

Older people's learning in 2012

A survey



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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.

NIACE is also grateful to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, who funded the fieldwork leading to this report.

Introduction

We live in an ageing society. Rising life expectancy, improved healthcare and declining birth rates mean that every year a larger proportion of the population is over 50. At the traditional retirement age of 65, most of us can look forward to 20 years more and growing numbers are living into their 90s and beyond. For some, retirement now lasts longer than working life itself.

Traditional stereotypes, which associate 'old age' with ill health and poverty, are still widely held, although they no longer represent reality for most people, and although everyone experiences declining capabilities with age, much of this extended lifespan is likely to be in relatively good health, as potentially active, contributing members of society.

No society in human history has ever experienced this, and it challenges traditional expectations: what can we expect of later life, and what does society expect of us after we leave the paid workforce? For individuals, it raises questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and for society it raises questions about how a shrinking proportion of people in work will pay for a growing proportion in retirement.

Although there have always been older people in adult education, they have been a largely neglected minority. As the shape of later life changes, educators and policy-makers need to consider how far learning can help us all, as we age, to lead more rewarding and healthy lives, and to remain active contributing members of the wider community, whether we do this through paid or voluntary work, through caring for partners, grandchildren and friends, or passing on skills and experience. How far can it help us to maintain our independence, and reduce the costs of an ageing society, in health and welfare services, to the wider community?

Summary

This is the report of a survey of older people in Great Britain, carried out in spring 2012.¹ It examined their learning: what they learned, where, when and why, and with what benefits. It also examined whether, and how far, current patterns might be changed.

This follows a similar survey in 2005, and reveals some significant changes since then, especially in the role of employment, in the location of learning, and the role of computing and online learning.

The following key points emerge.

Who is learning?

- Around one older person in five reports some form of learning in the last three years. This is unchanged since the 2005 survey, but what they are learning, where and why has changed markedly.
- It is possible that the rise of independent online learning is adding an entirely new form of learning, and cohort of 'learners', which is masking an overall fall in traditional forms of learning.
- Employment status is more influential than age itself in determining how likely people are to be 'learners', the subjects chosen, the reasons for learning, and the benefits achieved. As retirement patterns become more complex, age may become less relevant.
- Social class, and the age at which an individual left initial education continue to have a major bearing on the likelihood of learning, and on what is learned, whereas the influence of gender is much less.

What are they learning?

- Those learning for work-related reasons are younger, and come from a broader social range. The main subjects they study are health, social work, and occupational health and safety, and they are likely to report studying 'to help in my current job' or 'to get a recognised qualification'.
- Those learning for non-work-related reasons are most likely to be studying languages, arts, history and literature. They are most likely to report studying because of 'interest in the subject', because 'I enjoy learning', or 'to develop myself as a person'.

¹ A representative sample of 4601 people over 50.

How do they benefit?

- The benefits of learning are complex. Most older people report more than one kind of benefit.
- Motivations to learn are not the same as benefits from learning. Many of the benefits reported do not match the motives which led older people to embark on learning.
- The benefits of learning which older learners report most often are 'passing on knowledge and skills to others' (the most widely cited benefit), 'to improve my chances of getting or retaining paid work', 'to help me get involved in society', and 'to help improve my health'. Significant minorities, especially among the older, also report 'get involved in the digital world', 'manage my caring responsibilities', and 'coping with life crises'.
- For the oldest groups, learning is important to enable them to remain socially engaged, and to maintain their health.
- Almost two in five learners, particularly women, were aiming 'to improve my self-confidence', or 'to develop myself as a person'. Unlike other motivations, this does not change with age.

Where do they learn?

- The location of learning has changed significantly since 2005. The numbers of older people learning with the major public providers (further education [FE] colleges and universities) has fallen, and they are more likely to be learning in work-related settings, while the proportions learning in adult education centres has risen.
- There has been a large growth in independent learning, both individually and in groups, and a marked growth in the numbers reporting learning online, even among the 75+ age group. Independent learners are older, more likely to be male, and better educated.
- Employers pay for learning for about half of all older employees, and there is little sign that this is affected by the employee's age, though full-time employees are more likely to benefit than part-timers.

How many 'non-learners' are there?

- More than half of all older people say that nothing would make learning more attractive to them, and this rises to three quarters of those aged 75+. For those who might be persuaded, the relevance of the subject is more important than the traditional barriers of location, timing and cost.
- The 'non-learners' most likely to be attracted into learning are more likely to be younger, female, and to have done some learning since school (but not in the last three years). They are most likely to be in social classes D and E.

Where would they find out about learning?

- Most non-learners do not know where to go for advice about learning. For those who do, the internet is now the dominant source, followed by public libraries, attracting contrasting clienteles.

What are the policy implications?

The study suggests that the benefits to both individuals and society from older people's learning are substantial. This suggests some priorities for public policy:

- Strengthen the bridges between employment and retirement, to encourage the wide range of people who learn for work-related reasons to continue with learning in retirement.
- Encourage people to recognise the learning which they do, and to see the potential benefits of extending this.
- Support a wide range of learning opportunities, recognising that the social and personal benefits of learning are only loosely related to course titles and ostensible motivations.
- Review the implications for social inclusion of the shift from public to private services.
- Review the implications for social cohesion of the growth of individualised learning models.

What are the implications for future research?

The study also highlights some critical questions for future research:

- The notion of 'learning' is problematic. Despite the clarification at the beginning of the survey, it is clear that many people interpret the term more narrowly than intended, and probably differently by social class. The arrival of online learning as a major new feature of the landscape appears to be changing how people think about learning, as well as how they do it.
- The notion of social class is also problematic as society ages. The traditional model of social class, based on paid employment, can be misleading about the attitudes and expectations of people a decade after retirement, and about people who are phasing into retirement through transitional jobs.
- The nature of independent, self-organised, and online learning is not well understood. Its growth might indicate a decline in the social benefits of learning, which are reported by significant numbers of older people, and especially the oldest. Its relationship to the growth of the University of the Third Age (U3A) also requires further study.

This survey

This report is based on a survey of 4601 people over 50 in Great Britain. It was carried out in spring 2012, and follows a similar study in 2005.² Some of the questions are repeated, making it possible to examine changes over time. Some are new, reflecting new policy concerns.

Both surveys were based on NIACE's Adult Participation in Learning Survey of a representative sample of the adult population in Great Britain, carried out every spring.³ This has been tracking patterns of adult learning since 1996. However, the numbers of people over 50 in the normal survey are too small for any detailed analysis. To address this, in 2005 and 2012 the numbers of people over 50 surveyed were increased, while retaining a representative balance of age, gender, employment status and ethnicity.⁴

Two other surveys of adult learning were carried out by other bodies at broadly the same time. The National Adult Learner Survey was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and interviewed 4647 people over the age of 18 in spring 2010. Of these, 2100 were aged 50+. The second was commissioned by Pearson, surveying 1002 people aged 50+ in August 2012. Both found substantially higher levels of learning among older people than the NIACE survey reported here. We believe that the main reason for this is the nature of the prompts provided to interviewees (see Annex 2).

What do we mean by 'older'?

There is no simple point at which people become 'older'. We all experience decline in some capabilities as we age, but individuals differ greatly: some people's eyesight begins to weaken in adolescence, while some can run a marathon at 90. Although life expectancy is rising for most people,⁵ in general, the wealthier, those with higher qualifications, and those who have worked in professional occupations can expect to live longer, and in better health, although there are many exceptions. Nevertheless, people's attitudes, expectations and circumstances do change as they age.

For the purposes of this report, we use 'older' to refer to people over the age of 50, who currently constitute a little over a third of the UK population.⁶ Until then almost everyone is engaged, directly or through a partner, in the paid workforce, but although most men and women are still in work in their early 60s, significant numbers begin to leave the workforce after 50. Some are forced out by declining health or caring responsibilities; some are made

2 Aldridge, F. and Tuckett, A. (2007) *What Older People Learn*. Leicester: NIACE.

3 England, Scotland and Wales.

4 In this paper findings are reported if differences are statistically significant at the 95% level. Where there appear to be interesting differences which are not statistically significant, these are indicated.

5 Life expectancy at age 65 is now 82.8 for men and 85.4 for women.

6 ONS *Population Projections October 2011*.

redundant and find that they cannot return because of age discrimination by employers, or because their qualifications are out of date; others choose a poorer retirement rather than putting up with a job they hate. Furthermore, at some time after 50, most people begin to be aware of a choice, with paid work no longer an absolute necessity. If work is unrewarding, the appeal of retirement in some form begins to grow, and people begin to plan for a different life at some point, even if it remains some years away.

'Retirement' itself is an increasingly fluid concept. Real retirement ages are rising for men and women, and 65 is no longer the norm.⁷ Many people are retiring later, or gradually. Some take on new jobs, or shift to part-time working. Many who describe themselves as 'retired' are still in paid work of some kind.

What do we mean by 'learning'?

NIACE's Adult Participation in Learning Survey, on which the present report is based, is interested in all kinds of learning for people, without presuming any particular institutional framework or mode. For the purposes of this report, we use the term 'learners' as those who say they are currently learning, or have done so in the last three years.

However, the fact that the word 'learning' has many meanings makes attitudes to it particularly difficult to research. Some people see it as an activity in which all human beings engage all the time, inseparable from being human. Others see it only as what happens when a 'student' sits in front of a teacher in a classroom. This means that people with similar experiences may give different answers to questions about 'learning'.

The survey therefore begins with an introduction which aims to make this clear.

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.

However, the responses probably underestimate the actual learning taking place: some respondents will not understand the explanation, while others will forget it as the questionnaire progresses. However, since the formula is consistent from year to year, the results probably provide an accurate picture of change over time.

Over the 16 years of the NIACE Survey, the pattern has remained stable, with older people consistently less likely than younger ones to report that they are 'learning'. However, it is

⁷ The average age of retirement is now 64.6 for men and 62.3 for women, and 3% of the workforce is now over 65 (ONS *Pension Trends 2012*).

quite possible that this partly reflects the fact that older people are less likely to identify what they do as 'learning'. Anyone who engages in sport, a choir or the arts is likely to be involved, from time to time, in learning as defined above, but many people probably do not perceive it as such. This is a critical issue in interpreting the survey evidence, which may tell us as much about older peoples' perceptions of 'learning' as what they actually do. A further factor is the role of independent learning online. The survey finds a substantial number of people who say they are doing this. It is likely that a proportion of these are browsing the web to find information in a way which was not possible decade ago, and relatively rare when the last survey was done in 2005. If so, this is a genuinely new form of learning (since the only parallel in the past would be use of reference books, to which access was limited in practice).

The role of social class

Social class is a way of describing patterns of shared attitudes and behaviours within social groups, traditionally based on wealth and the nature of employment. Surveys consistently show that class is a major factor in determining who learns, what they learn and where. Generally, people in higher social classes stay longer in initial education, and are more likely to continue learning through their adult life, and into retirement.

The NIACE survey adopts the NRS 'social grades' used in market research to divide the population into groups on the basis of the chief income earner's occupation, which is also an approximate indicator of purchasing power.⁸

Class ⁹	Description	% of population
A	Higher managerial, administrative or professional	4
B	Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional	23
C1	Supervisory or clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional	29
C2	Skilled manual workers	21
D	Semi- or unskilled manual workers	15
E	Casual or lowest-class workers, pensioners, and those who depend on welfare benefits	6

However, for older people, classification on the basis of employment is problematic. Previous occupation is not necessarily a good indicator of income or of attitudes and behaviours in later life (perhaps 20 or 30 years after leaving work). Some people retire from relatively high status jobs, and then become dependent on the State Pension (which automatically leads to classification in class E), while growing numbers are phasing into retirement by moving to less demanding or lower status jobs, which will again result in them being reclassified downwards. Older women are more likely to be dependent on

⁸ For convenience the word 'class' is used in this report to refer to social grade.

⁹ Because their numbers are smaller, classes A and B, and D and E are often grouped together in reports.

state pensions, whatever their background. Finally, figures on social class will also be affected by the fact that the distribution of social classes in the population has changed very substantially over the lifetime of today's older people.¹⁰ All these factors may produce some distortion in the evidence on social class and learning.

The role of employment

One important finding of the survey is that employment status is a key factor in understanding older people's learning, affecting who learns what, where and how. Figure 1 therefore shows the employment status, by age, of the survey sample. Overall, a quarter of respondents are in paid work (full or part time), but while three-quarters of those under 55 are in full-time employment, this falls to under half of those in the 55–64 group, and the proportion in paid work of any kind after 65, while rising rapidly, is still below 10%.

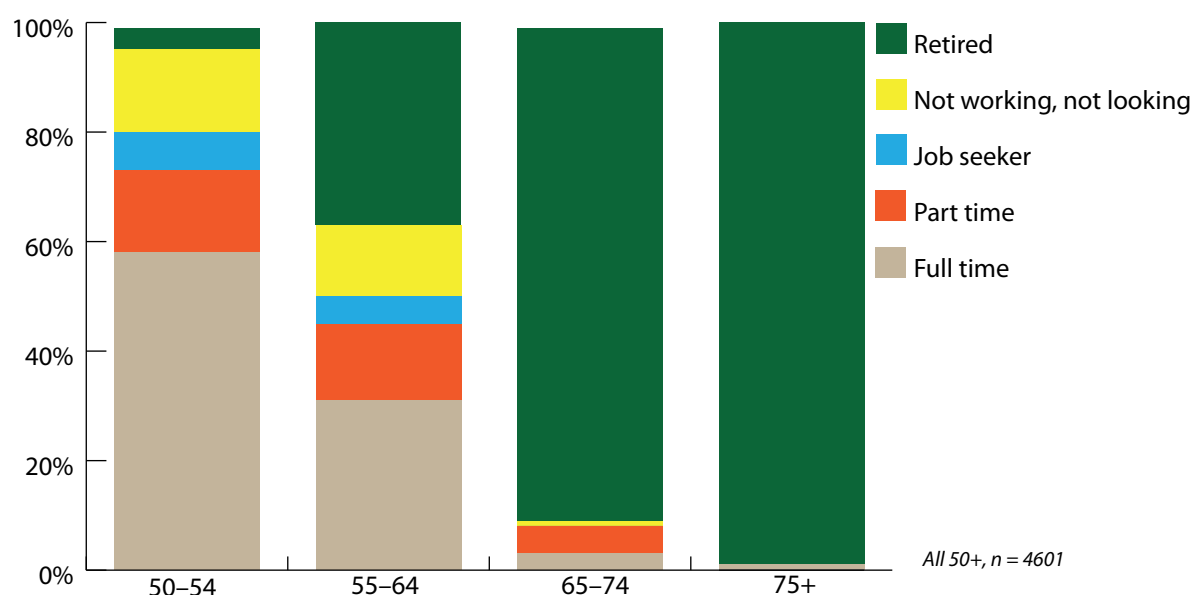


Figure 1. Employment status of respondents

¹⁰ The proportion of households classified as AB rose from 12% in 1968 to 27% in 2008, while the proportion in manual work (C2, and DEs) fell from 65% to 45% over the same period (IPSOS-MORI).

Older people learning now: the findings

Who is learning?

About one older person in five is a 'learner': either currently engaged in some form of learning (8%), or having done so in the last three years (11%). By contrast, nearly half (47%) say that they have done no learning since leaving school. The remaining third say they have done some learning since leaving initial education, but more than three years ago. Figure 2 shows that the proportion of active learners falls steadily with age, while the proportion who have done no learning since school rises.

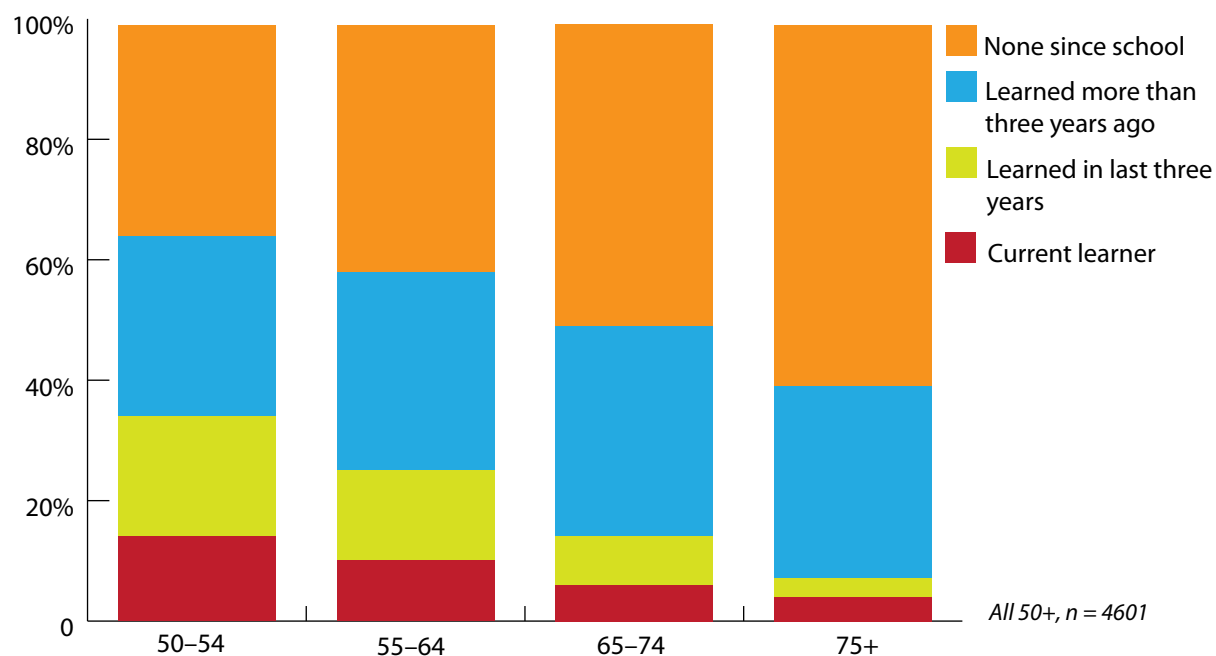


Figure 2. Learning and age

Figure 3 shows that there is relatively little difference between older women and men, though women are rather more likely than men to say that they have done no learning since school. Older men are more likely to say they have done some learning, but more than three years ago.

There is a very clear and progressive correlation between learning and class; although in all social classes those who have done no learning since school outnumber current and recent learners, Figure 4 shows that those in social classes A and B are much more likely to be current learners, and to have learned in the last three years.

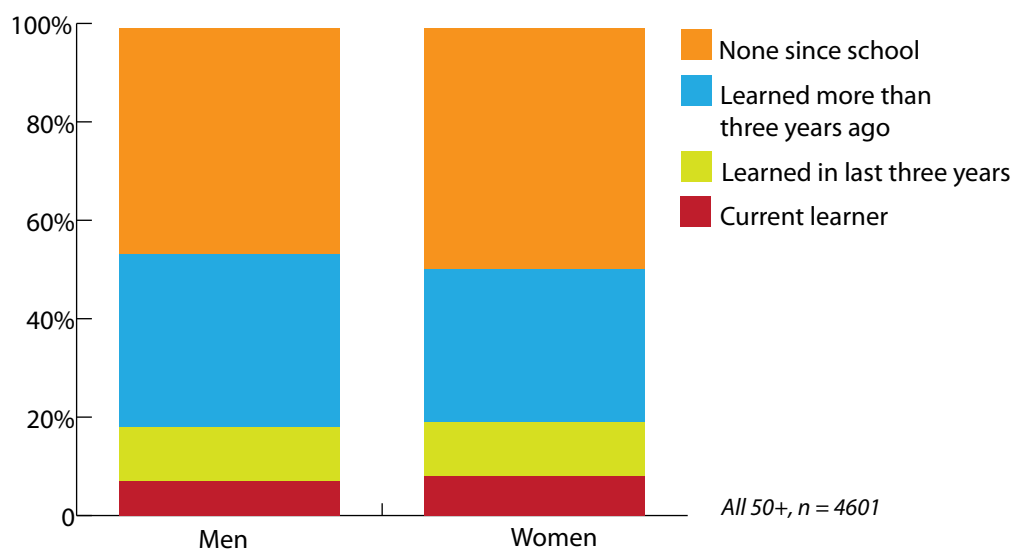


Figure 3. Learning and gender

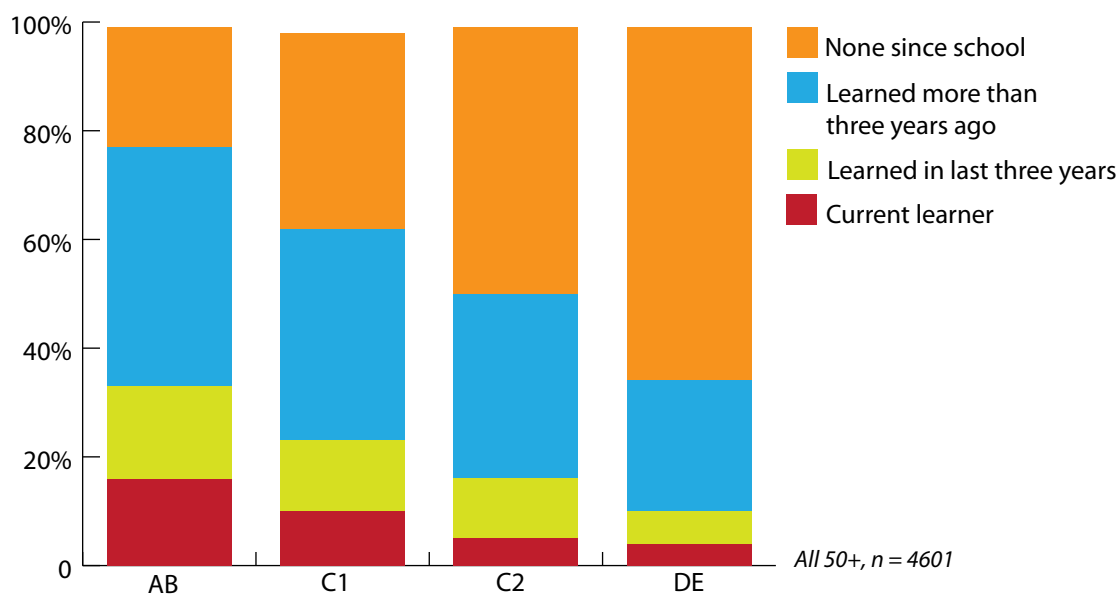
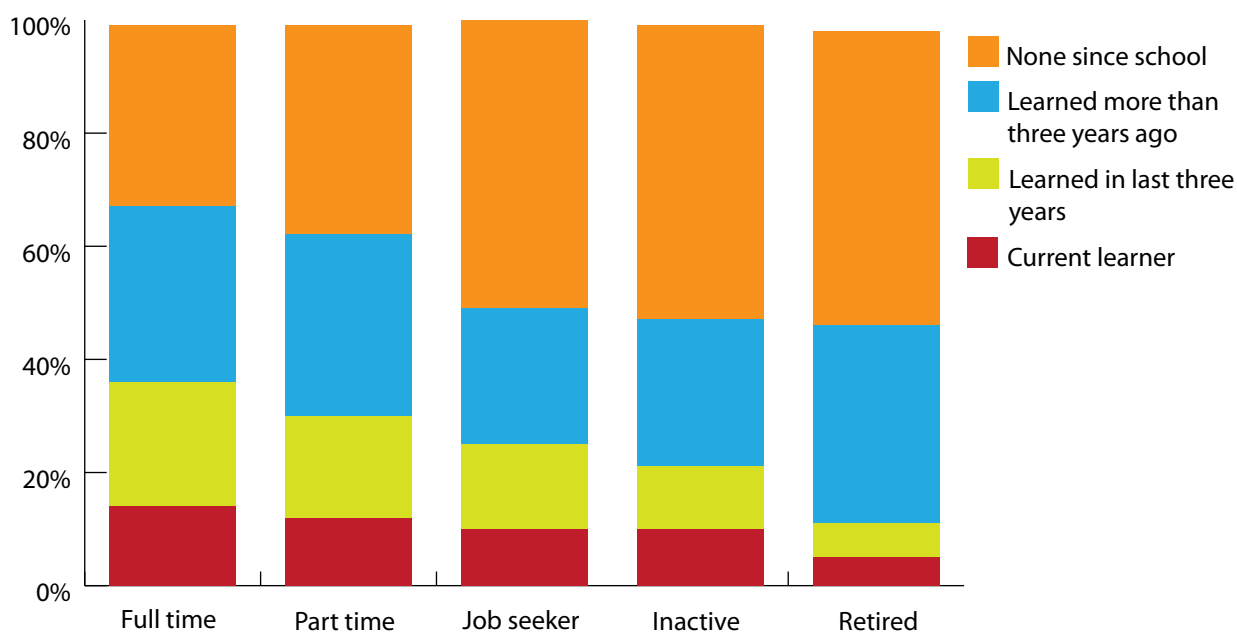


Figure 4. Learning and social class

Employment status has a major bearing on learning, and is particularly significant, since real retirement ages are rising steadily (for men and women), as a growing proportion of people stay longer in work, often on a part-time basis. Figure 5 shows clearly that those in employment, and especially in full-time employment, are much more likely to be learners than the retired and the economically inactive.¹¹ Two points are notable: first, that those who have done no learning since leaving initial education are much less likely to be in employment; and second, the proportion of current learners is the same for job seekers and the economically inactive, suggesting that they have common features, and perhaps some of the latter would in reality like work, but have given up the search.

¹¹ The inactive are those not in employment but who have not declared themselves as 'unemployed' or 'retired'.

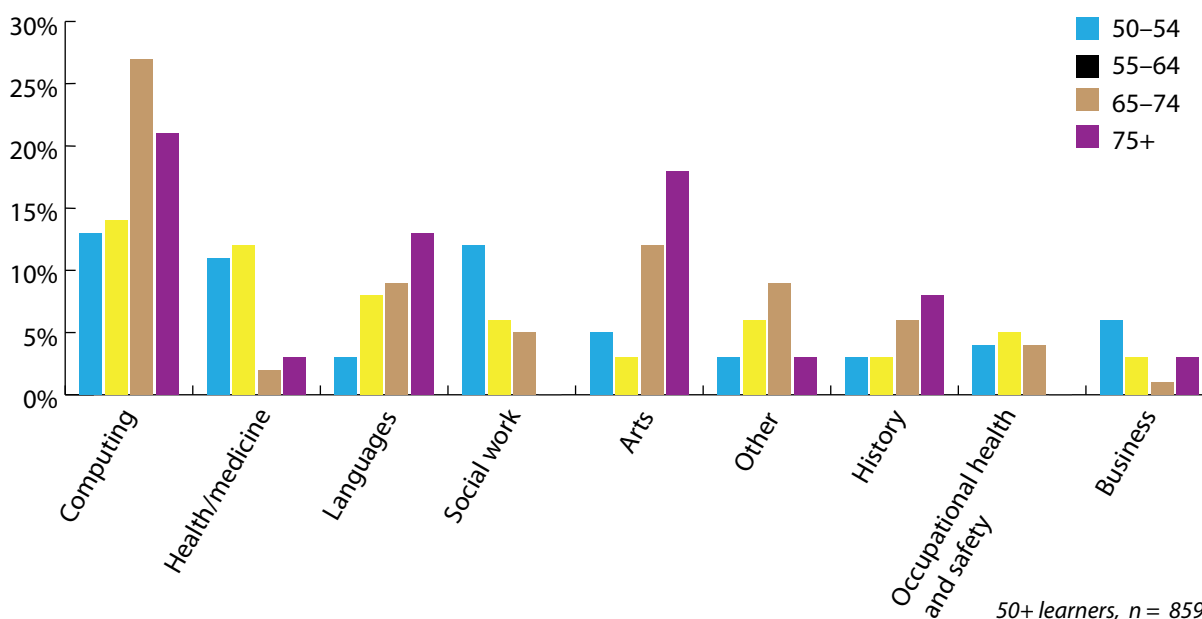


All 50+, n = 4601

Figure 5. Learning and employment status

What are they learning about?

Respondents were asked what they were currently learning about, or had learned about in the last three years.¹² Respondents had a free choice of how to define the subject, and 54 'subjects', from accountancy to Welsh language, were named by more than one person. Figure 6 shows the ten most popular, although the fact that 5% chose subjects outside the common list of 54 indicates that many other kinds of learning are going on, and traditional subject categories may not be entirely relevant.



50+ learners, n = 859

Figure 6. What are you currently/recently learning about?

12 This was an open question, and interviewers coded the responses against a checklist, adding new subjects where necessary.

Five subjects account for around half of all older learners but with a very notable shift in emphasis with age. While computing, arts and languages account for only one-fifth of the learners aged 50–54 they account for more than half of all learners in the 75+ group.

As in the 2005 survey, computer-related subjects are the most frequently cited. However, the proportion has more than halved over the seven-year period (from 40% to 17% of all older learners), and this trend appears to be continuing, with only 9% of current learners studying computing, compared to 23% of recent learners.

Unlike other changes in participation, this one probably reflects generational change rather than age itself. Because computer use only became widespread in the workplace and the home in the early 2000s, many of those who retired before 2005 will not have encountered computers at work, and many will have felt the need to ‘catch up’ at some time in the last decade. This was the cohort who reported ‘learning about computing’ in the previous older learner survey. Many of these probably feel that they have now learned what they need. By contrast, the generation who are now in their 50s and early 60s are much more likely to have had contact with computing, at work and in the home, than their predecessors, and are thus less likely to see the need for formal learning to catch up. It may also be that they see learning as part of normal use of computers, rather than conscious ‘learning’.

This would explain why the proportion studying computing is much higher among those aged 65–74 (27%) than those aged 50–54 (13%), and also higher among those who are retired (24%) than those in employment (10%). ‘Catching up’ is also a likely explanation of the differences between social classes in learning about computers, since the use of computers at work is also more widespread among people in white collar jobs: while only 8% of those in classes A and B are studying computing, 30% of learners in classes D and E are doing so.

After computing, participation divides very clearly between those in and out of employment, and between social classes. Employment is the main motivation for learning in four of the top ten subjects – health and medicine, social work, occupational health and safety, and business studies – and the large majority of learners in all these subjects are under 65:

- **Health and medicine** accounts for 9% of all older learners. This is strongly occupationally related (78% are in employment, and 84% say they are learning for work reasons). This probably reflects the relatively high levels of training and qualification requirements of the health service.¹³ Learners here are younger, with over 90% aged 50–64, and half are in social class C1 (junior professional, administrative and supervisory roles).

¹³ The 2011 Employer Skills Survey shows that levels of training are highest in public administration, education and health and social work. In all three, more than 80% of organisations train their employees.

- **Social work** is also predominantly work related, accounting for 7% of older learners but 12% of those learning for 'work' reasons. These are presumably the core of the social care workforce. Most learners here are women (10% of women learners, compared to 3% of men) in the lowest social classes (8% of learners in class C2, and 10% in D/E). Learners are more likely to be in full-time than part-time work (11% of full-time workers and 9% of part-time ones).
- **Occupational health and safety** accounts for 4% of older learners, and is entirely work related.¹⁴ Numbers are highest in the 55–64 age range. All learners here were in employment, although one in five also described themselves as 'retired'.
- **Business studies** is again a predominantly work-related field, dominated by men (7% of male learners) in full-time employment (8%).

The pattern of learning for non-work-related reasons is quite different, divided equally between languages, arts and history, with each attracting 7% of all older learners:

- **The arts** (including painting, pottery, sculpture and design) have a very heavy age bias. They account for 12% of learners aged 65–74, and 18% of the 75+ group. Here participation is dominated by the retired (14%), and those in social classes AB (10%).
- **Foreign language** learners are older (13% of the 75+ group) and more likely to be in the higher social classes (12% in social classes AB).
- **History and literature** learners are more evenly spread in terms of gender, and age, although they are more likely to be from social classes A or B.
- **Sport** is very much a minority topic for 'learning', recruiting only 3% of older learners (rising to 5% of the 65–74 group). This probably reflects the fact that many people do not think of their sport and physical activity as 'learning'. However, the finding is surprising, since sport and physical education have traditionally formed a major component of adult education programmes, and there is a clear link to health, which is a particular concern for older people.
- **Music** only recruits 2% of older learners overall, but 5% of those in the 65–74 and 75+ groups. Again, the figure is likely to under report learning activity in the broadest sense, since many members of music appreciation groups, choirs or orchestras will not see themselves as 'learning'.

Why do they take up learning?

All learners were asked why they took up their 'main learning',¹⁵ and were offered 24 options. This question is asked annually of the whole population sample, so comparisons with younger people, and with the previous older people's survey, are possible. The pattern is fairly consistent, with work-related motivations declining with age, while non-work-related ones increase. Figure 7 shows the proportions of respondents identifying work-related motivations, while Figure 8 shows the non-work-related ones.¹⁶

¹⁴ Health and safety training is a legal requirement in some occupations.

¹⁵ Those who had identified more than one piece of current or recent learning were asked to select the 'main' one.

¹⁶ Totals exceed 100% because multiple answers were allowed.

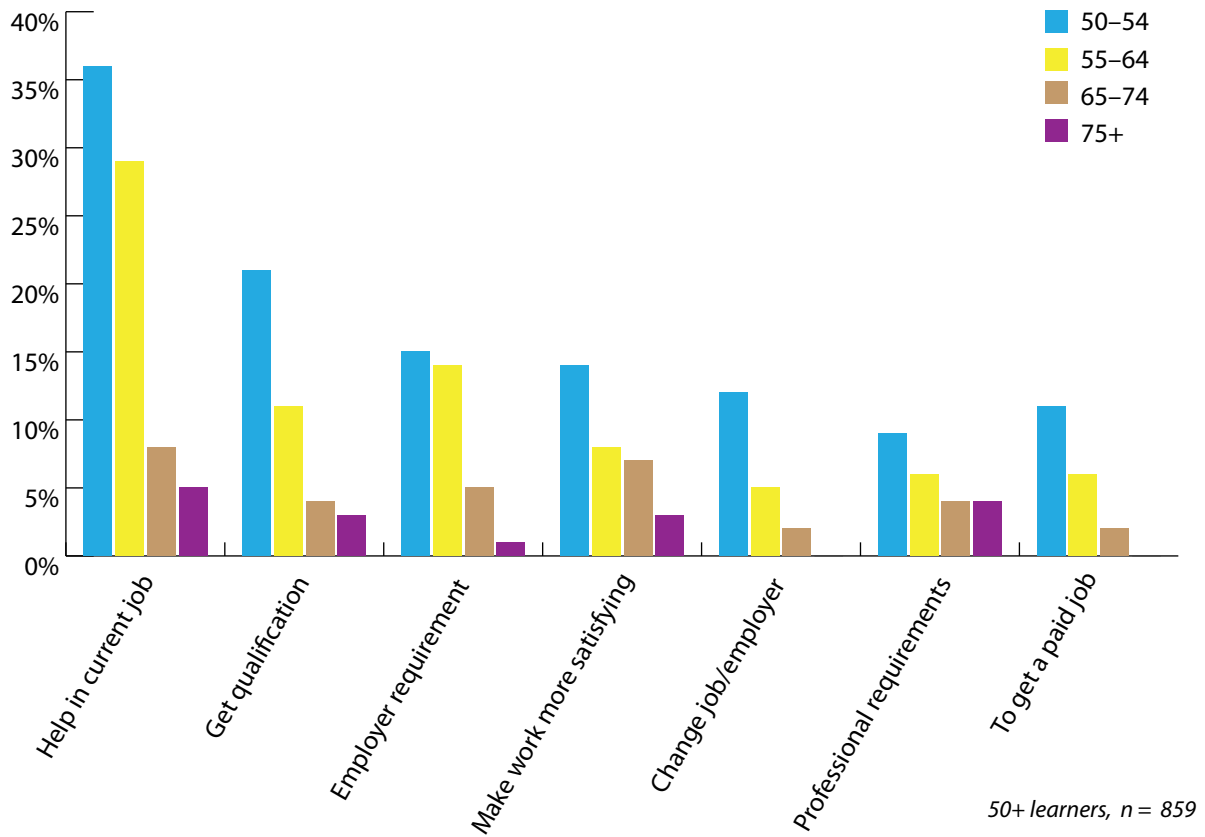


Figure 7. Work-related motivations for learning

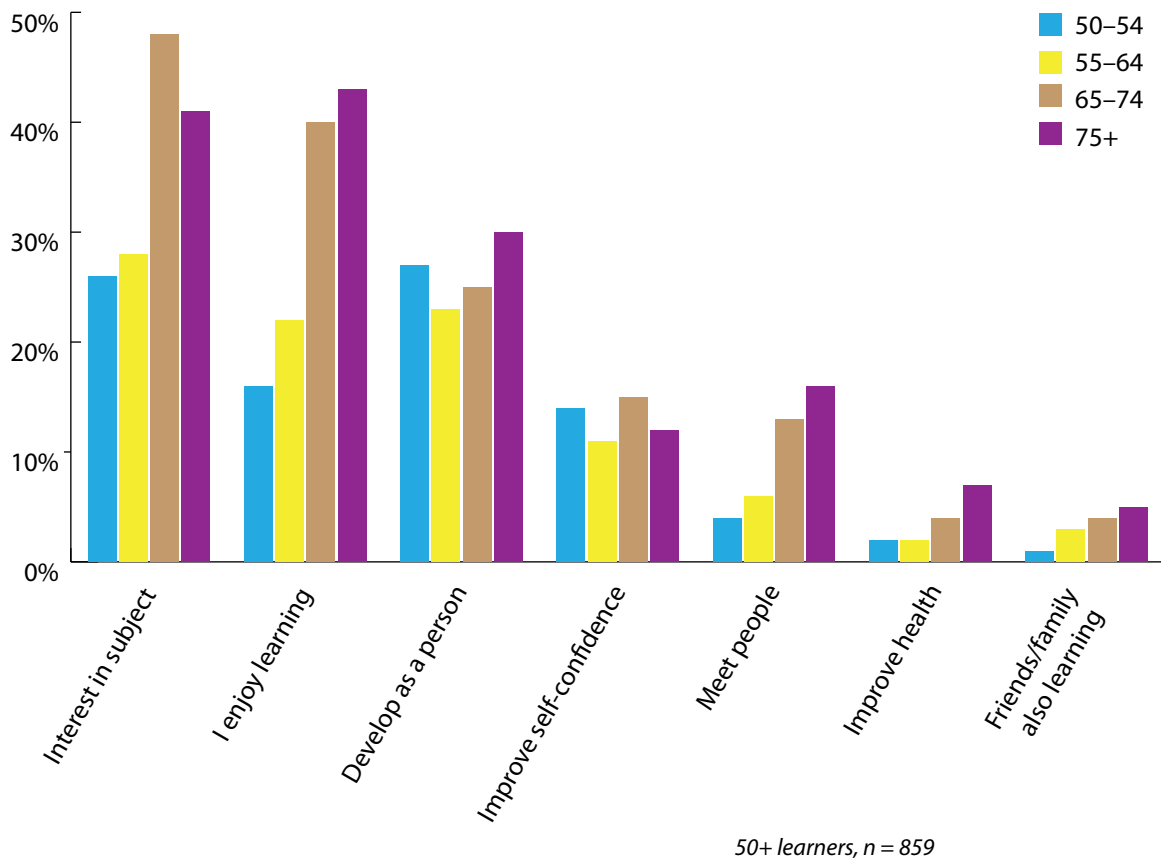


Figure 8. Non-work-related motivations for learning

Overall, the most common reasons among the whole 50+ population were 'I am interested in the subject/personal interest' (33%), followed by 'I enjoy learning/it gives me pleasure' (26%), 'To help in my current job' and 'To develop myself as a person' (both 25%). As people age, interest in the subject, enjoying learning and meeting people all rise steadily in importance, although interest in the subject appears to fall off slightly after 74.

- **'I am interested in the subject/personal interest'** and **'I enjoy learning/it gives me pleasure'** were chosen mainly by those who are retired and in higher social classes. This group were more likely than other older learners to be currently learning and to plan to learn again in the future, and are much more likely to describe their motivation as 'leisure' rather than 'work related'. White people were more likely to choose these than people from minority ethnic groups. These reasons were also significantly more likely to be cited by people who had finished their initial education after 21.
- **'To help in my current job'** was chosen by a quarter of respondents, with a slightly higher proportion in full-time than part-time work. The response here was strongly linked to social class, being cited by twice as many people in the C classes (30%) as in the DEs (16%).
- **'To develop myself as a person'** was chosen by a quarter of respondents. Those who chose this were distributed evenly across the age, social and educational range, and equally likely to be in employment or retired.
- **'To improve my self-confidence'** was chosen by 13%, mainly those in part-time work or economically inactive, and those who left school at 17 or 18. Women, the economically inactive, and people in Wales were more likely to cite this.
- **'To get a recognised qualification'** was cited by 12%, including many in full-time or part-time employment, but especially among job seekers.
- **'Not my choice – an employer requirement'** was chosen by 11%. This motivation falls rapidly with age.
- **'To improve my health'** is chosen especially by people in the 75+ age group (7%).

It is notable that two motivations do not change with age. 'To develop myself as a person', and 'To improve my self-confidence' are both evenly spread across the age range, and tend to be selected by the same sorts of people.

No other reason was chosen by more than 10% of respondents overall, but there is considerable variation between groups:

- Among **the oldest group**, social motivations are particularly strong: those over 74 were significantly more likely than younger ones to choose 'To meet people' (16%), and 'Because friends/family/colleagues are also learning' (5%).

- For **women**, social motives and self-confidence were more important: 'To improve my self-confidence' (16%), 'To meet people' (11%) and 'Because friends/family/colleagues are also learning' (4%).
- **Employer pressure** (formal and informal) was closely tied to occupational class, with people in social class C2 much more likely than respondents as a whole to cite 'Not really my choice – employer requirement' (22%), while those in classes AB were more likely to cite 'Not really my choice – professional requirement' (10%). Employer or professional requirements were significant motivators for younger groups: among the 50–54 age group 15% cited employer requirements and 9% professional ones.
- Older people from **ethnic minorities** were more likely than white people to cite one of the two work-related motives – 'To get a recognised qualification' (24%), and 'To make my work more satisfying' (21%).¹⁷

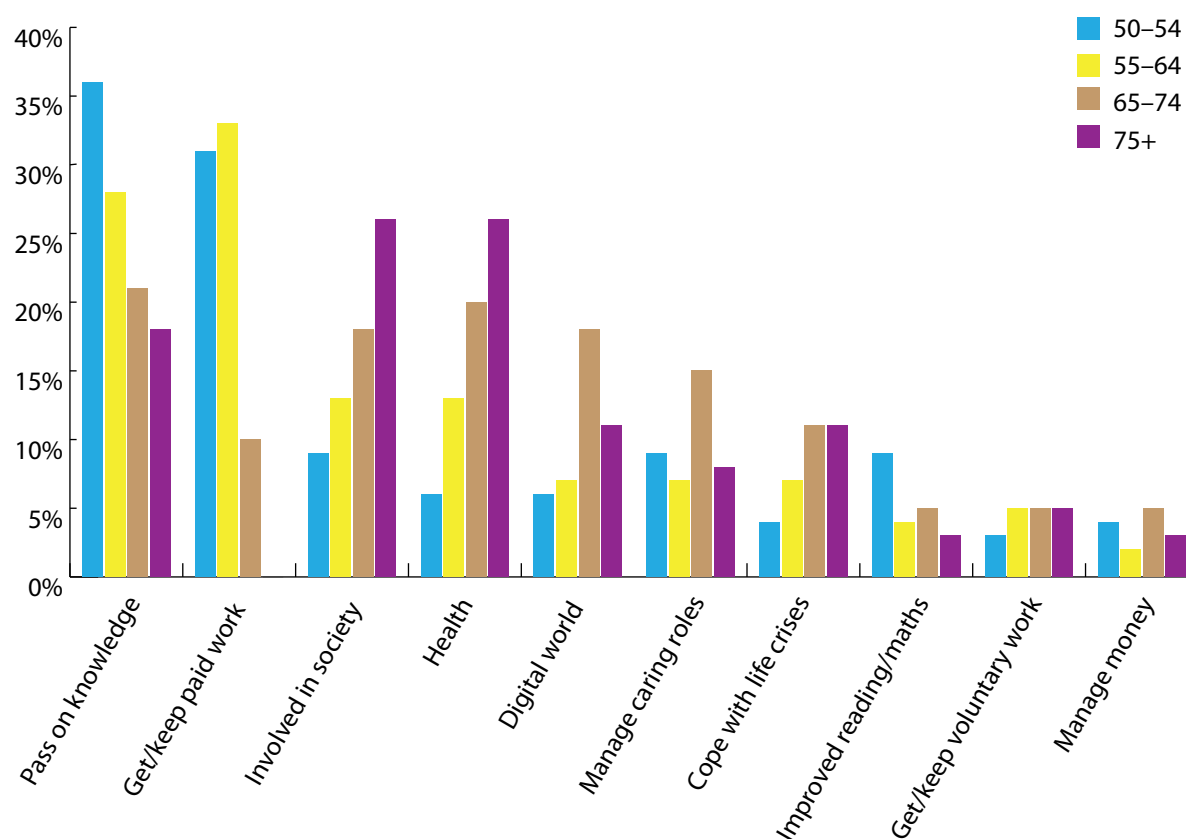
What benefits do they report?

The benefits people gain from learning do not necessarily match their motivation for taking it up in the first place. The questionnaire asked about benefits, using a list developed by a NIACE project on older people's learning in 2010.¹⁸ The survey asked all learners 'In which of the following [ten] ways, has learning helped you?'. This is the first time this question has been used in a survey, which makes the responses particularly interesting. However, the evidence must be treated with caution since many of the probable benefits of learning are relatively long term, and individuals may not make the connection between the learning (perhaps years ago) and the benefit (much more recent). Nevertheless, this evidence is an important indicator of some kinds of benefit.

Firstly it should be noted that benefits are complex: most of those who chose any of the options, selected more than one of them. Secondly, one-fifth of all respondents said 'None', and this response was evenly distributed by gender, working status, social class, and ethnicity, although it was less common among the 75+ group. There are several possible reasons for this: that the concept of learning 'helping' people is unfamiliar; that they had derived no benefit from the learning; or that they would have identified another benefit not listed. Figure 9 shows the proportion of each age group reporting each of the ten benefits.

¹⁷ Numbers from ethnic minorities were small, so these findings are indicative only.

¹⁸ McNair, S. (2009) *Choice and Opportunity: Learning, Wellbeing and the Quality of Life for Older People*. Leicester: NIACE



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

Figure 9. In which ways has learning helped you?

In general, reported benefits, like motivations, either rise or fall consistently across the age range. However, there are two exceptions, which peak among the 65–74 year-olds. The first, ‘Helped me get involved in the digital/online world’, presumably reflects the fact that this is the age group most likely both to have missed out on computerisation while in work, and still be motivated to ‘catch up’ (while the older group may feel it is too late). The second group probably reflects the peak of caring responsibility, since they are most likely to still have dependent parents and/or grandchildren.

Figure 10 examines the pattern of benefits for those who report their learning as being work-related and non work-related. Once again the patterns are very distinct.

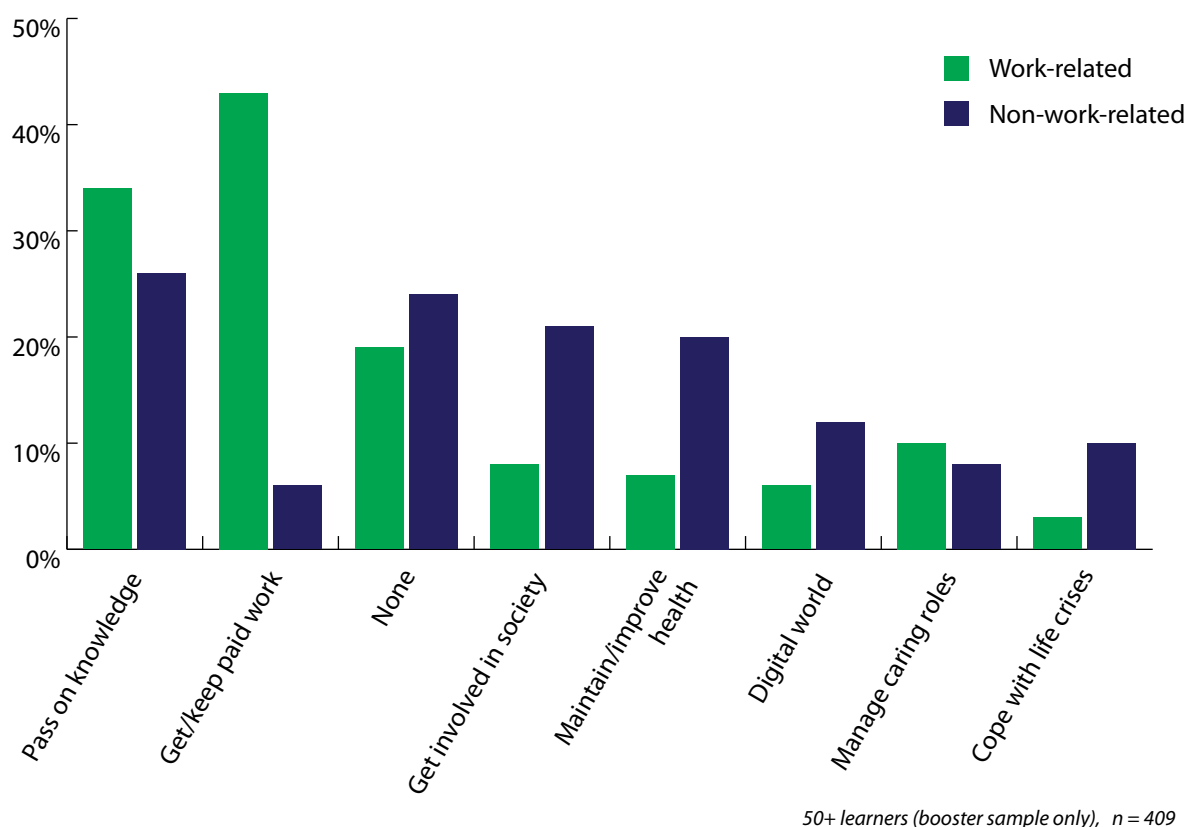


Figure 10. Benefits of learning – work-related and non-work-related learners

Five of the ten options were selected by more than 10% of respondents.

- **'Helped me pass on my skills and knowledge to other people'** was, surprisingly, the most widely chosen benefit of learning, with over a quarter of respondents selecting it. This was chosen mainly by those in their 50s, people who had finished initial education after 21, were in higher social classes (AB and C1), and in employment.
- **'Improved my chances of getting or staying in paid work'** was the second most common option (24%). This was largely restricted to people under 65, and people still in paid work. The numbers peak between 55 and 64, an age when people are particularly vulnerable to redundancy, age discrimination and long-term unemployment.
- **'Helped me get involved in society'** (14%) was chosen by the oldest groups (65–74 and 75+) and by those who were retired or in part-time work. This was also significantly more likely among social classes AB (25%).
- **'Helped me improve or maintain my health'** (13%) was also chosen by the oldest groups (65–74 and 75+), and by those who were retired or in part-time work.
- **'Helped me get involved in the digital/online world'** was chosen by 10%, particularly those aged 65–74 and people who had left initial education after 21. Here there does appear to be some regional bias, with this option being chosen more frequently by people in Wales, the South West and the West Midlands. The relatively low ranking of this benefit is surprising: although 17% of older learners are studying the subject, only a third of them identified this as a benefit.

- **Helped me manage my caring responsibilities – for children, partners, older friends or relatives'** was chosen by 9% of older people, mainly by those in social class C2, and by those aged 65–74. The upper limit presumably reflects the fact that by the age of 75 most people's parents are no longer living and most of their grandchildren have grown up, as well as reflecting declining physical capability.
- **'Helped me cope with life crises – divorce, bereavement, etc.'** (7%) was also chosen mainly by 65–74 year-olds, those in part-time work and the retired. It was also chosen particularly by those planning to learn in the future. The small numbers here are perhaps unsurprising, since life crises are generally infrequent, and many people will not have recently experienced one.
- **'Improved my reading and maths'** was chosen by 6%, mainly those in social classes C2 and DE. Interestingly this does not appear to be a work-related motivation among older people, since it is most often cited by those who are economically inactive and not seeking work.
- **'Improved my chances of getting or staying in voluntary work'** was chosen by only 4% and was rather more likely among those in higher social classes and those who had completed initial education later (who dominate the voluntary workforce).
- **'Helped me manage my money'** was chosen by only 3%. This may seem surprising, given the major new financial challenges which most people face around retirement (whether learning to live on the State Pension or to manage large lump sums). However, it also perhaps reflects a perception that the problem here is a need for 'advice' rather than 'learning'.

In general, current and recent learners give similar responses, except that maintaining health is more common among current learners, while help in getting/keeping paid work and getting involved in the digital world are more likely among those who have learned in the last three years.

To some extent, the benefits of learning reflect employment status. Those in employment are significantly more likely than others to cite 'passing on skills and knowledge', and 'improving chances of getting or keeping paid work' as benefits from learning. Part-time workers are more likely than full-timers to cite 'helping to cope with life crises' and 'helping to get involved in society', perhaps reflecting their more precarious circumstances (some of which may be the reason they are working part time). The retired are more likely than the employed to cite involvement in society, life crises, health and digital engagement. Once again, older learners from ethnic minorities appear distinctive. They are more likely to cite getting work, maintaining health, getting involved in society, and managing money, than the white population.

Do benefits match motivations?

Figure 11 shows that the relationship between subject studied and the benefits achieved is far from straightforward. The figure maps the seven most popular subjects against the four most commonly cited benefits. Although the numbers are small, and can only be taken as

indicative, it is notable how often people cite getting involved in society and improving health as outcomes of learning in subjects with no obvious direct relevance. It is also notable what a high proportion of learners of languages and occupational health cannot identify any benefit from learning (which may reflect in the latter case, the fact that health and safety training is mandatory for some occupations). These are issues which would probably repay further study.

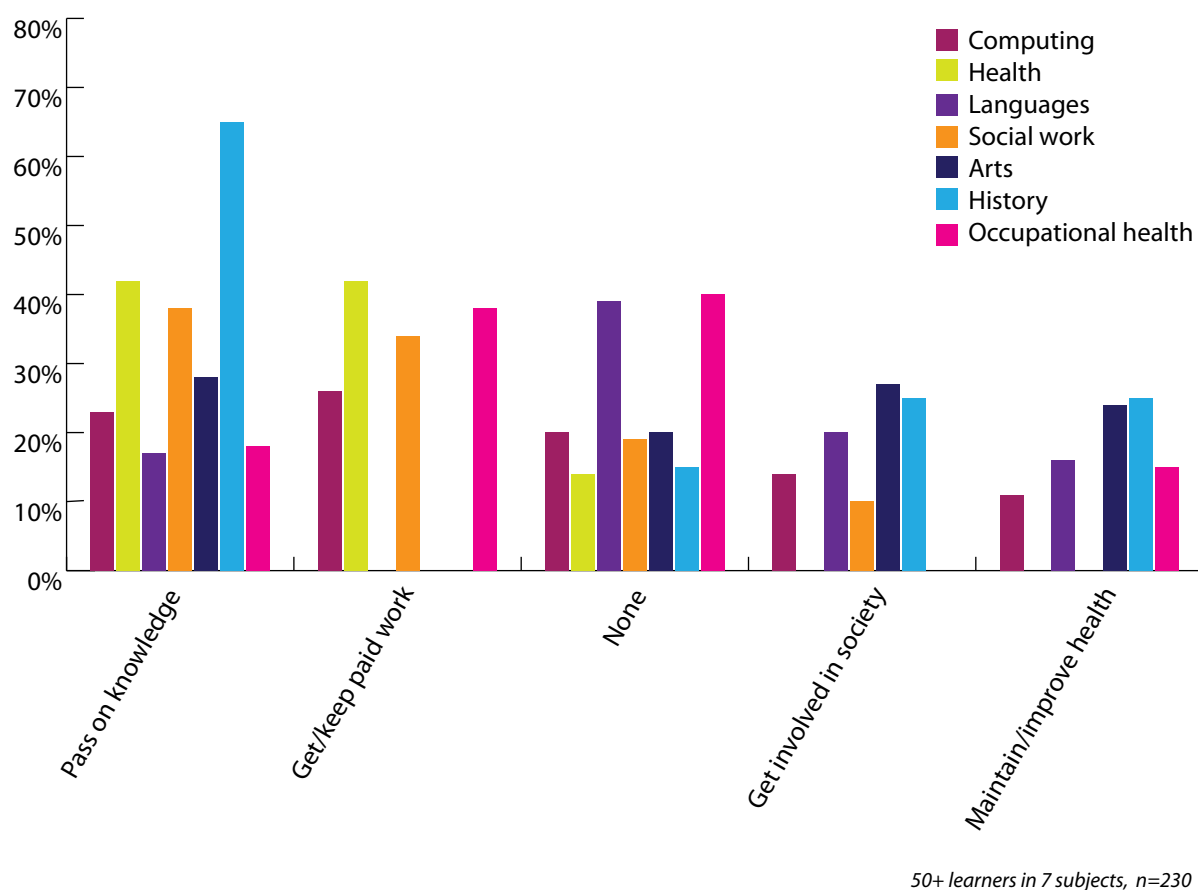
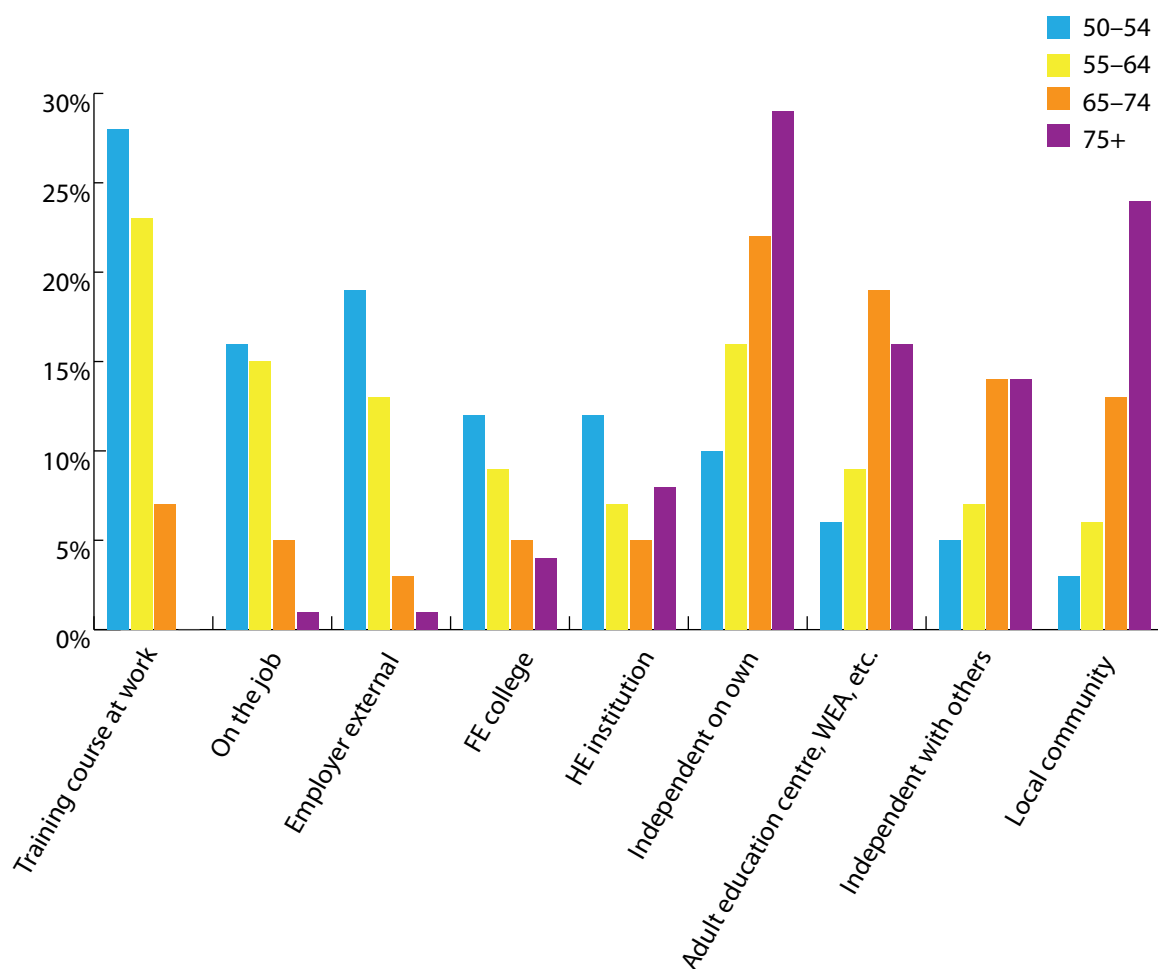


Figure 11. Benefits of learning by subject

Where do they learn?

Given the earlier findings about the relationship between learning and employment, it is not surprising that those aged 50–54 are most likely to be learning in work-related settings – at work (28%), an external course funded by the employer (19%), on the job (16%). By contrast, those over 74 are much more likely to be learning independently alone (29%), in a local community facility (24%, including libraries, churches and so on), or at an adult education centre/WEA class (16%). In general, as Figure 12 shows, work-related settings decline, and other settings rise in importance progressively, with two exceptions. Firstly, higher education institutions seem to continue to attract a stable clientele of around 7% of learners from 55 onwards. Secondly, online learning attracts about 9% of learners in all older age groups except the 55–64 group, whose participation rate in online learning is significantly higher than other age groups.



50+ learners, n = 859

Figure 12. How are you doing this learning?

- Work-related settings are more likely to be used by men and younger people, but the kinds of setting vary significantly by social class. The ABs are most likely to be learning on external courses funded by employers, while the Cs are most likely to be learning on the job or on a training course at work. Full- and part-time workers are equally likely to be on training courses at work, but full-timers are more likely to be funded on external courses and learning on the job, rather than workplace courses. People from ethnic minorities are more likely than their white colleagues to be learning on the job, or on workplace courses, while white British people are more likely to be on external courses.
- Adult education centres and the WEA, on the other hand, attract a quite different clientele. Here, learners are significantly more likely to be women, over 64, retired and in social classes DE.
- Further education (FE) colleges attract few people over 65. Those who do use FE colleges are mainly in social class C2, and not in paid work (either unemployed or inactive).
- Higher education (HE) institutions (including the Open University) attract men, in social classes AB and C1, and those who left school later. HE numbers appear less likely to

decline with age than those of other providers, suggesting a hard core of determined lifelong learners.

- Independent learning ('Independently on my own' or 'independently with others') accounts for a substantial proportion of older learners (16% of all older learners, and 29% of those over 74). They are disproportionately male, older, and retired. Those learning on their own (but not those learning independently with others) are more likely to have left initial education after 21, to be in the higher social classes (AB and C1), and to say that they will learn in the future.

Since 2005 there appear to have been significant changes in where people carry out their learning (Figure 13). Most striking is the rise in the role of work. Although the figures are not precisely comparable,¹⁹ the proportion of 55+ learners learning in work settings appears to have risen substantially, from under a quarter in 2005 to over a third in 2012. At the same time, the proportion learning in adult education centres and the WEA has risen by a third (7%/12%).

Two other apparent changes relate to questions which were not asked, and perhaps not seen as relevant, in 2005. Firstly, the proportion studying online is now 13%, reflecting the rise of internet access, and the expansion of resources available for learning in the intervening years.

The second issue relates to those learning 'independently with others' who now form 10% of older learners. This may reflect the growth of self-organised learning through the University of the Third Age (U3A), which targets this age group, and reports a very rapid rise in membership in recent years, to over 270,000 members in 2011. However, the survey results on U3A activity once again raise questions about respondents' understanding of the word 'learning'. Despite the U3A's high reported membership figures, and the fact that U3A was specifically mentioned as an option on the questionnaire, only 1% of respondents to this survey reported taking part in U3A activity. There are two probable explanations for this. Firstly, any U3A members who do not think of it as 'learning' (perhaps identifying more with a topic or activity than with U3A specifically or learning more generally) they will say that they are not learning in the first question, at which point they are classified as 'non-learners' and directed straight to the 'non-learner' questions, bypassing the question which mentions U3A. A second possibility is that U3A learners are also involved in other forms of learning, and when they are asked to answer questions about their 'main learning' they choose something more formal. Nevertheless, this is a question which clearly merits further investigation.

There appears to have been a withdrawal of FE colleges from work with older people, with the proportion studying there falling from 21% to 8%. The proportion studying through HE has also fallen, from 14% to 7%. These falls are both also reported in the National Adult Learner Survey (NALS), and both probably reflect the influence of government policy and funding strategies on the priorities of the institutions.

19 The 2012 figures include people on external courses funded by their employer, some of whom may have been counted in the FE or HE totals in 2005.

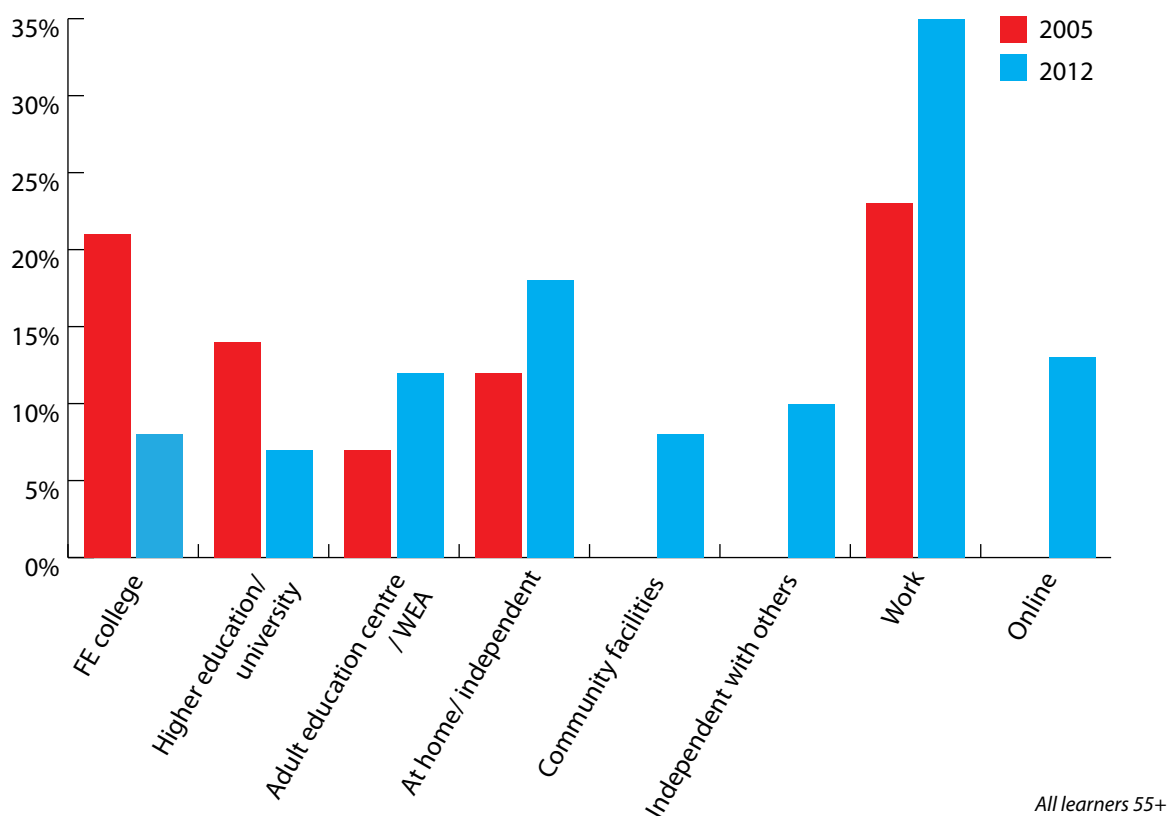


Figure 13. Location of learning 2005–2012

Are older workers supported by their employers?

Historically, employers have been more reluctant to invest in training for their older employees. However, this has gradually changed in recent years, and it appears that age no longer has a major impact on the support that working individuals receive from their employers. Figure 14 shows that more than half of all older learners in employment (55–60%) have had all the costs paid by their employer, with a further 7–10% receiving partial support, and that this does not change significantly with age.

Employer support is slightly lower for those in social classes DE (55%), while about two-thirds of people in all other social classes receive support. Full-time workers are significantly more likely to receive support than part-timers (73%/42%). Interestingly, those who left school at 16 or before are the most likely to receive employer support (74%), perhaps indicating that employers are actively seeking to retain experienced employees who lack formal qualifications, through retraining. Although numbers are small it would appear that employer support is higher in the South West, North East and North West, and lower in London and Scotland.

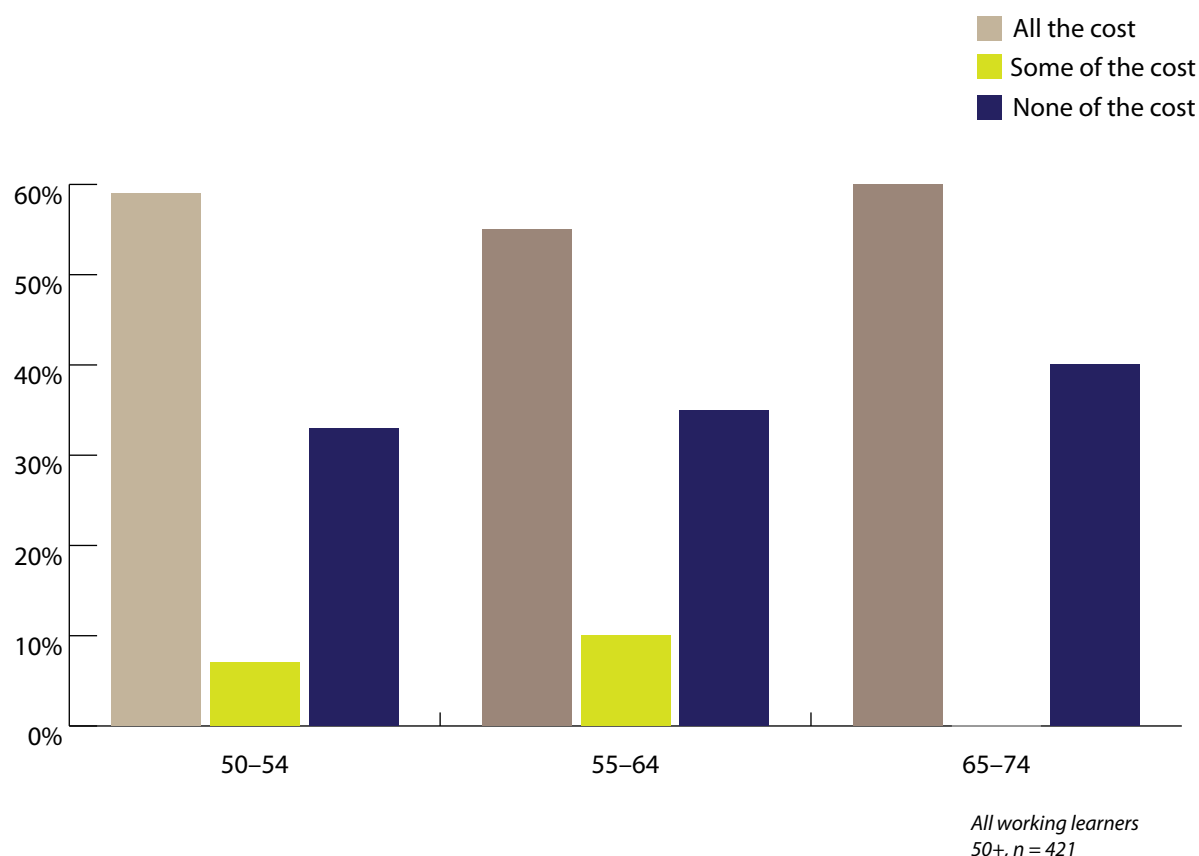


Figure 14. Does your employer pay for your training?

Use of TV, radio and online learning

There are many ways of learning other than formal classes. The broader Adult Participation in Learning Survey asked in some detail about learning through TV, radio and online sources.

Perhaps the most striking finding is that, although overall use of online sources declines with age, it is more widely cited than radio or television among all age groups, including those over 75. For those who do use these resources in this oldest group, online self-study courses, user-generated information sites like Wikipedia, and e-readers like the Kindle are particularly widespread.

By contrast, the use of radio for learning (including radio as podcasts) remains very stable with age, while television (including the BBC iPlayer and so on) appears to rise a little in importance with age.

It is notable that these modes of learning are relatively widespread in all social classes and educational levels, although the figure is higher in the higher classes, and those who left school at 16 or earlier are less likely to use them. They are also more widely used by those in work than those who are retired. Those who report online learning are more likely than

others to expect to learn in the future, and older people from minority ethnic groups are more likely to use these tools for learning than white British people.

There remains a substantial 'digital divide' in society, but it does not follow that those who have yet to use such tools are necessarily reluctant. A quarter of non-learners said that they would like to find out more about online learning. This response was very evenly divided across gender, age, social class and employment status, but was notably higher in London than the rest of the country. Similarly, a quarter of respondents said they would need support to take up online learning, mainly with how to learn, or to find information online. This was particularly true of people who were unemployed and seeking work, part-time workers, the oldest, those in the lowest social classes, and those without internet access.

Older people learning in the future

Are older people likely to learn in the near future?

All non-learners were asked if they were likely to take up learning in the next three years, and what might make it more attractive.

The first clear message is negative: nearly four in five non-learners do not 'plan to learn' in the next three years. Furthermore, two-thirds say this is 'very unlikely'. These are high numbers, even allowing for the likelihood of underreporting which has been discussed earlier.

Women are significantly more likely to plan to learn than men, and the numbers intending to learn decline directly with age. The proportion 'likely' or 'fairly likely' to learn in the next three years falls from 39% of 50–54 year-olds, to only 6% of the 75+ group. Social class is also significant: only 11% of the DEs are 'likely' learners, compared to 33% of the ABs. Employment status has a very clear influence on learning intentions. Those in employment are three times more likely to intend to learn than the retired (30–35%/11%). The highest likelihood is among those who are unemployed and seeking work (37%). Those who left initial education at 21+ are three times more likely to plan to learn as those who left at 16 or before (39%/13%). Intention to learn is strikingly higher among people from minority ethnic groups (27% compared to 18%). The Welsh, and people in the South East, are significantly more likely to intend to learn than the Scots or people in the rest of England. There is also a strong relationship between likelihood of learning and internet access. 26% of those with access are likely to learn, compared to 7% of those without. This may, of course, suggest either a group who are particularly resistant, or who are doubly disadvantaged.

What might make learning more attractive?

All those who had not learned in the last three years were asked what would make learning more attractive. Overall, 60% chose 'None of the above', with the proportion rising to three quarters of those aged 75+. Figure 15 shows the responses of the remaining 40%. The strongest positive response was a matter of relevance: 16% of older people chose 'If the learning was related to something I'm interested in'. They were younger, in higher social classes, with longer initial education, and in work. Again, there were marked regional differences, with less than 12% choosing this in the East Midlands, London and Scotland. Location and timing were barriers for a sizable group. One in five (20%) chose 'If it was more convenient', 10% 'If I could learn at home' and 5% 'If I could learn nearer to my home'. Surprisingly perhaps, since these attitudes are commonly associated with less-mobile older people, they were most often chosen by the youngest, and those in higher social classes, in employment, and with longer initial education.

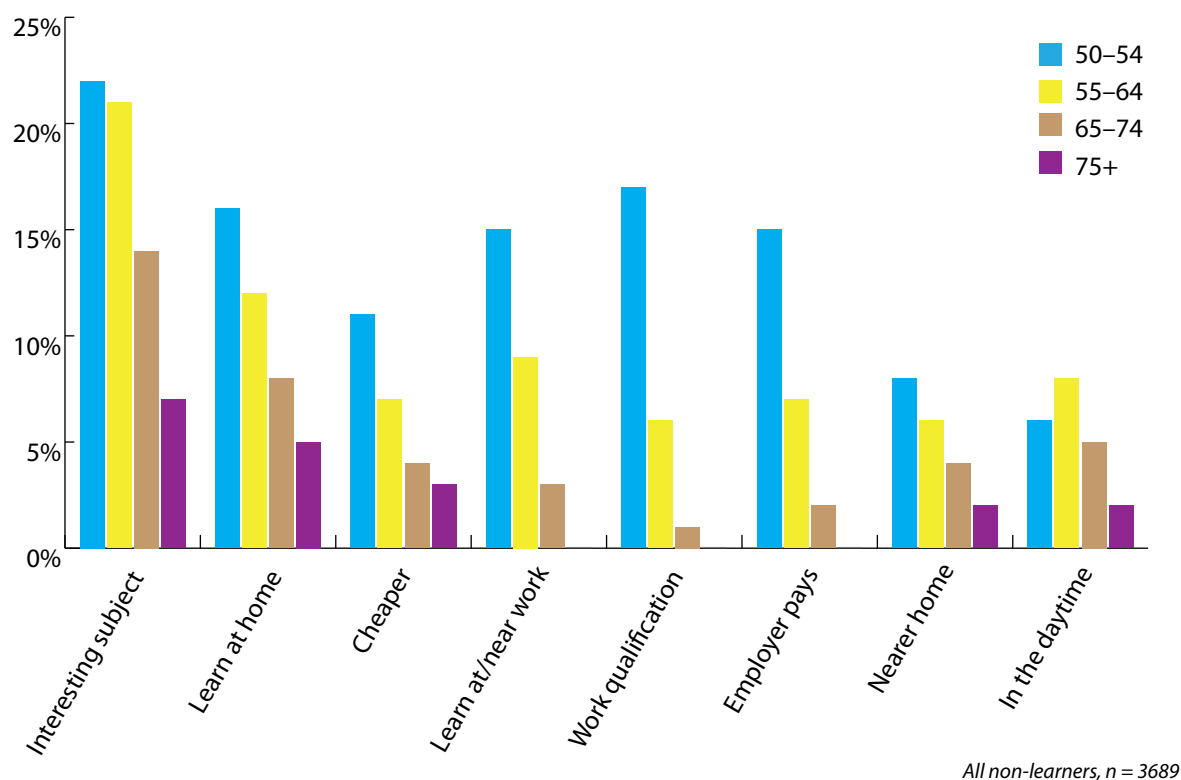


Figure 15. What would make learning more appealing?

Money is a barrier, but only for a relatively small group. 'If it was cheaper/the fees were lower' and 'if my employer paid' were both chosen by 7% of non-learners. Interestingly, those most likely to choose this were younger, and in social classes AB, who might be expected to have fewest concerns about money.

Among those who could identify a source of advice, two dominated: the internet and the public library, attracting two contrasting clienteles.

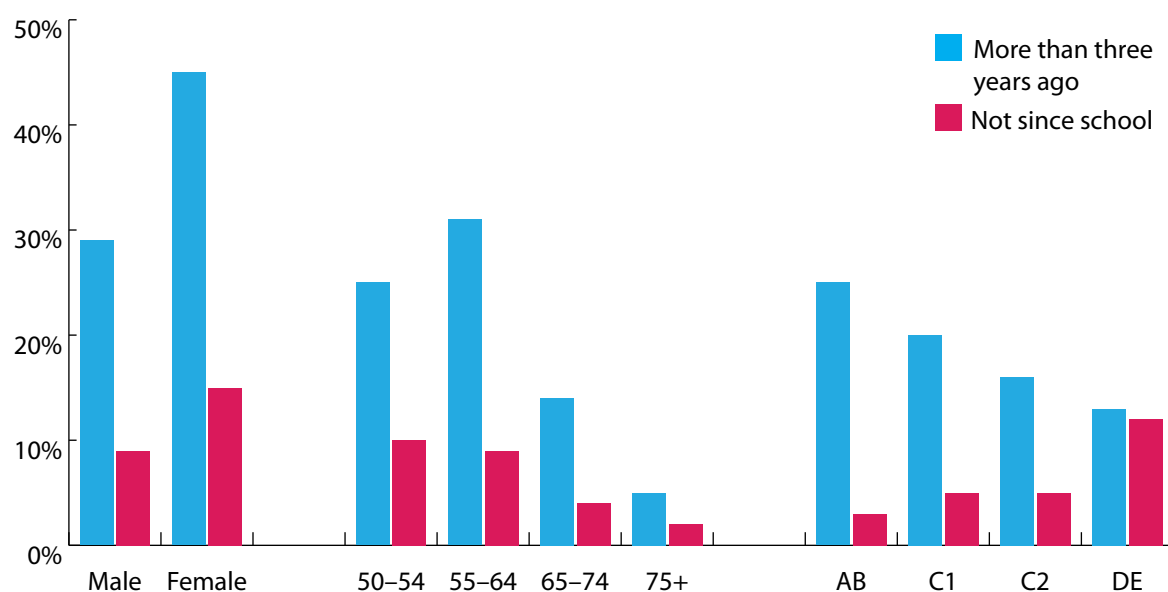
- **The internet** was mentioned by fewer than 2% of respondents in 2005, but is now the most widely quoted source for all but the oldest (and even by 4% of the 75+ group). Here the pattern clearly reflects the changing distribution of digital skills in the population. Among the 50–54 year-olds this was much more popular (33%), as it was among the higher social classes (30%), and those who finished initial education after 18 (36%). It was also more often chosen by men than women (21%/15%), by those in employment (33% of full-timers and 26% of part-timers), and by those who expected to continue learning (31%). It was significantly lower in the East Midlands, the South West, and in Scotland and Wales.
- **The public library** has traditionally been a major source of information about learning for adults, and it has only now been pushed into second place by the internet. 15% of older people cited this as the first choice for finding out about learning. The responses for libraries are the mirror image of those for online sources: with the library being nominated particularly by women (17%), older people (17% of those 65+), the retired (17%) and those without internet access (18%). There was no difference between social classes, reflecting the very broad social appeal of the public library service generally, but libraries were much less likely to be chosen by those who completed initial education after the age of 20 (9%). Libraries were most often chosen in the East of England (19%) and the West Midlands (18%), and were least likely to be chosen in Scotland (11%).
- **Further education institutions** (including both FE and tertiary colleges, and adult education centres and the WEA) were chosen by 14% of respondents, with no significant variation by gender, age or social class. However, FE colleges were more likely to be selected by people in Scotland (13%), Wales (11%), the North West and West Midlands (both 10%), while adult education centres were more commonly chosen in Yorkshire and the South East (both 9%).
- **'Friends/family'** is traditionally one of the most cited sources of advice, and was the most popular source for people over 55 in the 2005 survey. Since then, the proportion citing this has fallen, from 15% to 6%, although it remains significantly higher for people 65+. However, responses were distinctly biased towards women, older people, and lower social classes, early school leavers, and those who had never studied since school. This option was particularly low in the North East, and higher among members of minority ethnic groups (10%).
- **Employers** were not widely seen as a source of advice, being quoted by only 2%, and only 7% even among the 50–54 group. This compares with 11% of respondents in 2005. This fall is surprising given the rise in reported work-based learning among older people.

None of the other possible sources was cited by more than 3% of respondents, although unsurprisingly Jobcentre Plus was chosen by 15% of those unemployed and seeking work, and by 8% of those inactive and not seeking work. It was also chosen more often by people in social classes C2, and DE.

Although the English Government has recently launched a new National Careers Service, which is open to adults of all ages, careers services have yet to make an impact on this age group, being chosen by only 1% of respondents. However, the figure was significantly higher among the 50–54 group, social class C2, and by those in work or looking for it. Curiously it is also higher in Scotland, although the National Careers Service does not operate there.

Who might be attracted back to learning?

The survey provides some insight into who would be most likely to return to learning after 50. Figure 17 shows the profile of non-learners who say that they are 'likely' or 'fairly likely' to learn in the next three years.²⁰ It is evident that those who report having learned since school, but not in the last three years, are much more likely to consider returning than those who have done no learning since school. Women, and people aged 55–64 are also much more likely to consider returning. Conversely, the most resistant group are older men in social classes C1 and C2. It is notable that the only group where willingness to learn is as high among the non-learners as the learners is social classes DE.



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

Figure 17. Non-learners willing to return

²⁰ These numbers probably exaggerate, since a proportion of people will give a positive answer in order to be polite to the interviewer.

Is learning related to voluntary work?

Significant numbers of older people undertake some form of voluntary work. Some of this is informal, like caring for a relative, while some is organised through formal organisations (voluntary or statutory). Some is as structured as paid employment, with entrance qualifications, training and supervision. For some people (especially some carers) it takes much of their waking time; for others it is occasional or involves only a few hours a week. The survey asked about both formal and informal voluntary activity in order to explore the relationships between learning and such activity.

Although the overall numbers are large, voluntary work is a minority activity, involving only one-third of all older respondents (34%), and it is much more likely to be reported by people in higher social classes, with the DEs least likely to participate.²¹ Participation is more likely among women than men (38%/29%), and among younger people (38% of those aged 50–74, but only 22% of the 75+ age group).²²

Most kinds of volunteering are more common among those in part-time work than among full-timers, or the retired. Those who have done some learning since leaving initial education) are significantly more likely to be taking on voluntary roles. Figure 18 shows the distribution of voluntary activity.²³

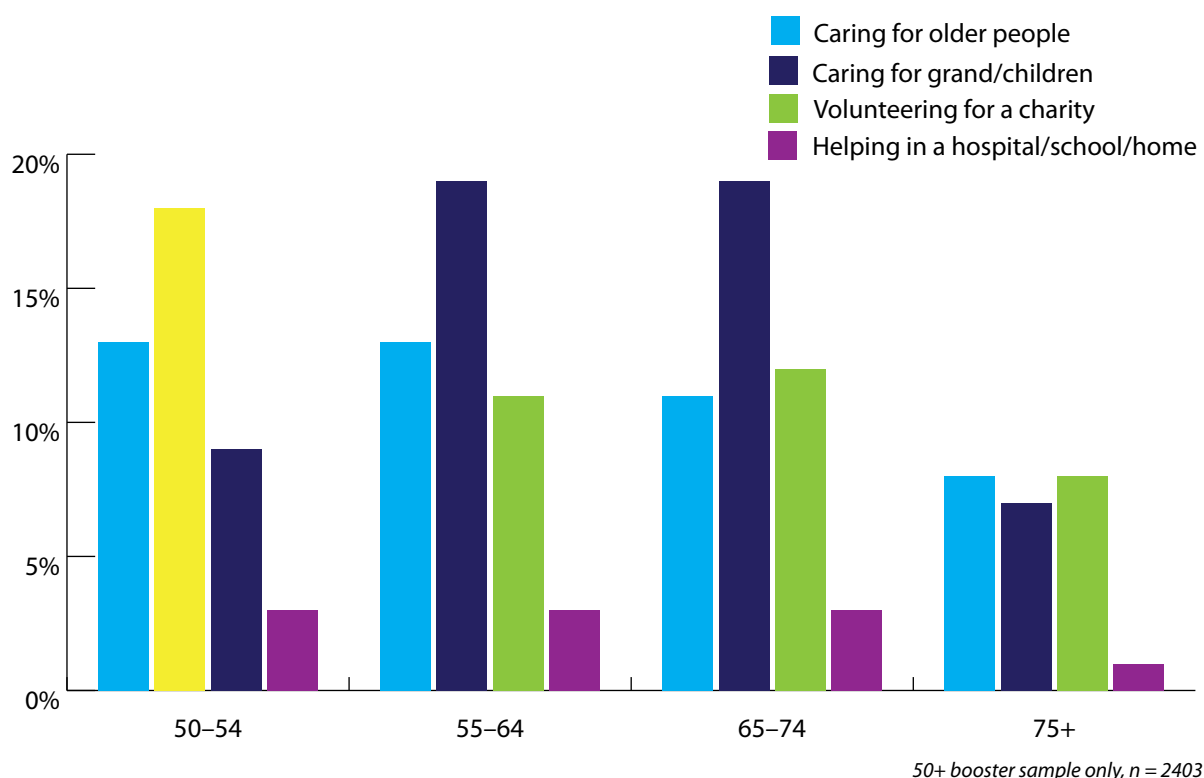


Figure 18. Voluntary activity

21 These findings should be treated with caution, since there may be social class differences both in how people describe voluntary activity, and in the nature of voluntary activity undertaken.

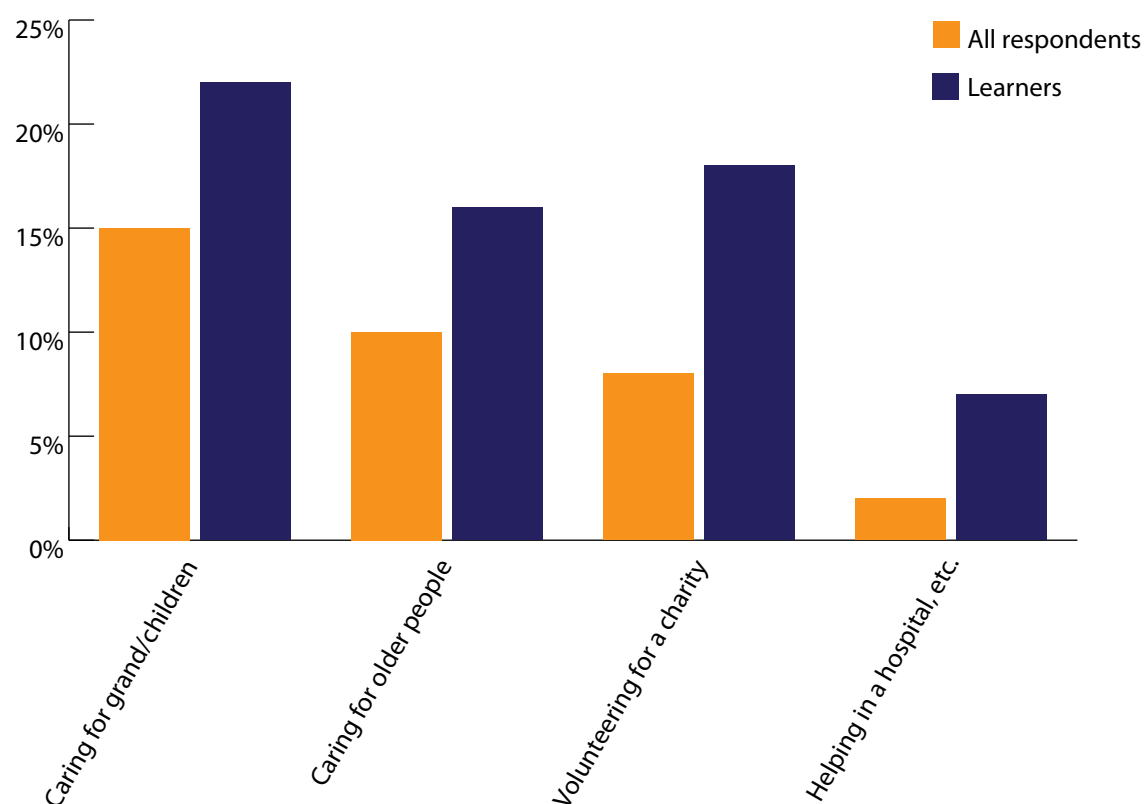
22 These figures are lower than those cited in some other surveys, probably because respondents to this survey were already 'primed' to think about learning issues, and may have underreported voluntary activity which has no obvious learning element.

23 These four types are the only forms cited by more than 1% of respondents.

Caring for children and older people are both predominantly done by women and people in the higher social classes, and in both cases the numbers fall abruptly after 74.

Volunteering for a charity is strongly linked to social class (19% of ABs, compared to 6% of DEs), but rises to a peak in the 65–74 age group, and then falls. Caring for adults is commonest in Wales (14%) and rarest in Scotland (5%). There are marked geographical variations, from Yorkshire (42%) to London (25%). Participation is markedly lower among ethnic minorities than the white population (34%/18%).

There is a relationship between participation in voluntary work and participation in learning. Figure 19 shows that older learners are significantly more likely to be volunteers than older people generally, most notably in volunteering for a charity, which is undertaken by 18% of learners, but only 8% of the general population. This must, partly at least, reflect the social class profile of both populations.



50+ booster sample only, n = 2403

Figure 19. Volunteering and learning

Conclusions

In some ways, this report presents a familiar picture. The proportion of people who see themselves as 'learning' declines progressively with age, and has not changed significantly since the 2005 survey, although where and why they are learning has. The people most likely to participate are those with the most previous education, who have higher qualifications, who completed their initial education later, and who have undertaken more learning since then.

We should not be surprised that take up is highest among those who have benefited most from learning in the past, who enjoy it, and can see the point. But one should be a little wary of this finding: the figures may exaggerate the effect, because these are probably also the people who are most likely to think of what they do as 'learning'.

How important is age?

The survey sheds new light on how important age is in determining attitudes to learning. In 2010, the National Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning proposed a rethinking of public policy to better reflect better the emerging nature of the lifecourse, using a 'four quarters' model (divided at 25, 50 and 75) to replace the traditional youth/working life/retirement one (divided at 18 and 65).²⁴

The survey confirms that, in learning terms, there are two distinct phases to life after 50. The first is a period of transition, where most learning is related to sustaining employment, through relatively formal kinds of learning and through learning in the workplace, or to the transition out of employment, where learning provides a means to hand on skills and knowledge, and to retain social status. This is the phase where caring responsibilities are most important in people's lives.

After this comes a period where employment is no longer significant. Then learning helps people to maintain social engagement, contribution and health; it is more likely to be informal, undertaken individually or in groups, and the subjects of study focus on broader cultural topics, the arts, history and literature.

Looking to the future, the increasing fluidity of retirement ages and patterns means that the picture is likely to get more, rather than less, complex, and to try to pin the divide to any particular age may be misleading. We might expect to see higher levels of participation, as a better-educated cohort move into retirement, since length of initial education and social class are powerful determinants of participation. It is probable that

24 Schuller, T. and Watson, D. (2009) *Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*. Leicester: NIACE.

those currently in their 40s, who have had much wider access to higher education, and who have lived at a time when the proportion of middle-class jobs was rising rapidly, will be more likely to continue learning than today's 70-year-olds.²⁵ This is especially true since these factors are also correlated with higher life expectancy. The comparison of this survey with the 2005 one suggests that this effect is already taking place.

What do people understand as 'learning'?

The survey findings raise again the question of how people understand the notion of 'learning'. While educators, and the survey preamble, take a broad view of learning, it seems that most people see it in a narrower, more formal sense.

This can be seen in the findings on learning about computing (and the majority of older people now have some level of computer literacy). Given the pace of change in digital technologies, it is highly unlikely that most older people who use them are not continuing to 'learn' in some sense: the fact that they do not report this as 'learning' tells us more about how people understand the word than about what is happening. A similar picture can be seen in relation to physical education and sport, which used to account for a quarter of all 'adult education' courses, and has largely disappeared from the NIACE survey. It is unlikely that all this activity has simply stopped: it is much more likely that people now see it as joining a club, a gym or a running group. However, while these changes suggest that some learning is not being recognised as such by the 'learners', a much broader notion of learning seems to be being adopted when older people consider online learning.

The importance of understanding people's definitions of 'learning' can be seen in the contrast between the three surveys of adult learning conducted between 2010 and 2012. The NIACE survey finds substantially lower levels of participation by older people than the National Adult Learner Survey (NALS)²⁶ and the Pearson 'Love to Learn' survey²⁷). It seems likely that this reflects the nature of the prompts provided to respondents and the wording of the questions (see Annex 2).

The role of employment

Paid work is very important in patterns of learning after 50. Among those in their 50s and early 60s, employment is the dominant reason for learning. Furthermore, work-related reasons for learning draw in a much wider social mix, and people with lower levels of qualification. These older people are taking part in work-related learning to remain employable, to make work more rewarding, and to change their work or employer, and they think that they are successful in this. Employers' attitudes have also changed significantly. They are now more likely to pay for training their older workers than in 2005

25 The proportion of households classified as AB rose from 12% in 1968 to 27% in 2008, while the DEs fell from 65% to 45% over the same period (IPSOS-MORI).

26 BIS (2012) *National Adult Learner Survey 2010*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. At: www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/n/12-p164-national-adult-learner-survey-2010.pdf

27 Pearson (2012) *Love to Learn*. www.lovetolearn.co.uk

and especially for those in manual jobs, although they are still much more likely to support full-timers than part-timers.

After retirement, at whatever age, the pattern of learning changes rapidly. Social class and previous education play a much more powerful role in determining who takes part, and the changing pattern of subjects studied probably reflects the kind of lifestyle changes which these groups experience, with languages, the arts, history, literature and music all rising in importance.

What people are learning

The subject mix in 2012 is broadly similar to that in 2005, though with some apparent shift towards a more instrumental attitude to learning. Computing is still the most widely studied subject at all ages, but the numbers are falling rapidly. Among those over 65 the same four subjects dominate: computing, arts, languages and history. Among the younger group (50–64) the pattern has become more vocational, with health and medicine, business studies, social work and occupational health and safety all figuring in the six most common subjects, where only three did so in 2005. The high figures for health and medicine perhaps demonstrate the power of a training culture in an occupational sector, with older health workers continuing to learn in far larger numbers than people in other sectors.

Older people and the digital world

One striking finding is the changing role of the digital world. In 2005, 'computing' in its various forms accounted for 40% of all learners over 55, but this has now halved, to 17%. However, the proportion of people learning online, which was too small to register in 2005, has risen significantly to one in ten of all learners aged 50–75.²⁸ Furthermore, the internet is now the most likely place for people under 70 to go to find information about adult learning, cited by under 2% in 2005, and by 18% now. This is particularly significant because digital learning is cited across a broader social spectrum than other forms of learning, and those who say they are learning online are significantly more likely to intend to learn in the future.

This suggests a population much more familiar with digital technologies. Many of those under 75 will now have met with computers in the workplace and the home and no longer see this as something you 'learn'. Among the 'older old' those who were keen to catch up with the technologies have now done so. In terms of bridging the digital divide (which is critical if older people are to be able to use these technologies to overcome declining mobility for example), the easily persuaded have been drawn in and reaching the digitally excluded old is likely to be an increasing challenge. Since two-thirds of older non-learners

28 A survey by UK Online Centres found that 20% of people over 75+ had used the internet for learning in the last year: Online Centres Foundation (2012) *The Internet and Informal Learning*. At: www.ukonlinecentres.com/media-centre/research-reports.html

say that nothing would make them more likely to 'learn' in the future, presenting this in other than 'learning' language will be important.

Motivation and the benefits of learning

The most surprising, and new, finding on benefits is that 'passing on skills and knowledge to other people' is the most widely cited benefit of learning among older people. This strongly supports the view that participation in learning among older people is about remaining engaged and contributing members of society.

Other things have changed less. Overall, interest in the subject and enjoyment remain the most widely cited motivators, especially for those over 65, while work remains a major motivator for those under that age. The broad direction of change with age remains the same, but with rather lower proportions of people identifying interest in the subject, enjoying learning and meeting people than in 2005. However, while most motivators either rise or decline in importance with age, there are two notable exceptions: the same proportions of people cite 'To develop myself as a person' and 'To improve my self-confidence' in every age group, suggesting a core of educational need which transcends both occupational and recreational motivations.

Policy often assumes that motivation to learn is the same as benefits from it. However, this is not necessarily true. For the first time, this survey used a checklist of benefits produced by a NIACE project in 2010, which includes social as well as personal benefits. While it is clear that the benefits are complex, with most people identifying more than one, it is clear that learning is more than simply a leisure activity for most older learners. A quarter say that it has helped them to pass on skills and knowledge to other people, and similar numbers have been enabled to get or keep a job. Getting involved in society and with the digital world, improving health, managing caring roles and coping with life crises are also identified, suggesting that learning plays an important part in enabling people to make a contribution to society.

The changing pattern of learning providers

During the last seven years, the providers of learning opportunities for older people have become more polarised and specialised. Public sector FE and HE institutions are withdrawing from work with older learners, while independent learning and work-based learning have grown. For those still in work, learning is largely provided by the employer, in the workplace or on the job for the lower occupational groups, and off-site for the higher ones.

For those who are still using the public sector institutions, the unemployed tend to go to FE colleges, while the retired are strongly concentrated in adult education and community centres and the WEA. There is a small, but apparently very loyal, group who study through HE institutions.

The rise of independent learning is notable, growing in importance as people age, and especially among the higher social classes and the better qualified. Where, in 2005, 21% of people over 55 said they were learning 'at home', in 2012, 38% of those aged 50+ said that they were learning 'independently'.²⁹ There appears to have been a very substantial shift from learning as a social activity to learning as a solitary one, with 28% of all learners learning either independently on their own or online. Nevertheless, nearly one in ten were learning independently with others, and 1% in a self-organised group (e.g. U3A). The real figure may be higher, if some people in learning groups do not see what they do as 'learning', or are involved in several forms of learning and choose something more formal as their 'main' learning (about which they are then questioned).

Who is not learning?

'Resistance to learning' remains strong among older people. Among the 80% who have not learned in the last three years, four out of five have no plans to start, and more than half say that nothing would make them more likely to do so.

However, there is a group of non-learners who might be persuaded to take up learning, predominantly people who have done some learning since school, women aged 55–64 and people in higher social classes. Among this 'persuadable' group, the dominant issue is relevance: 'If the learning was related to something I'm interested in' was the most common response, with traditional barriers like location, timing and cost relatively lower in priority.

There are two clear general messages from the responses to this question. Firstly, most older non-learners either do not see learning as relevant to their lives or they do not recognise things which they do as 'learning', despite the explanatory introduction to the survey. Secondly, although policy may seek to overcome 'barriers' to learning, the patterns of participation are deeply rooted in initial education, social class, working status and age. While the effect of age may change as each new generation brings different life experiences and expectations to later life, the others remain powerful and intractable barriers to wider participation. Given the personal and social benefits which learners report, this is a problem which needs tackling.

Policy implications

The benefits of learning identified in this survey are clearly desirable, for both individuals and society. If policy-makers wished to extend these to a wider population, what might be done to stimulate this? The key objectives would seem to be the following.

- **Improve the bridges between work and retirement.** Work-related learning engages a much wider spectrum of people. If this engagement could be spread into retirement

²⁹ The question changed in the 2012 survey so results are not directly comparable.

it would significantly change patterns of learning among the retired population. Pre-retirement education is one possible route, but few people, mainly professionals and managers, and those in large organisations, have access to it, and it is usually too short and too late.

- **Change perceptions of learning.** Encourage people to recognise the learning which they already do, and to recognise that this might be enhanced by more conscious and formal engagement.
- **Improve relevance.** Once people have begun to take part, and see themselves as successful learners, they are much more likely to continue. Since relevance is the key issue for the persuadable non-learners, it is important to expand the range of opportunities of all kinds. While this would include support for many 'subjects' whose public benefits appear remote, the evidence on the relationship between subject, motivation and benefit is clear that using course title to judge the benefits to society can be seriously misleading.
- **Review the role of public sector providers.** Government policy has led, directly and indirectly, to a major withdrawal by FE and HE institutions from provision for older people. While much of the gap seem to be taken up by private and voluntary activity, it is not clear that the same needs are being met, or that this is necessarily the most effective way of achieving broader social policy goals.

Research issues

All surveys raise new questions. Perhaps the most critical issue from this one is the ambiguity of the term 'learning'. Despite the careful explanation at the beginning of the survey, it appears that measuring what older people perceive as learning tells us more about how they understand their activities than about 'learning' as understood by professional educators or researchers. It is possible that this effect also varies with age. The contrast between the results of the three national surveys conducted between 2010 and 2012 suggests that this question would merit further study.

A further issue is the nature of independent learning. This appears to have expanded greatly as provision by public sector agencies has shrunk. It also appears to have led to more solitary and less social patterns of learning. Participation in this learning is also more heavily concentrated among the higher social classes and those with the longest initial education. Again, this may reflect how people are thinking about 'learning' and especially about online learning. However, it is worth further investigation to examine whether the shift from group learning in public sector institutions to independent learning is changing the social profile of learners and delivering different benefits.

For the population as a whole, social class is a critical factor in shaping attitudes and behaviour, including patterns of participation in learning. However, the notion of social class based on previous employment is problematic for people who left the labour market 30 years ago, while current income (which is affected by accidental patterns of personal circumstance and pension provision) may not reflect the attitudes and expectations of particular older people. It may be appropriate to explore different ways of understanding social groupings among the older population and the place which learning occupies in this.

Annex 1: Survey questionnaire

In 2012, the NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey included 2198 individuals aged over 49. All were asked the normal survey questions about their learning experiences and attitudes. A further sample of 2403 people over 49 was asked additional questions, about subject studied, benefits of learning and volunteering.

This report draws on both samples: giving a total population of 4601 older people, including 859 'learners' (18.7%) and 3689 'non-learners' (80.2%).³⁰ Unless stated otherwise, all the commentary in this report refers to this sample of people aged 50 or over.

NIACE's Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2012: questionnaire for boosted sample of adults 50+

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.

Q.1 Which of the following statements most applies to you?

- 1 I am currently doing some learning activity now
- 2 I have done some learning activity in the last three years
- 3 I have studied\learnt but it was over three years ago
- 4 I have not studied\learnt since I left full-time education

[All responding 1 or 2 are then asked questions 2 onwards. Others go straight to question 9.]

Q.2 What are you currently learning about?/What have you recently been learning about?

Thinking about your current/recent learning activity, I'd now like to ask you some further questions about it. If you are/have been involved in more than one learning activity, please think about your MAIN LEARNING when answering these questions.

³⁰ 55 replied 'don't know'!

Q2a What are you currently MAINLY learning about?/What have you MAINLY been learning about?

Q.3 So, thinking about your MAIN learning, why have you taken up this learning? /Why did you take up this learning?

If you think both these reasons apply, please pick the reason that best fits why you started the learning to begin with.

- 1 For leisure or personal interest
2 For my work and/or career

Q.4 And how are you doing this learning?/And how did you do this learning?

- 20 On a training course at work
21 On an external training course arranged by my employer
1 On the job
2 Through a university/higher education institution/Open University
3 Through a further education college/tertiary/6th form college
4 Through a local adult education centre/evening institute/Workers' Educational Association class
5 Through a local school
6 Through a voluntary organisation, e.g. Age Concern, Pre-School Learning Alliance
7 Through local community facilities, e.g. library, church
8 Through a leisure or health club
9 Online
10 Independently on my own
11 Independently with others
22 Through a self-organised learning group, e.g. University of the Third Age (U3A)
12 Other

Q.6 On this screen are some reasons people have given for why they chose to learn about a certain subject or skill. Again, thinking of your MAIN learning, which of the following best describes the reasons you started this learning? Probe: Any others?

- 20 To get a paid job
21 To get an unpaid job
22 To get a job with a different employer
23 To change the type of work I do
24 To get a recognised qualification
25 To help in my current job
3 To get a promotion
26 To get a rise in earnings
27 To make my work more satisfying

- 28 To help me get onto a future course of learning
- 29 To develop myself as a person
- 30 To improve my self-confidence
- 31 I enjoy learning/it gives me pleasure
- 32 I am interested in the subject\personal interest
- 33 To meet people
- 6 To find a new partner
- 9 To support my children's schooling
- 10 To improve my health
- 34 As a result of participating in another activity
- 35 Because friends/family/colleagues are also learning
- 12 Not really my choice – employer requirement
- 13 Not really my choice – professional requirement
- 14 Not really my choice – benefit requirement
- 36 Only type of learning available
- 15 Other

Q.6ai On this screen are some of the ways that other people have found learning to be helpful. In which of the following ways has learning helped you?

Please mention all that apply

- 1: Helped me cope with life crises – divorce, bereavement, etc.
- 2: Helped me get involved in society
- 3: Helped me get involved in the digital/online world
- 4: Helped me improve or maintain my health
- 5: Helped me manage my caring responsibilities – for children, partners, older friends or relatives
- 6: Helped me manage my money
- 7: Helped me pass on my skills and knowledge to other people
- 8: Improved my chances of getting or staying in paid work
- 9: Improved my chances of getting or staying in voluntary work
- 10: Improved my reading and maths

Other – PEN WRITE IN

None – BUTTON

DK - BUTTON

Q.6a Does your employer pay for...

- 1 All the cost of your learning
- 2 Some of the cost of your learning
- 3 None of the cost of your learning

Q.6b Which, if any, of these does your employer provide to support your learning/did your employer provide to support your learning?

PROBE: Anything else?

- 1 Financial support to pay fees
- 2 Financial support for materials, equipment and/or examinations costs
- 3 Financial support towards childcare/eldercare costs
- 4 Financial support towards transport costs
- 5 Employee Development Scheme to contribute towards non-work-related learning
- 6 Time off to learn
- 7 Provision of materials and equipment
- 8 Opportunities to put learning into practice in the workplace
- 9 Opportunities to discuss learning within an appraisal or review process
- 10 Learning club for employees
- 11 Workplace learning centre
- 12 Other
- 13 My employer does not offer any support for my learning

[All those not learning now or in last three years.]

Q.9 How likely are you to take up any learning in the next three years?

- 1 Very likely
- 2 Fairly likely
- 3 Fairly unlikely
- 4 Very unlikely

Q.9b On the screen below are some of the things that people say would make learning more attractive. Which, if any, would make you more likely to take up learning?

Please select all that apply.

- 1 If someone I knew and trusted encouraged me
- 2 If someone I knew and trusted came with me
- 3 If someone could help me decide what would be the best learning for me
- 4 If I could learn somewhere I already know and feel comfortable

- 5 If the learning was related to something I'm interested in
- 6 If I had a say in what and when I was going to learn
- 7 If it led to a qualification which employers recognise
- 8 If it led to a qualification which would help them earn more/gain a promotion
- 9 If my line manager/employer encouraged me
- 10 If it was cheaper/the fees were lower
- 11 If my employer would pay all the costs
- 12 If my employer would pay some of the costs
- 13 If I could learn nearer to my home
- 14 If I could learn at home
- 15 If I could learn nearer to my work
- 16 If I could learn at work
- 17 If I could learn in the evening
- 18 If I could learn in the daytime
- 19 If I could learn at weekends
- 20 None of the above

Q.11 If you were to take up learning in the future, Where is the FIRST place that you would go to find out about learning opportunities?

- 1 Friends/family
- 2 Work mates/colleagues
- 3 Work: my employer/training officer/personnel officer
- 4 Trade Union
- 20 Professional association
- 5 Workplace learning representative/Union learning representative
- 6 Jobcentre Plus\employment agency
- 7 Careers advice service/Nextstep/Connexions/Careers Wales/Careers Scotland
- 8 Internet
- 9 Newspapers/magazines
- 11 University/higher education institution/Open University
- 12 Further education college/tertiary/6th form college
- 13 Adult education centre/evening institute/Workers' Educational Association
- 14 Local school
- 15 Public library
- 16 Community centre/voluntary organisation/religious group
- 17 Other

Q.30 Below are various things that people do as unpaid work or as volunteering. Which, if any, do you do regularly as unpaid/a volunteer?

Please mention all that apply.

- 1: Caring for children/grandchildren
- 2: Caring for older people (e.g. partner, parents, neighbours, friends)
- 3: Helping in a school/hospital/care home, etc.
- 4: Volunteering for a charity
- 5: Other volunteering/non-paid (WRITE IN)
- 6: None of these – MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

Demographic variables: all respondents

Age

Gender

Social class (A–E)

Working status

Study status

Age of children

Ethnicity

Internet access

Terminal education age

Annex 2: The relationship between the NIACE survey and other surveys

The NIACE survey is the largest ever undertaken in the UK into older people's learning; however, three other surveys were collecting evidence on related issues at the same time. They produce rather different results, and it is important to understand why this might be.

The surveys are as follows:

National Adult Learner Survey (NALS)	Conducted intermittently since 1996 on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The latest survey interviewed 4647 people over 16 in 2010 about their learning, and reported in 2012. 2100 of these are aged 50+. The survey is exclusively concerned with learning, and asks more detailed questions than any other survey.
Pearson 'Love to Learn' survey	Conducted by IPSOS-MORI on behalf of Pearson, as part of commercial research into the older people's learning market. The sample was 1002 people aged 50+.
Labour Force Survey (LFS)	A quarterly survey conducted for government with a rolling panel of 60,000 adults, 1280 of whom are over 64. Its main focus is employment issues but it includes a number of questions about learning. However, it only questions people over 69 about learning if they are in paid employment.
NIACE Older Learner Survey (NOLS)	Conducted in 2005 and repeated (with some new questions) in 2010 by NIACE as part of its annual Adult Participation in Learning Survey. The sample in 2010 was 4601 people aged 50+, making it the largest of the surveys.

The 2012 National Adult Learner Survey (NALS) reports a significant drop in participation in overall adult learning (all ages) of 11% between 2005 and 2010, with the most dramatic drop (from 56% to 39%) being in non-formal learning.³¹ They attribute this to four factors: costs and the economic downturn; government policy to prioritise longer and qualification-bearing courses; a decline in employer training (also possibly recession related); and a decline in IT-related learning. The second and fourth of these are also evident in the NIACE Older Learner Survey (NOLS), but the first and third are not.

31 Learning in classes, but not leading to formal qualifications.

NALS shows a substantially higher participation rate than the NIACE survey for all learners. We believe that this reflects the different definition of learning used, as well as the way in which the questionnaire is structured. NOLS is carried out through a module inserted into a longer omnibus survey on a range of issues. The module begins with the introductory explanation of 'learning' (which is not repeated) and for most of the questions respondents are asked to identify the 'main' piece of learning when they are answering specific questions, so they are responding about only one kind of learning. By contrast, NALS asks separate questions about nine different kinds of learning, so respondents are reminded at each stage of the definition being used.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) also asks a series of questions about separate kinds of learning (e.g. qualification bearing, workplace, informal learning). LFS produces higher figures for participation, showing around 10% of people aged 65+ in work-related learning in the last 13 weeks. Again, this higher number probably reflects the fact that the survey asks more detailed questions about particular kinds of learning, but also because it excludes people who are over 69 and not in paid work, the group with the lowest participation rates.

The full report of the Pearson survey has not been published, but the executive summary indicates that it is based on a representative sample of 1002 people over 50, interviewed in August 2012. It reports that 87% of people aged 50+ have 'a strong appetite for learning', but that a third feel that 'learning doors' are closed to them. Only 13% said that their appetite for learning was low or non-existent.

It is likely that some of the differences between NOLS on one hand and NALS and LFS on the other, are explained by these differences in methodology. The NIACE definition is long and complex. Some respondents will probably not understand it, and more are likely to have forgotten it before they finish answering the questions. They may, therefore, fall back on their personal understanding of 'learning', which is likely to be more formal 'education'. When asked to identify their 'main' learning, they may also be more likely to select more formal kinds of learning, producing a bias away from informal and individual learning. As a result, NOLS probably produces a more accurate representation of unprompted attitudes to learning, but it will produce lower participation figures than the NALS approach, and may lead to underreporting of less formal kinds of learning.

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