
Older people and learning - some key statistics 2003



This briefing sheet provides a summary of recent key statistics relating to the participation of older people in learning. Taken from recent surveys, it provides evidence of current participation, recent trends, the types of learning that older people are involved in, future intentions, and the correlation between learning in later life and initial education. We also raise some issues for consideration.

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

Also available:

- 44. Basic skills
- 43. NHSU
- 42. Adult participation in learning
- 41. European initiatives and lifelong learning
- 40. Increasing participation and raising achievement of black and minority ethnic group adults in post-16 education

Many earlier titles in the Briefing Sheet series are still available; please contact us for more information about these titles.

Copies of this and other sheets are available from NIACE, 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE.

Tel. No. 0116 204 4209

E-mail: information@niace.org.uk

They are also available on the website at www.niace.org.uk

Requests for Briefing Sheets in other formats, such as large print, are welcomed; we will be pleased to consider your request.

The surveys quoted in this briefing sheet vary in their definitions of learning, the range of age groups surveyed, and methodology. The references for the surveys can be found at the end of the briefing sheet along with the definitions of learning used. It is our intention to update this information annually.

Summary of key findings

- Participation in learning declines with age, falling dramatically for those aged 65 and over.
- According to NIACE surveys on adult participation in learning, in 1999 and 2003 figures have remained fairly static for the over 55's.
- More older learners participate in non-vocational, non-accredited courses than vocational and accredited courses.
- The number of older learners involved in higher education is still minimal. (Only 0.5% of first year full time undergraduates in 2001/2002 were aged 50 or over).
- The earlier a person left school, the less likely he or she is subsequently to undertake any form of formal learning.
- According to research carried out in the USA, most older people in America value courses that are personally rewarding as opposed to qualification based courses, a finding that is reflected in the UK.
- Older people in the UK are significant users of education that is provided by informal organisations.
- Rates of participation in learning declines to 74% of those aged 50-59.

1. 2003: Current participation of older people in learning

Participation in learning, by age, 2003

	Total	17-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,893	248	335	864	1,029	764	685	575	393
Current learning	19	60	39	21	20	15	12	10	4
Recent learning (in the last 3 years)	20	20	22	24	25	26	18	7	3
All current/recent learning total	39	80	61	46	45	41	30	17	8
Past learning (more than 3 years ago)	26	4	14	24	25	28	32	34	36
None since leaving full-time education/ don't know	35	16	25	30	30	32	39	49	57

Source: A sharp reverse. NIACE Survey on Adult Participation in Learning 2003.

Key findings:

- In general, the older people are, the less likely they are to participate in learning.
- Decline in participation is particularly steep for those aged 65 and over, only 17 per cent of adults aged 65-74 and seven per cent of those aged over 75 regard themselves as learners.
- One half of those who are aged 65 and over say they have not been involved in any learning since leaving full time education.

Issues for consideration

- In the UK we are facing an ever growing older population, who in the future are predicted to continue working for longer. Adult education for over 55's does not reflect this changing trend in terms of increased participation in learning and a need to continue to update skills.
- With people living longer, more emphasis should be placed on learning in the "fourth age"; there are proven benefits that arise from learning to overall health and wellbeing, and it should be acknowledged that there are specific benefits in quality of life within "fourth age" settings, where learning is part of an overall package of care.

2. Since 1996: recent trends

The following tables show the result of surveys carried out by NIACE and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) over recent years, looking at participation in learning by age.

a) NIACE surveys

Percentage of age groups currently/recently participating in learning, by age: 1996-2003 compared

	1996	1999	2002	2003
Base: all respondents = 100%	4775	5205	4896	4893
17-19	86	81	78	80
20-24	65	70	72	61
25-35	48	50	51	46
35-44	43	47	49	45
45-54	36	41	44	41
55-64	25	30	30	30
65-74	19	16	20	17
75+	15	9	10	8

Source: NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Surveys

b) DfES Surveys

Percentage of age groups reporting some learning

	1997	2001	2002	% Change
Base: all respondents= 100%	5245	6451	6668	
16-19	82	76	82	0
20-29	85	86	85	0
30-39	82	83	83	+1
40-49	78	80	81	+4
50-59	67	74	74	+7
60-69	47	49	51	+4
70+	N/A	25	28	N/A

Source: DfES National Adult Learning Survey, 2002

Although the NIACE survey has a stable and consistent relationship with the DfES National Adult Learning Survey (NALS), differences in the methods of data collection, the definitions of learning and the age cohorts surveyed result in the findings of the NIACE survey being consistently markedly lower than those generated by NALS. The NIACE survey is useful in capturing the proportion of learners who see themselves as learners.

Key findings:

- NIACE surveys show that the number of learners aged 75+ has fallen by almost half between 1996 and 2003.
- Between 1996 and 2003 NIACE surveys show overall participation rates have fallen. For those aged 45-64 there has been some increase.
- The DFES figures show an increase in learning among those aged 45 and over between 1997 and 2002.

Issues for consideration:

- The consistent fall in the proportion of learners aged 75+ over the last seven years is a cause for concern.
- There is a need to standardise age bands in surveys to ease comparison.

3. Learning by sector

a) Adult education, Local Education Authority (LEA)

Adult education enrolments by mode, type of funding and age, England, November 2001 (with 1998 for comparison)

Mode	Type of provision	All men	Men aged 60+		All women	Women age 60+	
		No.	No.	%	No.	No.	%
Daytime	Non-vocational, non-accredited	75,769	36,129	47.6	278,177	121,695	43.7
	Vocational, accredited	51,428	13,279	25.8	148,428	23,119	15.5
	Total	127,197	49,408	38.8	426,605	144,814	33.9
Evening	Non-vocational, non-accredited	90,195	20,269	22.4	273,394	39,389	14.4
	Vocational, accredited	46,307	6,431	13.8	98,091	7,747	4.8
	Total	136,502	26,700	19.5	371,485	47,136	12.6
Total	Non-vocational, non-accredited	165,964	69,398	33.9	515,571	161,084	31.2
	Vocational, accredited	97,735	19,710	20.1	246,519	30,866	12.5
	Total (2001)	263,699	76,108	28.8	762,090	191,950	25.1
	Total (1998)	290,908	68,461	23.5	832,972	178,686	21.5

Source: DfES Adult education enrolments (AE1) return. (Oct 2002)

Key findings:

- Over 40% of daytime students on non-vocational, non-accredited courses are aged 60+, compared to about 26% on vocational and accredited courses. However this has increased since 2002.
- The proportions of evening provision in this age group halve for both men and women – highlighting the preference of older people for daytime activity.
- Between 1998 and 2001 there has been a consistent increase in the number of enrolments in adult education for people aged 60+.

Issues for consideration:

- There is a need to plan provision for older learners and to recognise the need for daytime, non-vocational non-accredited courses.
- The number of older women learning far outweighs the number of older men. Promotional work needs to look at gender specific targeting of older men to take up adult education in the 60+ category.

b) Further Education

Further education enrolment split by age and gender, includes only council funded enrolments (FE/LSC enrolments)

Year	1999/00		2000/01		2001/02	
	Female%	Male%	Female%	Male%	Female%	Male %
0-18	27.2	22.4	27.5	23.7	22.5	19.5
19-26	21.0	11.5	19.4	10.6	6.2	4.5
27-45	6.4	3.6	6.4	3.5	18.7	10.5
46-55	2.6	1.8	3.1	2.0	6.1	3.4
56-65	1.3	1.0	1.7	1.3	3.2	2.1
66-80	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	1.8	1.4
80+	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.1

Source: LSC.FE.Isr data

Key findings:

- Since 1999, enrolment figures have increased proportionally in further education for older learners.
- There is a significant drop in figures of enrolment for older male learners.

Issues for consideration:

- The FE sector widening participation agenda appears to have been more successful in targeting learners in the 56-65 group, where enrolment figures have increased by more than 3% for females and just under 2.5 % for males.
- Overall learner figures are still low for older adults compared to younger age groups.
- All sectors of education need to look at working in partnership to find innovative ways to encourage the participation of the over 80's in learning.

c) The Workers' Educational Association (WEA)

For some of its work the WEA targets specific disadvantaged student groups, among them older adults "affected by economic, educational or social disadvantage". The average age of WEA students from 1994–2001 has consistently hovered around the 52-53 mark. More older people participate in community based informal learning, indicating that participation in learning is pursued more for personal development than academic/vocational attainments for many older learners. Source WEA Annual Review 2002, *learning for life*.

d) Higher Education

First year students studying at UK HE institutions, by specified Age Group, Level of Study and Mode of Study, 2001/02

		<i>Levels of study</i>		
Age Group	<i>Mode of study</i>	<i>Post Grad %</i>	<i>Undergrad%</i>	<i>Grand Total%</i>
<i>49 and under</i>	<i>Full-Time</i>	<i>53.2</i>	<i>56.7</i>	<i>55.9</i>
	<i>Part-time</i>	<i>41.6</i>	<i>33.8</i>	<i>33.7</i>
<i>49 and under total</i>		<i>94.8</i>	<i>90.6</i>	<i>89.6</i>
<i>50 and over</i>	<i>Full-time</i>	<i>0.6</i>	<i>0.2</i>	<i>0.3</i>
	<i>Part-time</i>	<i>3.9</i>	<i>7.37</i>	<i>6.5</i>
<i>50 and over total</i>		<i>3.9</i>	<i>7.6</i>	<i>6.9</i>
<i>Age unknown</i>	<i>Full-time</i>	<i>0.06</i>	<i>0.3</i>	<i>0.04</i>
	<i>Part-time</i>	<i>0.4</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>1.3</i>
<i>Unknown total</i>		<i>0.5</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>1.3</i>

Source: HESA Student Record July 2002

- In 2001/02 only 0.2% of first year full time undergraduate students were aged 50 or over. (Source: HESA Services Ltd July 2002 data as requested by NIACE)
- Applicants for funding through student loans must be under the age of 55, if aged between 50-54 the intention of returning to work after graduation is needed.
- The Open University is the exception to the low level of participation of older learners in higher education. Its profile of students aged over 50 in undergraduate courses rose from 12.2% of students in 1994 to 16% in 2002. The total percentage of over 50's in postgraduate courses is 11%. In 2001/2 15% of all OU students were over the age of 50. (Source: email to NIACE from OU Information services 2003)

Issues for consideration:

- Life, work and family experiences of older people can be equivalent to formal qualifications and indicators of the ability to benefit from and contribute to HE.
- There appears to be ambiguity between academic institutions and research councils on the upper age limit for both funding and admission to post graduate programmes.

4. Types of learning

Percentage of age groups reporting different types of learning

	2001	2002	2001	2002	2001	2002	2001	2002	2001	2002	2001	2002	2001	2002
Age range	16-19	16-19	20-29	20-29	30-39	30-39	40-49	40-49	50-59	50-59	60-69	60-69	70+	70+
Any learning	76	82	86	85	83	83	80	81	74	74	49	51	25	28
Taught learning	56	67	70	69	66	70	63	67	55	54	32	35	15	18
Self-directed learning	47	57	70	69	67	65	64	68	59	60	34	34	15	16
Vocational learning	63	76	84	81	79	79	75	76	65	65	28	30	5	6
Non-vocational learning	27	23	20	22	23	26	23	26	28	27	30	33	22	25

Source: DfES National Adult Learning Survey, 2002

Key findings:

- There has been an increase since 1997 from 67% to 74% in participation in any learning, among the 50-59-age cohort, with a smaller increase in the group aged 60-69 (up 4 percentage points).
- Learning among those aged 70 and over has increased by 3 percentage points since 2001.

Issues for consideration:

- Lower levels of participation in vocational learning among older adults may relate to employers not investing in vocational learning, or individuals thinking that it has little to do with them.

5. Future intentions

Future intentions to take up learning, by age, 2003

	Total	17-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,893	248	335	864	1029	764	685	575	393
Total likely	41	73	59	54	53	41	26	15	6
Total unlikely	56	23	36	42	42	56	72	83	93

Source: A Sharp Reverse. The NIACE Survey on Adult Participation in Learning 2003.

Future intentions to take up learning, by age, 1996 and 2003 compared

	Total	17-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Total likely									
1996	38	71	58	49	47	37	20	14	10
2002	41	72	63	59	50	42	23	12	7
2003	41	73	59	54	53	41	26	15	6
% Change 1996 & 2003	+3	+2	+1	+5	+6	+4	+6	+1	-4
Total unlikely									
1996	55	19	35	42	45	57	76	82	83
2002	57	23	33	38	48	56	75	86	92
2003	56	23	36	42	44	56	72	83	93
% Change 1996 & 2003	+1	+4	+1	0	-1	-1	-4	+1	+10

Key findings:

- In 2003 83% of those aged 65 and over reported they were totally unlikely to take up learning.
- Future intentions to learn increased by 6% for the 55-64 age group and only 1% for 65-74 since 1996.
- For those age over 75 there has been an ongoing decline in intentions to learn, from 10% in 1996 to 6% in 2003.

6. Importance of initial education

The school leaving age was only raised to age 16 in 1974, and NIACE research has consistently shown a correlation between the age of leaving full time education and the likelihood of returning to any form of education. The 2003 figures again confirm the key divide between those who leave school at the earliest opportunity and those who stay on for even a short while.

Participation in Learning by age of finishing full time education 2000

	Total	Up to 16	17-18	19-20	21+
Base : all respondents =100 %	5054	3130	781	207	688
Current Learning	22	13	27	28	32
Recent Learning	18	14	26	27	29
All current/recent learning	40	28	53	55	61
Past learning	23	23	26	26	26
None since fulltime education	37	49	21	19	13

Source : The learning divide revisited. NIACE 2000

Participation in learning by age of finishing full time education 2003

	Total	Up to 16	17-18	19-20	21+
Base: all respondents = 100%	4893	2923	764	226	701
Current learning	19	11	22	19	27
Recent learning	20	16	27	22	32
All current/recent learning	39	27	49	41	59
Past learning	26	27	29	30	27
None since full-time education	35	46	22	30	14

Source: A Sharp Reverse. NIACE. 2003

7. Basic skills

For the first time in 2002 the NALS survey looked at measuring literacy and numeracy difficulties. All respondents who had either a degree, or maths and English GCSE or equivalent were automatically assumed not to have basic skills difficulties. This was proved wrong with the Skills for Life Survey. In 2003 the DFES published the *Skills for life Survey: a national needs and impact survey of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills*.

Percentage of age groups with basic skills difficulty:

	All	16-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
%								
Basic skill difficulty	25	30	17	15	18	22	35	46
No basic skills difficulty	75	70	83	85	83	78	65	54
Weighted base	6668	143	953	1393	1268	1069	826	1014
Unweighted base	6668	112	780	1371	1365	1169	928	943

Source: DFES National Adult Learning Survey 2002

Key findings:

- Skills ability decreases with age and yet equally complex decisions need to be made as we get older.

8. International comparisons – the USA

This section includes statistics from the National Household Education Surveys of the United States 2002 conducted by the National Centre for Education statistics, Washington DC. This data reflects interesting comparisons for education for older people in the USA and UK.

Adult education participation rates by age group and provider

Provider	30-38	39-47	48-57	57-65	66-74
Credential programme					
1991	18.0	20.1	11.3	5.7	2.8
1999	23.9	19.8	17.1	9.8	4.8
Business or Industry					
1991	16.5	22.2	12.6	7.3	2.0
1999	21.7	22.6	19.6	12.1	4.8
Community Organisations					
1991	7.1	6.7	5.4	4.9	4.5
1999	16.4	16.6	15.1	11.2	11.5

Source: 1991 and 1999 National Household Education Surveys, *Journal of Gerontology* 2002, vol 57B

Key findings

- Participation of older adults in education in the USA reflects the trend towards lower participation in the UK.
- Levels of participation of older learners are highest in community settings, rising from 4.6% in 1991 to 11.6% in 1999.
- Despite USA purporting to be a “life long learning society”, in 1999 only one fifth of the 66-74 age group reported any participation in any form of education.

- Take up of adult education has improved overall from 1991-1999; in 1991 8.4% of the 66-74 group had taken at least 1 adult education class. By 1999 this number increased by 19.9%.
- For the 55-74 groups there is an increase in participation in both formal and nonformal education in the 1990's.
- People aged 30-47 are twice as likely as people aged 60-74 to take employment-based courses.
- Although older adults may be less likely to take up education, they are also less likely to mention obstacles and barriers: younger age groups being more likely to cite finances or family responsibilities and lack of information on classes.
- Age clearly still presents as a barrier to accessing education, except in courses run by churches, community centres, and libraries etc where age does not influence participation.

Issues for Consideration

- The American education system has had a degree of success in encouraging learning across older age groups, with evidence of steady increased participation.
- The relevant absence of employment-based education for older learners reflects age related expectations of older people benefiting more from non-vocational education.
- Older people in the USA value courses that are personally rewarding, as opposed to qualification based courses. Education should therefore encourage learners who have personal development as the overall goal of pursuing adult education.
- Community organisations appear to be working closely to goals of lifelong learning, which challenge assumptions that courses run by these sectors are inferior to business or credential programmes.

9. Definitions of Learning

The following definitions were used in the above surveys:

NIACE surveys - "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 or part time, done at home, at work, or in another place like 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."

National Adult Learning Survey – "Taught learning which could be: any courses that were meant to lead to qualifications; any taught courses designed to help you develop 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; any other taught course, instruction or tuition."

"Non-taught learning which might be: studying for qualifications without taking part in a taught course; supervised training while you were actually doing a job; time spent keeping up to date with developments in the type of work you do without taking part in a taught course; deliberately trying to improve your knowledge about anything or teach yourself a skill without taking part in a taught course."

NIACE Surveys

A sharp reverse: the NIACE survey on adult participation in learning 2003

Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett, NIACE 2003. ISBN 1862011850

Adult learning and social division : a persistent pattern, volume 1 : the full NIACE survey on adult participation in learning 2002.

Fiona Aldridge and Naomi Sargant. NIACE, 2002. ISBN 1862011559

Beyond the boundaries – exploring the potential of widening participation in higher education

Julia Preece (ed), with Cal Weatherald and Maggie Woodrow. NIACE, 1998. ISBN 1 86201 047 1

Fees survey 2002-2003 : indicators of fee levels charged to part-time adult students by Local Education Authorities and Colleges.

Garrick Fincham. NIACE, 2004. ISBN 1862011958

The learning divide : a study of participation in adult learning in the UK.

Naomi Sargant with John Field, Hywel Francis, Tom Schuller and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 1997. ISBN 1862010161

The learning divide revisited : a report of a UK-wide survey on adult participation in education and learning.

Naomi Sargant. NIACE, 2000. ISBN 18620108891

Two steps forward, one step back : the NIACE survey on adult participation in learning 2002

Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 2002. ISBN 1862011451.

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

Other Useful Surveys and Statistics

Age discrimination in public policy: a review of evidence

Help the Aged, 2002. ISBN 0 90585267 2

DfES statistical bulletins and first releases. Wide range of statistics including post-16 learning.

Web Site: www.dfes.gov.uk/statistics

Education statistics actuals and estimates

Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy.

Web Site: www.ipf.co.uk/sis

Education and training statistics for the United Kingdom. The Stationery Office,

2003. ISBN 0 11 2711553

Education at a glance: OECD indicators

2003. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003. Web Site: www.oecd.org

Later life education in the 1990's : increasing involvement and continuing disparity.

Jenifer Hamil-Luker and Peter Uhlenberg. The Gerontological Society of America, 2002

National Learner Satisfaction Survey

2002/03. Learning and Skills Council, 2004. Available to download from www.lsc.gov.uk

National adult learning survey 2002

DfES, 2001. ISBN 184185 652 5. Available to download from www.dfes.gov.uk

Pathways in adult learning. National centre for Social Research. DfEE, 2000. ISBN 1 841580640

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.

Registered charity number 1002775; Company registration number 2603322