

# Tough times for adult learners

NIACE's 2010 survey of adult participation in learning showed the largest rise for a generation among the least skilled, with current or recent participation rising to 30 per cent. This year, just 23 per cent report current or recent study – the lowest rate recorded over 20 years. It's clear that cutbacks to provision are hitting those who have benefited least from education the hardest, write **ALAN TUCKETT** and **FIONA ALDRIDGE**

**T**he key message of NIACE's 2011 survey of adult participation in learning is that recession is bad for lifelong learning for anyone over the age of 25. The survey highlights the central importance of workplaces as sites of adult learning – and the challenges posed to a learning society when opportunities to learn reduce. It shows that the gap between the learning rich and the learning poor is widening, with professional and managerial groups more than twice as likely to take part in learning as the least skilled. Yet, a year ago, the lowest social class reported a sharp increase, suggesting that cutbacks in provision – whether public or private – have hurt most those who have had least benefit from their earlier experience of education and training. However, perhaps the most concerning aspect of the survey is the decline in reported future intentions to take up learning. Reductions in publicly funded provision, coupled with reduced workplace offers, have, it seems, a depressing effect on people's expectations for themselves.

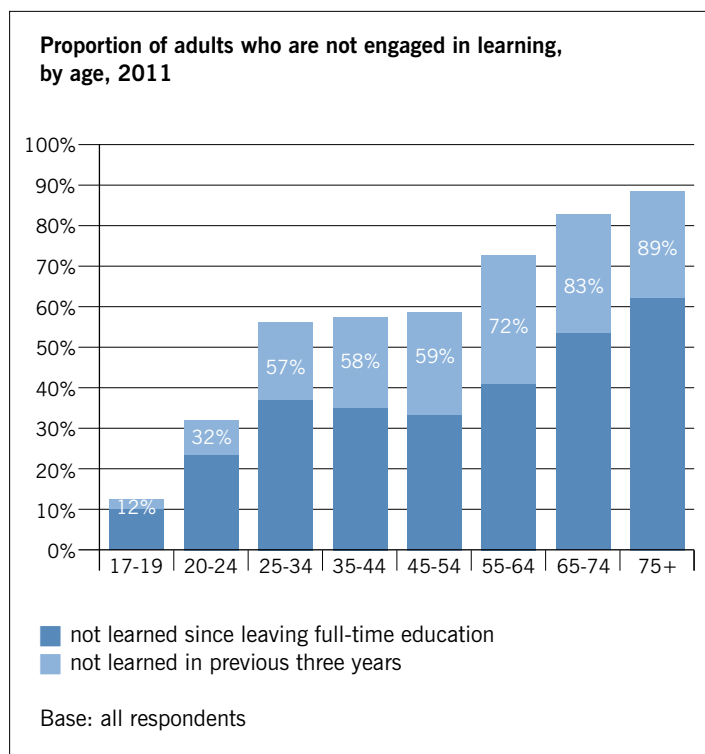
to 39 per cent this year. These figures are particularly disappointing given the evidence in the 2010 survey both of increased participation, and of the numbers of people with a clear intention to take up learning over the next three years. While younger adults continue to be offered opportunities, to take them up, and to plan future study, the picture for the adult population beyond 25 is of declining participation (linked to the widely reported shrinkage of chances to learn at work over the last three years), and of a decline, too, in the numbers planning future participation. Pressures on public finance, where budgets for adults overall have seen sharp reductions over the past few years, undoubtedly contribute to these findings, but the largest effect will result from changes in opportunities at work, where most adults learn.

Changes in the balance of public investment in learning can be seen most clearly in the striking changes in opportunity and take-up reported by different age groups. Current participation among 17 to 19-year-olds has soared, showing a 13 percentage point gain on last year (from 58 to 71 per cent), and a more modest gain of four percentage points is reported by 20-24s. Clearly, the trend noted last year has continued and strengthened. In the uncertain conditions of an economic downturn, a larger proportion of young people respond by deciding to strengthen their skills and qualifications by staying in education, or taking work with training. The growth in apprenticeships over the last three years has helped here, too.

Meanwhile, for the bulk of the population of working age, opportunities have reduced and participation has dropped sharply – with current and recent participation among the 25-34s falling by seven percentage points to 43 per cent (against 68 per cent among 20-24s). In part, this can be explained by the decisions of successive governments to concentrate funding on 16-19s and to shift public subsidy for post-19s to the 19-24s at the expense of older learners. But publicly offered education and training accounts for only a proportion of the total, and the fact that many companies are cutting back on training also contributes to the picture. A recent survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development indicated that more than four in 10 of its members had already cut back on training. Where companies do train, as report after report testifies, spending is concentrated on health and safety and induction training, and on senior managers.

Participation among 65-74s has also fallen – with current and recent participation down from 23 to 17 per cent – which means that over a quarter of learning opportunities for older adults have been lost, at a time when we know that learning has a positive impact on health, independence and general wellbeing in later life – and when, with an ageing labour force, we need to encourage people to prolong their active working lives. Reducing learning opportunities will hardly help with the wellbeing or work-readiness of Britain's third-age adults.

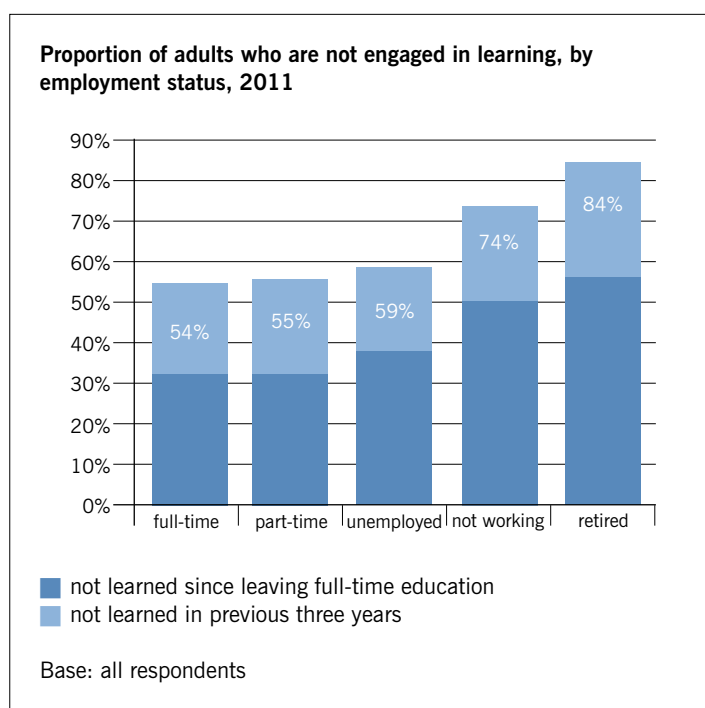
The 2010 survey showed the largest rise for a generation in participation among the least skilled; with current or recent participation by social class DE rising to 30 per cent. This year, just 23 per cent report current or recent study – the lowest rate recorded over



While the overall participation rate for current learners offers little cause for concern, having slipped by just one percentage point from 21 to 20 (well within the statistical margin of error), the total number taking part over the last three years has fallen from 43 per cent in 2010

20 years of NIACE surveys. The rise and fall were both well outside the margins of statistical error – suggesting that confidence in taking up learning for the least skilled was fragile and short-lived, and also that this group is the least likely to have provision protected when economic circumstances change.

The importance of the workplace can be seen in the participation rates of workers, unemployed people and those outside the workforce. Among full-time employees there is a drop of five percentage points among current and recent participants – from 51 per cent to 46 per cent – with slightly more of the fall concentrated among those offered training over the last three years. Almost the same volume and the same reduction is reported by part-time staff. People looking for work participate at nearly the same levels – with 41 per cent reporting current or recent study. For people outside the labour market and not looking for work, the picture is bleaker, with a 25 per cent participation rate, while only 15 per cent of retired people take part. The clear message here is that while opportunities at work are declining, it is still people in work who get most chance to learn.



That message is reinforced in a different part of the NIACE survey, where people were asked about motivation to learn and about the benefits of taking part. Asked whether the primary reason for taking up learning was for personal or leisure interests, or for work and career, 73 per cent of all learners reported a work-related motivation for taking part, with more than 80 per cent of those aged 17-54 agreeing. After that, unsurprisingly, the pattern shifts. Among 55-64s there is still a majority (56 per cent) reporting work-related reasons, while 85 per cent of 65-74s are pursuing personal and leisure interests.

When it comes to the benefits of learning the figures are just as clear. When asked about the impact that learning as an adult can have on various aspects of life, 86 per cent of all adults agree that learning can have a positive impact on self-confidence – a message consistently reported by adult learners in all kinds of settings. Eighty-three per cent also believe that learning as an adult can have positive effects on career and employment prospects, too. Seventy-five per cent acknowledge the positive effects on children's education, reinforcing the argument that the inter-generational effects of lifelong learning are of great significance. A belief in the positive impact of adult learning on health (62 per cent) and on involvement in local issues and events (53 per cent) was also encouraging.

Perhaps the most dramatic change over the last decade has been the rise of the internet as the first place of contact for anyone seeking

information and advice about learning. Eight years ago, the workplace dominated as a source of advice for everyone between the ages of 25 and 64. First came work, employer or training officer – cited by 20 per cent of all respondents in those age cohorts; next came 12 per cent citing workmates. This year employer/work/training officer received between three and eight per cent for 25-64s, and workmates just one per cent. There is a similar drop in people mentioning friends and family – from 12 per cent overall in 2002 to just two per cent now. The internet, meanwhile, was cited by 43 per cent of all respondents – rising to 52 per cent for 25-34s. When this finding is linked to the pattern of participation in learning where people with access to the internet are well over twice as likely to participate as those without, it is clear that digital exclusion is increasingly acting to reinforce the marginalisation of those who are not connected.

However, the most curious finding of this survey was an increase in the numbers reporting no learning since school – up from 31 per cent to 39 per cent – well beyond sampling errors, which suggests that people have either forgotten passages of earlier learning (most likely perhaps where that learning is in informal settings or at work), or, in line with an increased scepticism about the difference learning makes, a re-classification of whether activity previously seen as learning really counts. For a number of years, Scottish respondents reported significantly lower levels of engagement than other people in the UK – challenging other data on provision in and out of work. Schuller and Field suggested in a 1999 study that this might be because Scots were more likely to count only more formal passages of learning in the self-reported study. We will need to explore whether a similar change is underway elsewhere in the UK, when we report on subsequent findings.

These are the key findings from the survey:

- One in five adults are currently engaged in some form of learning, with 39 per cent reporting participation in learning over the last three years. Since 2010, current participation has fallen from 21 to 20 per cent. Taking current and recent learning together, participation fell from 43 to 39 per cent.
- A greater proportion of women continue to participate in learning than men, although both report a fall of four percentage points against 2010. Male participation is now at its lowest level since the survey series began.
- Socio-economic class remains a key predictor of adult participation in learning. Professional and managerial groups (ABs) are likely to participate at more than twice the rate of the least skilled and those outside the labour market (DEs). Since 2010, levels of participation among ABCs have decreased by between three and four percentage points, while participation among DEs has fallen by seven percentage points to 23 per cent – the lowest reported total over 20 years.
- Adults outside the labour market have much lower levels of participation than those engaged in, or looking for, work. While opportunities to learn for both full- and part-time workers have declined, it remains true that people in work still have the greatest chance of taking part in learning.
- In general, the older people are, the less likely they are to participate in learning. Since 2010, participation in learning has increased among young adults aged 17-24, but has decreased across all other age groups. Among 17 to 19-year-olds, in particular, current participation has soared from 58 to 71 per cent, with a more modest gain of four percentage points reported by those aged 20-24. At the other end of the age spectrum, the survey indicates a loss of over a quarter of learning opportunities for adults aged 65-74.
- In previous surveys, terminal age of education has been a key predictor of participation in learning as an adult. The 2011 figures again confirm the key divide between those who leave



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school at the earliest opportunity and those who stay on for even a short while.

- White adults are significantly less likely than those from black and minority ethnic groups to have participated in learning during the past three years and are only half as likely to be currently learning. However, minority ethnic participation shows a drop of six percentage points against 2010, while the drop for white Britons is just three per cent.
- Well over one-fifth of respondents reported no regular access to the internet. Of these, only 14 per cent reported any current or recent learning, against 46 per cent of those with internet access.
- A third of current and recent learners (34 per cent) report this as the first learning they have done since leaving school. More than a quarter (29 per cent) are returning to learning after more than three years.
- Nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of current or recent learners said that they had done this for work or career reasons, including more than 80 per cent of respondents aged 17-54. Over 80 per cent of those aged 65 and over are learning for personal and leisure interests.
- Twenty-eight per cent of learners are learning through work; 24 per cent through university or a higher education institute; 16 per cent through a further education, tertiary or sixth-form college; 12 per cent independently; seven per cent online; six per cent in adult education centres or through the Workers' Educational Association; and eight per cent in other venues, such as schools, voluntary or community organisations, or health and leisure clubs.

- Thirty-seven per cent of adults who have left full-time education say that they are likely to take up learning in the next three years, against 47 per cent in 2010.
- Data on future intentions to learn also show that we can expect the learning divide to continue into the future, potentially becoming wider. Forty-eight per cent of ABs and 43 per cent of C1s say that they are likely to take up learning in the next three years, compared with 33 per cent of skilled manual workers (C2s) and 27 per cent of the least skilled and those dependent on benefits (DE).
- As with participation in learning, future intentions to learn tend to decline with age, particularly among adults aged 55 and over. Just 26 per cent of 55-64s, 13 per cent of 65-74s and eight per cent of adults aged 75 and over are likely to take up learning in the next three years.

Taken together, the survey findings pose challenges for policymakers. Of course, judgements have to be made about the level of public investment that is made directly in the creation of a learning-rich society. But government has more levers than simply paying for provision. The Leitch report of 2006 promised a 2010 review of employers' patterns of investment in the development of their staff. But by the time 2010 came round the government of the day decided that review should be postponed until 2015. Meanwhile, British industry and commerce invests less in its people than comparable OECD countries. In the light of the survey, is it not time for government to revisit the case for licences to practise, as well as thinking how best to use its resources directly to encourage people to take part in learning?

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