
Adult participation in learning



"If the overall trend shows rising participation... it shows, too that progress reinforces the gap between the learning-haves and the learning-have-nots. We are a society where nine in ten believe that learning makes a positive difference to their work chances, to quality of life, and to their children's prospects. Yet one in four of us still believe that learning is not for the likes of us. Until we change those perceptions, and the responsiveness of our system to the needs of that quarter of the population, participation surveys are likely to report at best modest progress"

(Aldridge and Tuckett, 2002)

This is the forty-second in a series of briefing sheets which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues

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Mapping participation in learning is important for several reasons. Firstly, while participation is not always a sufficient condition for learning to take place, it is a necessary one! More importantly, participation in learning is associated with, if not a key determinant of economic, social and personal benefits. From an equity perspective therefore it remains essential to gather as much information as possible to assist in deepening our understanding of the familiar, but still central issues – who participates in what forms of learning opportunities, and why?

Over the last decade or so, increasing efforts have been made to measure adult participation in learning, partly as a result of the establishment of national education and training targets.

Determining an exact measure of participation however has proved to be difficult with variation between the results of different surveys on adult learning flowing from issues of scope – target population, definition of learning reference period – and of methodology, especially the different ways of asking questions about participation.

The main sources of data used to measure adult participation in learning are:

- The NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey
- The National Adult Learning Survey
- The English Local Labour Force Survey

1. The NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey

For over a decade, NIACE has undertaken a series of surveys to measure adult participation in learning. These surveys have not only provided information on the proportion of adults participating in learning and a detailed breakdown of who participates and who does not, but the comparison of results within the series, enables the examination of how patterns of participation change over time.

The NIACE surveys are based on a weighted population sample of 5,000 adults aged 17 and over in the UK and are included in regular omnibus market research surveys. The question used within the survey since 1996 has been drafted as broadly as possible to include all types of learning and in any mode. It is a question asked of individuals themselves, not in terms of levels or providers, and it asks the respondents to tell the interviewer what they are learning about without any further prompting. The findings are therefore useful in capturing the proportion of the population who see themselves as learners.

Respondents are asked:

“Learning can mean practising, studying or reading about something. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is so you can develop skills, knowledge, abilities or understanding of something. Learning can also be called education or training. You can do it regularly (each day or month) or you can do it for a short period of time. It can be full time or part time, done at home, at work, or in another place like a college. Learning does not have to lead to a qualification. We are interested in any learning you have done, whether or not it was finished.

Turning to learning in general: which one of these statements most applies to you?

I am currently doing some learning activity; I have done some learning activity in the last three years; I have studied or learned but it was over three years ago; I have not studied or learned since I left full-time education”

A more detailed analysis of the origins and development of the NIACE survey series can be found in *Adult learning and social division: a persistent pattern*: volume 2. (Sargant and Aldridge, NIACE, 2003).

Headline findings from the NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2002

Nearly one in four adults are currently learning, with 42% having participated in some learning activity during the last three years. Over one third of adults (36%) have not participated in any learning since leaving full-time education (table 1). The proportion of current/recent learners has increased by two percentage points since the

1996 and 1999 surveys, when 40% of adults said that they were current or recent learners (table 2).

For the first time, men and women are currently participating in equal numbers, although more women than men say that they have not done any learning since leaving full-time education (table 1). The older people are, the less likely they are to participate in learning. The decline in participation is particularly steep for those aged 65 and over (table 3).

Socio-economic class remains a key determinant of adult participation in learning. Adults in socio-economic groups AB are more than twice as likely to be current or recent learners than those in groups DE (table 4). Since 1996, current participation has remained unchanged for all groups except ABs where small increases in participation were achieved in both 1999 and 2002

The workplace is not only a major location of learning, but also provides information about learning opportunities and the finance to take them up. Those in employment are more likely than those outside of the labour market to participate in learning (table 5). Since the last major survey in 1999, the largest increase in learning has been among the unemployed, from 41% to 46%.

There is a key divide in participation rates between those who leave school at the earliest opportunity and those who stay on even for a short while (table 6). Considerable regional and national differences exist in adult participation in learning (table 7). Forty-one percent of adults say that they are likely to take up learning in the next three years. Table 8 confirms the findings of previous surveys that recent experience of learning is a powerful influence upon whether adults expect to learn in the future.

The headline findings and full report of the findings of this survey are available for purchase from NIACE (see resources section).

For more information:

contact Fiona Aldridge at fiona@niace.org.uk or on 0116 2044246.

Table 1: PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING, by gender

	Total	Men	Women
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,896	2,381	2,515
Current learning	23	23	23
Recent learning (in the last 3 years)	19	19	19
All current/recent learning	42	43	42
Past learning (more than 3 years ago)	21	23	19
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	34	39

Table 2: PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING, 1996, 1999 and 2002 compared

	1996	1999	2002
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,673	5,054	4,896
Current learning	23	22	23
Recent learning	17	18	19
All current/recent learning	40	40	42
Past learning	23	23	21
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	37	36

Table 3: PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING, by age

	Total	17-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,896	250	336	887	1,002	757	705	583	375
Current learning	23	61	45	24	25	24	14	11	5
Recent learning	19	17	27	26	24	20	16	9	5
All current/recent learning	42	78	72	51	49	44	30	20	10
Past learning	21	2	11	21	22	23	25	25	27
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	20	17	28	29	33	45	55	63

<i>Table 4: PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING, by socio-economic class</i>					
	Total	AB	C1	C2	DE
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,896	906	1,398	1,084	1,509
Current learning	23	35	32	17	12
Recent learning	19	25	22	19	13
All current/recent learning	42	60	54	37	25
Past learning	21	23	22	25	17
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	17	24	39	58

<i>Table 5: PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING, by employment status</i>						
	Total	Full time	Part time	Unemployed	Not working	Retired
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,896	2,008	566	187	739	1,188
Current learning	23	25	28	17	13	11
Recent learning	19	26	23	29	17	8
All current/recent learning	42	52	51	46	31	19
Past learning	21	21	19	18	23	25
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	27	30	35	47	56

<i>Table 6: PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING, by terminal age of education</i>					
	Total	Up to 16	17-18	19-20	21+
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,896	2,899	766	207	798
Current learning	23	13	26	25	37
Recent learning	19	16	26	21	29
All current/recent learning	42	30	52	45	65
Past learning	21	21	25	31	22
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	50	24	23	13

Table 7: PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING AND FUTURE INTENTIONS TO LEARN, by Government Office region and by nation

	Base: all respondents = 100%	Current/recent participation	Future intentions	
			Total likely	Total unlikely
Total: UK	4,896	42	41	57
South East	477	48	46	52
North East	276	46	43	52
London	498	45	45	53
South West	326	45	42	57
East Midlands	431	44	40	57
Yorkshire & Humberside	518	41	38	59
West Midlands	471	40	40	57
North West	639	39	40	59
Eastern	401	36	37	60
Scotland	475	44	37	58
England	4,036	42	41	56
Northern Ireland	144	40	39	60
Wales	241	39	37	59

Table 8: FUTURE INTENTIONS TO TAKE UP LEARNING, by learning status

	Total	Current learners	Recent learners	Past learners	None since leaving full-time education
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,896	1,130	943	1,039	1,747
Very likely	22	55	28	9	5
Fairly likely	19	24	32	19	8
Total 'likely'	41	78	61	28	13
Fairly unlikely	10	7	12	15	8
Very unlikely	47	12	24	55	77
Total 'unlikely'	57	19	36	69	85
Don't know	3	3	4	3	2

2. National Adult Learning Survey (NALS)

The National Adult Learning Survey is commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to monitor the effectiveness of its adult learning policies, and progress in meeting the National Learning Targets for adult participation. A baseline study, covering a representative sample of 5,500 adults, was undertaken in 1997 followed by repeat surveys in 2000 and 2001. The samples for NALS 1997 and 2000 were selected from all adults aged 16-69 (in England and Wales), with the age cap lifted in 2001. Given the sample size, the NALS results cannot be disaggregated by LSC area, or by skills and employment sectors.

In NALS, the respondents is asked a series of questions about different types of learning activities as is defined as a 'learner' if any of these activities have been done during the last three years:

“Taught learning:

- Any taught courses that were meant to lead to qualifications;
- Any taught courses designed to help you develop the skills that you might use in a job;
- Any courses, instruction or tuition in driving, in playing a musical instrument, in an art or craft, in a sport or in any practical skill;
- Evening classes;
- Learning which has involved working on your own from a package of materials provided by an employer, college, commercial organisation or other training provider;
- Any other taught course, instruction or tuition.

Non-taught learning:

- Studying for qualifications without taking part in a taught course;
- Supervised training while you were actually doing a job (ie when a manager or experienced colleague has spent time with you helping you learn or develop skills as you do specific tasks at work);
- Time spent keeping up to date with developments in the type of work you do without taking part in a taught course – for example, by reading books, manuals or journals or attending seminars;

- Deliberately trying to improve your knowledge about anything or teach yourself a skill without taking part in a taught course.”

The broad definition of learning used by NALS and the use of in-depth hour-long interviews mean that the participation rate produced by NALS is the highest of all the surveys. In 2002, NALS reported an overall participation rate of 76%.

For more information:

www.lifelonglearning.co.uk

3. English Local Labour Force Survey (ELLFS)

The English Local Labour Force Survey is a partnership project between the DfES the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), to provide for the first time, statistics on adult participation at a local level. The survey which began in 2001, uses a sample size of 60,000 adults, with a cohort of 12,000 added each quarter. Each cohort is interviewed quarterly 5 times – securing a sample size large enough to produce statistically robust data for each local LSC and each LEA area. ELLFS gives a participation rate for each of the 47 local LSCs, enabling realistic targets to be set for each area. In addition, ELLFS can track participation nationally among population groups who are priorities for widening participation, although some questions are asked only of the working age population. In 2001/02 more data were also collected in Wales through the Welsh Local Labour Force Survey, leading to significantly better local labour market data being available for Wales. Some of the questions within the surveys are limited to the working age population only.

The ELLFS includes questions paralleling NALS' broad definition of adult learning. In 2001 it reported an overall participation rate for adults aged 16-69 who had completed continuous full-time education of 74%.

For more information:

www.statistics.gov.uk/llfs

Contact LFS data service at

lfs.dataservice@ons.gov.uk or on 020 7533 5614

References and Useful Resources

NIACE Surveys

Adult learning and social division : a persistent pattern : volume 2. Naomi Sargant and Fiona Aldridge. NIACE, 2003. ISBN 1862011672 £16.95

Adult learning and social division : a persistent pattern : volume 1. Naomi Sargant and Fiona Aldridge. NIACE, 2002. ISBN 1862011559 £24.95

Two steps forward, one step back : the NIACE survey on adult participation in learning 2002. Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 2002. ISBN 1862011451 £8.95

Winners and losers in an expanding system : the NIACE survey on adult participation in learning 2001. Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 2001. ISBN 1862011257 £6.95

The learning divide revisited : a report on the findings of a UK-wide survey on adult participation in education and learning. Naomi Sargant. NIACE, 2000. ISBN 186201088 9 1. £24.95

The learning divide : a study of participation in adult learning in the United Kingdom. Naomi Sargant with John Field, Hywel Francis, Tom Schuller and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 1997. ISBN 1862010161 £24.95

Learning and 'lesisure' : a study of adult participation in learning and its policy implications. Naomi Sargant. NIACE, 1991. ISBN 187941117 £12.95

Adults : their educational experience and needs. Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education. ACACE, 1982. ISBN 0906436176

Adult education : adequacy of provision. National Institute of Adult Education. NIAE, 1970.

National Adult Learning Survey

National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) 2002. R Fitzgerald, Ivana La Valle and R Taylor. Department for Education and Skills, 2003

National Adult Learning Survey 2001. Ivana La Valle and Margaret Blake. Research Brief 321 /Research Report 321. Department for Education and Skills, 2001. ISBN 1841856525.
www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB321.doc
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Pathways in adult learning. Ivana La Valle and Steven Finch. Department for Education and Employment, 1999. ISBN 1841850640

National Adult Learning Survey 1997. Sarah Beinart and Patten Smith. Research report 49. DfEE, 1998. ISBN 0 85522 720 6 (NALS97). Summary also available

Local Labour Force Survey

Annual Local Area Labour Force Survey. Office for National Statistics. ONS, 2002
www.statistics.gov.uk/llfs

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient resources.
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