high numbers of students studying in Humanities subjects, whilst science subjects were neglected. He advocated for “higher standards” in the workplace and the importance of training in response to new “legislation on health and safety at work, employment protection and industrial change”. During a period of intense economic crisis, culminating in soaring inflation, which had peaked at 24.2% in 1975,<sup>12</sup> and the dramatic reining-in of public expenditure as a result, Callaghan’s government sought to focus education on fitting the individual for working life and playing a role in the economic machine. As Callaghan expressed it:

*There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills. Nor at the other extreme must they be technically efficient robots. Both of the basic purposes of education require the same essential tools. These are basic literacy, basic numeracy, the understanding of how to live and work together, respect for others, respect for the individual (Callaghan, 1976).*

With the election of a Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher in 1979, this trend intensified. It is now well-established as the dominant theme in policy at all levels of education, and not only nationally but internationally. This emphasis on skills and work-readiness does, of course, contrast with the liberal adult educational approaches within which the residential colleges had developed, and which remain a hallmark of their approach and ethos now. Managing the tension between the ideals and traditions that

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<sup>11</sup> James Callaghan’s speech (18th October 1976) has been widely reprinted. The text is available online at: <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html>.

<sup>12</sup>Retail Price Index: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/timeseries/czbh/mm23>, Accessed 24 April 2017.

underpin their sense of educational purpose, and the narrow vocationalism of policy debate, has been a major challenge for the colleges over recent decades.

Structurally, the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 took colleges of Further Education out of local authority control and they set up as freestanding public bodies. The small group of long-term residential colleges were registered as 'specialist designated institutions' (SDI). The SDIs differ from other colleges of Further Education in being independently constituted charities, regulated by their own trust deeds. They all also receive public funding from the Education Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

The "long-term" or "short-term" nature of the courses which used to differentiate the colleges has now become largely irrelevant, with most offering a mixture of both types of courses. Broader debates continue about the nature of adult education and what public funding should support.

## The Colleges

The four colleges studied – all the residential Institutes of Adult Learning – were:

### Fircroft College

Fircroft, the smallest of the four residential adult education colleges in England, was founded in 1909 by George Cadbury Jr., grandson of Cadbury's co-founder, John. It is based in his former family home, set in six acres of gardens, four miles from the centre of Birmingham. It was originally created to provide educational opportunities for some of the most disadvantaged and excluded members of society and it remains committed to its social justice mission. Many of its students are still referred by partner agencies working with groups furthest from learning.

In 2015/16 Fircroft offered 193 residential short courses, specifically Personal Development and Functional Skills, primarily aimed at adults with few or no previous qualifications. 43.9% of this group were disabled. Students were generally residential for 2 to 3 nights, between Monday evening and Sunday afternoon. Such courses lead on to Level 2 progression programmes. The College also offered a full-time Access to Higher Education programme for 20 learners, who were mainly residential.



Currently all of Fircroft's courses are accredited and are delivered on a residential basis or on-site. This is currently under review, with consideration being given to more outreach provision. Whilst the college's ESFA funding previously came entirely from within the Adult Skills Budget, 86% of its funding in 2016/17 is coming from the Community Learning budget.

### Hillcroft College

Hillcroft College was founded in 1920, as a Residential Working Women's College, in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. It was initially based in a large house in Buckinghamshire but in 1926 it moved to its current location in Surbiton and this was also the point at which the college became known as Hillcroft College.

Hillcroft is the only publicly funded women only college in the country. In 2015/16 82% of learners reported Widening Participation indicators such as caring responsibilities, being in recovery from substance misuse, disrupted education, seeking refuge from domestic violence and/or a disability. Over the last four years there has been a significant increase in the number of learners disclosing a disability (67% in 2015/16). This includes a significant and increasing proportion of learners disclosing mental health issues and dyslexia. The provision of an on-site counsellor has been very well-received. The students are generally between 21 and 60 years of age. There are now far more students with low prior attainment – below Level 1 – and over 70% are unemployed.

The College attracts a significant number of students from BME backgrounds. It draws students from the Greater London area as well as further afield due to its unique single sex nature.

### Northern College

Northern College was founded in 1978 and is an adult residential college based at Wentworth Castle in Barnsley, South Yorkshire. Its explicit objective remains to provide transformational residential and community education for the empowerment of people without formal qualifications who are seeking to return to learning, as well as training for those who are active in community and voluntary groups and in trade unions. The College retains strong links with the WEA.

The college has established progression routes in the broad curriculum areas of Humanities, Social Sciences and Computing, meaning students can move from entry level or non-accredited provision through to the full time Access to HE Diploma and beyond. The college attracts a broadly even mix of men and women, some of whom come into residence with their families, the children attending the on-site Children's Centre.

In 2016/17 44% of students declared a disability or learning difficulty and 77% were unemployed; individuals and groups who need support due to mental health issues or drug or alcohol abuse access the College via its links with a variety of voluntary and support groups in the region and families are able to take advantage of intergenerational learning opportunities. The college continues to offer education for trade union activists and teacher education with a focus on social purpose education, often for those active in the voluntary sector rather than traditional education providers.

## Ruskin College

Ruskin College is the oldest of the four residential colleges and was founded in 1899, with a view to providing educational opportunities for working class men; as the *Oxford and Working Class Education* Report (1908) reported, "to give working men, and especially those likely to take a leading part in the Working-class Movement, an education which will help them in acquiring the knowledge essential to intelligent citizenship" (University of Oxford, 1908, p.8).

Out of the student body, 50 (80) students live on site and 200 are non-residential full time and up to 2,000 part-time. Access to HE courses are a significant attraction, leading on to vocational qualifications in Health and Social Sciences, particularly in the areas of social work and youth work etc. Ruskin also offers placement arrangements with hospitals and social work settings. Other popular courses include Applied Social Sciences, Creative Writing/Arts, Maths, English and the Certificate in H.E. Pre-Access courses – for brushing up on skills –which is 10 weeks in duration. Ruskin tends to attract most students from within a 50 mile radius.

Ruskin still places central importance on offering second chance learning opportunities for people who have often faced (and dealt with) extraordinary personal and societal challenges and focuses on opening up access to the job market, even for older learners.

It retains strong links with the unions and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) – for instance, Unionlearn<sup>13</sup> offers its TUC short courses programme at Ruskin. The Unite union community membership programme also meets at Ruskin. Ruskin College supports both the national and regional programmes for Unite and the CWU. As Pollins commented during the seismic shifts of the early 1980s, “Ruskin, like other institutions, has adapted to changing circumstances, the stimulus coming from a variety of sources” (Pollins, 1984, p.62). It continues to adapt, as do all the residential colleges, by both necessity and design.

In 2016/17 the four colleges had a total of **10,150** student enrolments on Further Education courses and **271** student enrolments on Higher Education courses.

## Methodology and Theory

During May 2017, a series of interviews took place with current and former staff and students at Ruskin College (Sharon Clancy and John Holford, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> May), Northern College (Sharon Clancy and Rebecca Suart, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> May), Fircroft College (Sharon Clancy, 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> May) and Hillcroft College (Sharon Clancy, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> May). All of the 41 interviews were recorded digitally at the time and all were later transcribed. Most of the interviews took place face to face, though a few (at Hillcroft) were undertaken by telephone (and recorded simultaneously). The majority of the interviews were one-to-one in nature, though each College made focus groups of multiple students – and also staff – available.

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<sup>13</sup> The Trades Union Congress (TUC) Education Service, called Unionlearn, runs courses for shop stewards, union officers and health and safety representatives. According to the Unionlearn website, “over the past 12 years, more than 30,000 union learning representatives (ULRs) have been trained and more than 220,000 people are being given training and learning opportunities through their union every year. Unionlearn is also responsible for providing education and training opportunities for workplace reps and professionals via TUC Education. Each year, more than 50,000 trade union reps enrol in trade union education courses organised by the TUC” ([www.unionlearn.org.uk](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk), Accessed May 12 2017).

Each interviewee or focus group participant was issued with a description of the project which outlined the key interview questions which were to be covered, as well as the context of the research. All participants were asked to read and complete an informed consent form, which outlined the ethical parameters for the research and allowed for total anonymisation. Ethical approval was given by the University of Nottingham in April 2017.

The interviews were of no more than an hour's duration and some were half an hour in length. Each interview examined the following key areas:

- Does residential learning intensify and accelerate the learning process? Do the specific settings of the Colleges have an impact?
- What is the importance of the residential learning community and the group learning experience?
- Does this differ depending on the type of course i.e. non-vocational or skills-based?
- What impact has the College learning had on longer-term personal and professional development?

All interview recordings will ultimately be stored in the respective College archive.

### “Bathing in Data”

The recorded interviews were analysed according to the themes/areas explored in the questions, enabling a recoupling of the social and the personal. This approach is consistent with the theoretical positioning utilised in the development of this report which places as much emphasis on the interviewee's 'situated context' over a celebration of the 'idiosyncrasies of the individual, locating life *history* in contradistinction to life *story*, with the researcher and the 'story teller' working collaboratively to achieve an inter-textual and inter-contextual account. Ivor Goodson has argued that:

*In studying learning, like any social practice, we need to build in an understanding of the context, historical and social, in which that learning takes place (Goodson, p. 11).*

Goodson also describes the process of achieving connection with a large body of data through a narrative analysis methodology, which Goodson referred to as “bathing in data”—a state of complete immersion, without judgement, in the material from which key themes and strands emerge: “I adopt a process of immersion, or what I call ‘bathing in the data’. I read and re-read the transcripts noting emergent and then recurrent themes; organising the quotes into clusters” (Goodson, 2008, p.4). This allows for a system of codification which

moves from individual testimony to translated material and facilitates thematic cross comparisons between the interviewees. This approach emphasises what is said and the time and place of narration, and allows for comparison across different types of material. It is respectful of the stories told, by keeping them 'intact' and allowing for analysis of long sequences. It also enables a process of 'imaginative reconstruction', or 'narrative imagination', which connects with Martha Nussbaum's definition of the process of successfully reading another person's story. This is described by Nussbaum as a means of unpicking and exploring how we best engender the capacity to discriminate and to think critically and empathically across boundaries of distinction and difference, in contemporary society, and at a range of levels. She described this capability as the 'narrative imagination', or 'the ability to be an intelligent reader of another person's story' (Nussbaum, 1997, p.3).

### Perspectives on the Students

Mature students are more likely – as indicated above – to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, to have family and/or caring responsibilities, to have a disability and to be from a BME background (OFFA Report, 2015). They may also be more averse to taking on loans and to incurring debt. They can be people who are experiencing multiple levels of disadvantage. Too often such learners are perceived in deficit terms at a policy level, hence a slew of policies and reports describing 'at risk groups', 'the hard to reach', problematic behavioural characteristics, the need for 'Bridging the Gap' and 'Learning for All'. Many students have come from backgrounds where they have experienced real barriers to education – such as having been looked-after children, engagement in early drug use, experiencing family break up, being homeless and having an undiagnosed mental health issue or learning disability. Anxiety problems are also becoming a growing issue in a society in which speed and efficiency and an increased focus on self-worth are of the essence.

All four residential colleges place considerable emphasis on enabling vulnerable adults to reconnect with themselves as learners, to re-gain confidence – or acquire it for the first time. As the staff at Northern College expressed it - and this was a sentiment echoed throughout all the staff interviews in all the colleges – "our specialism is our students".

Deficit models focus on the individual and do not acknowledge the massive structural barriers which prevail in Austerity Britain in terms of our social class, our race, our gender or our physical and mental health. In order to move beyond a focus on ourselves as

defective and inadequate, we have to become aware of our conditions, both those which surround us structurally and socially and those which we have internalised. Otherwise we are delimited by what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called our “habitus”: this refers to the socialised norms or tendencies, the lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities that guide our behaviour and thinking. Bourdieu argued that habitus is created through a social, rather than an individual process, leading to patterns that are enduring and transferrable from one context to another, but that also shift in relation to specific contexts and over time. Habitus is both a product of free will and societal structures, effectively an interplay between the two, and comes to seem as if it has always existed. The sociologist Steph Lawler expressed this interplay, in her book *Identity* (2008):

*... we learn how to act, how to behave, what is and is not appropriate, and so on, but we rarely remember that we have learned them. They come to seem ‘natural’ – a ‘second nature’....What this suggests is that ‘taste’ is not innate but learned through the deep socialization of the habitus. Furthermore, what gets to count as ‘tasteful’ – in clothes and demeanour as much as in art and music – is what the group with the power to name things as tasteful decide is tasteful (Lawler, 2008, p. 130).*

Such learned tendencies and dispositions create a form of “cultural capital”, which we carry with us, in internalised form, and wear externally in our networks and social connections – our “social capital”. Bourdieu argued that cultural capital, like social capital, is *convertible* “into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications”, (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241). It can serve as a form of *protection for the interests of those in power, ensuring that the educational system replicates* “the reproduction of the social structure by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital” (ibid, p.241). This theorisation provides a very useful framework for understanding the structural aspects of learning and how they become encoded in human culture and within our internal mental and emotional frameworks, or habitus, by a set of acquired sensibilities, schemata, tastes and dispositions.

Once we become socially isolated, decoupled from our collective understanding of ourselves, from our community, our class and from our families, our attitudes, dispositions and tastes can become pathologised and our sense of failure individualised. Lawler described this process in terms of habitus, arguing that habitus are profoundly social and hierarchical and “carry the traces of the lines of division and distinction along which the social is organised” (Lawler, 2008, p.131). Lawler suggested that not all habitus are created equal, that they are relational – “some are normalized, while others are pathological” (ibid),

meaning that, without a collective identity, the individual can be judged as lacking if they do not possess the 'right kind' of habitus.

Richard Desjardins and Kjell Rubenson (2009), two contemporary educationalists have written extensively on adult education and lifelong learning, and have developed the concept of bounded agency. They argue that the broader structural and cultural conditions in which an individual has been raised - specifically the institutional and labour market settings and the social support available - are as important in shaping his/her response to education and future life chances and opportunities as dispositional factors, internalized conceptual frameworks or personal agency. In other words, as Karen Evans has expressed it, bounded agency requires a "re-conceptualisation of agency as a process in which past habits and routines are contextualised and future possibilities envisaged within the contingencies of the present moment" (Evans, 2007, p.86). In this sense their contemporary theory links closely with Bourdieu's concept of habitus.

Róbert (2012) makes the important point that bounded agency is especially useful as a paradigm as it recognises the complex interplay between personal/individual motivation and the social structures in which individuals are located upon their decision to engage in lifelong learning/adult education. The concept of bounded agency suggests that:

structural factors are centrally involved in individual motivation, since a person's sense of their ability to actively construct their life is shaped by the economic, social and cultural resources they are able to mobilize. People living in specially disadvantaged circumstances are less likely to engage in lifelong learning, in part because they lack the financial resources to fund their studies and believe that there will be few economic benefits. In addition, their life experiences may have reinforced a sense of powerlessness and inability to control risk (Róbert 2012, p. 88).

As Riddell (2012) has commented, learning is motivated by "an interconnected mix of intrinsic and extrinsic factors...economic instrumentalism is very far from the sole, or even the main, driver of the decision to participate in adult education". Human beings are also motivated by "the love of learning, the desire for personal growth and the urge to exert some control over future life events" (Riddell 2012, p.152). Whilst an individual's initial drive to undertake a course of learning might be economic, or at least extrinsic (skills acquisition, promotion, qualifications), Riddell argues that "the act of engaging in learning of any type

generally stirs a desire for further learning experiences” (ibid.) and that that is the reason that human capital theories are inadequate in explaining the motivation of adult learners as they place “undue emphasis on rational economic planning” (ibid.)

Amartya Sen suggested that a human capabilities model builds on earlier concepts of human capital. Whilst theories of human capital focus on the idea that “human qualities...can be employed as “capital” in production in the way physical capital is”, human capability concepts place as much importance “on the prospect of leading a worthwhile life as well as in being more productive” (Sen, 1997, p.1959). Education is a good example of the self-actualising emphasis of human capability concepts. Sen argued that “a person may benefit from education, in reading, communicating, arguing, in being able to choose in a more informed way, in being taken more seriously by others, and so on. The benefits of education, thus, exceed its role as human capital in commodity production” (Sen, 1997, p.1959).

However, whilst Sen emphasizes the plasticity and creativity implicit in human capability, he also describes a phenomenon – “adaptive preferences” – where the preferences of individuals in deprived circumstances are formed in response to their restricted options. In other words, people can internalize the harshness of their circumstances so that they do not desire what they can never expect to achieve. This suggests that personal transformation for people from disadvantaged backgrounds is unlikely.

By contrast, Jack Mezirow’s (1997), theory of transformative learning describes the kind of learning which causes a sudden recalibration of the individual’s ‘meaning perspectives’, or overall worldview – a paradigm shift in thinking – as “perspective transformation”. Such a transformation, often precipitated by what Mezirow described as a disorientating dilemma, has three dimensions: psychological (changes in understanding of the self), convictional (revision of belief systems), and behavioural (changes in lifestyle). Such a dilemma can be seismic in its impact, creating much more far-reaching change in the learner than other kinds of learning, as it impacts on all the learner’s subsequent experiences. Central to Mezirow’s theory is the role of critical reflection. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking – “in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgements, and feelings of others” (Mezirow, 1997, p.5). For Mezirow experience is positive rather than preconditioning us to be limited by our circumstances:



*A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgements, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understandings is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking (Mezirow, 1997, p.5).*

Therefore, for Mezirow understanding how society operates and manages power is crucial. This may be a longer-term prospect for the adult learner and requires a learning approach which recognises the need for short-term gains in a longer game plan. It is almost a form of learning by stealth, but central to it is the concept of building confidence, skill and mastery:

*Often, adult learners' immediate focus is on practical, short-term objectives—to be able to qualify for a driver's license, get a job or promotion, or teach a child to read. It is crucial to recognize that learning needs must be defined so as to recognize both short-term objectives and long-term goals. The learner's immediate objectives may be described in terms of subject matter mastery, attainment of specific competencies, or other job-related objectives, but his or her goal is to become a socially responsible autonomous thinker (Mezirow, 1997, p.8).*

Crucially, critical reflection and becoming an autonomous thinker do not happen in isolation. A community of like-minded peers is important in allowing for the realisation that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. This requires a process of recognition – being recognised by others and affording them the same level of recognition. Through debate and dialogue change and transformation occur, at both the individual and the social level, and it is through such dialogue that plans are formulated and praxis or informed action (Freire, 1972) can take place. This assumes a bringing together of theory and action, the process by which a theory is enacted, embodied, or realised. For Freire education is by nature political and should be a process of developing or harnessing political consciousness – or “conscientisation” (Freire, 1972, p.55) – within the specific context in which it is taught. Fleming (2016) describes the theory of recognition as establishing “a link between the social causes of experiences of injustice and the motivation for emancipatory movements .... The political is personal. This is an attempt to reconfigure the age-old sociological debate involving structure and agency” (Fleming, 2016, p.16). Ultimately, therefore, in transformational learning the social and the individual come together and the residential setting provides ideal circumstances in which this shift can take place.

## The Interview Evidence

The analysis of the interview transcripts led to a wealth of detailed material from the interviewees; sifting through and refining the narratives and themes emerging was critical. As the emphasis of the research was on examining the value of residential learning, it was especially important to address the issue of what residency offers the adult learner that is not available elsewhere, as well as its particular suitability for certain types of learners – and specifically those from disadvantaged backgrounds situated furthest away from education.

### Theme One: The residential experience and the value of place/space/community

*The tutors here and their services and support networks are outstanding, no words, there are no words to describe this place really, other than it's a safe haven, a sanctuary for your education, for your health, for your mental health....*

In all of the four colleges, the sense of being away from the mundane and the day to day, from the distractions – and sometimes the chaos – of everyday life was crucial in engendering space for reflection and learning. It was also remarked upon numerous times that this was in stark contrast to the Further Education colleges which some students had experienced and which were perceived to be large and busy, and made many students feel anonymous.

*The main aspect was the atmosphere, I was totally in love, I was actually, I came on a tour and I'm not going to lie by saying I was dreaming of the college for a week, it had that much of an effect in that, in the way it relaxes you. And it was very quiet and totally different to an FE college in the sense it's always hustly bustly and very hectic, students go in for one thing and run out....the college is much more student focused, and that's what makes this residential stand out from the rest. A further aspect I loved about it being residential was it took out the distractions that come with real life and FE colleges (Male Student, Northern College – who described himself as 'the King of Procrastination').*

The feeling of safety and tranquillity the colleges elicited was vital to students who had often had traumatic life experiences, such as domestic violence, homelessness, or were seeking asylum from the hard realities of unemployment and trying to make a living in precarious or unstimulating work. Many students talked about the inclusive nature of the college, welcoming people from all backgrounds, and one student in particular, at Hillcroft, described the holistic approach offered by the college as addressing elements missing from her childhood:

*I genuinely think this is the only place I've seen life-changing things happen. That sounds religious, I'm not religious, but when you look at it ... because it's so ... holistic and all-inclusive, everyone's lives, it gives the safe opportunity to provide everything possible that's missing in people's childhoods in one place, you know that you're safe, and that sounds a very strange thing to say, you're safe...(Female student, Hillcroft).*

*Everything's now opened up, and I was stuck in this job doing what a chimpanzee could do (Male student, Ruskin).*

Others commented on being in an environment historically associated with the elite and how this broke down perceptions of places of beauty being only for the “1%” or the cream of academia. They saw access to such buildings as restorative, conferring “social justice” on people from working class or disadvantaged backgrounds. The grounds, gardens and the buildings themselves were a strong theme in conferring a sense of value on students. Strikingly, some of these comments were reminiscent of Soja's work on how physical spaces shape us, and our learning practice - “[w]e must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology” (Soja, 1989, p.6):

*I think also this kind of environment, this kind of building and these kind of grounds are probably something that, that is quite alien to a lot of people, it's almost like you know that's kind of seen as like an ivory tower for other people. But it's got that almost Oxbridge feel to it, so you do kind of, you feel part of something that's got a lot of history that welcomes you, values you, so social justice values as well (Male student, Fircroft).*

*I mean coming in to Hillcroft College is a, oh it's, there is such a sense of respectfulness ...and dignity and self-worth because the building is the type of building that, as a working class woman you'd never, ever have access to. These spaces are reserved for heritage sites and the 1%! (Female former student and current staff member, Hillcroft).*

*You've got all these fantastic gardens...you can have access to these grounds and you can walk around them and...switch off completely...it's an element of freedom and you sort of think – you start drifting back in time and you think 'oh I wonder who walked around here 200 or 300 years ago...you've got a bit of escapism when you come here...your imagination can go mad, can go wild....(Male student, Northern).*

*And I regularly see squirrels climbing trees and birds you know flying out on to the tree outside, clutching an egg and it's pretty cool! Open up my blinds and there's, you know, a picture out the back there (Male student, Ruskin).*

Many students described the social benefits and the sense of community which resulted from living and learning with fellow students in a small and intimate environment. One younger student described how other older and more experienced students both looked after her and ensured she was not isolated. She described them as “*the parent crowd*” (Female student, Ruskin). This inter-generational awareness worked both ways, and other older students were grateful for support (on IT matters for instance) from younger students.

*So you've got 20 year olds and 30 year olds through to 50 and 60 year olds...you communicate with all of them...in the big wide world no 20 year old is going to entertain a 58 year old - but in this environment, where you're all learning and you're all put in the same class, you're on the same level. I'll be looking at others to support me – and that's what happens, they do! And they gather round you, like cotton wool! (Male student, Northern).*

Another student, who is Muslim and does not drink alcohol, was delighted that her hijab did not prevent people from asking her to socialise with them, describing the group as like a family:

*But the good thing about this group, because we're residential, we get to know each other a lot more, become really close, like a little family, I've found that you know people will come up to me and say, oh are you coming to the party in the bar later? I'm like, no, no, I don't go into the bar, you know. And like, no it doesn't matter, you don't have to drink, you know, come and join us! Whereas normally people wouldn't invite me because as soon as they see the hijab...(Female student, Northern).*

The sense of inclusivity and the diversity of the student group encourages greater inter-cultural and inter-generational tolerance and understanding and also enhances the learning experience, as people share aspects of their own backgrounds and life paths:

*It plays a vital role in shaping you for university life because you've still got that independence, you're away from your family and ... actually another aspect is you meet a range of students from different backgrounds, and always being in close contact with them, you learn to be open-minded and respect their attitudes to life and it just breaks down barriers that would otherwise have stayed put (Female student, Northern).*

For many students being able to stay on-site enables them to concentrate and focus on the learning experience, instead of being preoccupied with childcare, or the daily commute, or having to cook and clean for themselves. Having a room to retreat to, with a desk, bed and shower, after a day of intensive learning, is perceived as an important aspect of the sense

of being in a sanctuary for learning. A significant additional advantage of being residential is access to the library during both the day and night.

*I think for some people, you know, it's probably one of the best meals they have, some people probably don't eat that well at home, so that's another thing (Male student, Northern).*

*To be honest they've got everything you need, there's a desk for you if you want to do some coursework. I mean obviously as well you've got access to the library twenty four hours a day (Female student, Fircroft).*

## Theme Two: Pastoral/tailored support and the learning and academic experience

Being a mature learner brings its own particular anxieties as people have often been out of the learning environment for a long time or have unhappy memories of their time in statutory education. For many of the interviewees, this included having learning disabilities or mental health issues in school which went undiagnosed. Staff attention to student welfare, both within the learning environment and outside, as well as their care in creating an atmosphere which supports personal resilience and a sense of well-being, is viewed as central to the residential college experience. The level of support from both academic staff and operational staff was a constant theme in the interviews. Staff talked about individualised, person-centred and 'scaffolded' support, and students commented that 'being listened to' and knowing help was on hand if it was needed helped them gain in confidence:

*I didn't go to school, I was made to feel a bit stupid when I was younger, so you kind of take that on board in the end, so I didn't really bother with school, I didn't go to college or university, and then I just, I had my children, so I've not really ever been in education much. So I was quite nervous. But like coming here, it was just so relaxing and everyone was dead friendly and you're not made to feel in any way inferior to anybody else (Female student, Northern).*

*Yeah, well they're saying, oh you should get like you know an A or a B and I'd end up you know at least one or two grades lower. And then you know you're sort of thinking, well what's wrong with me? Like, why am I not getting the grades and ... But then I've come here and the support you get here is just, you know it's just so amazing. Because they listen to you and they don't have any preconceived ideas. I mean I also have ADHD which is partly why I used to struggle so much (Female student, Fircroft).*

*And they're watching out for things, if you're here all the time, they know you, they get to know you more I think, so ... if you're having an off day, they know, and they're prepared for it then....they get to know you so much better. And I mean because you're here all the time, you get to know the catering staff, the cleaning*

*staff, and they all work together, so they know, they'll come and talk to you and they all pass information between them (Male student, Northern).*

The changing student profile alluded to previously means that mental health issues and dependency on alcohol and drugs have had a place either in their own lives or those around them. One student described the impact of her father's drug use on her own confidence and mental health, also describing an attitude of rising above difficult circumstances:

*I fit today's Ruskin, which is, there's a lot of people who have got a background where they've got, they've had alcoholism or drugs, my dad was using drugs, he had mental breakdowns he had psychiatric problems, you know he was offering me ... there's all sorts of things that he was doing you know so that really I've turned out quite normal all things considered! So that's why I think I've basically got the right instincts to do well because of whatever's been thrown at me...(Female student, Ruskin).*

Others described the immense confidence boost of being, or of having been, a student in one of the residential colleges, looking back on the sense of personal value and self-worth the experience conferred. Going on to Higher Education – which many students who complete the Access courses achieve – becomes a realisable ambition, though some find the experience of higher education very different, and challenging in new ways. The 'toolbox' of resources and coping strategies gained at the colleges helps foster ongoing emotional and intellectual resilience. Staff argue that the residential aspect allows for the creation of techniques and skills which cannot be built up through limited contact time:

*So they're able to you know be of value to the world...and just go for what they want and it makes you more determined and ... When I left Hillcroft I felt like I could have been the next prime minister! When I left Hillcroft! Yeah, because I was on such a high! (Female former student, Hillcroft).*

*I enjoy the course, but I do find the settings a bit hard! Because when you've come from somewhere like Hillcroft to somewhere where you're just a number again or a percentage ...so it's really hard ... I think it's taught me that, to ask for help and stuff, because even in the uni, you know, I don't get the same kind of attention, people don't know my name... (Female former student, Hillcroft).*

*And what then that happens is the things that they get here give them that toolbox of ways of learning, ways of interacting, ways of dealing ... other things that you may learn about yourself you may be able to confront that you perhaps can't always... it's a step out of life but I wouldn't say it was a step away from life. And that's the important thing for me about it and about residency ...It's a step away so you can sort, re-evaluate and think. That's why the development of the mental health first aid training that K and S have been leading on here is incredibly important, the dyslexia,*

*trying to establish issues and give people toolboxes of resilience/resource that they can do. You can't do that in just coming in for two hours (Female former staff member/current volunteer, Hillcroft).*

### Theme Three: Andragogy and Critical Thinking – Transformative learning

Many of the courses offered in the residential college environment take place over two or three days. They are by necessity intensive and demanding, with learning compressed into a limited time frame. It has been referred to as 'a super-charged educational experience' (Mel Lenehan, Principal of Fircroft College)<sup>14</sup>. This is particularly the case for students aiming to reach Level 3 in attainment. For many students this intensive learning experience is exhilarating. One student at Fircroft described working as a tutor on the Aspire programme, which worked to support people with criminal backgrounds and ex-offenders back into work:

*It was two weekends throughout the year, and at the end of it, the peer mentors or recovery coaches we called them, volunteers, it was quite intensive, but they got an OCN grade and they were ready to go and work in the community, and they did, and a lot of them now work professionally in prisons and all over the place (Male student/tutor – Fircroft).*

Sometimes the intensity of the ongoing learning – not just in class but in social time, in the gardens, in the canteen – creates a desire to leave it all behind from time to time:

*you're amongst it all the time, you're amongst it all the time, you're talking to people, you're teaching each other, you're speaking in a way that some of us have never spoken before, you're speaking academically. And that becomes more and more frequent, and it becomes normal. And ... it is more intense because it is so nice now and again to just go home and talk about summat random! (Male student, Ruskin).*

The importance of critical thinking, debate and challenge was raised many times by the students as the specific hallmark of their learning experience and a number describe the change in their perceptions, convictions and behaviour as having a dramatic emancipatory effect on their understanding of political, economic and social structures, as well as their internalised views on identity and their capacity for self-reflection. Coming from such rich, complex and diverse backgrounds, the students are able to harness the course content, the

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<sup>14</sup> Paper presented at the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA) 2017, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2017, University of Edinburgh.

levels of tutor engagement and debate and to make use of their own experiences and understanding of inequality and social injustice:

*...my understanding of politics, economics, has changed massively how that impacts on myself as a person, that impacts on the world around me. Those kind of nuts and bolts things that you learn in class, I've taken a lot of them to heart, looking at race, ethnicity, sex and gender studies, you know, what it means to be a man or masculine or feminine or how I was brought up in a really working class background with loads of problems and you know in part why that was, and why that was passed on to me, that second generational socialisation process of keeping me you know chained down, then coming and trying to break free from it (Male student, Ruskin)*

*...levels of political literacy, it makes me sad.....I think the important thing is debating stuff that you didn't agree with. Like having to debate for capitalism makes you sort of question your own views, and I think that's important about what this place does - you might have a view but you can't stand by that view unless you've challenged it (Female student, Northern)*

Finally, students so fired by their experience of learning are keen to 'give back to the community', and specifically their own communities. Numerous students described a strong service ethic - a desire to set up a charity, to work as a volunteer in a community organisation, to help others engage in learning and debate, or to teach themselves. Most of those going on to university wanted to stay close to their home environment. Far from this being a sign of trepidation or tentativeness or an unease at going into a new environment, this was a sign of local pride and solidarity. Such colleges foster civic activists who care for their fellow men and women.

*Yeah, I don't want to leave the area... because it's like the amount of political persuasion that Unions had, and how much Yorkshire had. And even if it's not in Dearne Valley now... if I went in locally and said, I'm going to teach politics, I don't think it would work, but even if I came back to teach here, people from [home town] do come here, and I'd love to teach here [at Northern]...because it's not like normal teaching either, it's social purpose education....*



## Conclusions

- This report identifies that residential education plays a powerful role in and accelerating and deepening learning experiences for adults. The experience is particularly valuable for those who have faced extraordinary personal and societal challenges. Many students come with specific barriers to learning – such as ADHD, epilepsy, dyslexia, mental health or anxiety issues. These have often gone undiagnosed at school. The second chance learning opportunities for such people are a unique and invaluable social resource.
- The college settings – their grounds and historic buildings – confer feelings of worth on students who have been subject to social exclusion. As one student commented, they are “usually heritage sites or for the 1%”. The colleges generate a sense of safety, security, retreat and refuge for people often stepping out of difficult home lives. Particularly important are the provision of quiet spaces for learning (such as libraries and computer suites), which are generally open for 24 hours, and individual, private rooms with *en suite* facilities (except Hillcroft).
- Hillcroft College is a uniquely important learning space and sanctuary for women – especially those escaping domestic abuse or sexual violence. The space and support networks it provides create a feeling of trust and safety, which is crucial.
- In the residential setting, experiential learning from the group – ongoing discussion and debate after classes and in informal interactions – leads to an intensity of learning experience and real intimacy. The absence of rigid formality helps learning. Pastoral and academic support at the colleges is substantial, vital and highly valued by the students. It is provided not only by tutorial staff, but also informally by all categories of support and operational staff. The small size of the colleges means students can get to know tutors and feel they can approach them as equals.
- Access to Higher Education courses, leading to vocational qualifications in areas such as Health and Social Sciences, Social Work, Youth Work, etc., open up access to the job market, even for older learners.

- The college experience fosters critical thinking and understandings of politics and society which challenge mainstream and establishment views: it “changes the way we think about the world”. Seminar-style classes play an important role in encouraging debate and discussion – in turning the college into “a poor man’s Eton”. The education on offer provides adult students with “the tools to learn anything”, to test and experiment without “fear of failure”.
- The colleges’ ethos, curricula and traditions foster an “ethic of service” and social justice. Students and alumni take their compassion and understanding back to their own communities. They have a keen awareness of the contribution of “emotional labour” to community and solidarity. The dominant aspiration is to work in social care, the care sector or the voluntary sector, helping others access what they have had.
- The colleges’ educational outreach, community engagement and advocacy promote the colleges formally and informally, including through word of mouth, at job centres, community organisations, etc.
- The colleges have a vital role to play in sharing their strong outreach and community engagement expertise and their effective links with the “third sector” with others in the field of access and widening participation to higher and further education.
- The financial cost of the residential colleges – an almost minute element of the educational budget – is nevertheless of overwhelming value both in the lives of individuals and communities across the country, and for maintaining a unique and innovative educational tradition.

## Final comments

We argue that there is also a wider role for the colleges in disseminating their pedagogical expertise in access to higher education, in order to help rebuild part-time higher educational and lifelong learning opportunities for adults, especially among socially excluded groups and those who have experienced psychological and similar challenges.

Our report concludes that the unique role of the colleges in providing second-chance educational opportunities for the most vulnerable in society should be recognised as a vital contribution to the community. We argue for continued and, if possible, enhanced financial support to the colleges and their students, which should include the provision of bursaries and fee reductions.

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## Appendix: Summary of main regulation, funding and policy bodies

There is now a unified Department for Education with responsibility for policy for all forms of education. The main exception is training that forms part of Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs), as this area of policy belongs to the Department for Work and Pensions.

Regulation, direct funding and delivery responsibilities lie with a variety of government agencies. Local authorities have an important role in school and community-based learning, and employer representative bodies in the development of work-based qualifications.

- **Department for Education:** responsible for children's services and education, including higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and wider skills.
- **Department for Work and Pensions:** Responsible for strategy, policy, funding and legislation of all aspects of the social security system in the UK, including ALMPs, Job Centres (for the unemployed who are in receipt of benefits which require the recipient to be actively job searching) and the state pension service.
- **Local authorities:** Responsible for local policy and funding of state schools, community and adult learning, social work services, local economic development, and for initiating, facilitating and maintaining community planning.
- **Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)** are voluntary partnerships established between local authorities and businesses, and set up in 2011 by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Their objective is to help determine local economic priorities and lead economic growth and job creation within the local area.
- **Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual):** regulates qualifications, examinations and assessments (GCSEs, AS levels, A levels and vocational qualifications), and is responsible for the Regulated Qualifications Framework.
- **Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted):** inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people, and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages.
- **Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA):** the funding agency accountable for funding education and training for children, young people and adults. It regulates academies, FE Colleges, employers and training providers, intervening where there is risk of failure or where there is evidence of mismanagement of public funds. It delivers

major projects and operates key services in the education and skills sector, such as school capital programmes, the National Careers Service, the Digital Apprenticeship Service and National Apprenticeship Service.

- **Institute for Apprenticeships:** responsible for apprenticeship standards development and approval and funding advice to the government.
- **Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE):** distributes public money for teaching and research to universities and colleges.
- **Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA):** responsible for quality assurance of higher education provision, and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.
- **Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC):** the UK guardian of quality in open and distance learning, set up originally by government in 1968, but now independent. Accreditation is open to all providers of home study, distance learning, online or e-learning, and other open learning or flexible learning courses. To gain accreditation, providers must meet required standards; there are currently 19 accredited members.
- **Sector Skills Councils:** 21 UK-wide, independent, employer-led, organisations under licence from the UK Government. Responsible for developing the Apprenticeship structure relevant to their employment sector, in partnership with the sector.
- **JobCentre Plus:** Public sector organisations that are part of the Department for Work and Pensions and operate as an employment agency and social security office. They administer unemployment benefits, help with and monitor job searching, and advise on or refer individuals on to ALMP programmes, which can include training.
- **LEAFA (Local Education Authorities Forum for the Education of Adults):** represents a network of over 250 adult and community learning provider members and is a sector membership body for Local Authority Community Learning (ACL) services with local network membership groups in most areas of the country. There are more than 150 providers in membership.