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Report on Research into Barriers to Learning in the SELP Area

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BARRIERS TO LEARNING

CONTENTS	PAGE	
1	KEY FINDINGS	3
2	PURPOSE OF RESEARCH	5
	2.1 Background	
	2.2 Research aims	
	2.3 Research methods	
3	OVERVIEW OF POLICY AND CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH	9
	3.1 Policy overview	
	3.2 Contemporary research	
4	ANALYSIS OF DATA	16
	4.1 Profile of respondents	
	4.2 Issues arising	
	4.3 Significant barriers	
5	CONCLUSIONS	24
	5.1 Discussion of evidence about barriers to learning	
	5.2 Discussion of evidence about incentives to learning	
	5.3 Recommendations	
6	REFERENCES	28

1 KEY FINDINGS

Identifying barriers to learning for adults was the focus of this research project. The key aim was to understand the particular barriers that hindered access to learning for adults in the South Essex Learning Partnership (SELP) area. It was therefore important to study adults who were not currently involved in formal learning. This was carried out through interviews with a purposive sample of adults in the SELP area. Some adults were also engaged in longer, in-depth interviews. Accounts of some their experiences were used as case studies to provide illustrative evidence to support key issues. The second section outlines the background to the research and the research aims and methods. Recent research in this area is summarised in the third section together with a brief overview of government policies relating to adult learning. In the fourth section the interviewees' responses are analysed and summarised and the fifth section contains conclusions and recommends strategies for reducing barriers to learning for adults that will help facilitate access in the SELP area.

In the group studied there was a general pattern of barriers that appear to be accounted for by:

- the individual's perception of learning
- social changes in the wider community
- organisational practices within the education system.

Significant barriers to learning identified by those interviewed linked to their perception of learning were:

- the actual timing of activities – when classes were held and what attendance pattern was required
- the amount of time such learning activities took – respondents perceived they could not be fitted into their spare time and social and family commitments were a priority
- the cost of learning activities – they did not appear affordable

Significant barriers to learning identified by those interviewed linked to social changes in the wider community were:

- the difficulty in attending – work patterns prohibited a commitment to regular attendance
- the lack of safety in being out at night – fear expressed by women about being out alone and transport difficulties

Significant barriers to learning identified by those interviewed linked to organisational practices were:

- lack of childminding facilities
- lack of day-time provision
- having to pay fees up-front rather than session by session

- lack of information about provision locally

Ways forward for the South Essex Learning Partnership to meet their key tasks might be to:

Harness the strengths of a range of local partners

- by raising the awareness of the individual partners about the provision of adult learning opportunities in the SELP area: continued networking, inter-advisory group activities, mapping of provision (as already started by the Basic Skills Advisory Group)

Co-ordinate action towards shared objectives

- by collaborating to develop an overall strategy for adult provision in the region by recognising the strengths of the partners and building on the expertise of individual organisations within the partnership: acknowledging that boundaries need to be broken down, allocating of specialist provision in a non-competitive way, acknowledging that individual organisations cannot answer the needs of all the community and specialisation is essential

Achieve greater coherence and value for money

- promoting the range of provision in a more systematic and pro-active way under the banner of SELP: develop a one-stop telephone help line for enquiries about learning opportunities, partners contributing to an information database and regularly up-dating it, considering more learning shops across the area, more on-line development
- promoting the changes that had already been made to educational and training offers for adults: local advertising, leafleting, promotional offers
- promoting the flexibility and family-friendly courses already on offer and widening the flexible provision already on offer: local provision, more flexible delivery styles, payment methods, times.

2 THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

2.1 Background

South Essex Learning Partnership (SELP) is one of many Learning Partnerships established throughout England to improve the planning and coherence of local post-16 learning. The partnership vision, formalised in the Action Plan following its inception in April 1999 is:

‘The partners of the South Essex Lifelong Learning Partnership will work together energetically to promote and encourage social inclusion and lifelong learning to the people of South Essex.’

All Learning Partnerships are charged with the same key tasks:

- To harness the strengths of a range of local partners
- To co-ordinate action towards shared objectives
- To achieve greater coherence and value for money

In formulating actions to meet these shared objectives, the working groups of the partnership identified the need for specific research to be undertaken into the barriers to learning in the SELP area and in particular those affecting adults.

The chief barriers were usually considered to be the lack of funding and resources available to a sector of education that was extremely diverse and not compulsory. Whilst the further and higher education sectors in England are seen as the main progression routes for those post-16, and indeed adults over 21 now form the majority of the student body in these sectors, most adult education has remained peripheral. The image that participation in adult education is a choice for those who have the time and the money still persists. This is in part due to the public perception that the further and higher education sectors provide academic and vocational training, and formal provision outside this is focused on non-vocational and leisure courses.

However, government policy is making substantial changes to the provision of post-16 education and training as part of wider educational reforms that are aimed at laying much stronger foundations for a competitive and inclusive society of the future. The government’s White Paper Learning to Succeed (1999) revealed its policy aims which included raising basic skill levels, widening adult participation, combating social exclusion and giving more coherence to the range of adult learning taking place in different contexts. It promises to break down the artificial divide between schedule 2 provision (mainly leading to qualifications) and non-schedule 2 provision (sometimes called non-vocational or recreational provision).

A new national Learning and Skills Council will have separate adult and youth committees and a separate adult learning inspectorate. The national Council will operate through 47 local Learning and Skills Councils and be supported by over 100 local Learning Partnerships which have been developing local learning targets linked to the national learning targets. The funding regime may introduce significant differences in subsidising provision for 16-19 year olds and more mature students.

Moreover, the remit of the Learning and Skills Council will extend beyond colleges to cover a range of contexts where adults may be learning: in the workplace or learning centres, in LEA, voluntary or community provision.

This wider remit provides an opportunity to review provision locally as the emphasis on learning challenges the boundaries established on the basis of certain forms of provision. So a shift from concern with *provision* to concern with *learning* means that adults will be encouraged to participate in a more diverse range of learning activities in a wider range of settings. The challenge for Learning Partnerships is in not only co-ordinating these diverse activities to meet the targets set, but in widening adult participation by meeting the needs of the less committed learners and engaging them in learning activities that can be recorded and accredited.

2.2 Research Aims

The overall requirements of the research were to:

- Produce a more refined picture of the barriers to learning in the SELP area
- Illuminate barriers existing in the SELP area to the full participation of adults
- Make recommendations that will enable learning providers to target these barriers with a view to widening participation across the age range.

Barriers to learning have been one of the key issues in contemporary adult education. They were seen to have been erected nationally by educational policies and implemented locally by the ways in which organisations delivered and charged for adult education provision.

As it is anticipated that within SELP the core issues of this topic are already well understood, the project will aim to:

- elicit the learners' and especially the non-learners' agendas
- illuminate their needs and expectations
- identify what barriers exist to learning in the eyes of those less committed to learning
- focus on the perceptions of the adults about their experiences of adult education provision (if any)
- uncover what puts them off and what might encourage them to participate.

An additional request for a brief review of contemporary research was requested after the overall requirements had been agreed, and this was incorporated in the overall aim of the project.

Research methods

Although some quantitative data was gathered to provide a profile of less committed learners or non-learners, the research approach was essentially to gather qualitative data ie what these issues mean to the less committed learners. The design of the project attempted to ensure that the agendas of all stakeholders were addressed.

To identify key issues, and to clarify what the barriers and current strategies were, a focus group was held. The eight members of the focus group which was held on 15 December 2000 at Essex Careers and Business Partnership were members of the 16-19 Learning Advisory Group of SELP. The researcher moderated the group and a summary of barriers as perceived by the group was recorded.

These propositions were tabled into 19 statements and presented to the Adult Advisory Group of SELP at a meeting on 16 January 2001 for peer review. This was conducted through a questionnaire asking for agreement or disagreement on the statements. Additional comments were also sought and data was gathered from group discussion. Information gained during this peer review was used to indicate significant barriers and incentives to learning. These two stages, focus groups and peer review, provided a vital familiarisation process for the researcher entering this specialised field.

To ensure coverage of the SELP area, interviews were held in the districts within SELP identified by Essex County Council: Basildon, Benfleet, Canvey Island, Southend-on-Sea and Rochford. Access to locations where there was a high likelihood of adults not committed to learning was sought. Contacts gained through the focus group, the peer review process and networking opportunities at advisory group meetings and a SELP conference were followed up. Local permission for access was always obtained, but as some locations were regional offices of larger organisations who might or might not be aware of this, it was agreed with the providers that actual locations would not be revealed. The locations did however include: local government premises, libraries, private training establishments, charities and premises of national government agencies.

The locations were chosen to provide a purposive sample of adults over-sixteen to over-sixty who were currently not involved in formal learning activities. A gender balance was planned as was a balance between those employed and unemployed.

Two hundred and twenty-one adults were interviewed for the project. Brief, focussed interviews were chosen as an appropriate vehicle for ascertaining the adults' viewpoint. Two open-ended, informally-worded questions were posed. One about barriers to learning 'what puts you off?'. One about incentives 'what would encourage you do something?'. A checklist of important issues derived from the focus group and peer review process was used as a prompt. Follow-up questions were also posed to elicit any other issues.

Twenty-three adults were engaged in longer, in-depth interviews to provide rich data to support the credibility of data from other interviews. Again, it was agreed that no details such as full names or location would be included so that no adult would be able to be identified. All those involved in in-depth interviews agreed that their first name could be used to introduce their account if it was included in the final report.

Analysis was through grounded theory by which concepts, categories and their dimensions were induced from the data. When particular categories emerged then new cases were continually compared to these to build a substantive theory. The longer, in-depth interviews held with a small number of respondents were also used to verify

and clarify the emerging picture by building up typical case studies for each emerging category.

3 OVERVIEW OF POLICY AND CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

3.1 Policy Review

In the closing years of the twentieth century, there was what amounted to a crusade by successive governments to raise the level of retention and achievement in education by young people. The main weapons in this crusade were benchmarking, inspections, and funding arrangements to reward successful institutions. Despite this flurry of exhortation to increase retention and achievement, the figures for both showed only slow improvement, leading to the White Paper, *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999) declaring that ‘aspirations and staying on rates remain too low. The system fails a significant section of the community, often the most vulnerable.’

We are now, according to the government, entering a ‘renaissance’ of post-compulsory and adult education. The notion of lifelong learning, having gathered momentum since the 1970s, is being widely promoted by policy-makers and educationalists under the aegis of establishing a ‘learning society’. The aim of ushering Britain into a ‘learning age’ is now a central tenet of current educational thinking.

Education and training do not, of course, exist in a vacuum. They are part of a wider social fabric of values, families, employment and civic life. What happens within education is, in part, dependent on what happens outside education - in homes, communities and workplaces. Britain’s ‘learning revolution’ is taking place within a far wider social, cultural, economic and political context.

The Minister for Lifelong Learning made it clear that *Learning to Succeed* is ‘absolutely central to what the government is about – it’s about economics, but also about social policy’.

I give below a list of relevant post-16 publications and consultation documents published since 1997 which illustrates the government’s priorities:

- National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997, *Higher Education in the Learning Society (The Dearing Report)*, London: National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education
- Fryer R , 1997, *Learning for the twenty-first century*, London, DfEE
- Department for Education and Employment, 1998a, *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain*, Stationery Office
- Department for Education and Employment, 1998b, *University for Industry: Engaging People in Learning for Life*, Stationery Office
- Department for Education and Employment, 1999a, *Learning to Succeed: a new framework for post 16-learning*, White Paper, Norwich: Stationery Office
- Department for Education and Employment, 1999b, *The Learning and Skills Council Prospectus: Learning to Succeed*, Stationery Office
- Department for Education and Employment, 2000, *Post-16 Funding and Allocations: First Technical Consultation Paper*, Stationery Office
- Department for Education and Employment, 2000, *Connexions: The best start in life for every young person*, Norwich: Stationery Office

- Department for Education and Employment, 2000, Raising Standards in Post-16 Learning: A summary consultation document, Stationery Office
- National Skills Task Force, 2000, Tackling the adult skills gap: upskilling adults and the role of workplace learning, Suffolk, DfEE

A brief overview of three significant policies is provided.

Kennedy H (1997) Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education (The Kennedy Report), Coventry: FEFC

One need look no further than the report of the Widening Participation Committee of the Further Education Funding Council (1997), under the chairmanship of Helena Kennedy, to realise that the question of widening participation in post-16 education is seen as a priority for policymakers, not only for the further education sector but also for the nation.

Statistical evidence to the Kennedy Report showed that at 16 over 80% of people were receiving some form of education. By age 17 this had dropped to about 75%, and by 18 to less than 60%. The drop-out rate was disproportionately among young people from lower social classes, and some ethnic minorities.

The Kennedy Report held that ‘Learning is a weapon against poverty and the route to participation and active citizenship.’

DfEE, 1998, The Learning Age: A renaissance for a New Britain, The Stationery Office

‘We stand on the brink of a new age. Familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing ... In our hearts we know we have no choice but to prepare for this new age, in which the key to success will be the education, knowledge and skills of our people ... The fostering of an enquiring mind and the love of learning are essential for our future success.’ (Blunkett, 1998)

These are the opening words of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in his foreword to a government publication ‘The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain’ (DfEE, 1998). Currently one of the government’s major priorities is to encourage a love of learning.

The changing patterns of employment and lifestyles that characterise our society today place demands on individuals who face uncertainty as full employment and job security are options that no government offers any more. What they offer is the notion of lifelong learning. Learning can no longer be seen as involving people for less than the first quarter of their life as the learning society is rapidly replacing the industrial society. As we enter the new millennium, those who do not have the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and know-how will have an increasingly difficult time. Anyone can, the government presupposes, learn to learn and so have access to employment. Unfortunately, learning tends to go where learning is. Those who have had longer experiences of education tend to value education more than other groups. So the more likely outcome of this new form of knowledge work is an increasing divided society – unless we can transform the whole of society into a personal learning culture where

everyone pursues learning avidly. How can adult educators bridge the learning divide between those who have benefited from education and training and those who have not? The challenges for those involved in adult education are enormous because it is their role to prepare people for this new age and equip them to function well under uncertainty.

Adult educators can accept or dismiss political and economic pressures to be competitive, run as businesses, embrace a market mentality which emphasises quality control and consumerism. But can adult educators reject the concern for equity and opportunity for different groups in society that learning brings? Or not encourage people to engage in learning in whatever guise it may take in the future? Benefits will surely accrue to a society that develops a framework for fostering an enquiring mind and a love of learning. Opportunities for learning need to be a way of life for all, not a means to an end for a few. Adult educators can contribute to such a framework.

DfEE, 1999, Learning to Succeed: A New Framework for Post-16 Learning, The Stationery Office

Proposals in the Learning to Succeed White Paper (DfEE, 1999) provide the basis for a more coherent infrastructure from which to plan and fund post-16 learning, and to achieve the Governments vision of a modern economy and a skilled, engaged and creative workforce.

The White Paper announced the setting up of Learning and Skills Councils, based on the then Further Education Funding Council and the Training and Enterprise Councils, and set out a clear agenda to produce a more flexible curriculum to suit all young people, including the less 'academic'. Two extracts from paragraphs from the White Paper make its intentions clear:

- 3.18 The Learning and Skills Council must build on the work already done to promote progression for all 14-19 year olds, particularly those who have previously been turned off by learning. Currently, schools have flexibility at Key Stage 4 to enhance opportunities for work related learning. Our proposals for a revised national curriculum from 2000 extend this approach and will provide wider opportunities, as will *Qualifying for Success* reforms announced earlier this year which will increase the opportunities for young people to pursue a broader post-16 curriculum. We want to build on the best practice in schools, further and higher education and work based provision. There should be enough flexibility in the curriculum to allow options for those who are not motivated by a traditional curriculum offering and would find other options, such as the more vocational route, attractive. This will include schemes whereby disaffected and excluded 14-16 year old pupils are able to study in colleges and voluntary sector providers in conjunction with employers.
- 3.19 We would expect the Learning and Skills Council to seek further ways of enhancing opportunities for young people to be able to study in flexible ways that suit their needs. The Council will do this in part through the promotion and support of work experience programmes for those aged under 16. It will build on the contribution of all those involved in Education Business

Partnerships, including local education authorities, to ensure coherence between school business links for pre-16 education and the post-16 agenda.

3.2 Contemporary Research

A review of contemporary research suggests that the concept of participation by adults in learning is both complex and contradictory. First, there is the distinction between adult learning that focuses on informal learning activities of individuals and groups outside educational institutions, and the formal provision of learning opportunities for adults. Second, further distinctions have been made by boundaries created by policymakers between what is considered education, training and learning for leisure. Third, different influences on policy development create different priorities. The modernisers' view is that a competitive economy requires a highly skilled workforce; the progressives' view is that there should be opportunity for social mobility and greater equity; and the traditionalists' view is that there should be a form of selection and standards must be maintained.

Contemporary research topics include:

- evidencing formal and informal learning
- encouraging further learning
- considering real and virtual locations for learning
- how to stimulate demand for adult learning
- benefits of skills and qualifications

A brief overview of research papers covering these topics is provided.

A Sense of Achievement: outcomes of adult learning (Foster P, Howard U and Reisenburger A, 1997)

This research focussed on the learner's perspective. The research identified that all learning opportunities should be able to demonstrate that they have helped students to: increase their confidence, improve their capacity to continue or apply the learning, deepen their knowledge or understanding and acquire new skills. The acquisition of skills could be either in relation to the learner's subject or interpersonal skills.

Examples of programmes and processes which exemplify these characteristics in learning opportunities include: learning diaries, records of achievement, mapping learning outcomes, identification of outcomes from 'leisure' courses, a format for assessing and recording learning and confidence gains, learning contracts and modular access programmes.

The research recommends that formats for the collection of evidence of learning gain must be simple enough to be used by people who lack confidence in basic skills. They must be robust enough to provide a collective view of a group's learning, capable of providing comparable data and they must be sensitive to different contexts.

Pathways in Adult Learning (La Valle I and Finch S, 1999)

The recent DfEE national survey of adult learners has reinforced what we know about non-participants in adult education. Non-participants are likely to be older, working class, less well qualified or unemployed.

The survey revealed the complexity of learning pathways and identified employment as an important route into participation in learning. It also demonstrated that people move between taught and non-taught learning episodes. Another finding was that the longer people have been involved in learning the more likely they are to plan further learning. The research shows nearly half of courses had helped boost the learner's confidence and nearly a quarter had encouraged people to do further learning.

The survey recommended that the minimum prerequisites for courses to help people achieve these broad learning outcomes would include that the tutor clarifies what the student can expect to gain and the learner says what they want to gain. Another prerequisite was that there should be clarity about the likely ways of learning and of demonstrating that the learning has happened. It is also important that the support students can expect is explicit and the organisation is realistic about what it can and cannot offer

Accommodation for adult education (Normie G, 1999)

Research into the essential prerequisites for successful adult learning explored the issue of whether the place where learning took place was of importance and if so how important. Few people are completely indifferent to the quality of their environment and nearly everybody is affected either favourably or adversely by the nature of his surroundings. Although there was a lot of evidence to suggest that the environment itself is a powerful influence, the consensus amongst adult learners was similar to views held by Henry Morris (who pioneered the design and construction of the first village college in Cambridgeshire in the 1920s) that 'competent teachers and beautiful buildings are of equal importance'.

One conclusion presented by the research is that when asked what design they would advise, several principals of adult education centres said they would not recommend a new building but instead they would prefer to look for a suitable old house. Another conclusion reflected the learners' view that it is the atmosphere generated or possessed by the buildings that is important, i.e. whether it is friendly and welcoming.

Anyway, anyhow, anywhere: Overcoming the barrier of space in adult education through the use of information and Communications Technology (Selwyn N and Gorard, 1999)

Against the background of the creation of the Learning Age the research acknowledges that the university, college or learning centre of the next century will look very different. It challenges the idea that information and communications technology offer a flexibility of time and space that negates many, if not all, traditional barriers to lifelong learning. The research conclusion is that technologically-based learning may simply modify the importance of space and place to participation in adult learning rather than rendering it irrelevant. Access to on-line

space and technology based learning is intrinsically linked to real-life spaces that learners inhabit. Acknowledging that these are early days for the virtual college movement, observation of the ongoing work towards the simultaneous objectives of widening participation and improving economic readiness suggests that existing tensions between them will not ameliorate whatever the method of delivery. Space is still relevant as a determinant of participation and to ignore that fact may lead to further inequalities.

Will adult learning ever be popular? (Forrester K and Payne J, 2000)

The research contends that government initiatives have tended to locate the problem of establishing lifelong learning as a supply-side problem and that less effort has been expended in thinking about how demand can be stimulated and where the motivation to learn comes from. The general assumption about adult learning in the academic literature is, according to the researchers, that non-participation in organised learning activities of a majority of the majority of the adult population is a problem. They suggest that there are discontinuities between informal and formal learning but that if these discontinuities are to be overcome, then it will be necessary to consider not just those learning projects which adults engage in consciously, but also the overlapping area of informal learning captured by the term situated learning. This implies the type of learning which arises incidental to a person's active involvement in a job, a voluntary organisation or an activity such as playing a sport or coping with an illness.

If situated learning is a major part of the day-to-day lives of adults, and formal learning is a relatively unusual activity for adults, then they conclude that only an engagement with informal learning in all its variety will allow formal education and training to re-establish its links with the world of adult enthusiasms, interests and desires. They conclude it is not just a question of access, but of access to what? And under whose terms?

Inclusion and the denial of difference in the education of adults (Edwards R and Miller N, 2000)

The context of the research is that, as part of its rationale for widening participation in post-school education and in lifelong learning generally, the government has placed strong emphasis on social inclusion. Those who are at the margins of society are being encouraged to include themselves and it is difficult to argue against it – it is constructed as a good thing, a sign of virtue. The researchers challenge the view that the commitment to inclusion in education, training and employment is of itself an inherent good and argue that inclusion is unachievable inasmuch as it only has meaning in relation to its opposite, exclusion. They conclude that positioning education as the root of social exclusion and maybe even the route to inclusion suggests a simplified causal relationship without addressing other obvious exclusions such as housing, employment, and health. This means a re-negotiation of our practices and their effects as, like inclusion, lifelong learning can be located in philosophies both of identify and of difference.

The returns to academic, vocational and basic skills in Britain (Dearden I, McIntosh S, Myck M and Vignoles A, 2000)

The results of a recent research paper, which was commissioned by the Skills Task Force of the Department for Education and Employment, provide some insights into the benefits of a wide range of qualifications and skills in terms of the earning premiums they command.

The research attempts, through comparisons of the length of time taken to complete qualifications of various types, to provide estimates of the rates of return of those qualifications. Returns to academic qualifications, in terms of higher earnings, are typically above those to vocational qualifications at the same level. But the returns per year of study for vocational qualifications are closer to the returns per year of study for academic qualifications.

It is reported that there is evidence of returns, in terms of higher earnings, to a wide range of academic and vocational qualifications. Vocational courses at level 3 and above provide higher returns to lower ability individuals. The possession of level 1 literacy and numeracy skills has benefits in terms of increased earnings and a higher probability of being employed.

4 ANALYSIS

4.2 Profile of respondents

Two hundred and twenty-one adults were interviewed for the project. Brief, focussed interviews were chosen as an appropriate vehicle for ascertaining the adults' viewpoint. Two open-ended, informally-worded questions were posed. One about barriers to learning 'what puts you off?'. One about incentives 'what would encourage you do something?'. A checklist of important issues derived from the focus group and peer review processes was used as a prompt, and follow-up questions were also posed to elicit any other issues.

Twenty-three adults were engaged in longer, in-depth interviews to provide rich data to verify the data from other interviews. Again, it was agreed that no details such as location would be included so that no adult would be identified. All agreed that their first name could be used to introduce their account if it was included in the final report.

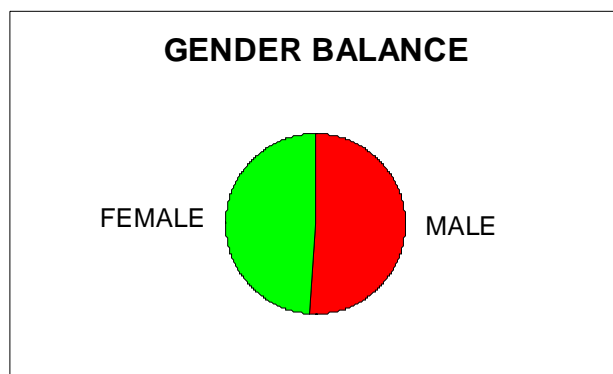
Although no formal identification was made with this group interviewed, there is a match with significant factors about non-participants (McGiveney, 1990) in that I identified:

- Unemployed young adults and those unemployed with little education
- Some rural populations
- The aged (widely regarded now as over 50 years if not working)
- Urban poverty groups
- Unskilled and semi-skilled workers
- Some groups of women (housebound mothers, women from lower socio-economic groups)

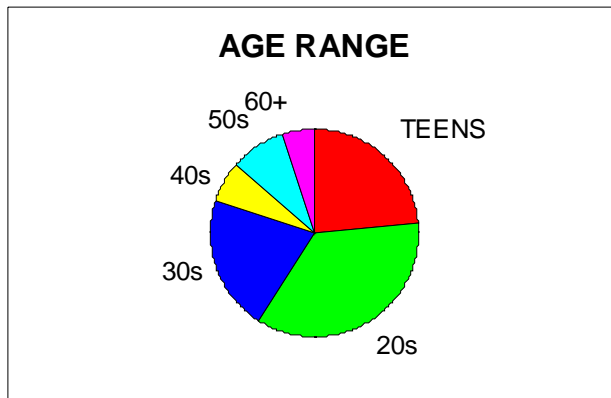
I did not identify

- People with linguistic problems
- immigrants

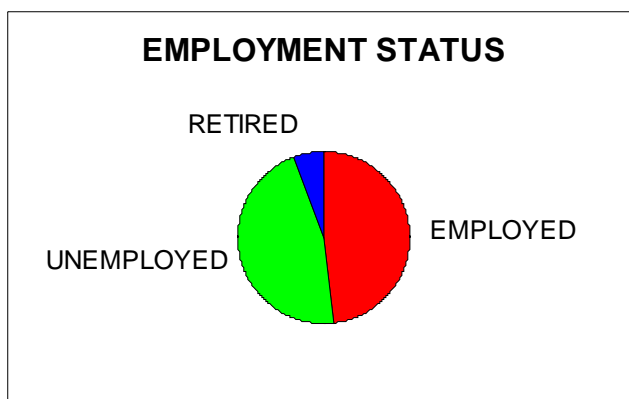
A gender balance was achieved: Females interviewed numbered 108 and males interviewed numbered 113:



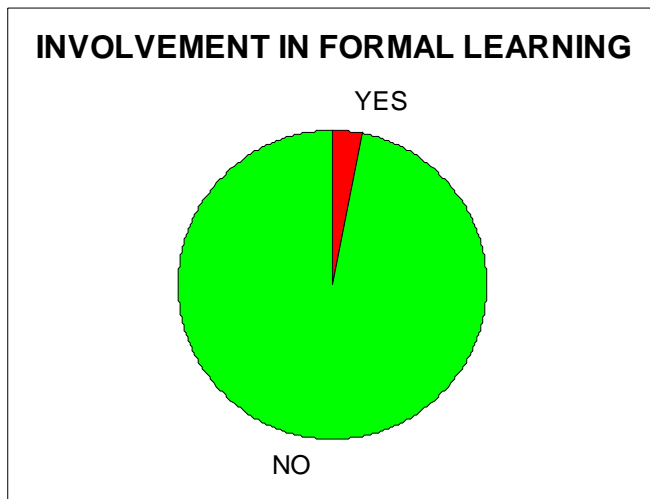
The locations were chosen to provide a purposive sample of adults over-sixteen to over-sixty. Although there was a spread across the age groups, the age range was not equally balanced. 52 were in their teens, 78 were in their twenties, 47 were in their 30s, 14 were in their 40s, 19 were in their 50s and 11 were 60 and over:



A balance between those employed and unemployed was achieved. 106 employed adults were interviewed and 103 unemployed. 12 were retired:



The intention of the research was to reach those who were currently not involved in formal learning activities. Of those interviewed, only 7 were currently involved in such activities, and a minority had been involved in formal learning over the age of 16.



4.2 Developing categories

The respondents' replies were analysed and re-occurring phenomena were identified. When these were compared and matched, categories were allocated. All new cases were compared to the categories to seek a match (or otherwise) to strengthen the category.

4.1 Significant barriers

Perceptions of when and where learning took place

The participants' assumptions about learning appeared to constrain the way they approached the question of whether they were involved in any learning at the moment.

The majority of participants assumed that learning for those who had left school meant attending college courses or going to evening classes. They had a firmly held idea that learning took place within an educational institution. The classroom still seemed to them to be the only place to learn, and classes were held mainly in schools. For many, learning meant attending classes that involved attendance for one night a week for a year split into three terms. The participants' assumptions about learning were that it was formal and followed the same pattern as their learning during their own schooldays. The only difference was now they would have to pay for it, and it would be in the evening.

This traditional and firmly held view of learning for those who had left school, coloured their views about their own potential for undertaking formal learning and created barriers which actually provided obstacles which individual's did not think they could overcome.

The majority of respondents in this research project, like most British adults according to Bell (1996), seemed blissfully unaware of the developments in adult education over their lifetime.

Case Study 1: Traditional view of adult learning offer

Karen a full-time mother in her late twenties

As you can see, my two little ones stop me doing anything at the moment. I have done night courses in the past though before I have the children. Now I'm at home looking after them and not working. If I did anything it must fit in with the family. I would need childcare, and that's really expensive. I could only do something that fitted in. If there was a creche that would make a difference, but it would still have to be at the right time, perhaps in the daytime as evenings would be difficult. I wouldn't like to leave them too long.

The amount of time learning activities took up

The perception was that learning activities took up too much time and that they could not be fitted into spare time. The reasons given fell mainly into two categories: socialising and family commitments. Both were seen as a more important priority for the respondents' time than undertaking formal learning.

Examples of social activities that took up spare time were identified by the 16-19 and 20s age groups as:

- Meeting friends outside the home
- Going out for a drink or a meal
- Clubbing
- Shopping with family or friends.

Learning activities were not seen as an opportunity to meet other people by these groups, nor as a way of enjoying themselves.

This was not the case for the other age groups, who expressed interest in classes as:

- A good way of meeting people
- Getting you out of the house
- A way of learning new hobbies

However, for these groups – 30s to 60+ - family commitments took up a lot of time. Examples given were:

- Looking after young children
- Anything must fit in with my family
- I would need childcare

Family commitments such as childcare was not restricted to parents as Case Study 2 illustrates.

Case Study 2: Family commitments

Maureen a grandmother in her 50s'

I do lots of things. I've got lots of hobbies and interests. I love knitting and craft things. I'm always doing something. I would really like to go to a class to learn something different but I'm tied really. I look after my grandchildren every day after school. My daughter is on her own now so I have her two for tea every day. They are very good and watch TV or do their homework. She doesn't usually get to mine to pick them up until about 6.30 so by then I feel too tired to go out. But if I didn't do it, she couldn't do the job she does. She's got a good job and earns enough to look after the children properly, but can't afford a childminder after school every day. So, you see I'm tied. I like doing it for her but it's still a tie and stops me going out, but I still do lots at home.

Cost of learning activities

There was a strong perception by the majority of respondents that classes or training courses did not appear affordable. Price was seen as a major barrier to learning. Having to pay fees up-front rather than session by session was considered a big disincentive. Examples given by respondents were:

- Price is a big consideration
- It would be better if it was like the slimming class – you pay each week
- If you can't go you lose money
- I can't afford the fees they ask

There were ways of overcoming the lack of money for those with motivation as Case Study 3 shows.

Case Study 3 – Money a problem

Glen an employed man in his early twenties

I would be interested in a course that helped me get a different job. I'm not sure what I want to do though – perhaps electrical installation. I know you can do that. I know there are courses on that. I have got a job, but it's not well paid and there's no future in it. They do some training courses at work, but that's just for the job I do now. The trouble is that if I do anything myself it would cost too much I can't afford to do a course that would really help me. What I do though is on my day off I come into the library and use the computers to try and improve myself. They're free you see. I don't have to pay for them.

Lack of information

There was a majority view that there was a lack of information about opportunities. It was a strongly held feeling that there was not enough information around and that respondents did not know where to look for it - despite the increase in advertising materials such as brochures, prospectuses, web-sites, etc.. Examples of this were:

- I don't know where to find a brochure
- I'm not sure what to do
- How do you know what the level of the class is?
- I've done courses in the past and might start again if I can find out when anything is on.
- I would like to up-date my computing skills, but I don't know what's on offer

As the last item shows it is not necessarily lack of interest and motivation that was to blame, but rather a feeling that you had to search out information and it wasn't always obvious where to start. Case Study 4 provides evidence of this.

Case Study 4: Lack of information

John, a self-employed man in his forties

School was OK, I enjoyed it but I messed about a lot. I left without any GCSEs. Well they didn't have them in my day, I've just got CSEs which is no good really. What I would really like to do is take GCSE English and Maths. Up to now I really haven't had the time. When I left school I got an apprenticeship, so I have worked on my maths a bit and can get by. I just did what was wanted for my apprenticeship, but I didn't need English so that's really bad. I notice it when I come to write letters at work and have to read contracts and progress reports. When I finished my apprenticeship I worked really long hours to save up and get married. Then I started up my own business. My wife was really good, she helped me a lot with the figure-work and letters. We were both really busy then as the kids were small and it was a job building up the business. But we did it. If people meet me now they think I've done well, but I know that my English and Maths let me down. I've always wanted to do GCSE's but never had the time. I don't really know if I could do them now. I wouldn't know where to go. Obviously the money wouldn't be a problem and I would make the time now I'm my own boss. It's something I would really like to do but I haven't got any information about it and I wouldn't know where to start.

Difficulty in attending

A minority view was that work patterns prohibited a commitment to regular attendance. For those in employment, this often meant working irregular hours. Working away from home was also seen as a barrier to undertaking learning activities. Lack of daytime provision was perceived as a barrier particularly by those caring for young children and those in the 50s and 60+ age groups. Examples given were:

- I work away a lot so I can't commit to the course length
- I'm a shift-worker and the times never seem to fit in
- I work nights so that stops me doing anything

Flexible working patterns did seem to pose a problem even for those keen to be engaged in learning as Case Study 5 shows.

Case Study 5: Work patterns not allowing attendance

Clare, a shift-worker in her thirties

I really would like to do something, learn something new, but I work shifts so the times never fit in. My shifts change over a two-week cycle so I can't commit myself to a set time each week. What I would really like to do is First Aid. I work as a Care Assistant in a residential home and if I got that I would be able to get a bit more money as they need trained people on each shift. I think the only way you can do it is to go to proper classes to get the certificate, so it doesn't look as if I'll get it. There's not enough of us at work for them to put it on for us. It's my shifts at work that stop me going to classes, and I need the classes for my work. Funny, isn't it.

Lack of motivation

Across the age range there was a minority view expressed by respondents that they were not interested in learning. There was not a strong link either between learning for enjoyment, to get work or to improve yourself, with these respondents. There did not seem to be any link between investing time and maybe reaping the rewards later. Examples expressed were:

- It's never got me anywhere, yes, where does it get you?
- What's the point if I can't even get a job
- I've got better things to do with my time
- I'd only go if there was a special course that really interested me.

There was a perception, too, that training should be provided by the employer if it was necessary for a job.

A minority view was expressed by those in the 50s and 60+ age groups. Examples are:

- I'm too old
- I've got my knitting, that's all I'm fit for now
- I seem to have lost confidence in learning now

Case Study 6 is evidence that this view is held by those who have experienced full-time education after the age of 16, but a link is not made between learning and future rewards.

Case Study 6: Lack of motivation

Emma an employed woman in her late teens

I'm just not interested in learning any more. I've had enough. I did my A levels and that took up all my time. I didn't do anything else when I was working towards them. I don't want to do that any more. The A levels haven't really helped me to get a good job, lots of others at work haven't got any qualifications like me. After A levels I've had enough.

The lack of safety in being out at night

A minority of women expressed a fear about being out alone at night. Incidents of violence locally and hooliganism were cited as reasons for not going out at night, or having to go to areas they did not know. A minority of women expressed concerns about transport which they saw as a barrier to partaking in learning activities.

Example of this were given:

- Having transport available would make a big difference
- It must be near home
- I would need to get a lift
- I don't go out at night on my own, it's not safe round here any more

Case Study 7: Fears about safety

Donna an unemployed woman in her thirties

I can't say the buses aren't good round here, because they are. They're very regular and stop near my house. But even so, I don't go out on my own at night now – so I certainly wouldn't go out for a class or something like that. It's just too dangerous. Someone was murdered not far from here a few months ago. There's been a lot of trouble and I wouldn't feel safe on my own. It's changed. There's always kids hanging round and messing around. Even if they don't mean trouble, it's frightening having to walk by. If they're on the bus going home late they start shouting and being abusive and it's not very nice. I know they might not mean it but when they've had a few drinks you don't know what they'll do next. I do like doing something. If I did anything it would have to be in the day and quite near me.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Discussion of evidence about barriers to learning

In the group studied there was a general pattern of barriers that appear to be accounted for by:

- the individual's perception of learning
- social changes in the wider community
- organisational practices within the education system.

Significant barriers to learning identified by those interviewed linked to their perception of learning were:

- the actual timing of activities – when classes were held and what attendance pattern was required
- the amount of time such learning activities took – respondents perceived they could not be fitted into their spare time and social and family commitments were a priority
- the cost of learning activities – they did not appear affordable

Significant barriers to learning identified by those interviewed linked to social changes in the wider community were:

- the difficulty in attending – work patterns prohibited a commitment to regular attendance
- the lack of safety in being out at night – fear expressed by women about being out alone and transport difficulties

Significant barriers to learning identified by those interviewed linked to organisational practices were:

- lack of childminding facilities
- lack of day-time provision
- having to pay fees up-front rather than session by session
- lack of information about provision locally

The view of respondents that learning for those post-16 equalled 'school' was overarching. Their individual experience of learning coloured their understanding of what learning meant. These ingrained and widely held views comprised an enormous barrier for learners. With no knowledge of the flexible offers, the range of locations and diverse providers, undertaking learning activities was not something the majority of those interviewed were even contemplating, as it was not perceived that learning would fit into their current lifestyle.

5.2 Discussion of evidence about incentives to learning

John Harwood, Chief Executive of the Learning and Skills Council, said in a recent

speech that the reforms in adult learning will only work *'if people in the community want what we provide'*.

Although a minority expressed a view that they were not interested in learning, others had a clear idea of what would encourage them. For this group to avail themselves of a learning opportunity it had to be:

- Local, within easy distance from where they were living and preferably in a familiar setting
- A friendly and welcoming atmosphere
- Accessible by public transport, or offer easy parking
- Of personal interest, eg a hobby, learning about computers, and pitched at the right level
- Affordable and worth the money
- Provide support, eg childcare, advice re opportunities

'Schools, colleges and adult learning provision must meet the needs and desires of individuals, community and interest groups, as well as the needs of the economy. Educationalists need to look outward as never before. It is critical to learn from what has worked elsewhere – the experience of other countries, like America, and regions throughout the UK.' (Howard, 2001)

America has a long tradition of community colleges with a clear focus on inclusion; it has a culture in which most people 'graduate' sooner or later; and a high-tech, high-skilled economy. There is also real poverty and low pay for many, but there is a positive culture of learning which is borne out by research on adult participation levels. Active communities and self-improvement seem to be the key. There is intensive advertising of learning opportunities, advice and guidance – much of it through do.com colleges and virtual providers. In the public and private sectors the learning business is booming.

From the contemporary research reviewed, and from the evidence from this research project, it would seem that local, accessible and affordable provision broadly linked to self-improvement is the key.

It is not necessary to go quite so far afield to find this in action. Within the SELP area, despite responding that they were not involved in any learning currently, it emerged that a minority of those interviewed were actually involved in organised learning activities. Because these were not held in schools they were not considered learning or relevant to my questions. Examples of these were:

- Football training sessions
- Attending slimming clubs
- Taking exercise classes in a gym.

These learning opportunities were seen as attractive because there was:

- A friendly atmosphere
- You could start and finish when you chose

- You did not get penalised if you did not attend every session,
- You could pay session by session
- They were easy to get to.
- Information about these opportunities was acquired through advertisements in the local paper, posters on the premises and through word of mouth.

It may well be that to open up new markets, rather than simply providing more of the same, approaches such as these (see Table 1 below) should be considered

The elements of a new strategy towards adult learning are emerging. There have been major campaigns to promote lifelong learning such as Ufi's online delivery Learn Direct, personal advice and guidance through Connexions, neighbourhood renewal policies and learning in the workplace – with adult basic skills a particular focus.

TABLE 1: KEY CONSIDERATIONS

<p><u>FIT IN WITH LIFESTYLE</u></p> <p>Short courses: half-day, one-day, week-end, 5 sessions, 10 sessions Start any time of the year Affordable fees, eg pay as you go session by session Incentives to start, eg 1st session free Discounts for loyalty, eg for repeat booking, for introducing a friend Fit in with school hours, eg day-time and evening provision Use learning activities connected with hobbies and leisure pursuits to encourage initial attendance 'One-size' provisions does not fit all</p>	<p><u>SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURES</u></p> <p>Local venue, eg community centre, village/church hall, primary school, Learning shops, eg local shop used as learning centre Learning stations, eg in local communities Out-reach facilities of larger organisations, eg in estates, in rural areas Friendly and welcoming atmosphere Creche/childcare facilities Opportunity to socialise, eg coffee breaks Accessible by public transport Parking available Surroundings familiar and comfortable, not intimidating</p>
<p><u>INFORMATION EASILY ACCESSIBLE</u></p> <p>Through a central point, eg telephone help line Advice centre, eg SELP members contribute to information database Door-to-door local leafleting, eg for learning opportunities nearby Posters in local shops Advertisements in local papers Repeated adverts in the 'small ads' columns</p>	<p><u>ADDRESS ASSUMPTIONS</u></p> <p>Promote family-friendly learning opportunities Highlight future rewards and success in marketing materials Promote 'free' courses and opportunities, eg ILAs Promote 1-day opportunities, eg Saturday workshops, summer schemes Address needs of different age groups, eg sociable atmosphere, vocational opportunities, self-development</p>

5.2 Recommendations

Ways forward for the South Essex Learning Partnership to meet their key tasks might be by:

- raising the awareness of the individual partners about the provision of adult learning opportunities in the SELP area: continued networking, inter-advisory group activities, mapping of provision (as already started by the Basic Skills Advisory Group)
- collaborating to develop an overall strategy for adult provision in the region by recognising the strengths of the partners and building on the expertise of individual organisations within the partnership: acknowledging that boundaries need to be broken down, allocating of specialist provision in a non-competitive way, acknowledging that individual organisations cannot answer the needs of all the community and specialisation is essential
- promoting the range of provision in a more systematic and pro-active way under the banner of SELP: develop a one stop telephone help line for enquiries about learning opportunities, partners contributing to an information database and regularly up-dating it, considering more learning shops across the area, more on-line development
- promoting the changes that had already been made to educational and training offers for adults: local advertising, leafleting, promotional offers
- promoting the flexibility and family-friendly courses already on offer and widening the flexible provision already on offer: local provision, using familiar premises, more flexible delivery styles, payment methods, times.

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