
What motivates people to learn



Participation in adult learning can be related to major life events and changes. Wanting promotion at work (71%), moving house or home (59%) or involvement in a marriage or relationship breakdown (45%), losing a job, all relate to higher proportions of learning than in the population as a whole.

The learning divide: a study of participation in adult learning in the United Kingdom, NIACE, 1997

Types of adult learner

Much of the emphasis in participation research has been what motivates people to learn. One of the pioneers of motivation research, Cyril Houle (1966), identified three categories of adult learner:

- ◆ goal-oriented (pursuing identified objectives)
- ◆ learning-oriented (learning for the love of it)
- ◆ activity-oriented (learning for reasons unconnected with programme or content).

These categories are still largely accepted although it is now common to reduce them into a simple dichotomy - learning for instrumental motives (to achieve specific goals) or intrinsic motives (learning for its own sake; interest in subject etc.) Many now believe this division is too simple as people often have mixed motives for learning and motives tend to change over time.

Vocational/non-vocational divide

It is also common to find people taking vocational and qualification-bearing programmes for 'intrinsic' reasons and participating in so-called 'leisure' courses for instrumental reasons such as to help in employment. Hence there has been widespread dissatisfaction with the vocational/non vocational funding divide which reflects an assumption that people follow vocational programmes for purely instrumental reasons and non vocational programmes for purely intrinsic reasons.

Factors affecting motivation

There are further complexities. A person's readiness to participate in an organised learning programme is influenced by a whole range of factors such as sex, age, race, family background, school experience, social class, cultural norms, occupation, external influences and pressures (e.g. from employer, welfare benefit regulations, family), ones place of residence and the existence or lack of local learning opportunities, and, crucially, by policy decisions and thrusts that affect the nature and extent of learning and economic opportunities available to adults.

This is the second 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

Suggestions for future issues to be covered are welcome.

Copies are available from NIACE, 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE.

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

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

The following figures from the 1996 Gallup survey illustrate this:

- ◆ more men (25%) than women (21%) are currently learning.
- ◆ those who are not working (23% and retired people (20%) have almost half the levels of participation of people in work or seeking work
- ◆ current and recent participation is greatest among young people, and decreases with each successive age cohort - with 86% of 17-19 year olds; 43% of 35-44 year olds, 19% of 65-74 year olds, and 15% of the 75-plus population reporting current or recent participation
- ◆ social class continues to be the key discriminator in understanding participation in learning. Over half of all upper and middle class (AB) respondents are current or recent learners, compared with one-third of the skilled working class (C2) and one quarter of unskilled working class people and people on limited incomes
- ◆ where people live has a major impact on whether they are likely to participate
- ◆ there are striking differences in the English regions with Yorkshire and Humberside (52%) topping the list; and the East Midlands (50%), the North (45%), London (44%) and East Anglia enjoying the higher than average proportions of current/recent learners, and West Midlands (35%), and the North West (35%) having the lowest proportion
- ◆ there are marked national differences in levels of participation. Overall 40% of the UK population are current/recent learners. The national totals are England 42%; Scotland 38%; Wales 37% and Northern Ireland 28%
- ◆ the length of initial education continues to be the best single predictor of participation in adult learning. The more initial education and training people receive, the greater the likelihood of their learning later on. Only 20% of people leaving full-time education below the age of 16 are current/recent learners. 39% of people leaving at 16 or 17, and 59% of those leaving at 18 or later are current/recent learners

Motivation is therefore not a simple issue since individual motives and action are strongly affected by where people are located (socially, culturally and spatially) and the constraints or incentives that operate on their choices.

Resources on motivation

NIACE Briefing Sheet 2

All things being equal: a practical guide to widening participation for adults with learning difficulties in continuing education Jeannie Sutcliffe and Yola Jacobsen NIACE, 1998. ISBN 1 86201 051 X. £6.95

Education's for other people: access to education for non-participant adults Veronica McGivney. NIACE. 1990. ISBN 0 900559 93 4

Excluded men Veronica McGivney NIACE, 1998. ISBN 1 86201 039 0. £12.00

Individual commitment to learning: comparative findings from the surveys of individuals: employers' and providers' attitudes N Tremlett and A Park. DfEE. 1995. ISBN 0 86 392472 7

Individual commitment: tracking learners' decision making D Firth and L Goffey. HMSO. 1996. ISBN 0 11 270939 7. £25.95

Individual commitment to learning: individuals' decision-making about lifetime learning A Hand, J Gambles and E Cooper. Department of Employment. 1994. ISBN 0 86 392434 4

The inquiring mind Cyril Houle. University of Wisconsin Press. 1961. Reprinted University of Oklahoma. 1988

The learning divide: a study of participation in adult learning in the United Kingdom Naomi Sargant et al. NIACE. 1997. ISBN 1 86201 016 1. £20.00

Motivating unemployed adults to undertake education and training: some British and other European findings Veronica McGivney. NIACE. 1992. ISBN 1 872941 17 6. £9.95

The motivation to train: a review of the literature and the development of a comprehensive theoretical model of training motivation. Mary Crowder and Kate Pupynin. Department of Employment (now DfEE). 1993. Research Series No 9. ISBN 0 85 522498 3

Understanding learner motivation Mary Crowder and Kate Pupynin. Individual Commitment Branch, Department of Employment (now DfEE). 1995.

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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