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Widening and Motivating Participation in adult learning – evidence from the Adult and Community Learning Fund (England)

In order to begin to discover what motivates adults to engage in learning and widen participation amongst those groups of people who currently do not get involved in continuing learning, it seems helpful to examine some of the data from the latest participation survey. Every year NIACE (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) conducts such a survey, over the UK. This paper attempts to outline the current data (2002) on participation and, in this context, illustrate how the Adult Community Learning Fund has contributed to insight and understanding about widening and motivating participation.

The survey was conducted in partnership with RSGB, a market research organisation and builds on work over the last decade by Sargent, Aldridge and Tuckett (Aldridge, F and Tuckett A, 2002 p vi). The initial report of May 2002 revealed trends and indicators which help us to understand the need to widen participation and motivate more and different adults to become involved in learning. When examining the data by social class there are clear correlations between participation and social classification. The learning divide, by class, remains alive and well with 17% of classes A/B not participating in learning since leaving school compared with 32% in social classes C and C2 and 58% of social classes D and E. However, for the first time in the NIACE survey men and women are currently participating in equal numbers. This may be due to the increasing number of women in the work place and the decrease in the number of men in employment.

If we examine the data by age there are strong indicators that the older you get the less likely you are to participate in learning – 70% of those who left school recently have been involved whilst there is a dramatic fall in participation amongst people over 65 years. The graphical presentation of the data clearly illustrates that learning is still seen as something carried out by young people. Whilst we have probably extended the period of time, to 25 years, when young people are engaged in learning the trend falls gradually during middle age and then more dramatically amongst older people.

The work place seems to have a strong influence on whether people continue to learn and this seems to be the same whether people are employed full or part-time. Unemployed people do appear to get involved and this may not be surprising when the government's New Deal Initiatives are considered. However, there is a dramatic fall in participation amongst people who have retired or who are not in work for other reasons. People may be learning for their work, encouraged or instructed to participate by their employers or simply more interested, motivated and supported by colleagues and managers.

We know from recent studies by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) (2002) and John Bynner (2002) that learning pays. Graduates earn more, have better

and healthier life-styles than their non-graduate counter-parts. They are more likely to holiday abroad, have their own homes and are less likely to smoke. People who have continued learning into Higher Education are more likely to be active in voluntary and community activities such as parent-teacher associations. What's more, the higher levels of learning receive higher rates of funding than entry and lower levels of learning. The more you have the more you seem to get.

We also know from the government's Wider Benefits of Learning Unit that there are health and well-being benefits to be gained from learning. This applies especially to those experiencing mental ill health ageing or dementia. Access to information via the internet, was identified in the Participation survey as further illuminating the learning divide. 21% of those with no access to the internet currently participate whilst of those who have access at home or work 65% participate.

Deviations are also revealed between the counties of the UK as well as the regions. Just over 42% of the UK population have engaged in learning; this drops to 39% in Wales and rises to 44% in Scotland. English regional differences indicate high participation in the SE and NE whilst much lower rates are revealed for Yorkshire and Humber, the West Midlands, the NW and Eastern areas.

The learning divisions seem to be as clear as ever with social, regional, age and digital divisions indicating where those divisions lie and amongst which sectors of the population. Little appears to have changed in the last 20 years or since 1997 when the Kennedy report (FEFC 1997) suggested that the need to widen participation in adult learning was vital to social and economic cohesion.

There are many examples of attempts to encourage widening of participation including offering extra funds to Further Education Colleges if they attracted learners from particularly disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Quality Initiatives which supported the development of widening participation strategies in institutions have been introduced. Recently, targeted resources for the poorest areas of the 88 most disadvantaged Local Authorities have been announced in the shape of the Learning Curve proposals. This will link learning to Neighbourhood Renewal. Following the Kennedy Report and the government's consultation paper, The Learning Age in 1998, the proposal was made to establish a fund which would assist in discovering what works best in attracting different learners. The Learning Age said, "Learning is the key to prosperity – for each of us as individuals, as well as the nation as a whole, investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty first century." (HMSO, 1998)

In 1999 the government's Department for Education and Employment (now the Department for Education and Skills, DfES) launched a fund designed to attempt to discover interesting and innovative practice in what seems to work best in motivating more and different people to become involved in learning, build the capacity of organisations to provide learning outside the conventional structures and support partnership. It was called the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF)

A prospectus was produced, clearly explaining the purpose and the priorities which the fund sought to support. The prospectus stated, "Learning in its broadest sense is central to creating a society in which everyone can realise their potential and play

their part in the community…   The economic and social benefits of learning are linked and reinforce each other." (DfEE, 1999) Organisations were invited to bid for funds, in response to the regulations set out in the prospectus and accompanying form. A process of bidding, assessment and evaluation was established which included at least two independent readings, moderation where necessary and an advisory group to make the final selection. Project financial support ranged from £1,000 to £100,000 and project activity covered from 6 months to three years' duration.   The fund continues to March 2004 and has a total budget of £30m.

The ACLF is jointly managed by two national agencies who are concerned with the development and promotion of adult learning. These are the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) and the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). They set up an infrastructure of monitoring and support as well as mechanisms to evaluate, learn from and disseminate the emerging findings. All projects are inducted into the ACLF management procedures and offered support with individual project management. Quarterly report frameworks are provided and financial claim mechanisms introduced.

 All projects are given a management handbook, quarterly reports are carefully read and responded to. Projects are visited at least once each year and pro-formas used to capture interesting practices as well as arising issues. Extra support visits are offered to projects where difficulties arise. Other forms of support include telephone and email responses, email discussion groups, regional network meetings and focus group activities.

So, what kind of initiatives, innovations and ideas emerged? What did the bidders believe would be most effective in reaching and teaching those people who don't see continuing education is for them? There have now been six rounds of applications to the fund and over 600 projects have been approved and run. In the earliest rounds applications came predominantly from mainstream providers such as colleagues of Further Education, Adult Education institutions and Local Education Authorities. They dominated the scene but brought voluntary and community partners with them. This position changed gradually and 61% of applications in the latest rounds came from the voluntary and community sector. Their partners are most likely to be from Local Education Authorities and Further Education Colleges.

The projects worked with a wide range of people including those with learning difficulties and sensory and physical disabilities, people from black and minority groups such as travellers and gypsies, people who have experienced mental ill-health, older people, drug/alcohol abusers and people living in some of the poorest and most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.   The correlation between poverty, social and economic disadvantage and the target groups was evident. Two major evaluation studies (DfES 2001, Institute for Employment Studies 2002) have revealed the success of projects in reaching 'hard to reach' learners.

Projects reached people using a number of strategies. They reversed the notion of who was hard to reach by taking provision to people. They concluded that existing services were 'hard to reach'. The advantages which voluntary and community organisations presented related to their existing contacts with their target group. Many of them were already working with and alongside those people they proposed

to engage in learning. They had identified that some kind of learning opportunities would enhance their endeavours. For example, people working with housing associations could see that having IT literate tenants would improve the housing services offered. An alcohol recovery initiative could see that their service users would be assisted in developing independence and progression into mainstream services through some kind of learning opportunity.

A great deal of outreach work involved inter-agency contacts, networking face-to-face work with groups and individuals, very short informal 'taster' activities and fun days to reach potential learners. Publicity and marketing materials were produced which provided first step information. It was acknowledged by the majority of providers that such materials are vital but of little use without direct contact and outreach work. Much time, effort and energy was invested in partnerships, the development of relationships with project allies as well as wider networks. These were seen as important strategies to inform others who could encourage and support individual or group involvement and also in sustaining the initiative. Some projects trained learning promoters, ambassadors or champions from the local community to become involved in outreach work.

Very little provision was offered in mainstream venues. Faith halls, community halls, health centres, community and voluntary group venues, schools, care homes, libraries and neighbourhood centres were used. These were regarded as non-threatening, familiar venues often very close to where people lived. Projects believed that motivating adults to join some kind of learning involved taking learning closer to where they lived or into venues where they were already meeting for other purposes. The partnerships in which projects were involved enabled participants to become involved in a wider ranged services which were either taken to them or to which participants were supported. This included specialist information, advice and guidance services, specialist curricula and progression opportunities. All projects indicated the importance of providing assessment of support service needs such as childcare, transport and materials, which could create barriers to accessing learning.

The range of activities which motivated people to engage in learning was enormous but included arts, crafts, performing arts, media, community studies, local history, ICT, family learning, environmental issues, volunteer training and the capacity-building of small local community organisations. The most common approach was to offer non-accredited (70%) programmes whilst others offered workshops and drop-in facilities (55%). Slightly less than 50% of courses offered led to accreditation or a qualification. One of the characteristics of provision, declared by practitioners (Eldred, 2001) was that the curriculum had to be negotiated and developed with the participants. They reported that in order to motivate learners the course content had to be relevant and of interest to the target group. This meant that from the outset the learning framework had to be discussed and negotiated with the potential learners. Regular on-programme reviews and evaluation, which included close consultation with the learners meant that responsive changes in method, content and support were made. These strategies ensured learners were kept 'on board'.

Sixty six per cent of ACLF projects focussed on activities which were concerned with basic skills whilst fifty five per cent were concerned with building bridges into

learning opportunities. Thirty three per cent worked on ICT and/or employment related skills. Some projects had multiple foci.

The NIACE website, in particular the ACLF web pages, carry brief descriptions of many of the projects supported by NIACE. Some are published in the evaluation reports. Here are three examples to illustrate how projects helped to motivate learners and widen participation in adult learning.

The Living Memory project, Norfolk is based in the county town of Norwich in a predominantly rural part of the Eastern region of England. The work reaches into other areas of the county. Over one third of the population is aged 50 or over. The project works with older people, including very frail elderly people and those with dementia. It set out to offer a range of learning opportunities in different venues, however, in spite of making presentations, taking information and publicity to potential learners and promoting learning in venues familiar to the older people, there was little take-up. The organisers decided to use reminiscence which covered a range of activities to encourage groups of older people and their carers to recall past times, and experiences. It aided self-worth and confidence and linked into a wide range of other activities by helping to recall earlier skills, knowledge and insights and led groups and individuals into new opportunities. Having rejected learning, participants subsequently became involved in such programmes as ICT, water-colour painting and health and fitness.

The three year programme resulted in the involvement of over 2000 people in 97 different venues. Over 220 carers have been trained as well as volunteers, and paid tutors. Strong partnerships with Social Services, the Health Authority, the Museums Service and Age Concern have been formed.

The Second Wave Youth Arts project works in the Deptford area of South East London engaging young people in learning by offering a wide range of opportunities associated with performing arts. They work almost exclusively with young people from Black and Minority groups, reaching to those who feel that schooling has not been a relevant and fulfilling experience. From the first contact with the project young people participate in shaping, forming and taking responsibility for their learning and the direction of the project. A great deal of peer tutoring, guidance and support is built into the initiative. Learners participate in workshops, weekend activities and tasters to tempt them and motivate them to participate in learning and to help them assess possible ways forward.

The programme includes script writing, music, performance and technical skills. Participative approaches are used at all stages which encourage ownership and responsibility.

The project uses performance outcomes in the shape of full productions for the local community, families and professionals. These are organised in close partnership with the local college of Higher Education, Goldsmiths College. This helps to open up progression routes for participants which include performing arts qualifications, teaching and counselling qualifications. Currently the Adult and Community Learning Fund is supporting an initiative to reach and work with Black young men. The secret of success seems to lie in the fact that performing arts appears exciting,

different from school, the young people are given responsibilities and a wide range of skills and outcomes as well as progression routes are possible.

The Keighley Healthy Living Network is a voluntary organisation based in the West Yorkshire area of Northern England. Its ACLF project aims to engage women from Pakistan and Bangladesh in healthy living activities. It seeks to motivate interest in learning by drawing on Asian customs, especially around food and gardening. By engaging Asian bilingual tutors, developing learning opportunities which the women suggest and are interested in, further learning opportunities have been created. Growing food, developing cooking skills, exchanging recipes, going swimming, taking part in gentle health and exercise activities as well as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and ICT has resulted from the project.

Provision is made in the local community, by local people who are known and trusted. Barriers of language are addressed and attitudinal difficulties posed by families or community leaders overcome by employing tutors from the Asian community. Once the women have become involved, in small ways to begin with, they have grown in confidence to seek further and different learning opportunities. They have encouraged other women from their community to become involved. The motivation to learn has arisen from their interest, the relevance of the programme and the addressing of potential barriers.

These are only three examples of the 600+ projects. However through analysis of project reports, visits and dialogue with learners and tutors as well as the two major evaluation studies many lessons have been learned. They tell us more about what helps to reach, motivate and retain adults who are not traditionally found in learning.

Outreach work must be undertaken and demands time, funds and skills to be effective. Networks with other organisations and agencies who have an interest in the target group should be approached and their co-operation and commitment gained. They can act as trusted and honest brokers in supporting potential learners. Information and publicity which are attractive, in direct clear language, illustrated and carefully targeted should accompany face to face work. Bilingual publicity can be helpful. Informal, drop-in tasters should form part of the outreach activities. The helps potential learners to try out, in non-threatening ways, the kind of learning activities they might join. They should, be fun, well supported and include information and guidance for individuals and groups.

Such introductions to learning must be based on the interests and wishes of the target group. This assumes that careful research, needs analysis and understanding of social and economic contexts has been developed. Cultural sensitivity must be included and the negotiated programme must be relevant to the hopes and aspirations of the participants.

Community-based locations address barriers of travel, threats posed by strange or intimidating venues and attitudes that colleges are for 'other' people. Such venues can be familiar to the learners and help in accommodating the time involved in taking children to and from school. Staff in community venues are often known to people in the locality and trust may have already developed.

Support for learners which acknowledges the challenges they face when considering learning also helps to remove difficulties which can demotivate. Support with fee remission, childcare, travel expenses as well personal support for people with learning, sensory or physical disabilities. Learning support assists with language, literacy or numeracy skills.

The staff who are involved in community provision should have local credibility, be prepared to listen and respond and be appropriately qualified. This does not necessarily mean the highest academic qualifications but does include experience of community learning, an understanding of the challenges faced by the target group and ways of addressing them. Similarly, volunteers should be appropriately trained and supported to carry out the tasks demanded. This is a specialist area of learning and special skills should be recognised and developed.

Many projects have found their partnerships to be challenging and difficult; some projects have struggled because their partnership failed. Good partners meet regularly, face differences, negotiate solutions, are reliable and communicate regularly with each other. Partner relationships which leave mainstream providers feeling that their voluntary sector partners are not committed or capable or which leave voluntary sector providers feeling that mainstream patterns dominate and control need to be sensitively worked through if the interests of learners are to be maintained. This is a very problematic area for many projects and the trust which needs to be built and the time which should be invested cannot be under-estimated.

The learning programme must be built upon the interests of potential participants; this suggests that market research and needs analysis have been conducted. The curriculum must then be discussed and negotiated with the learners so that it meets their interests and requirements. Regular reviews with individuals and the group help to maintain that interest and relevance as well as modify, adapt or develop the programme. This suggests that motivational learning is not driven by accreditation but by the learners.

Almost every report from ACLF projects records growth in soft outcomes such as gains in self-esteem and self-confidence amongst participants. We know that many people who do not participate in continuing learning felt that initial education was not fulfilling and many failed to reach their potential leaving them with negative feelings about learning. Lack of identity as a successful learner can create a high barrier. Learners need the opportunity to track personal developments which suggest some form of self assessment and review. Observation by staff can also assist as growth in confidence can be evidenced by changes in behaviour such as contributions to discussion, speaking up, helping others in the group and taking work home. Whilst many projects indicated that these outcomes were very important tracking them and evidencing them is challenging. Such a vital aspect of learning is difficult to measure and the tendency is for providers and policy-makers to require measurement of those things it is easy to measure, "We only count those things we can count….." (   ). This can lead to significant omission in the learning process.

Evaluating learning is an important aspect of widening participation as providers, their partners, practitioners and learners ask themselves, "Is this working?". Evaluating from the outset, identifying and recording what seems to work well and

changing those things which seem less effective helps the developmental process. It encourages amendment and adaptation along the way, leading to a more responsive and rewarding experience. It also means that subsequent opportunities build on experience.

Offering <u>information, advice and guidance</u> on entry to the learning activities, during the programme and on exit means that learners can be gently supported to consider not only accessing learning but considering next steps too. Waiting until the end of a learning experience can be too late for many participants. Guided and informed discussion in a supportive environment can open up possibilities previously unconsidered. Further support mechanisms can then be planned and used to aid progression.

Finally the celebration of achievement through festivities with learners' families and friends project partners, providers and practitioners further reinforces that positive achievements must be recognised through recording the outcomes gained (both 'hard' and 'soft') or through accreditation. The award of certificates of accreditation may not be appropriate for some learners; the recognition of achievement is vital for all.

So, if we are to continue to work towards changing the data on who participates in learning we, as adult educators must continue to be creative and imaginative, thinking 'outside the box' so that we motivate move and different people to become involved. We should take ideas from anywhere and everywhere and adapt them in the interests of the target group. We must celebrate even the smallest steps along learning journeys and let others know about it too.

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