

“All in all, the surveys show the need for sustained policies to stimulate demand if we are to create a learning society for all. 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, 2003)

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

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- 45. Older people and learning
- 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

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Introduction

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 series 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 discussion 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, 2003).

Headline findings from the NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2003

The 2003 participation rate is the lowest that has been recorded by NIACE since 1996 when the current introductory question and definition of learning were adopted. The 2003 survey shows that almost one in five adults are currently learning (19%), with 39% of adults having participated in some learning activity during the last three years. (Table 1).

This represents a significant fall in participation since last year, when 42% of adults said that they were current or recent learners. Within this

overall decline, there has been a 4% fall in the proportion of adults who are currently learning, while the proportion of recent learners has increased slightly.

	1996	1999	2002	2003
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,673	5,054	4,896	4,893
Current learning	23	22	23	19
Recent learning	17	18	19	20
All current/recent learning	40	40	42	39
Past learning	23	23	21	26
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	37	36	35

More men (40%) than women (38%) have participated in learning during the past three years. Women (37%) are more likely than men (32%) to say that they have not participated since leaving full-time education. (Table 2).

	Total	Men	Women
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,893	2,389	2,504
Current learning	19	20	19
Recent learning (in the last 3 years)	20	20	20
All current/recent learning	39	40	38
Past learning (more than 3 years ago)	26	28	25
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	35	32	37

In general, the older people are, the less likely they are to participate in learning. Four-fifths of 17-19-year-olds and 61% of 20-24-year-olds are current or recent learners. This compares with under half of the rest of the working age population. The decline in participation is particularly steep for those aged 55 and over, such that only 17% of adults aged 65-74 and 8% of those aged 75 and over regard themselves as learners. Over half of all adults aged 65 and over say that they have not participated in any learning since leaving full-time education. (Table 3).

	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	20	20	22	24	25	26	18	7	3
All current/recent learning	39	80	61	46	45	41	30	17	8
Past learning	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

Socio-economic class remains a key determinant of adult participation in learning. The 2003 survey shows that a substantial divide remains between participation among the upper and middle classes, with around one half of ABs (53%) and C1s (49%) participating compared with just over one third of C2s (35%) and only one quarter of DEs (25%). Over one half of DEs (53%) have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education, compared with only 16% of ABs. (Table 4).

	Total	AB	C1	C2	DE
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,893	837	1,415	1,102	1,540
Current learning	19	27	25	15	12
Recent learning	20	26	24	20	13
All current/recent learning	39	53	49	35	25
Past learning	26	30	27	27	23
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	35	16	24	37	53

Just under one half of both full-time (47%) and part-time (49%) workers are current or recent learners, compared with 40% of the unemployed, 28% of those not working and just 17% of retired adults. Around one half of those who are retired (50%) or not working (46%) say that they have not been involved in any learning since leaving full-time education. (Table 5).

	Total	Full time	Part time	Unemployed	Not working	Retired
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,893	2,015	533	222	714	1,187
Current learning	19	20	21	14	11	8
Recent learning	20	27	28	26	16	8
All current/recent learning	39	47	49	40	28	17
Past learning	26	26	23	27	26	33
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	35	27	28	33	46	50

In previous surveys, terminal age of education has been a key predictor of participation in learning as an adult. 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. Only 27% of those who left school as early as possible are current or recent learners, compared with at least two-fifths of all other groups. (Table 6).

	Total	Up to 16	17-18	19-20	21+
Base: all respondents = 100%	4,893	2,923	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 leaving full-time education/don't know	35	46	22	30	14

Participation across the nations and regions of the UK continue to display considerable differences that cannot be easily explained. In 2003 the highest proportion of current or recent learners is to be found in Wales where participation has increased by 3 points to 42% and the lowest proportion in Northern Ireland where participation has fallen 10 points to 30%. In Scotland, participation has fallen from a peak of 44% in 2002 to 38% this year. Adults in Wales

(43%) are most likely to see themselves as future learners, while those in Northern Ireland (33%) are least likely to take up learning in the next three years.

Within Government office regions, the highest levels of participation are reported in London and the South West (42%). The North East (33%) and the West Midlands (36%) report the lowest levels of participation. Adults in the South East (45%) and London (44%) are most likely to see themselves as future learners, while those least likely to take up learning in the next three years reside in the North East (32%) and West Midlands (38%). (For Table 7, see end of briefing sheet).

Forty-one percent of adults say that they are likely to take up learning in the next three years. Fifty-six percent say that they are unlikely to do so. Despite a significant fall in participation in 2003, there has been no change in the proportion of adults who say that they are likely to learn in the next three years. There are however, fewer adults who believe that they are *very* unlikely to learn in the next three years (43% compared with 47%).

This year's survey reinforces findings from previous years, which suggest that current participation impacts upon future intentions to learn. Eighty percent of current learners report that they are likely to take up learning in the future, compared with only 13% of those who have not participated since leaving full-time education. (For Table 8, see end of briefing sheet).

The headline findings '*A Sharp Reverse*' is available for purchase from NIACE.

For more information, contact Fiona Aldridge at fiona@niace.org.uk or on 0116 2044246.

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, 2001 and 2002. 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 respondent 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, go to: 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 in England, 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, go to:

www.statistics.gov.uk/llfs

Contact LFS data service at

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

References and Useful Resources

1. The NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey

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Fitzgerald R., La Valle I. and Taylor R. (2003) *National adult learning survey 2002*. Sheffield: Department for Education and Skills

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www.statistics.gov.uk/llfs

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	4,893	39	41	56
South East	682	40	45	52
North East	204	33	32	65
London	615	42	44	53
South West	428	42	40	58
East Midlands	371	39	40	56
Yorkshire & Humberside	416	39	40	58
West Midlands	450	36	38	60
North West	566	39	43	53
Eastern	422	41	44	53
Scotland	547	38	36	60
England	3,956	39	41	56
Northern Ireland	146	30	33	58
Wales	244	42	43	54

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%	4,893	940	966	1,285	1,640
Very likely	21	56	31	10	5
Fairly likely	19	24	33	20	8
Total 'likely'	41	80	65	30	13
Fairly unlikely	14	9	14	19	13
Very unlikely	43	9	17	48	72
Total 'unlikely'	56	18	31	67	85
Don't know	3	3	4	3	2

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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