

NIACE Research and Development



Key Findings



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Successful Participation for All: Widening Adult Participation Stocktake @ 18 months

Abstract

This project set out to examine the impact of the LSC widening adult participation (WAP) strategy 'Successful Participation for All' upon adult learning activity and provision. The rationale behind this strategy was that extending learning to disadvantaged and under-represented groups could contribute to Level 2 targets, Skills for Life, the national skills agenda, social inclusion and cohesion, and promoting appreciation of learning. Some 18 months or so after its publication was deemed an appropriate time to take stock.

The four main goals of the project were:

- ❖ To examine the nature and impact of local, regional and national activity initiated in the wake of Successful Participation for All.
- ❖ To highlight factors that hinder activity to widen adult participation.
- ❖ To consider how widening participation sits with more recent strategies and priorities.
- ❖ To revisit and update the aspirations of Successful Participation for All.

Research methodology:

- ❖ This was a qualitative study, which involved participants from the LSC (from local LSCs and National Office), and adult learning providers (from the Voluntary Sector, LEAs and Further Education Colleges).
- ❖ Focus groups and interviews followed a semi-structured schedule which explored themes under the following headings: i) Planning and monitoring; ii) Management; iii) Activity; iv) Funding; v) Providers and partners; vi) Success factors and constraints.

NB: The sample size was small, meaning that this study is a modest snapshot of activity, therefore, generalisations on the basis of this research can only be tentative. The participants were self-selecting so it is also likely that the sample contained respondents who took a significant interest in WAP.

Key Findings

The main conclusions of the project are:

- ❖ There is a broad commitment to widening participation within the LSC and providers. LSC staff generally felt that widening participation was integrated into the LSC's working practices. The milestones of the WAP strategy were also being addressed. However, there is some despondency amongst local LSC staff who are set the task of widening participation but feel that they are not receiving broader support as a result of the current policy context.
- ❖ The rhetoric of the recent skills strategies endorses widening participation, but questions remain as to whether the means are in place to realise stated objectives. Extremely tight adult learning budgets, linked with performance targets, create the temptation to focus on the easiest to help. This can mean that widening participation is often conflated with increasing participation.
- ❖ One of the key problems that featured throughout the research was the difficulty of defining 'widening participation'. Widening participation was argued to be a more prevalent feature of practice than the stereotype of unaccredited, first-steps, community based provision. One LSC respondent felt it could be argued that all LSC work contributed to widening participation. As a result of this ambiguity it is difficult to assess the amount of funding and activity that belongs under the 'WAP' banner: estimates of LLSC budgets dedicated to WAP varied from 5% to over 50%.

Recommendations

The report did not make concrete recommendations for action; rather it raised topics and suggested areas that the LSC could usefully scrutinise, such as:

- ❖ Reinforce the embedding of widening participation as a cross-cutting responsibility with designated WAP lead in each local LSC office
- ❖ Link with other strategies – 'Working Together' and 'National Equality and Diversity Strategy 2004-2007'
- ❖ Recognise the importance of IAG & associated functions, such as learning champions, mentors
- ❖ *Widening participation should not be conflated with increasing participation.*

Output

- ❖ McGimpsey, K. and Tolhurst, E. (2005), *Successful Participation for All: Widening Adult Participation Stocktake @ 18 months*. NIACE: Leicester.

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Project Managers: Kate McGimpsey, Edward Tolhurst

Email: kate.mcgimpsey@niace.org.uk

Requests for 'Key Findings' in other formats, such as large print, are welcome. We would be pleased to consider your request.

niace
promoting adult learning

21 De Montfort Street
Leicester LE1 7GE

Tel: +44 (0)116 204 4200/1
Fax: +44 (0)116 285 4514
Website: www.niace.org.uk

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