

“All in all, the surveys show the need for sustained policies to stimulate demand if we are to create a learning society for all. 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 fifty-second in a series of briefing sheets, which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues

Also available:

- 51. The NLN and adult and community learning
- 50. Fees charged to part-time adult students 2002-2003
- 49. Sources of funding for adult learners
- 48. Older people and mentoring
- 47. Young adult learners, disaffection and social inclusion
- 46. Adult participation in learning
- 45. Older people and learning
- 44. Basic skills

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 4289

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

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

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

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:

1. The NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey
2. The National Adult Learning Survey
3. 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 *Adult learning and social division: a persistent pattern: Volume 2* (Sargant and Aldridge, 2003).

### ***Headline findings from the NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2004***

The 2004 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 2004 survey shows that almost one in five adults are currently learning (19%), with 38% of adults having participated in some learning activity during the last three years. Over one-third of adults (36%) say that they have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education.

Despite seven years of commitment to the vision set out in *The Learning Age* (Department for Education and Employment (1998) *The Learning*

*Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain*, London: HMSO), the survey shows that there is still much work to be done. The 2004 participation rate is not significantly different to that found in 1996, when 40 per cent of adults said that they were current or recent learners. It is also the lowest rate recorded by NIACE since the current introductory question and definition of learning were adopted (table 1).

Although the survey shows that slightly more men (38 per cent) than women (37 per cent) have participated in learning during the past three years, this difference is not significant, and equal proportions of men and women reported current participation. Women (38 per cent) are significantly more likely than men (34 per cent), however, to say that they have not participated since leaving full-time education (table 2).

In general, the older people are, the less likely they are to participate in learning. Four-fifths of 17–19-year-olds and 62 per cent 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 14 per cent of adults aged 65–74 and 10 per cent of those aged 75 and over regard themselves as learners. Over one-half of all adults aged 65 and over say that they have not participated in any learning since leaving full-time education (table 3).

Socio-economic class remains a key determinant of adult participation in learning. The 2004 survey shows that a substantial divide remains between participation among the upper and middle classes, with around half of ABs (54 per cent) and C1s (49 per cent) participating, and the lower classes, with participation rates of 32 per cent for skilled manual workers (C2s) and 23 per cent for unskilled workers and people on limited incomes (DEs). As a result, adults in socio-economic groups ABC1 are more than twice as likely to be learning as those in groups DE. In addition, nearly three-fifths of DEs (57 per cent) have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education, compared with only 15 per cent of ABs (table 4).

Just under one-half of part-time workers (47 per cent), full-time workers (45 per cent) and the unemployed (46 per cent) are current or recent learners, compared with 25 per cent of those who are not working and just 15 per cent of retired

adults. While 46 per cent of all those who are in full-time or part-time employment are learning, the proportion falls to 36 per cent among those who are self-employed. Around one-half of those who are retired (52 per cent) or not working (48 per cent) say that they have not been involved in any learning since leaving full-time education (table 5).

In previous surveys, terminal age of education has been a key predictor of participation in learning as an adult. The 2004 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 26 per cent 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).

Participation across the nations and regions of the UK continues to display considerable differences that cannot be easily explained. In 2004 the highest proportions of current or recent learners were found in England (39 per cent) and Northern Ireland (38 per cent). Just over a third of Welsh respondents (34 per cent) reported participation in learning, as did 30 per cent of those living in Scotland. Within government office regions, the highest levels of participation are reported in London (44 per cent) and Yorkshire & Humberside (42 per cent). The North East (34 per cent) and the East Midlands (31 per cent) report the lowest levels of participation. Adults in London (52 per cent) and the East of England (46 per cent) 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 West Midlands (39 per cent) and North East (36 per cent). Among the nations of the UK, adults in England (43 per cent) and Wales (42 per cent) are most likely to see themselves as future learners, while those in Scotland (32 per cent) say that they are least likely to take up learning in the next three years (table 7).

Forty-two per cent of adults say that they are likely to take up learning in the next three years. Fifty-six per cent say that they are unlikely to do so. This year's survey reinforces findings from previous years, which suggest that current participation has a significant impact upon future intentions to learn. Eighty-six per cent of current learners report that they are likely to take up learning in the future, compared with only 14 per cent of those who have not participated since

leaving full-time education. The majority of those who have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education (85%) say that they have no intention of doing so in the future (figure 1).

***For more information:***

contact Fiona Aldridge at [fiona@niace.org.uk](mailto:fiona@niace.org.uk) or on 0116 2044246.

**Business as usual...? : the NIACE survey on adult participation learning 2004.** Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 2004 ISBN 1862012016 £8.95

**A sharp reverse: the NIACE survey on adult participation in learning 2003.** Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 2003. ISBN 1862011850. £8.95

**The learning divide: a study of participation in adult learning in the United Kingdom.** Naomi Sargant with John Field, Hywel Francis, Tom Schuller and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 1997

**The learning divide revisited : a report on the findings of a UK-wide survey on adult participation in education and learning.** Naomi Sargant. NIACE, 2000. ISBN 186201088 91. £24.95

**Adult learning and social division: a persistent pattern: Volume 2.** Naomi Sargant and Fiona Aldridge. NIACE, 2003. ISBN 1862011672. £16.95

**Adult learning and social division: a persistent pattern: Volume 1.** Naomi Sargant and Fiona Aldridge. NIACE, 2002. ISBN 1862011559. £24.95

**Two steps forward, one step back: the NIACE survey on adult participation in learning 2002.** Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 2002. ISBN 1862011451. £8.95

**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 £6.95

**Learning and 'leisure': a study of adult participation in learning and its policy implications.** Naomi Sargant. NIACE, 1991. ISBN 187941117

**Adults: their educational experience and needs** Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education. ACACE, 1982. ISBN 0906436176

**Adult education – adequacy of provision.** National Institute of Adult Education, 1970

<i>Table 1. Participation in learning – 1996, 1999, 2002 and 2004 compared</i>				
	<b>1996</b> %	<b>1999</b> %	<b>2002</b> %	<b>2004</b> %
Current learning	23	22	23	19
Recent learning (in the last three years)	17	18	19	19
<b>All current or recent learning</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>38</b>
Past learning (more than three years ago)	23	23	21	26
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	37	36	36
Weighted base	4,755	5,205	5,885	4,902

<i>Table 2. Participation in learning 2004, men and women compared</i>			
	<b>Total</b> %	<b>Men</b> %	<b>Women</b> %
Current learning	19	19	19
Recent learning (in the last three years)	19	19	18
<b>All current or recent learning</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>37</b>
Past learning (more than three years ago)	26	28	24
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	34	38
Weighted base	4,902	2,388	2,514

<i>Table 3. Participation in learning 2004, by age</i>									
	<b>Total</b> %	<b>17–19</b> %	<b>20–24</b> %	<b>25–34</b> %	<b>35–44</b> %	<b>45–54</b> %	<b>55–64</b> %	<b>65–74</b> %	<b>75+</b> %
Current learning	19	57	43	23	20	15	10	8	5
Recent learning	19	23	19	24	22	22	20	6	5
<b>All current/recent learning</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>
Past learning	26	3	15	26	26	29	30	35	29
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	17	24	27	32	35	40	51	61
Weighted base	4,902	221	372	866	1026	775	676	554	412

	<b>Total %</b>	<b>AB %</b>	<b>C1 %</b>	<b>C2 %</b>	<b>DE %</b>
Current learning	19	26	26	16	11
Recent learning (in the last three years)	19	28	23	15	11
<b>All current/recent learning</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>23</b>
Past learning (more than three years ago)	26	32	27	29	21
None since leaving full-time education/ don't know	36	15	24	39	57
Weighted base	4,902	828	1439	1098	1538

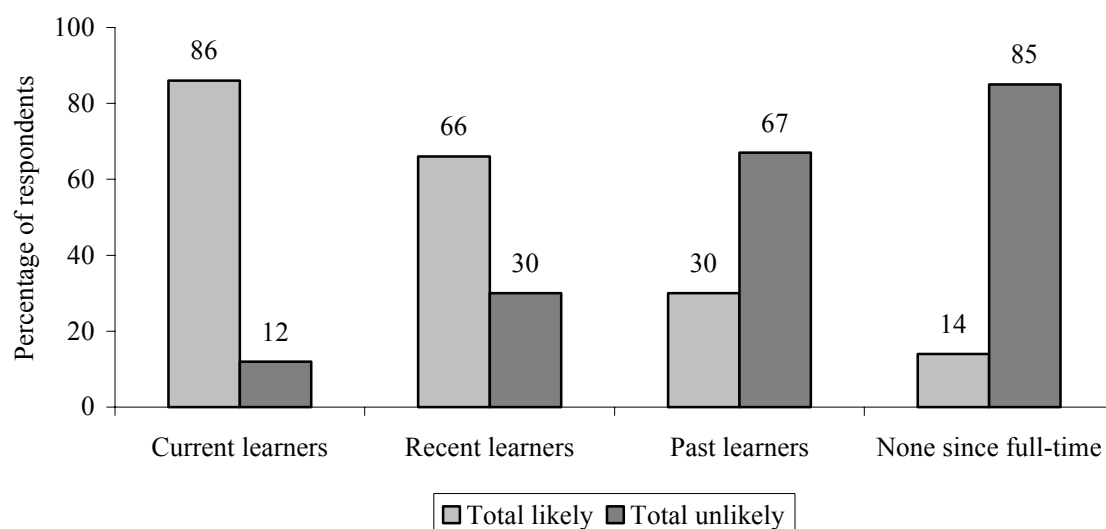
	<b>Total %</b>	<b>Full-time %</b>	<b>Part-time %</b>	<b>Unemployed %</b>	<b>Not working %</b>	<b>Retired %</b>
Current learning	19	20	22	14	11	7
Recent learning (in the last three years)	19	25	25	32	15	8
<b>All current/recent learning</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>15</b>
Past learning (more than three years ago)	26	28	23	19	26	33
None since leaving full-time education/ don't know	36	27	31	34	48	52
Weighted base	4,902	1,927	589	229	685	1,236

	<b>Total %</b>	<b>Up to 16 %</b>	<b>17-18 %</b>	<b>19-20 %</b>	<b>21+ %</b>
Current learning	19	11	20	16	29
Recent learning (in the last three years)	19	15	25	24	29
<b>All current/recent learning</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>58</b>
Past learning (more than three years ago)	26	26	29	35	31
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	48	26	25	12
Weighted base	4,902	2,956	802	219	647

Table 7. Participation in learning and future intentions to learn 2004, by government office region and nation of the UK

	Weighted base	Current or recent participation %	Future intentions	
			Total likely %	Total unlikely %
<b>Total. United Kingdom</b>	<b>4,902</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>56</b>
London	521	44	52	46
Yorkshire & Humberside	486	42	42	54
South West	348	41	43	57
East of England	414	40	46	51
South East	458	40	41	54
West Midlands	545	39	39	59
North West	629	36	40	44
North East	257	34	36	64
East Midlands	354	31	42	56
England	4,011	39	43	43
Northern Ireland	155	38	38	59
Wales	272	34	42	56
Scotland	464	30	33	64

Figure 1. Future intentions to learn by learning status, 2004



## 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 respondents 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 see:*

[www.lifelonglearning.co.uk](http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk)

### **Pathways in adult learning survey (PALS)**

**2003.** Dawn Snape, Alice Bell and Abigail Jones. National Centre for Social Research. Research Report RR559. Department for Education and Skills, 2004. ISBN 1844782832

[www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR559.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR559.pdf)

### **National adult learning survey (NALS) 2002.**

Rory Fitzgerald, Ivana La Valle and Rebecca Taylor. Research Report 415/Research Brief 415. Department for Education and Skills, 2003. ISBN 1841859087

[www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR415.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR415.pdf)

[www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB415.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB415.pdf)

**National adult learning survey 2001.** Ivana La Valle and Margaret Blake. Research Brief 321 /Research Report 321. Department for Education and Skills, 2001. ISBN 1841856525.

[www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB321.doc](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB321.doc)

[www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR321.doc](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR321.doc)

**Pathways in adult learning.** Ivana La Valle and Steven Finch. Department for Education and Employment, 1999. ISBN 1841850640

[www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB137.doc](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB137.doc)

**National adult learning survey 1997.** Sarah Beinart and Patten Smith. Research report 49. DfEE, 1998. ISBN 0 85522 720 6 (NALS97).

[www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/ACF2F7B.doc](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/ACF2F7B.doc)

### 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:***

[www.statistics.gov.uk/llfs](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/llfs)

Contact LFS data service at  
[llfs.dataservice@ons.gov.uk](mailto:llfs.dataservice@ons.gov.uk) or on 020 7533 5614

**Annual local area labour force survey 2002/03.**

National Statistics, 2004

[www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_labour/ALALFS\\_2002\\_03.Pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_labour/ALALFS_2002_03.Pdf)

**Annual local area labour force survey 2001/02,**

National Statistics, 2002 -

[www.statistics.gov.uk/llfs](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/llfs)

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