

## Adult participation in learning

Mapping participation in learning is important. Participation in learning is associated with 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, and why?

Over the two last decades 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. Variation between the results of different surveys on adult learning flowing from issues of target population, definition of learning reference period, and of methodology, especially the different ways of asking questions about participation, proving particularly difficult.

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 2006

The 2006 survey shows that one in five adults are currently learning (20 per cent), with 42 per cent having participated in some learning activity during the last four years. Just over one-third of adults (34 per cent) say that they have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education, a figure which has remained relatively constant since 1996 when the current introductory questions and definition of learning were adopted. Despite the use of a broad definition of learning, the survey captures respondents' *perceptions of themselves as learners*. It does not claim to capture all of the activity undertaken by respondents through which learning has taken place.

	1996 %	1999 %	2002 %	2005 %	2006 %
Current learning	23	22	23	19	20
Recent learning (in the last three years)	17	18	19	22	22
<b>All current or recent learning</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>
Past learning (more than three years ago)	23	23	21	24	23
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	37	36	35	34
Weighted base	4,755	5,205	5,885	5,053	4,924

Although the survey shows that slightly more women (44 per cent) than men (41 per cent) have participated in learning during the past three years, this difference is not statistically significant (see Table 2). Women (35 per cent) are only marginally more likely than men (34 per cent), to say that they have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education.

	<b>Total</b> %	<b>Men</b> %	<b>Women</b> %
Current learning	20	19	21
Recent learning (in the last three years)	22	22	23
<b>All current or recent learning</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>44</b>
Past learning (more than three years ago)	23	25	21
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	34	34	35
Weighted base	4,924	2,375	2,549

Base: all respondents

Socio-economic class remains a key determinant of adult participation in learning. The 2006 survey (see Table 3) shows that a significant divide remains between participation among the upper and middle classes, with over half of ABs (58 per cent) and only slightly less C1s (50 per cent) participating, and lower socio-economic groups, with participation rates of 41 per cent for skilled manual workers (C2s) and 27 per cent for unskilled workers and people on limited incomes (DEs). As a result, adults in socio-economic groups AB and C1 are around twice as likely to be learning as those in groups DE. In addition, nearly one-half of DEs (52 per cent) have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education, compared with only 21 per cent of ABs. (Socio-economic Group A includes the upper and upper-middle classes and is generally grouped with Group B, the middle classes. Group C1 includes the lower-middle class, often called white-collar workers. Group C2 mainly consists of skilled manual workers. Group D comprises the semi-skilled and unskilled working class, and is usually linked with Group E, those on the lowest levels of subsistence such as those receiving state retirement pension and those dependent upon welfare benefits).

	<b>Total</b> %	<b>AB</b> %	<b>C1</b> %	<b>C2</b> %	<b>DE</b> %
Current learning	20	29	26	17	12
Recent learning (in the last three years)	22	29	25	24	15
<b>All current or recent learning</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>27</b>
Past learning (more than three years ago)	23	23	26	23	21
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	34	21	24	36	52
Weighted base	4,924	929	1,420	984	1,592

Base: all respondents

Just over one-half of part-time workers (55 per cent) and full-time workers (51 per cent) are current or recent learners, compared with 47 per cent of unemployed adults, 30 per cent of those who are not working and just 16 per cent of retired adults (see Table 4). Around one-half of those who are retired (53 per cent) or not working (49 per cent) say that they have not been involved in any learning since leaving full-time education, compared with one quarter of adults in employment. (The unemployed category includes only those who are registered as unemployed and claiming Job Seekers Allowance).

	Total %	Full- time %	Part- time %	Unem- ployed %	Not working %	Retired %
Current learning	20	21	24	14	12	7
Recent learning (in the last three years)	22	30	31	33	17	9
<b>All current or recent learning</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>16</b>
Past learning (more than three years ago)	23	24	19	19	22	30
None since leaving full-time education/ don't know	34	25	26	34	49	53
Weighted base	4,924	2,008	587	236	668	1,191

Base: all respondents

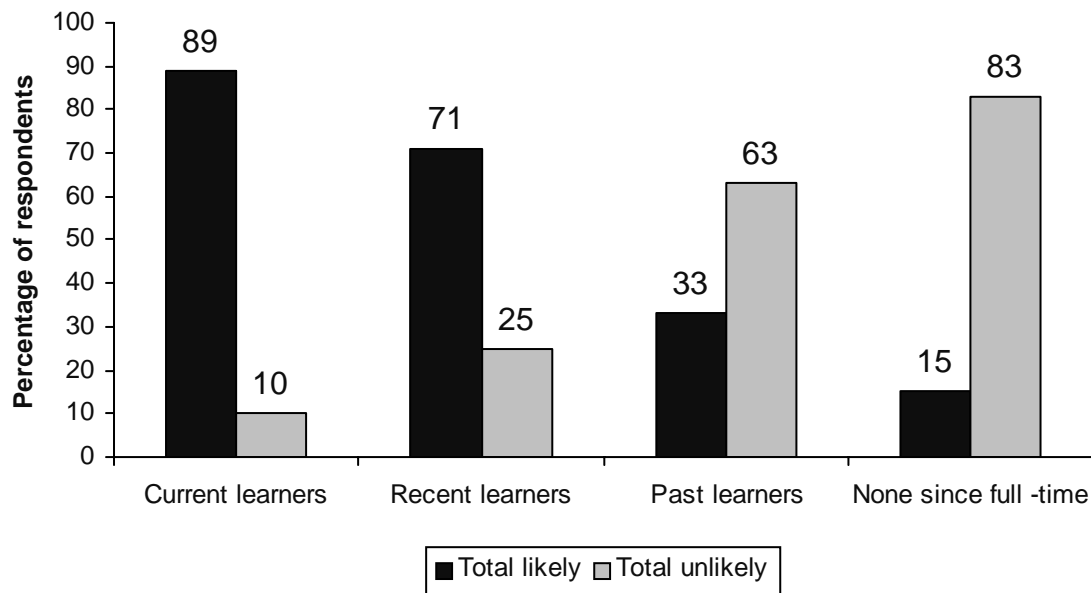
In general, the older that people are, the less likely they are to participate in learning (see Table 5). Sixty-eight per cent of 20–24-year-olds are current or recent learners, compared with around half of the rest of the working age population. There is a sharp decline in participation for those aged 55 and over, such that only 34 per cent of adults aged 55–64, 19 per cent of adults aged 65–74 and 10 per cent of those aged 75 and over regard themselves as learners. In addition, over one-half of all adults aged 65 and over say that they have not participated in any learning since leaving full-time education.

	Total %	17–19 %	20–24 %	25–34 %	35–44 %	45–54 %	55–64 %	65–74 %	75+ %
Current learning	20	60	37	22	21	19	12	8	4
Recent learning (in the last three years)	22	22	31	27	27	25	21	10	6
<b>All current/recent learning</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>
Past learning (more than three years ago)	23	4	11	25	23	24	26	29	30
None since leaving full-time edu- cation/don't know	34	14	21	27	29	32	40	53	60
Weighted base	4,924	259	361	821	952	836	778	534	383

Base: all respondents

This year's survey reinforces findings from previous years, which suggest that current participation has a significant impact upon future intentions to learn. Eighty-nine per cent of current learners report that they are likely to take up learning in the future, compared with only 15 per cent of those who have not participated since leaving fulltime education. The majority of those who have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education (83%) say that they have no intention of doing so in the future.

Figure 1: Future intentions to learn by learning status, 2006



Base: all respondents who have finished full-time education

#### For more information

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

#### References and Useful Publications

**Green shoots? the NIACE survey on adult participation learning 2005.**

Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 2006. ISBN 1862012857. £8.95

**Better news this time? the NIACE survey on adult participation learning 2005.**

Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 2005. ISBN 1862012385. £8.95

**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

**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

**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

**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. ISBN 1862010161. £24.95

**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. NIACE, 1970

## **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, 2002 and 2005 (to be published). 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 and 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 (including reminders of the definition) 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)

### **References and Useful Publications**

**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) and [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. ISBN1841856525. [www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB321.doc](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB321.doc) and [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 Learning and Skills Councils (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

Contact LFS data service at [lfs.dataservice@ons.gov.uk](mailto:lfs.dataservice@ons.gov.uk) or on 020 7533 5614  
[www.statistics.gov.uk/lfs](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/lfs)

## References and Useful Publications

**Annual local area labour force survey 2003/04.** National Statistics, 2005.  
[www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/labour\\_market\\_trends/LMT\\_alalfs.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/labour_market_trends/LMT_alalfs.pdf)

**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/lfs](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/lfs)

## NIACE contact for participation surveys

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This is the seventy-fifth in a series of briefing sheets, which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues. Many earlier titles in the series are still available including:

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