

Your Guide 2...

Widening adult participation:

Overcoming the barriers to engaging adult learners

August 2004

Actively recruiting people who do not tend to participate in learning, even though they might want to learn, makes an important contribution to social inclusion and employability. This Guide 2 looks at the barriers providers may face in engaging adult learners and provides practical guidance on how to overcome them.

Where do I start?

Actively recruiting people who don't tend to participate in learning, even though they might want to learn, makes an important contribution to social inclusion and employability. To meet LSC targets to raise basic skills levels among adults and increase the proportion of adults reaching Level 2, providers need to look both at what prevents people joining in and how provision can be made more accessible to potential adult learners. The Widening Participation Action Fund offers financial support for providers to develop projects to attract new adult learners.

Research has found that a third of adults have not participated in learning since leaving compulsory education, and only 39% of adults surveyed in 2003 were currently or had recently been involved in any learning. People less likely to participate in learning include:

- those aged over 70
- those with no qualifications
- those with basic skills difficulties
- those living in deprived areas.

So how can providers really get in there and work with adult learners? Let's take a look at the barriers to success.

What are the barriers to engaging adult learners?

There can be many different barriers to adult learning, largely relating to the individual's own circumstances, background and personality. A comparison between the National Adult Learning Survey 2002 and previous studies found that obstacles to learning change very little over time. They fall into roughly three categories.

Physical barriers. These might include:

- lack of time due to work, family, and childcare responsibilities
- difficulties in paying course fees and fear of losing benefits
- disability, particularly lack of mobility
- ill health
- difficulties with reading and writing, English and numeracy.

Attitudinal barriers. These are often the hardest to overcome. They might include:

- being nervous about going back to the classroom and concern about not being able to keep up
- negative perceptions of schooling and scepticism about the value of learning
- low self-esteem and lack of confidence both generally and in relation to learning
- low aspirations and lack of role models
- lack of trust in 'officialdom' and formal institutions or organisations
- age. One in five non-learners think they are too old to learn.

Structural barriers. These may relate to both supply (provider) and demand (learner), and include:

- lack of transport
- limited learning opportunities locally
- lack of facilities and equipment

- lack of necessary qualifications
- lack of knowledge about local learning opportunities and learning advice sources.

So what does this mean to a provider who is trying to engage adult learners and what can providers do to overcome these barriers?

What are the challenges for providers in engaging adult learners?

Research has shown that providers who are likely to be successful are those for whom widening participation is a genuine, long-term commitment which includes a strategic approach, sustained investment and a properly resourced development plan. The strategy is likely to include:

- purposeful engagement with communities
- changes to the curriculum portfolio, curriculum design and delivery
- seeing support for learners as an entitlement not an optional extra
- a willingness and ability to work in partnership.

In addition to a strategic view, learning provision has to be:

- attractive to adults and relevant to their experience
- flexible, to suit adults' circumstances and schedules
- supported by outreach programmes to attract adults who otherwise might not consider learning
- backed by pertinent, up-to-date information and sound advice.

What are the practical actions for providers?

Research has shown that where providers have been successful they undertake the following types of actions:

- try different methods of making information available, such as open days and taster sessions, not just written materials that assume a level of literacy
- make enablers such as free childcare or travel expenses part of the marketing process
- employ staff whose background reflects the experience of target groups of learners, and who understand the specific issues facing them
- provide learning in accessible and familiar venues to help people who wouldn't normally think of entering a formal learning environment. Use alternative locations imaginatively to provide quality surroundings that make new learners feel valued
- don't define outcomes too narrowly or prescriptively. Help potential learners decide what they personally want to get out of the experience
- don't dismiss 'useless' activities, especially if they are unconnected with people's previous experiences of education. They can provide an effective 'hook' back into learning if they are relevant and interesting
- bite-size courses can generate an interest in acquiring new skills or knowledge, and give access to more substantial learning opportunities
- don't make assumptions about learners' needs. The most successful projects are developed through sharing ideas and aspirations
- form partnerships with groups and organisations potential learners may be involved in, such as tenants and residents associations and trade unions
- give recognition to prior learning, including skills acquired in work, home or community settings.

Where is the evidence?

Beyond rhetoric

Training for adults is often too focused on workers who are already qualified and enjoy relatively high professional status in large companies, according to this report. This leaves out low-skilled or older workers, those in small companies, and those on temporary contracts. Many low-educated or low-skilled adults believe their existing skills are good enough and don't feel they need to improve. The report notes a 'hidden unmet demand' for adult learning, including people with psychological barriers to participation who do not make their needs known.

Read **Beyond rhetoric - Adult learning policies and practices**, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, summary document, 2003, at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/18/57/18466358.pdf>

Curriculum leadership in adult learning

A strategic approach to the curriculum and building partnerships can help deliver quality learning programmes that match the needs and interests of local adults, engage the excluded and provide pathways to progression. This report looks at how the curriculum can be made more attractive, accessible and relevant to potential learners.

Read **Curriculum leadership in adult learning**, Learning and Skills Development Agency, Good practice guide, 2003, at <http://www.lsc.gov.uk/files/PDF/1322.pdf>

Bringing education to life

Proactive approaches are needed to engage people who are least well-equipped to participate in learning. This report looks at examples of good practice in reaching potential learners in the UK and Sweden. The surroundings, staff and activities all need to reflect the specific needs of the target group to generate their interest. It advises providers to project an ethos of 'positive diversity' to counteract people's negative experiences or wariness of returning to learning.

Read **Bringing education to life: A UK-Sweden initiative to reach hard-to-reach learners by creating innovative approaches to adult and community learning**, Foreign and Commonwealth Office/National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, project report, 2003, at http://www.fco.gov.uk/Files/KFile/Project_BringingEducationToLife.pdf

Successful futures?

Negative experiences at school or college and concern about academic competence can put people off training. Some people surveyed for this report were sceptical about the value of qualifications and confused about the most appropriate ones to help them progress. People felt comfortable using small local learning centres, particularly women with children. They gained confidence, but were disinclined to access more 'formal' provision.

Read **Successful futures? Community views on adult education and training**, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, key findings summary, 2000, at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/810.asp>

National adult learning survey

Participation in adult learning is lower than average among certain groups, according to this survey. Practical obstacles included work and family commitments and fear of losing benefits. Some were nervous about going back to the classroom and being able to keep up. Assistance with childcare and transport, more advice, and access to learning at the right time would encourage more people to learn.

Read **National adult learning survey**, Department for Education and Skills, research report, 2002, at
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR415.pdf>

Good practice

Both learners and providers in rural areas face barriers, says this report. These include high travel times and costs, limited facilities and breadth of provision, and lack of employers to support learning opportunities such as work placements. Working in partnership and sharing resources can make training provision more economically viable. Community development centres may be particularly attractive to adults returning to learning, particularly women with children.

Read **Good practice - Education and training in sparsely populated areas**, Learning and Skills Council, good practice guide, 2003, at
<http://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/ee6t2i7ne6pgr4kql3ktkedb7o662tvixjggn6on426kmqyepophziriga2v44mhs56prkzfaoc7no/Goodpracticeeducationandtraininginsparselypopulate.pdf>

Tackling low skills

Employers need to find ways to encourage adults to improve their basic skills in the workplace, says this report. Successful approaches include confidential counselling for employees to overcome the stigma of literacy and numeracy problems. Other initiatives that can help are giving people time off to study, providing on-site learning resources like a company intranet, mentoring schemes, and linking basic skills education to ICT training.

Read **Tackling low skills: Finding the right approach**, Confederation of British Industry, policy brief, 2002, at
[http://www.cbi.org.uk/ndbs/PositionDoc.nsf/fb66d262805fa2f58025673a0058587b/7da1c4607f9c038980256c8b004e49bf/\\$FILE/tacklingnov02.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/ndbs/PositionDoc.nsf/fb66d262805fa2f58025673a0058587b/7da1c4607f9c038980256c8b004e49bf/$FILE/tacklingnov02.pdf)

Learning in later life

A quarter of older people feel they have done enough learning in their life, or are too old to learn, according to this report. Health problems or disability can be barriers to learning,

particularly limited mobility, lack of energy and communication difficulties. These could be overcome with support, or alternatives like learning from home.

Read **Learning in later life: Motivation and impact**, Institute for Employment Studies, research brief, 2000, at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/ACF31AF.doc>

Where do I go next?

Campaign for Learning

The Campaign for Learning is a partnership of private, public and voluntary sector organisations dedicated to developing a learning society, particularly by stimulating learning in the family and workplace.

<http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/>

Workers Educational Association (WEA)

The WEA aims to provide access to education and learning for adults from all backgrounds, especially those who have previously missed out on education.

<http://www.wea.org.uk/>

PAULO

PAULO is the national training organisation for people working in community-based adult learning and development, particularly educators trying to remove the barriers to learning and skills opportunities.

<http://www.paulo.org.uk/>

ContinYou

The Community Education Development Centre develops imaginative ways to widen opportunities for community education and regeneration. It has joined with Education Extra to form ContinYou, which runs projects to promote lifelong learning.

<http://www.continyou.org.uk/index.php>

Federation for Community Development Learning

A national network for community development learning, which promotes the creation of opportunities for training and qualifications.

<http://www.fcdl.org.uk/>

Lifelong Learning

Department for Education and Skills website which offers information on initiatives and funding available to encourage lifelong learning, particularly among older people.

<http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/>

Skills and Education Network

The Skills and Education Network is a web-based information and knowledge sharing service for providers, managed by the Learning and Skills Council. The website contains features, news, events, and services that are specially designed to meet providers' needs.

<http://senet.lsc.gov.uk>

Additional information

The Skills and Education Network team are constantly updating the content of Guides 2. This title was published in August 2004 – please check the website periodically to see if this title has been updated

[<http://senet.lsc.gov.uk/guide2/wideparticipationovercomebarriers/index.cfm>]. If you have any suggestions for this, or other Guides 2, please send us an email at senet@lsc.gov.uk

Glossary...

Widening adult participation: Overcoming the barriers to engaging adult learners

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Widening participation

Widening participation is a process that tries to make education after the age of 16 more attractive and supportive to people who wouldn't usually take part in it. The learning might take place in the workplace, local community, online, or at home.

An important part of widening participation is making education and training programmes more appealing and suitable to a range of learners and circumstances. This is done with the support of a range of training providers, including employers, colleges and local education authorities.

Source:

<http://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/e2rbs2dorn2xe4kbvcxjnhzuzqrrm32t5vzf6jpdz74v22txobnqf5xrfxkohulw76gcvns4tt372l/AdultParticipationStrategyMainbody.pdf>

Updated: November 2004

Young people's participation

Targeting young people's participation in education and training is seen as vital to help those who have been failed in the past by the education system.

Recent government policy has brought in a variety of initiatives aimed at young people between the ages of 13 and 25 – to improve their self esteem and help them back into some form of learning or employment.

Source: <http://www.socialexclusion.gov.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=31>

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