

WORKERS' EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION (WEA)



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Assessment Information

Assessment Type	Accreditation Review
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Assessor's Name	Steve Jackson
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Organisation – Introduction, Aims, Objectives and Outcomes

Workers' Educational Association (WEA) is a registered charity that delivers adult learning, employability, and skills training in England and Scotland. WEA provides its learners with an Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Service and this is embedded in all the non-leisure learning provision. This was the scope of the **matrix** Accreditation Review. WEA receives Adult Education Budget (AEB) through the ESFA and the Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCA) such as Peterborough and Cambridgeshire but not all e.g. Tees Valley Combined Authority which determine skills priorities through planning with local authorities and employers groups in the region. During lockdowns WEA provided online learning through Zoom and IAG support by email, video, and phone. Feedback from learners is very positive about this provision and learners interviewed felt they had been supported well over the previous year, emphasising how much support they had. Access was hampered by the problem of digital poverty and poor Wi-Fi signals in some areas. Partnership working is essential to WEA's success and there was evidence of good referral and good practice sharing between community groups and partners.

Since the last **matrix** Accreditation Review held in 2019 there has been considerable change in the organisation. A new Leadership Team is in place and new strategy, formulated during 19/20 is now well in motion. The changes brought about are principally around strategic direction and delivery priorities. With the advent of Mayoral Combined Authorities the control of the AEB has moved from ESFA, and WEA has had to tender for contracts to operate its learning offer. This has also had to change to meet the policy priorities of the new MCAs. The Skills Agenda is the major theme running through all MCA priorities and WEA has been successful in several of these bidding processes. The key is continuing to provide the means to upskill local people to ensure they can compete successfully. This meant WEA has had to re-prioritise its learning offer to fit the need to improve employability among job-seekers. WEA traditionally has supported people with little or no educational qualifications and in many ways the learning offer was well suited to new or returning learners. However, much of the curriculum has been re-designed to offer accreditation or pathways to accreditation and WEA tutors have adapted well to this challenge.

WEA continues to offer Community Learning successfully, learning delivered by its tutors but 'commissioned' through local volunteers' branches representing learners and delivering services on behalf of learners. This activity now constitutes less than half of the WEA's delivery, reflecting the funding changes and consequent priorities followed. This part of the learning offer is sometimes described as 'liberal arts' or the 'cultural offer' and continues to offer 'return to learn' opportunities and is popular with retired or semi-retired people. However there were many examples of learners much younger some of whom took advantage of fee remission if they were unemployed to take up courses as small steps to learning and eventually re-skilling.

WEA has created a wealth of short courses designed to help people re-skill using the MCA funding, especially around Functional Skills and ESOL learning. This is now described as English, Maths and ESOL (EME). As found in the previous **matrix** Accreditation Review ESOL is a popular course option and WEA is over-subscribed with waiting lists in many areas. WEA has a strong reputation for ESOL delivery, operating most of its courses within communities. Word of mouth recommendation is a good indicator of the trust built up by WEA over many years and WEA staff are skilled at supporting refugees, economic migrants and second/third generation non-English speakers. EME courses are also effective in supporting learners with their career plans and combatting social issues such as isolation, poor wellbeing and low confidence. Financial support was mentioned many times by students and includes the Discretionary Support for Learners Fund (DSL) and ALS. The Learning IAG Manager oversees this and Regions said this was vital support, with fast decision-making.

WEA's mission is 'To bring adult education within reach of everyone who needs it, fighting inequality and promoting social justice' and this inspires the ethos of the organisation. Staff interviewed said this drew them to the organisation to work alongside other committed staff and be ambassadors for Adult Learning. From the Mission operational objectives including IAG, are included in the Self-Assessment Review (SAR) and Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). These determine the Key Performance Indicators: achievement, retention, and progression. Tutors ensure information is provided that will enable learners better access other opportunities and aid progression. Objectives are derived from the WEA's Strategy and the Strategic Skills Plan of the MCA as appropriate which are focused on the strategic objectives of supporting innovation and addressing long term unemployment. There is considerable cause for optimism about jobs in the future but the 'drag' of low skills in the population is a major concern, and that local people may miss out especially from the most deprived areas.

WEA objectives for the IAG Service are included in the WEA Recruitment and Admissions Policy and includes entitlement to IAG as stated in the following objectives:

'Inform and advise students about opportunities that will meet their needs.

Ensure students apply for relevant courses and offer Information and Advice for students applying for multiple courses. Students will be signposted for careers advice where relevant.

Provide accurate, objective and up to date information about WEA learning opportunities, financial support and learning support.

Ensure that information is available in a range of accessible formats that encourages widening participation.

Ensure that all national and regional publicity materials are compliant with the **matrix** Standard and with the WEA's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy'.

For on-course IAG this includes the provision of Tutor discussions on progression, referral to the National Careers Service, and regular reviews. At the end of courses reviews can include referral to the National Careers Service, Tutor discussions or discussions with internal IAG staff.

IAG is provided to all learners at the start of courses. Learners undergo a screening process through Initial Assessment (IA) to ensure they are aware of the provision and the progression opportunities. This IA is mandatory before enrolment can be completed and is part of the Quality Assurance process that ensures there is a consistency about 'on-boarding'. This also provides reassurance about the contribution of IAG to the retention and achievement of learners. All Adult Learners complete an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) which captures career aspirations and has a section to record IAG discussions. In-depth IAG can be provided by careers advisers from the National Careers Service (NCS) to help learners think about next steps and be clear about what courses entail and what the learning outcomes might be. This service has been disrupted during lockdowns. Career aspirations are determined and agreement is reached on learners' objectives to ensure clarity about personal and clear goals.

All learners are reviewed regularly and when courses finish learners are surveyed to determine satisfaction and what had gone well. Tutors ask learners at the end of every learning event for feedback and learners interviewed appeared to be extremely satisfied.

WEA monitors the outcomes and targets referred to earlier very carefully and expertly so that the data is robust. Regional analyses were provided for the **matrix** Assessment Review and included breakdowns of learner demographics, achievement rates and retention and progression rates and led to very good conclusions about development and where WEA should seek improvements.

Examples of monitoring came from the regions assessed. The East Midlands Region, for example, provided a clear breakdown of KPIs and outcomes in 19/20 and included an analysis of Achievement (79%), and Retention (93%). Given that many of the learners are operating at entry level and are ESOL learners and are from the most deprived wards these figures represent very good outcomes and it is hoped that there will be a quick return to the upward trend in 21/22. Tutors interviewed reflected on these issues and the focus is on the most deprived wards targeting improvements in digital skills and better progression to work. One important KPI is enrolments and there were 12,000 enrolments in 20/21 with 5,000 students engaging. Other analyses provided demographic information e.g. 35% of the region's learners are on benefits of some form. There are also 20 volunteer lead groups providing fee paying courses and it is hoped to increase this number.

WEA makes very good use of its resources, and the staff group it employs. Excellent team-working featured strongly in the organisation as may be expected, and this is a very important element of the WEA's success. The Student Support Centre in Leeds provides considerable learner support with excellent response times for calls and responses to emails. Learners who used the Centre were highly complimentary about the service received and the friendliness of the staff. IT support has increased considerably, and the introduction of online learning and IAG had gone well. The implementation of Canvas over the last two years has been transformational for the WEA and there remain many features to refine and exploit. The employment of a Digital Development Manager and two 'Learning Technologists' has increased the pace of change and quality of curriculum support to tutors and created innovative content. Learners interviewed confirmed that working on-line was managed well by WEA. It is recognised how important high quality IAG is to achievement and there is appropriate emphasis on 'front-end' support during recruitment and enrolment.

Examples were given of high quality information provided to learners through website referral, particularly to reputable organisations, such as colleges and universities. For ESOL learners advice appeared up to date and relevant to learners' needs with good advice provided on which courses to progress to and regular careers IAG. Extensive use is made of partners in the regions with mutual support and excellent responses. Partners were very pleased with WEA's response to difficult cases such as the representative of charity, Inspire which supports clients with mental health issues and the transition from secure institutions to intermediate accommodation. WEA tutors provided very good support and learning opportunities to provide positivity and hope for success.

WEA provides staff and volunteers with access to an impressive range of training and CPD opportunities with staff noting mental health support, online course and other qualifications. Prevent, British values, safeguarding and health and safety are all revisited bi-annually. There is significant potential for enhancing online provision through webinars, blogs, podcasts and sharing of learning and IAG materials. There could be further resources developed around self-employment and enterprise for learners to encourage business ideas and entrepreneurship.

WEA carries out regular feedback activities among learners and achieves excellent satisfaction rates. WEA uses a questionnaire called 'Tell Us About It' that is used at the end of courses and includes questions about the IAG received. Learners confirmed they are always asked about progress and whether learning sessions have been effective for them. Although not all of this activity could be carried out because of lockdowns this intent shows WEA recognises the value of systematic follow up and that impact of courses and IAG is often delayed.

There is an effective quality assurance approach taken to IAG that demonstrates how the **matrix** Standard has been used positively to improve the IAG service and provide clarity about service expectations. An excellent 'Quality Improvement Framework' document was shared and demonstrated clear processes and procedures to follow. Management control is strong but relaxed.

The Quality Assurance processes and procedures are robust, and processes appeared comprehensive and appropriate. Regions provided much evidence to show how these were followed. The ethos behind Quality control in WEA gives considerable confidence in the organisation. Funders also expressed their pleasure with reporting mechanisms and felt they received secure and reliable monitoring and outturn information. The Impact Report continues to be a rich source of performance data and also contains very good coverage of intent and impact, as well as cogent stories of individual learners success, often against considerable barriers.

During the **matrix** Assessment Review it was evident that at an individual and a strategic level WEA has in place very effective approaches to IAG delivery and continuous quality improvement. Partners and learners commented on the way that WEA is always looking to improve, and it is suggested that continuing joint activity could develop with partners around the demand for creative employability training, and curriculum areas that will continue to be attractive to learners in the future. These will obviously be dependent on continuation funding and successful bidding but WEA's model of learning is effective and is critical to bringing learners and communities into education and training that otherwise would have very little access to IAG support and opportunities. The advocacy role of the WEA on behalf of learners who may have a voice but are rarely listened to, is vital. From the evidence of this **matrix** Accreditation Review WEA is in a very good position to move forward and contribute ever more cogently to the Skills Agenda and Adult Learning in general.

Strengths

A number of strengths were identified during the assessment, which are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- WEA provides clear leadership for Adult Learning with very good direction, communication, and decision making. The Strategy document 'We Are WEA' is clear and inspiring. WEA has an excellent reputation for delivery and very good learner outcomes. (1.1,1.2)
- Partners interviewed consistently praised the quality of delivery and the high standard of support for learners. Partners cited the professionalism and enthusiasm of staff and their positive attitude. Excellent communication featured strongly in the feedback provided for the **matrix** Accreditation Review and funding partners appreciated positive and quick responses to requests for additional delivery. There was much respect for the staff of WEA in evidence from partners. (1.8, 2.1, 3.2)
- There was much evidence of personal progression, especially for learners whose self-belief had been low. Initial Assessment is robust and provides assurance that most learners are enrolled on the right course. Initial Assessment is mandatory and this seems vital to ensuring retention and achievement are 'on track'. ESOL learners were clear about the career pathways identified through high quality IAG. Partners also noted how well WEA achieved progression even from areas of high deprivation. (1.5, 2.1, 3.2)
- There is a strong compliance and quality culture in WEA, and WEA staff maintain a robust Quality Assurance system. The commitment to continuous improvement through the **matrix** Standard is embedded in all activities in delivery and reinforced by WEA values. (4.2, 4.3, 4.8)
- Communications within WEA has improved considerably and staff interviewed commented on being kept informed and feeling part of the organisation, influencing operational design and delivery. Staff also confirmed that the ethos of the organisation remained key to their sense of wellbeing citing the 'no blame culture' as an important element of satisfaction at work. (2.1, 3.2)
- The creation of communities of good practice/development groups among the regions is an excellent way of sharing 'what works' and enables joint approach to delivery and possible funding opportunities. There is considerable expertise among all staff. (1.8, 2.1, 3.2)
- WEA responsibilities are discharged effectively and consistently with regard to safeguarding and health and safety. WEA's approach to the coronavirus lockdowns demonstrated absolute commitment to safe working practices and procedures that ensured risks were minimised and learners would feel safe and be safe. (1.4)
- Learners commented that WEA compared very well to other providers. While comparisons are very personal and often anecdotal this contributes well to 'word of mouth' recommendation in the communities served. Learners interviewed said how much they appreciated the support received and that their achievements had gone way beyond their expectations. (1,4, 2.1, 3.2)
- WEA continues to produce excellent research material and the annual Impact Report which demonstrates return on investment, value for money and, of course, impact on learners and communities. This continues to be valuable and builds a wealth of evidence about 'what works'. WEA should continue to build its research and celebrate its achievements through this valuable research work. (4.1, 4.8)

Areas for Development

Areas for development are offered in the spirit of continuous improvement and a way for an Assessor to add value e.g. where the service is of a high quality, development areas are offered to help the service be even better than it already is, or to give insight into practices seen elsewhere. There is no correlation between the number of strengths and areas for development. Where development areas are greater in number this is not intended to indicate that the information, advice, and guidance service is in any way lacking. These will form the basis for discussion at the Continuous Improvement Checks (CIC) conducted twelve and twenty-four months from the date of this Assessment, along with any other notable developments. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- The wider use of social media is a very welcome development. The website is recognised as being out of date and the architecture enables limited keyword searching but other marketing material could celebrate success of learners more overtly. 'Talking Heads' and video particularly for learners from learner groups and regions where there is low expectation and aspiration could be used more widely, celebrating success. Learners could be willing to create blogs or be the subject of Talking Heads to share their back-story and hopefully inspire others to apply for opportunities they might otherwise have assumed was not for them. Jobcentre Plus could publicise WEA on its Twitter feed to post messages to its customers. (1.6, 2.1, 3.2)
- There was evidence of using former learners' experience for promotion to provide inspirational evidence that learners from WEA can and do succeed, perhaps unexpectedly. It is suggested that WEA adopt a more consistent approach by creating an 'Alumni Strategy' that harnesses the talents and loyalty of former learners to add impetus to acquiring career management skills and help raise aspirations, especially for those learners from 'socially deprived' areas. WEA could explore using blogs and podcasts and other digital media to share these experiences. (1.6, 2.1, 3.2)
- Staff provide good first line careers IAG and rely on NCS to provide more in depth support by local agreement. However the demand for support means that WEA staff are inevitably reactive and capacity appears limited. It was agreed that a review of the arrangement with the local National Careers Service (NCS) was needed to secure a better and more consistent service, particularly to learners in areas of high deprivation and ESOL groups. (1.8, 2.1, 3.2)
- WEA offers many CPD opportunities. It is suggested that staff should be offered the two day Mental Health First Aid course. This has the benefit of giving staff more confidence to talk to learners about their wellbeing as well as recognising language conditions. Since WEA has started to offer Leadership and Management at L3 some staff may benefit from this for career progression. Some staff have IAG qualifications but it is suggested that carrying out IA should be trained in at least L4 IAG (comparable to most colleges) and, over time it is suggested that moving to L4 and beyond may be beneficial rather than rely solely on NCS to be the main provider of careers IAG. (2.4, 3.2)
- The development of a more dedicated coaching approach may be viable for some learners to encourage progression. The L3 Coaching qualification could help establish whether this could go further and act as an incentive to volunteering and participation in courses. (1.2, 2.4, 4.1)
- Other areas for CPD to consider could include approaches to employers and discussing skills requirements, as well as understanding labour market information. (2.4)

- WEA branch offices could be beneficial for work placements for learners from other organisations and it is further suggested the Student Support Centre in Leeds is an ideal environment for apprentices. The WEA could use its Levy more productively this way and create a pathway for customer support roles – a ‘grow your own’ approach. Volunteers may also find this attractive if their circumstances are appropriate. (2.1, 2.4, 3.2)
- WEA provides much encouragement for learners to progress but there was a sense that learners could do better and it is suggested that internal progression pathways should be kept under review to secure more repeat business and encourage job-seekers in particular to think beyond ‘the next job’. Although the emphasis is on employability a more appropriate approach may be to think in terms of teaching ‘career management skills’. The use of IA and the subsequent Learning Plan could be reviewed regularly, in particular the later for currency and relevance. (2.1, 3.2)
- Since WEA is reliant increasingly on MCAs for its AEB allocation it is constrained by what these regard as priorities. The use of Test & Learn to enable more innovative activity is commendable and WEA has demonstrated how important this is. It is suggested WEA has the expertise and should have the confidence to promote further Pilot programmes in conjunction with other partners. Other successful programmes such as Sector-based courses are another example of ‘what works’. Discussions with Regional Managers and Central Services staff around outcomes were helpful in exploring the measurement of soft skills. Although this was often prevalent under ESF projects, it seems less tangible with MCAs. Given WEA’s expertise in this area and resources already developed it is suggested this could be a theme for a Test & Learn Project which in turn could lead to innovative work for the yet established MCAs. (1.8, 2.1, 4.1, 4.8)
- Partners interviewed were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about WEA but suggested that the success of WEA was not widely known nor promoted enough. This was particularly evident around return on investment as well as social return on investment. It is suggested this is not a marketing issue as such but a need to raise awareness relentlessly among funders about impact and value for money. Following the government report, *A Plan for an Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning Revolution* WEA remains in a good position to continue to influence strategy through evidence-based practice. (1.8, 4.1)
- Tutors are faced with learners often with quite complex lives and are frequently challenging. It is suggested that WEA managers could recognise the cumulative effect of supporting complex learners and offer some form of professional supervision beyond team meetings and 1-2-1 meetings with line managers to discuss specific learners and discuss approaches. Staff interviewed said they were well supported but as tutors begin to work with less-motivated and more troubled individuals (perhaps referrals from Job Centre Plus) there may be a need to give tutors more targeted support around classroom practice and IAG. One tutor requested better information from referring agencies to inform better preparation. (2.4, 3.2)
- One partner suggest WEA routinely use sub-titles during online learning, not just for hearing impaired learners but to help where audio clarity is inconsistent. (4.7)

The annual matrix Continuous Improvement Check will allow the organisation to demonstrate on an ongoing basis the developments they are continuing to make in order to support individuals. These may include the Areas for Development above. <https://matrixstandard.com/assessment-journey/continuous-improvement-checks/> Please note that annual Continuous Improvement Checks are mandatory and non-completion within the required timescale will impact on your organisation’s accreditation, please see the section Assessment Information for dates.

Methodology

The following methods were used to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard during the assessment process. All interviews were carried out by telephone or by Zoom video link.

Initial discussions with the Learning and IAG Manager to identify scope

Opening meeting with the Learning and IAG Manager

Interviews with Central Services:

Chief Executive and General Secretary

Director of Quality and Learner Services

Head of Learner Services

Director of Education: Employability & Skills

Director of Education: Community Learning

EME and Curriculum Manager

Director of Marketing, Membership and Income Growth

Digital Marketing Manager

Digital Development Manager and Learning Technologists

Head of Quality and Performance, Tutor Training and Development Manager, Quality, Performance and Training Administrator

Research Manager

Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development

Interviews in three Regions: East Midlands, North West and West Midlands

Regional Managers (3)

Senior Area Education Managers (6)

Area Education Managers (6)

Education Coordinators (10)

Tutors (18)

Education Support Staff (4)

Total number of WEA Staff interviewed: 64

Twenty delivery and funding Partners

37 Learners including ESOL, Employability, Functional Skills and Community

Closing meeting with the Director of Quality and Learner Services, Head of Learner Services and Learning and IAG Manager

Desk research including WEA Strategy, Impact Report, Policies and Procedures including Equality and Diversity, Health and Safety, Safeguarding and Prevent Duty, Quality Assurance, Information, Advice and Guidance, Examples: Booking confirmation, Student Learner Record template, Course Information Sheet, TUAI template, What's next and progression, Learner Induction, Internal Quality Assurance, Initial Assessment, Compliments and Complaints, Covid-19 online statement, Learner satisfaction results, Adult Learners ILP, Website, Social media including Face Book

Conditions of Accreditation

Holders of the **matrix** Standard Accreditation must:

1. Maintain and continually improve upon their services.
2. Throughout the period of accreditation satisfy The Growth Company that the organisation continues to meet the requirements of the **matrix** Standard via the annual continuous improvement checks and the three-year accreditation review.
3. Complete annual continuous improvement checks in a timely way, it is expected these will be carried out annually by the accreditation anniversary date.
4. Inform The Growth Company or their Assessor if the key contact name/contact details change.
5. Submit their Booking Form for re-accreditation to the **matrix** Standard at least 3 months prior to the accreditation anniversary date ensuring all pre on-site activity is completed in a timely way including planning, payment, and interview scheduling. Accreditation Reviews are due 3 years from the anniversary accreditation date; it is expected that organisations will be assessed by this date or will risk being de-accredited.
6. Inform The Growth Company of any significant changes made to the organisational structure, senior management or systems that may impact on their accreditation; email: matrixStandard@growthco.uk.
7. Inform The Growth Company immediately if they wish to extend or reduce the scope of their accreditation.
8. Inform The Growth Company of any serious complaint or rise in numbers of complaints received (within the scope of the accreditation).
9. Not undertake or omit to undertake any activity that may be misleading and/or may cause The Growth Company and/or the **matrix** Standard to be brought into disrepute.
10. Only use the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark for the areas within the scope of the accreditation and in accordance with the guidelines. For example, if a certain department is successfully **matrix** accredited, the Quality Mark can only be used on that department's letterhead or on that department's page on their internet homepage.
11. Ensure in cases where accreditation is withdrawn or where they do not come forward for accreditation review, remove from display any certificates or plaques issued by The Growth Company and do not display the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark nor refer to be a former holder of the **matrix** Standard.
12. Be aware that The Growth Company reserves the right to remove any accreditation and/or certification previously applied if payment is not received for services provided.