

Older people's learning in 2012

A survey

Summary report



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This is a summary report on older people's learning in Great Britain. It is based on one of the largest surveys of the issue ever carried out in Britain, and perhaps in Europe. The survey was carried out in spring 2012, and follows a similar one undertaken in 2005.

The study aimed to understand how many older people (over 50) are learning, what kind of people they are, what they study, why and with what benefits. It also aimed to monitor what had changed over the seven years since the previous survey.

The survey interviews people over 50, because this is the age when people begin to enter the 'retirement zone', when the possibility of retirement (voluntary or otherwise) begins to affect career choices. After 50, some people begin to retire early, some are forced into retirement by poor health or disability, and some are driven out by age discrimination in the labour market.

The changing pattern of older people's learning

The proportion of people over 50 who report that they are learning has not changed in the last seven years. Nor has the social and gender mix of participants.

However, where they learn has changed markedly, with a rise in independent and online learning, and a decline in learning in public sector institutions of further and higher education.

The proportion learning for work-related reasons has risen. Work-related learning attracts a broader mix of people, and employers are now more likely to support learning for older employees than in the past.

The most dramatic change since 2005 is the halving of the proportion of older people learning about 'computing', from over 40% to only 17%, suggesting that many older people now feel that they have caught up with computing technologies.

What changes with age?

With age, the proportion of adults who say they are 'learning' declines progressively. Only one in five people over 50 are 'learners', compared to two in five of the adult population as a whole. The proportion falls from a third of those aged 50–54, to only 7% of those aged 75+.

With age, the social mix of learners changes. At all ages, people in higher social classes, and with longer initial education, are more likely to report that they are learning, but the proportion is much higher among those over 65, and higher still after 75.¹

Some of these changes are directly related to age, but some will reflect the life patterns of particular generations. Since patterns of learning reflect social class and previous education, it is likely that the proportion of older people learning will rise, as better-educated people now in their 40s move into their 50s and 60s.

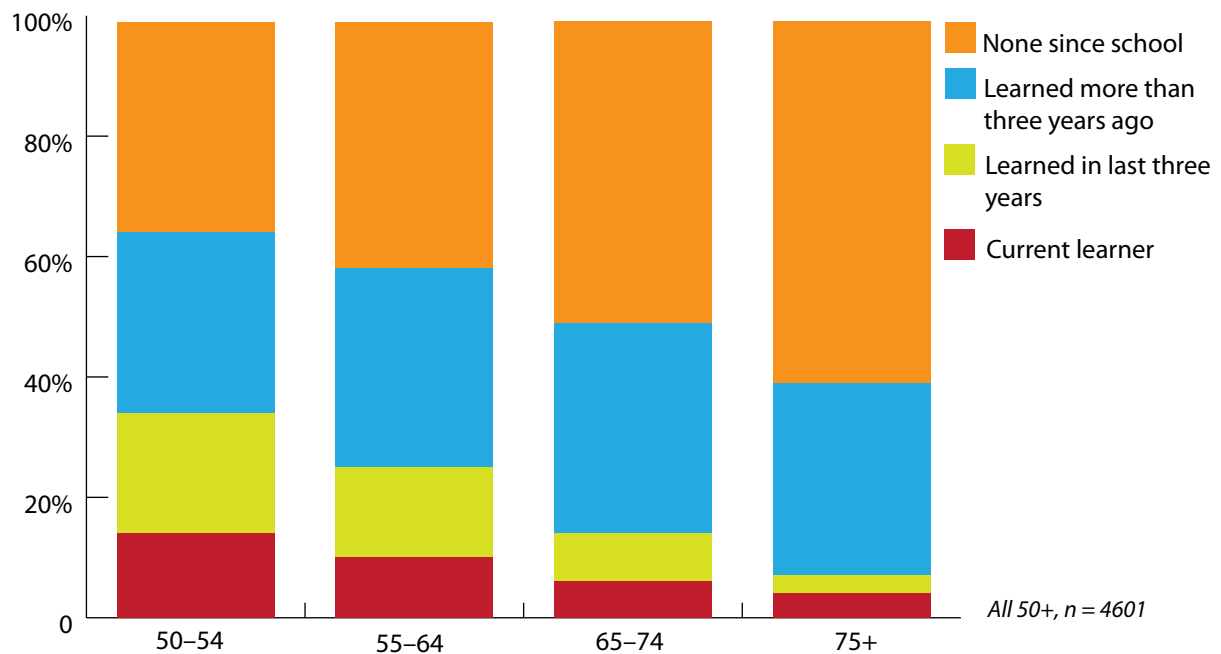


Figure 1. Learning and age

The role of employment

Employment status plays a vital role in learning for people over 50, and it may be more important than age itself in determining who learns. The proportion of older people learning for work-related reasons has risen, and one in three of those in paid employment have learned in the last three years, compared to one in ten of the retired. Full-time workers are more likely to learn than part-time workers, and the unemployed more than the economically inactive.

¹ This figure should be treated with caution: since life expectancy is higher among these groups, they form a larger proportion of the population among the older groups.

This change may partly reflect the rise, since the 1990s, in real retirement ages. The average retirement age, which fell in the late 20th century, is now 65 for men and over 62 for women. The UK has significantly higher labour market participation rates after 50 than most EU countries, and the employment of people over 65 (currently 7%) has risen by a fifth in the last year.

Furthermore, older workers are now more likely than in the past to be supported in their learning by their employers. Whereas, historically, employers have been reluctant to support training for older workers, employees over 50 are now more likely than younger ones to receive support for training from their employers.

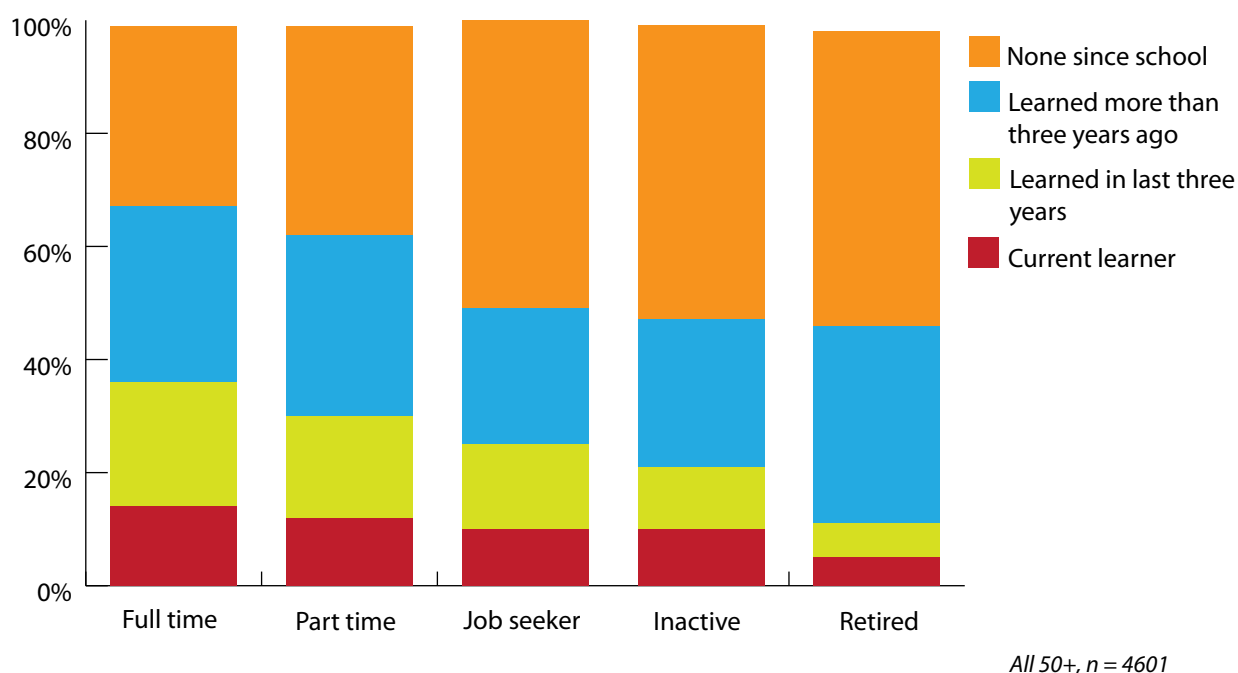


Figure 2. Learning and employment status

Changing subjects

Unsurprisingly, those learning for work-related reasons are younger, but they also come from a broader social range. The subjects they are studying – health, social care and occupational health and safety – reflect the high concentrations of older workers, and higher levels of training generally, in those employment sectors, as well as the extent of formal regulation of training on issues like health and safety.

As people age, they are increasingly likely to be studying languages, the arts, history and literature. There are two particularly striking findings here. Those studying history are much more likely to report ‘passing on skills and knowledge to others’ than people studying other subjects; and those studying languages are much more likely to report no benefits from learning.

Changing notions of 'learning' in a digital world

Access to the digital world has changed significantly in the last decade, and this is reflected clearly in the two NIACE surveys. In 2005, more than 40% of all older learners said that they were learning about 'computing', and none mentioned using the internet for learning. By 2012, the pattern had reversed. The number learning about computing had halved, to 17% (presumably because those who had not acquired computing skills during their working lives and who were keen to do so have now done this) while the proportion 'learning online' had risen to 12% (and to 16% of people aged 55–64). Similarly, in 2005 only 2% of non-learners² said that they would look for information about learning on the Internet. By 2012 this had become the most frequently chosen source of such information (cited by one in five, and one in three of those aged 50–55).

These figures suggest a change in older people's understanding of 'learning', and perhaps a change in what is actually happening, which may call for some rethinking of the nature of 'informal' learning.

At the beginning of the survey the interviewer explains that the word 'learning' is being used to embrace a wide range of activity, in public, private, voluntary and individual settings. However, individuals differ in their understanding of the term, and in their recollection of the explanation later in the interview. This survey probably accurately reflects how people think instinctively about 'learning', but other surveys, which use different definitions, or which prompt respondents more frequently with the definition, produce higher participation figures.

Although some of those citing online independent learning refer to formal online courses, many refer to sites like Wikipedia or to the use of e-readers. Where this 'learning' is based around web browsing, it is an activity which few would have been able to do in the past without access to a substantial reference library. This would appear to be a genuine expansion of learning activity. Similarly e-readers provide easier access to a wider range of literature, but this sort of reading might not have been described as 'learning' in the past.

Motivations and benefits

The reasons people give for taking up learning are not the same as the benefits they report afterwards. The motivations of those learning for work-related reasons are different from the non-work ones and, not surprisingly, the former decline with age, while the latter rise.³

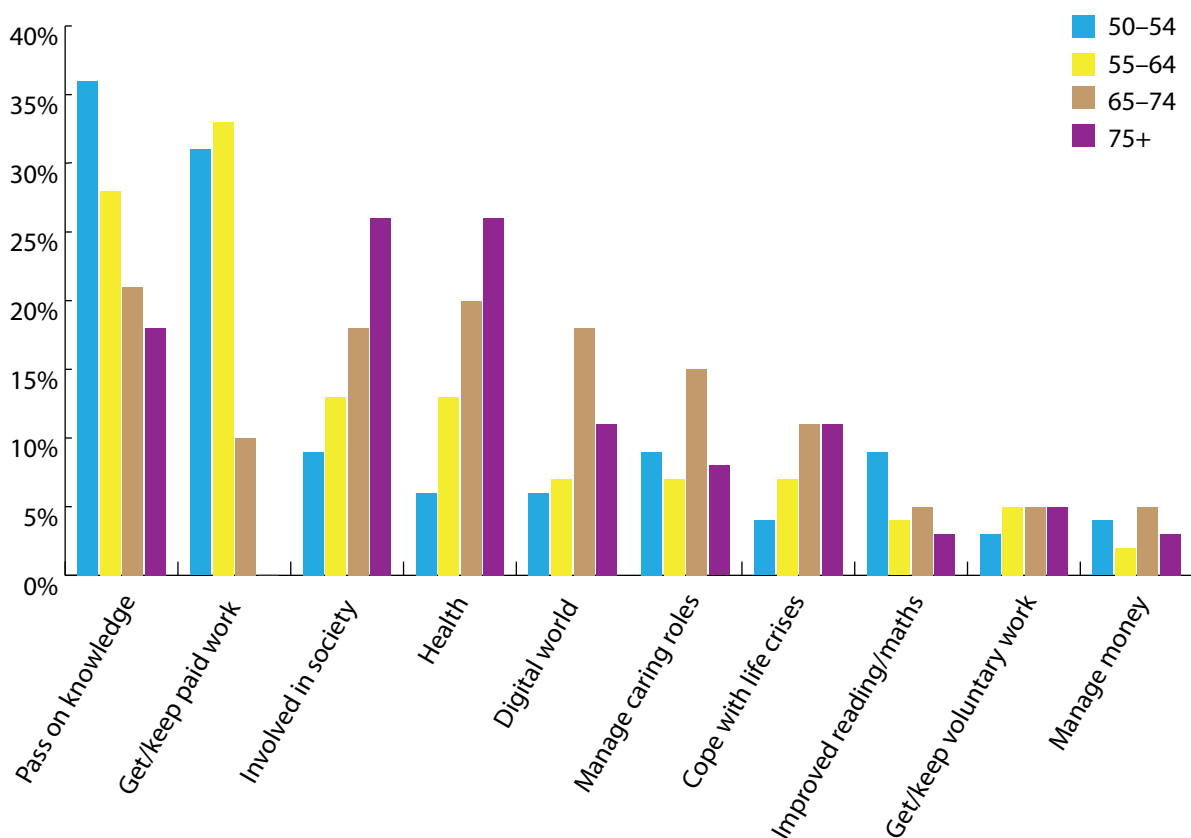
Work-related learners are most likely to learn 'To help in my current job' (25% of all learners), followed by 'To get a recognised qualification', 'employer requirement', and 'To make my work more satisfying' (all around 10% of learners). Non-work-related learners, by contrast, are most likely to learn because of interest in the subject (33%), or because they 'enjoy learning' (26%). By contrast, two motivations appear unaffected by age: in all age groups over 50, about a quarter of learners cite 'To develop myself as a person' and a further one in ten cite 'To improve my self-confidence'.

² 'Non-learners' are those who say they have not done any learning in the last three years.

³ Percentages do not add to 100 since multiple answers were permitted to the questions on motivation and benefits.

For the oldest group, social motivations ('To meet people' and 'Because friends/family/colleagues are also learning') are most important (16% and 5%). For older women social motives and self-confidence are particularly important (16% and 11%). For younger people, employer or professional requirements are more important (22% and 10%).

The 2012 survey asked, for the first time, about the benefits of learning, offering respondents a choice of ten options. Most people chose several of these (although one in five chose 'None'). Most surprisingly, the most widely cited benefit of learning was 'Helped me pass on my skills and knowledge to other people' (28%, declining with age), followed by 'Improved my chances of getting or staying in paid work' (24%, almost all by people under 65), and by 'Helped me get involved in society' (14%) and 'Helped me improve or maintain my health' (13%), both of which rise with age. One in ten cited 'Helped me get involved in the digital/online world' (peaking among the 65–74-year-old group). Smaller, but significant, numbers cited 'Helped me to manage my caring responsibilities', 'Helped me cope with life crises', 'Improved my reading and maths' and 'Improved my chances of getting or staying in voluntary work'.



50+ learners (booster sample only), n = 409

Figure 3. How has learning helped you?

The shift from public to private

One significant change since 2005 has been a change in the balance between public sector educational institutions, work-related providers and independent learning.

The proportion studying in further education colleges and universities has halved (from 21% to 9% in the former, and from 14% to 8% in the latter). This probably reflects government policy to focus public resources on longer, qualification-bearing vocational courses. On the other hand, the proportion learning at or through work has risen from a quarter to a third; the proportion learning independently on their own has risen from 12% to 18%; and the proportion learning through public adult education centres and the Workers' Educational Association has risen from 7% to 12%.

This suggests an increasingly polarised market for older people's learning, with vocational and non-vocational learning happening in different institutions and forms.

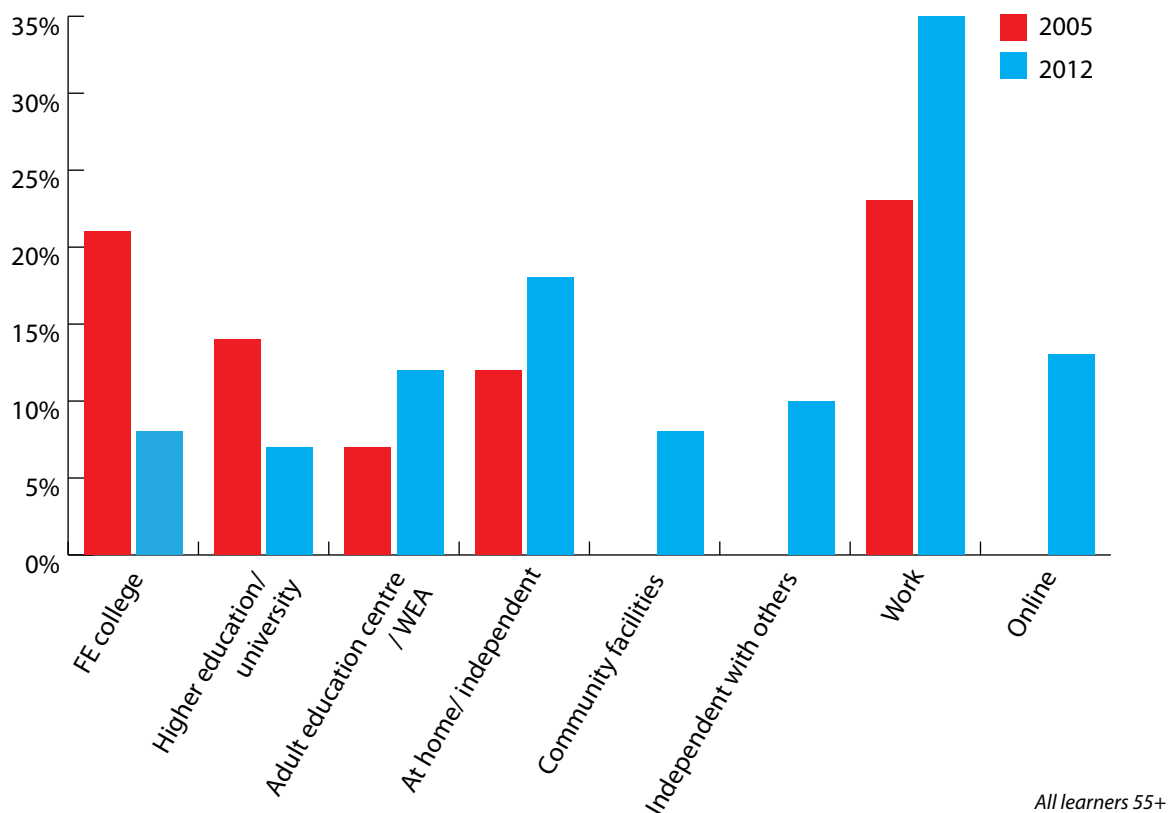


Figure 4. Location of learning 2005 and 2012

Independent learning

One remarkable change since 2005 is the growth of independent learning among older people. 16% of older learners report learning 'Independently on my own', and a further 9% 'Independently with others'. The former figure rises to nearly 30% of learners over 75 (mainly better educated and with internet access), while the latter rises to 14% among the 75+ group.

The 'Independently with others' group probably reflects the rapid growth in recent years of the University of the Third Age (U3A) which provides self-organised learning groups, and currently reports a national membership of 270,000. However, only 2% of respondents actually named U3A in the list of learning providers, which suggests that many of these members see themselves as members of, for example, a music or history group, rather than of U3A itself.

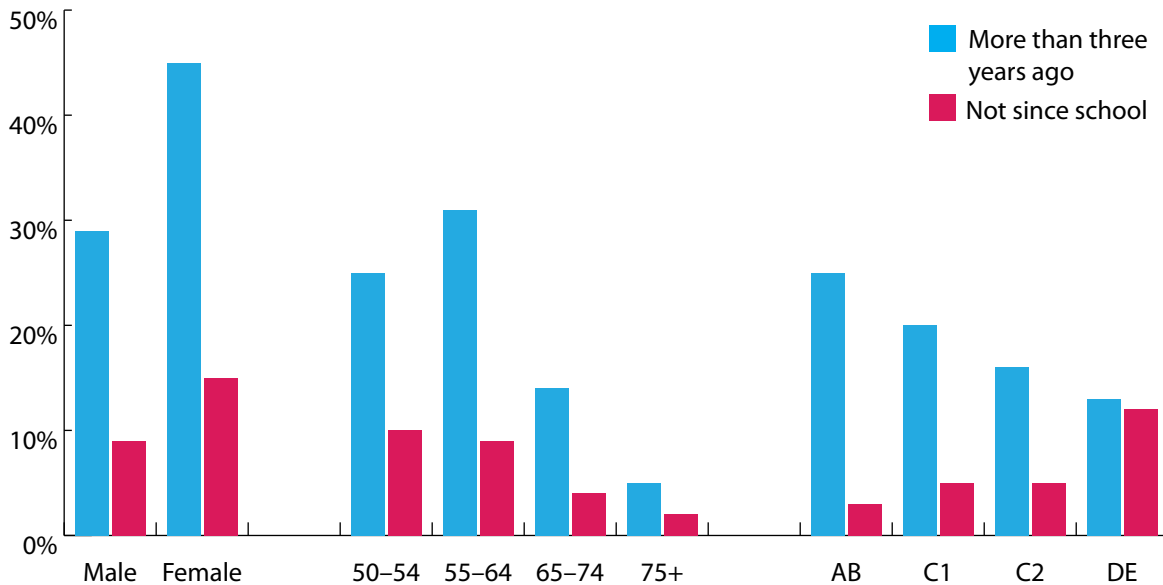
The 'non-learners'

The survey documents and confirms some of the positive findings of previous research on the economic and wider benefits of learning, for the individual and for wider society. It follows that it is desirable to encourage learning among those who do not currently see themselves as 'learners'.

However, the survey findings are not encouraging: two-thirds of those who have not learned in the last three years say that it is 'very unlikely' that they will do so in the future, and the proportion rises with age. When asked, two-thirds of these 'non-learners' said nothing would make learning more attractive.

Those who are most likely to consider learning in the future are younger (39% of 'non-learners' aged 50–54, but only 6% of those over 75). They are more likely to be women, to have longer initial education, to come from higher social classes, with internet access and be from ethnic minorities. The most resistant group is men in social classes C1 and C2.

Among those who would consider learning in the future, it is clear that the most important motivator would be interest in the subject. 16% of respondents chose 'If the learning was related to something I'm interested in' (16%), followed by 'If I could learn at home' (10%). Traditional 'barriers to access' of cost, location and daytime classes are each chosen by fewer than 5%.



Non-learners 50+ likely or fairly likely to learn in next three years, n = 343

Figure 5. Non-learners willing to return

Sources of advice

There are many providers of learning opportunities for older people, and finding out about them can be difficult, especially for those who have done no learning for many years. When asked where they would go for information or advice about learning, non-learners most often chose the internet (18%, compared to only 2% in 2005), chosen mainly by younger people, men, those in employment, and those most likely to consider learning in the future. By contrast, the 15% who chose public libraries are mainly older people, women, those without internet access, and the retired. In 2005, 15% of people chose 'Friends/family', but this has fallen to 6% and, despite the high proportion of work related learning, the proportion choosing their employer as a source of advice has fallen from 11% to 2%.

The extent of resistance to learning among the 'non-learners' is evidenced by the fact that, even when offered a list of places they might choose to seek advice on learning, nearly a third of non-learners said that they did not know where they would go.

Conclusions

A relatively small proportion of older people undertake what they understand as 'learning', and the proportion doing so falls with age. However, the pattern is clearly changing for two major reasons: firstly, the changing role of paid work in the lives of older people, as retirement ages, and levels of work-related learning rise; secondly, the rapid expansion of internet access among older people, which has led to a growth of online and independent learning. Although learning remains strongest among those with the most previous education, and those from higher social classes, these two factors appear to have widened the social range of learners.

However, these changes do suggest a decline in what has traditionally been thought of as adult learning. Overall learner numbers remain steady, but the proportion engaging in independent learning 'on your own', suggests a decline in learning as a social activity which merits further study, both to test whether it is true, and to explore the social implications.

The survey: technical details

NIACE conducts an annual survey of adult learning as part of a wider Omnibus survey of a representative sample of adults across Great Britain. To generate large enough numbers for detailed analysis, in 2005, and again in 2012, the sample of people aged 50+ was boosted (while remaining representative).

The result, in 2012, was a sample of 4601 people aged 50 and above, who were interviewed, face to face, in spring. Of these, 859 were defined as 'learners': either currently learning or having learned in the last three years. Some of the 2005 questions were repeated in 2012, enabling a comparison over the seven years.

The survey uses a very broad definition of learning, to include formal, non-formal and informal, as well as online and individual learning. This is explained to interviewees at the beginning of the survey, as follows:

I would now like to talk about the sort of learning that people do. 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 college. Learning does not have to lead to a qualification. I am interested in any learning you have done, whether or not it was finished.

The full report, including the questionnaire, is available on the NIACE website at www.niace.org.uk

Acknowledgements

This report might never have appeared without the work of the late Naomi Sargant, who pioneered survey research into adult learning at the Open University in the 1970s, and who advised on the design and analysis of NIACE surveys of adult learners from their first creation until her death. We are all in her debt.

I am also grateful to Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett, who carried out the first survey of older learners, and have shaped and developed the broader NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey for many years.

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