
LEARNING IN LATER LIFE: MOTIVATION AND IMPACT

*Sally Dench and Jo Regan
Institute for Employment Studies*

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Background

Lifelong learning is an important part of government policy. A major drive behind this policy has been concern about the general skill and qualification levels of the economically active population. It is widely recognised that people will need to continually update and learn new skills if they are to remain competitive in the labour market, and for the national economy to compete effectively in international markets. However, it is also recognised that participation in learning has much wider benefits, contributing to the health and social well-being of individuals and communities.

It is suggested that older people who are involved in learning benefit in terms of their own health and well-being, that they lead a more active social life and become involved in their community. There is, however, relatively little data to substantiate these arguments. The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to explore the impact of learning on older people. The study also provides information on patterns and characteristics of learning amongst a sample of people aged between 50 and 71, their motivations to learn, reasons for not learning, barriers to learning and other aspects of their lives.

Key Findings

- Eighty per cent of learners reported a positive impact of learning on at least one of the following areas: their enjoyment of life; their self-confidence; how they felt about themselves; satisfaction with other areas of life; and their ability to cope.
- Forty-two per cent reported an improvement in their ability to stand up and be heard and/or their willingness to take responsibility.
- Twenty-eight per cent reported an increased involvement in social, community and/or voluntary activities as a result of learning.
- Being disabled or in poor health is a barrier to participation in learning. However, higher proportions of learners with a disability or health problem reported various positive benefits of learning, compared to those in good health.
- There is a strong association between learning and work. However, while participation in learning declines after retirement, giving up work can also act as a trigger into learning.
- The most important reasons for learning were intellectual, for example, wanting to keep their brain active, enjoying the challenge of learning new things and wanting to learn about things interested in; followed by personal and instrumental reasons.
- The most common reasons for not learning were a lack of time and a lack of interest in learning. A quarter said they had done enough learning in their life and 22 per cent felt too old to learn. Family responsibilities were also important, and non-learners were particularly likely to be spending time with their grandchildren.

Methodology

A review of existing literature on the non-economic impact of learning was conducted. This focused on studies which were particularly relevant to the objectives of this study. The National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) was conducted in 1997 amongst people aged 16 to 59. For this new study, a sample of those aged 50 or over were re-interviewed during spring 1999. A total of 336 structured face-to-face interviews were conducted, and these new were linked with the detailed information on learning collected in NALS. The interview updated information on participation in learning. It also collected information on motivations to learn and reasons for not learning; future learning plans; respondents' own perceptions of the impact of learning; and data on their health and wider social and political involvement. A broad definition of learning was used to include taught and non-taught activities. Everyone who had taken part in at least one of these during the two years prior to the survey was defined as a learner. In addition, 30 respondents participated in an in-depth interview exploring the impact of and motivation to learn in greater detail.

Patterns of Learning

During the two years 1997 to 1999, 70 per cent of respondents had done some learning. Most people were participating in a range of different types of learning; 48 per cent had done some taught and 56 per cent some non-taught learning.

- Over 80 per cent of those in work had participated in learning, compared to around half of those who were retired.
- Women were less likely to be learners: 66 per cent compared to 74 per cent of men.
- People aged under 60 were more likely to be learners: 79 per cent compared to 60 per cent of those aged 60 to 71.

Women and people aged over 60 were less likely to be working, and this helps to explain their lower levels of involvement in learning.

Those with a disability or who were in poor health were less likely to be learners:

- 58 per cent of those in poor health were learners, compared to 74 per cent of those rating their health as excellent or very good.
- 55 per cent of respondents with a disability or illness which limited their normal activities were learners, compared to 73 per cent of those with no disability or health problem.

Using data from the NALS and our new survey, we can look at participation in learning over a five year period. Sixty per cent of respondents were learners during the whole period and 16 per cent were non-learners. Ten per cent had become learners by the time of the IES survey, and 14 per cent had dropped out of learning. Those in employment were more likely to be continuous learners. Those who had retired were more likely to have dropped out of learning or be non-learners. This suggests that retirement can be a trigger out of learning. The reduction in work-related learning plays a major role here. However, the in-depth interviews also illustrate how retirement can be a trigger into more, or different learning.

Characteristics of Learning

Information was collected about all episodes of taught learning:

- IT related learning was most common, followed by work-related learning. Some of the IT learning was through work, but a number of people were involved in this area out of personal interest. Amongst those aged 60 and over, courses related to leisure interests were more common.
- The majority of learning episodes amongst those who were in full-time work were work-related. Taught learning amongst those who had retired was related to personal interest and fulfilment.
- Qualifications were not very important. Only one quarter of learning episodes were leading to a qualification.
- The majority of learning takes place during week days, and this partly reflects the importance of work-related learning. However amongst those who were retired,

59 per cent of training episodes were during the day in the week and almost one-third in the evening.

- The most common locations were at a workplace or employer's training centre. Those aged over 60 were more likely to have attended an adult education institute or further education college. Very little taught learning takes place in other local and community-based locations.
- For one third of learning episodes there were no fees to pay and in another third the respondent paid the fees themselves. In 22 per cent of cases an employer had paid.
- The cost of learning varied considerably. Of those paying the fees themselves, 23 per cent were unable to report the cost; 23 per cent paid under £50; and 12 per cent £500 or more.

Those who had improved their knowledge without taking part in a course had most often studied IT, arts and crafts, music or drama or another leisure activity. The learning methods were predominantly paper based, although 19 per cent had used computer software and 10 per cent the Internet.

The Motivation to Learn

The most important reasons for learning were intellectual. Learners reported wanting to increase their knowledge, to keep their brain active, enjoying the challenge of learning new things and wanting to learn about something they had always been interested in. The second most important group of reasons were personal. People wanted to gain qualifications for personal satisfaction, to do something with their time and to take their life in different directions. Instrumental reasons, such as having to do some learning for work, to help the family and to help with voluntary or community work were less important. Nevertheless, 74 per cent of learners reported at least one of these types of reason as very or fairly important.

The in-depth interviews illustrate the importance of early influences. Contact with family, teachers and others who were able to impart their interest in learning had a major impact. An early interest in and experience of learning also

provides people with the tools to take this further. A common theme amongst our group of learners was a desire to know about things and a general interest in life. This was usually present throughout their lives, although retirement might provide an opportunity for this to be followed through.

Reasons for not Learning

The most commonly reported reasons for not learning were a lack of time and a lack of interest in learning. A quarter of non-learners said they had done enough learning in their life and 22 per cent felt they were too old to learn. Seventeen per cent reported that a health problem or disability made it difficult for them to learn. The qualitative interviews illustrate the particular difficulties people in poor health experience in participating in learning. Having a disability or health problem can limit activities in many different ways. For example, some people have limited mobility, others have difficulties with communication, limited energy or are unable to look after themselves. The barriers to learning are, therefore, very varied. There were examples of people overcoming the difficulties created by a disability or poor health, for example, through pacing themselves or the support of others. Furthermore, learning does not necessarily involve attending an external course. While learning alone at home can be isolating, it can also lead to new interests and contacts.

More structural barriers, such as travelling, the fees and the availability of courses were less frequently reported.

Future Plans

Just over one-third had definite plans to do some learning over the next year, another third thought they might do some learning and 28 per cent reported that they definitely would not. Five per cent of non-learners were planning to do some learning in the coming year and 18 per cent thought they might. Those in work were most likely to be planning some learning, while those who had retired were most likely to say they would definitely not be doing any learning. Respondents with a disability which limited their activities or who were in poor health were also less likely to report plans for future

learning.

The Impact of Learning on Health and Social Involvement

The survey illustrates how learning has an impact on individual's well-being, and to a lesser extent on their wider involvement in life. Eighty per cent of learners reported a positive impact of learning on at least one of the following areas:

- their enjoyment of life
- their self-confidence
- how they felt about themselves
- satisfaction with other areas of their life
- their ability to cope with everyday life.

Forty-two per cent of learners reported an improvement in their ability to stand up and be heard and/or their willingness to take responsibility. Twenty-eight per cent reported an increase in their involvement in either social, voluntary or community activities. Compared to other groups, higher proportions of those who were retired or aged 60 and over reported a positive impact of learning on their wider social and community involvement.

Women were more likely to report positive benefits of learning and across the whole range of areas listed above, apart from their willingness to take responsibility. A number of women in our sample reported having few opportunities to learn earlier in their life, for example, due to their parents and/or partner seeing learning as unimportant for women or due to their family and caring responsibilities. Women in particular, reported the sense of achievement they experienced through being able to learn and, in some cases, pass a qualification.

A number of measures of health and well-being were used in this study, and our data suggest that those in poor health or with a disability are more likely to benefit from learning. In particular, they are more likely (compared to those with good health) to report that learning improved their enjoyment of life, their self-

confidence, their ability to cope, their satisfaction with life and how they felt about themselves.

Other benefits of learning included: broadened horizons and outlook; personal satisfaction; being happier and an improved quality of life; meeting people and more social interaction; keeping active and occupied; and being better able to deal with other people.

The study also explored other aspects of the lives of learners and non-learners. Learners were likely to be involved in a wider range of non-learning activities, while non-learners spent more time on a smaller number. A higher proportion of learners reported actively following a hobby or personal interest, visiting the theatre or cinema, being involved in voluntary or community work and playing sport. Non-learners were spending time baby-sitting or with their children/grandchildren.

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*Further information about this research can be obtained from Caroline Berry, Room N607, DfEE, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ.
Email: caroline.berry@dfes.gov.uk*