

---

# Briefing 2000 on Learning in Later Life



Briefing paper outlining the issues around learning provision for older people

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

Also available:

1. A history of the development of NIACE
2. What motivates people to learn
3. Student non-completion (drop out)
4. Who learns - key facts
5. Family learning
6. Lifelong learning - opportunities and initiatives
7. New Deal
8. Learning centres
9. Young adult learners, disaffection and social exclusion
10. Social exclusion
11. Emancipatory learning
12. Fees charged to part-time adult students
13. Learning and Skills Councils and older people
14. Building effective partnerships – lessons from the Adult and Community Learning Fund

Suggestions for future issues to be covered are welcome.

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

Tel. No. 0116 2044 261

E-mail: [information@niace.org.uk](mailto:information@niace.org.uk)

They are also available on the website at [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)

If you require a different format - e.g. a large print version - please let us know.

## Introduction

People are living longer – in 1997, 32% of the UK population were over 50 and 18% were over retirement age. It is estimated that by 2031, 41% of the UK population will be over 50, and 23% over retirement age. Although health care needs do increase with age, many older people enjoy good health, with over 65s making, on average, only two visits a year more to their GPs than young people. Improved health means that older people can continue to contribute to their community for a longer period of time, and the challenge for society generally is to make that time as fulfilling as possible.

Growing older for some people can bring about exclusion – from work, from family and society and from a sense of purpose. Continuing participation in learning can prevent or reverse this process, yet older people are almost invisible in most forms of adult education. NIACE (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) has been mapping adult participation in formal and informal learning since the 1930s and studies published during the last 20 years consistently show that participation in learning declines with age.

For example, a study published in 1997, based on a survey carried out by Gallup in 1996 on a population sample of 4,755, showed that while more than 2 in 5 of the whole population over the age of 16 were then learning or had done so over the previous three years, only 1 in 4 of the 55-64 age group, 1 in 5 of the 65-74s and less than 1 in 7 of those over 75 did so. NIACE also undertakes an annual National Adult Learning Survey and this year's results indicate a fall in participation by retired people over the last 3 years from 20% to 16% among current/recent learners. Most of those who do engage in some form of learning activity do so at home through correspondence courses or at adult education centres rather than at Higher or Further Education institutions.

The Government has published a plethora of documents recently on various aspects of ageing,

including the following (which will be the subject of another briefing sheet in the near future):

- *Age Diversity in Employment*. Voluntary code of good practice in avoiding age discrimination in employment. One of its recommendations is that employers should “ensure the training and development needs of all staff are regularly reviewed and that age is not a barrier to training”.
- *The Age Shift*. Consultation document from the Foresight Ageing Population Panel on the implications of an ageing population for various aspects of everyday life, including learning, leisure, and information and communications technology.
- *All our Futures*. Report of the Better Government for Older People Steering Committee on its pilot programme to develop and test integrated inter-agency strategies. One of its main conclusions is that central and local government and voluntary organisations can produce more effective outcomes through working together with older people and their organisations.
- *Building a Better Society for Older People*. Report to the Inter-Ministerial Group on Older People on the ‘listening events’ initiated by them in 1999 to enable ministers to listen to older people and better understand their concerns.
- *Learning in Later Life: Motivation and Impact*. Findings of a study to explore the impact of learning on older people.
- *Learning in the Fourth Age*. Report on an investigation into whether the benefits of learning and other activities extend to those with a degree of dependency on others, and whether their carers believe that such benefits exist.
- *Learning to Succeed* – The 1999 White Paper which set out the new framework for post-16 learning.
- *Life Begins at 50: A Better Society for Older People*. Report describing the programme of measures implemented or planned by the Government in response to the feedback from the Listening to Older People Events in . One of these measures was a commitment that the new Information and Communication Technology Learning Centres would target disadvantaged older people and offer local access to ICT equipment and training.

- *Making a Difference – The Better Government for Older People Programme Evaluation Report*. Review of the achievements of the 28 pilot projects and their contribution to the aims of the programme. One of the achievements mentioned is the shifting of local authority activity on ageing from services to older people, to opportunities for older people actively to participate in learning, employment or volunteering.
- *Winning the Generation Game: Improving Opportunities for People aged 50-65 in Work and Community Activity*. Report highlighting the way in which economic trends, prevailing attitudes and demographic changes are all contributing to a situation where increasing numbers of over-50s are being written off - by employers, by society and by themselves.
- *With Respect to Old Age: Long Term Care – Rights and Responsibilities* – report by the Royal Commission on Long Term Care.

These publications represent a welcome focus on older people and indicate that a lot of thinking and talking about joined-up government is taking place in certain areas. Further encouraging initiatives include:

- New Deal 50 plus, a voluntary programme with an optional training element to help older people back into work.
- Older Volunteers Initiative – a project to create more and better opportunities for older people to become volunteers.
- The Inter-ministerial Group for Older People, set up to co-ordinate government policy on older people.
- The Learning and Skills Act 2000 - the proposals to encourage community learning and to promote equality of opportunity initiatives **could** make a difference by making it easier to reach excluded older people.
- DfEE’s Learning in Later Life Campaign, including a competition to find the oldest learner in England.
- The appointment of Alistair Darling as a ‘champion of older people’.

However, there are still some areas of concern:

- Older learners’ needs are not funding priorities.
- The recent focus on vocational learning, which attracted better funding than non-vocational education, was unhelpful.

- Adult education fees are too high and have discouraged many potential older learners.
- The availability of concessions is patchy, with some local authorities offering varying levels of concessions and others none at all.
- The curriculum tends to be too narrow, as recent funding constraints have tended to discourage innovation.

### Why do people learn?

It may be pertinent to list some of the reasons for engaging in learning in later life:

- Intellectual stimulation
- To gain qualifications
- To help find/change a job or to gain promotion
- For fun
- To fill time
- Interest in a particular subject
- Personal development
- Better social interaction
- To help other family members
- Ability to make demands more effectively
- To help with voluntary or community work
- To improve health – recent research by NIACE confirmed that concentration on study took the mind off many physical, mental and emotional problems.

*“I took up art at the age of 61. Although not intended as such, it proved a therapy from depression I was suffering, but continued by opening up a much wider experience of life and friendships.”*

(Testimony of 92-year-old from Oxford)

### Recommendations

There is much that can be done to enable older people to begin or continue to enjoy the benefits of learning in later life:

- Standardise concessions for older learners and encourage older people to sign up for Individual Learning Accounts.
- Recognise that older adults want learning opportunities that do not necessarily lead to exams and qualifications.
- Promote more widely the existing schemes to improve older people’s chances of finding work (e.g. New Deal 50 plus) or setting up their own business (e.g. PRIME).
- Ensure that centres created for older people’s activities do not just benefit those who are

already ‘joiners’ but offer information and guidance (including peer group mentoring) on a range of opportunities across the whole community.

- Create opportunities for progression so older people can see a clear route to the achievement of their goals and therefore be encouraged to continue learning.
- Ensure that funding arrangements do not result in older people’s provision falling off the end of Councils’ priority lists. Encourage LSCs and other funding agencies to be imaginative in their approach. For example, bearing in mind the health and social benefits to be derived from lifelong learning, funding need not be seen as the sole responsibility of the education sector, but could also include Health and Social Services.
- Provide more opportunities for inter-generational learning – see ‘good practice’ example below of Hope High School and Peterloo Court, Salford, where an inter-generational project succeeded in breaking down barriers and developing understanding between generations and in creating mutual learning opportunities.
- Have a properly negotiated curriculum - its core may need to be changed so that provision is relevant, timely and affordable.
- Give incentives to providers to take the learning out to the learner, i.e. to base some learning activities in community settings rather than in educational institutions.
- Encourage community-based, self-help learning initiatives. These may well result from local concerns, e.g. environmental issues.

### Examples of good practice in learning provision

Warwickshire library service has teamed up with Age Concern to launch ‘ActivAge’, a project to make services more accessible to older people. The project includes information points at five libraries, with details of activities and courses.

Since September 1999 Hope High School in Salford has worked with the residents of Peterloo Court, a sheltered housing scheme in their area, in an initiative to reduce crime and the fear of crime in their community. Joint learning activities soon became a regular feature of the project and the interaction between the two groups has resulted in a greater understanding of each generation’s lifestyle and problems, and the development of strong bonds between the school and the elderly residents

Park Lane College in Leeds has developed an innovative and effective programme of learning activities with older people in South Leeds, including basic skills development. In 1996, 25 older people aged from 52 to 86 embarked on a study tour in Crete, producing excellent diaries recording the event. Overall the College has developed a framework for a multi-agency and modular approach to work.

Southwark LEA has an Older Learning Project which targets those over the age of 50, providing a range of activities in over 30 venues across the borough. The programme has been developed through collaboration with many agencies and sensitive outreach work has succeeded in reaching normally excluded groups of older people.

Somerset College of Arts and Technology runs basic skills courses for small groups of over 50s. The way some of their students is recruited is of particular interest. Using funding from the Basic Skills Agency, a team of “barefoot helpers” have been trained to identify people with basic skills needs they may come across while acting as learning support volunteers and to brief them on the learning opportunities available to them.

## References and Further Reading

Age diversity in employment. DfEE, 1999.  
Ref: Age2

The age shift. Foresight Ageing Population Panel. DTI, 2000

All our Futures: the report of the Better Government for Older People Steering Committee. 2000

Building a Better Society for Older People: Report on the Listening Events to the Inter-Ministerial Group on Older People. Annette Boaz and Carol Hayden. University of Warwick, March 2000

The impact of learning on health. Fiona Aldridge and Peter Lavender. NIACE, 2000. ISBN 186201101X

The Learning and Skills Act 2000. The Stationery Office. ISBN 010542100 6

The learning divide revisited: a report of the findings of a UK-wide survey on adult participation in education and learning. Naomi Sargant. NIACE, 2000. ISBN 1862010889

Learning in Later Life: Motivation and Impact. Sally Dench and Jo Regan. DfEE, 2000. ISBN 184185199X

Learning in the Fourth Age. Jim Soulsby. DfEE, May 2000. ISBN 1841852821

Learning to grow older & bolder. Shiela Carlton and Jim Soulsby. NIACE, 1999. ISBN 1862010501

Learning to succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning. The Stationery Office, 1999

Life Begins at 50: A Better Society for Older People. DSS, May 2000

Long Term Care: The Government’s Response to the Health Committee’s Report on Long Term Care. July 1999

Making a Difference – The Better Government for Older People Programme Evaluation Report. University of Warwick, May 2000.

The NHS Plan: A Plan for Investment. A Plan for Reform. Department of Health, July 2000

Our Present for the Future. Better Government for Older People Programme. 2000

Winning the Generation Game: Improving Opportunities for People aged 50-65 in Work and Community Activity. Performance and Innovation Unit, Cabinet Office. The Stationery Office, April 2000. ISBN 0114301662

With Respect to Old Age: Long Term Care – Rights and Responsibilities. Royal Commission on Long Term Care, March 1999. Cm 4192-I

*“Learning has kept me independent, active and mobile. It keeps me in touch with enthusiastic and motivated people of all ages and walks of life and has made my old age my new age!”*  
(Testimony of 86 year old learner from Croydon)

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