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A proposed
**Strategy for an inclusive
student profile in adult
education**

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Colchester Adult Learning Continuing Access Group
August 2007

Introduction

Learning in adult life contributes significantly towards the development and sustainability of a civilised and cohesive society. This assertion featured significantly in the first Remit Letter to the Learning and Skills Council from the Secretary of State in November 2000 and has been continually reinforced by the Occasional Research Papers of the School of Continuing Education, Birkbeck College, and the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, University of London.

Positive learning opportunities experienced at all stages of life foster open, enquiring minds and help to build greater understanding between individuals, generations and communities and build stronger neighbourhoods.

Alternatively, if there are significant cohorts within the community who choose not to continue learning, perhaps succumbing to barriers such as loss of confidence, lack of motivation or the financial costs entailed, there is a corresponding weakening of the economic and social fabric of society.

In younger adults this could be due to lack of achievement at school. More mature adults could face a range of life-changing experiences which divert them from learning, whereas in older adults all these, plus other factors such as the prospect of failing health, reduced income and being out of step with modern society may come into play. Adults at any stage of life can be coerced by the enormity of a range of life-changing events into adopting a silo mentality.

Promoting adult learning for all by adopting a strategy which positively encourages active learning throughout life is a powerful way for local and national government to support and develop its citizens. Offering a range of choices and incentives, whether curriculum-based or financial, can encourage participation and demonstrate that adult learning is meant to be an inclusive activity - open to all adults, of all ages, backgrounds and at all stages of life.

Shared positive learning experiences can help to strengthen families, and the individuals within them, by opening up opportunities of all kinds; from skills for work to skills for life and leisure; from an understanding of history to understanding new technologies, and from the appreciation of the arts and culture to the practice and development of artistic and cultural activities.

Active participation in learning helps to create a society of active citizens.

A society of learners creates a learning society - to the benefit of individuals, families, communities, and local and national enterprise, commerce and industry.

Aims

This strategy aims to ensure:

- that learning opportunities are accessible to adults at all life stages
- that adults are encouraged to gain access to the curriculum whenever it is appropriate for them
- that participation by all adults is enabled, acknowledging the wide range of motivations, from finding work to progressing in work; from personal reasons to family and community reasons.

This strategy recognises that motivation varies and can reflect differing circumstances encountered during different life stages. These are addressed by a range of measures addressing:

- the effects of previous educational experience
- the relevance of the curriculum available
- the social and learning environment
- the effects of various financial barriers

In ensuring that the educational opportunities on offer reflect the needs of individuals, the local community and society in general, regard should also be paid to the composition of the student body. The best-balanced student cohort is one which best reflects the local community.

This brings a further dimension in support of relevance, excellence and added value during the learning experience; that of the pursuit of high-quality interaction between diverse participants. In these circumstances, no learner is more important than another and no reason for learning more relevant than another.

Objectives

This strategy supports teaching and learning by aiming to create a cohesive, inclusive student body through pursuit of these objectives:

- equal access for everyone
- active participation, not passive consumption
- encouragement of contributions from all learners
- all learners' contributions being valued
- prevention of isolation and marginalisation
- participation regardless of previous educational experience
- positive interaction between all sectors of society engaged in learning

Strategy

Learning requirements and the modes of learning adopted by adults may vary according to individuals' circumstances, but may also be significantly affected by life stages. Various barriers likely to be encountered at each stage are addressed in the Strategy.

Young adults

Adult education offers an alternative to the standard choice of sixth-form, further- or higher-education routes.

Young adults may access adult learning opportunities in order to:

- start afresh in a new environment after problematic previous experiences
- take advantage of the support available from more mature company
- address underachievement in specific areas such as basic and key skills in less formal settings

This strategy will enable this to be achieved by:

- identifying curriculum areas which can support young adults in preparing to take up further education and training not currently open to them
- marketing to young adults the advantages of continuing to learn in a more mature environment guided by sympathetic tutors and in the company of supportive older colleagues
- implementing the current financial incentives available through government funding agencies and support systems

These measures are necessary because:

- adult education will not usually be seen by younger adults as a natural path to follow upon leaving school
- young people with few qualifications are unlikely to have been able to gain lucrative employment and may not have financial resources to choose fee-paying courses from the wider adult education curriculum
- government funding agencies will only remit fees and/or provide funding for a designated range of national priority subjects and levels

Adults experiencing life changes

Adult life is complicated and brings many challenges, often unforeseen, unplanned and at inconvenient and inappropriate times.

People may access adult learning opportunities in order to seek support in coping with life-changing circumstances, such as:

- addressing issues arising from parenthood
- coping with career issues such as unemployment and redundancy
- ameliorating damaging effects of personal, family and health circumstances
- coping with the effects of lack of confidence and/or a skills deficit
- addressing problems encountered due to issues such as gender and ethnicity
- coping with a changing society, nationally and in local communities

This strategy will enable this to be achieved by:

- identifying where support is required and designing and implementing curriculum responses through appropriate subjects, levels, modes of presentation and learning environments
- identifying and providing additional support mechanisms such as educational advice and guidance, childcare, study facilities, mentoring and counselling
- researching a range of methods of funding such opportunities, from seeking short-term funding for pump-priming projects for communities to sustain themselves, to building curriculum pathways which may be inserted into the core adult education programme and become part of the main programme
- where appropriate, implementing the current financial incentives available through government funding agencies and support systems for national priority subjects and levels of study
- building partnerships with appropriate other agencies in order to maximise both the sustainability of initiatives and the financial resources available - especially where it may be possible to remit fees entirely as an incentive to participation

These measures are necessary because:

- when faced with stressful life changes, many people will be reluctant to commit to a course of learning unless it clearly demonstrates its relevance
- when a loss of confidence has occurred, many people will be reluctant to expose themselves to possibilities of failure and any consequent stress unless the perceived barriers, such as time commitment, possibility of failure, financial difficulties are addressed
- government funding agencies will only remit fees and/or provide funding for a designated range of national priority subjects and levels

Older adults

Older adults can benefit from continued engagement in learning in ways which go beyond the curriculum content.

This strategy positively encourages participation in courses and classes, beyond social gatherings, because these are structured for development and can help to stimulate individuals' faculties, as well as providing fellowship and encouraging sociability.

Additionally, by drawing on experience, older people as fellow students can enrich the educational experience of others.

Older people may access adult education opportunities in order to:

- continue participation in learning of all kinds
- maintain independence
- reduce dependence on social and health support agencies
- understand changes and developments in technology, society and the world
- combat the isolation which can come with advancing years
- prevent marginalisation in their communities
- access learning/up-skilling currently targeted on the economically active

This strategy will enable this to be achieved by:

- ensuring that the mainstream curriculum is inclusive
- actively promoting intergenerational understanding and co-operation
- ensuring that there is flexibility for self-managing groups of older people to contribute to their own curriculum development through the organisation of co-operative learning opportunities
- ensuring that community outreach activities acknowledge and encourage the contribution that can be made by older residents
- reducing the financial burden of fees by offering a range of reductions to those no longer in full-time paid employment and who qualify for the state retirement pension

Older adults continued

These measures are necessary because:

- access to adult education is made more difficult for older people for a number of reasons not necessarily covered by means-testing, such as a reduction in health, mobility problems, much-reduced income, cultural difficulties and feelings of alienation
 - the current increasing concentration on provision for younger people will result in a consequent lowering of the age profile in adult education, making access even less likely for those older people who are more comfortable learning in a predominantly adult environment.
 - government funding agencies will only remit fees and/or provide funding for a designated range of national priority subjects and levels
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Conclusion

Thus, by addressing specific issues of access and participation at all life stages, this Strategy objectively justifies curriculum, organisational and financial incentives relevant to distinct age ranges, throughout an adult life-span.

We commend this Strategy to any provider of adult learning wishing to acknowledge and positively challenge barriers to access to lifelong learning opportunities.

CALCAG Trustees
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Additional Notes

Funding and administrative arrangements

The current fees, any available financial support and the implementation of regulations for publicly-supported adult education will inevitably be affected by the provider's own budget, national and local government policies, as well as those of the relevant funding, quality and professional regulatory regimes.

However, adoption of this Strategy should enable analysis of the effects of such influences. In this way, providers can directly manage their provision within a strategic context, rather than be forced to implement sudden changes in a reactive way.

Breadth of curriculum offer

A provider's ability to present a relevant and comprehensive curriculum will inevitably be affected by a number of external and internal influences. Adoption of this Strategy should enhance their contribution to a community's educational opportunities by enabling an analysis of the effectiveness of the provider's own services and encourage networking with other local providers, to the benefit of the whole community.

A community of learners

Although the curriculum forms the basis of educational activity, it is by no means the only learning experience to be gained from participation in classes. A representative, vibrant, active and cohesive student body engenders a community of learners, rather than a disparate collection of individuals or groups which happen to attend the same venue.

An interactive learning community gives rise to extra-mural activities, whether educationally or socially motivated. These opportunities for enhanced participation, including the chance to contribute, lead to enhanced integration within the student body and, eventually in relation to the wider community. In this way the student body can not only become a reflection of the local community, but also have significance within it - to the advantage of the institution, the staff and learners and wider society.

Personal circumstances and special needs

Whilst recognising that some individuals will require extra support for a variety of reasons including the need to cope with disabling conditions, physical and intellectual, personal and social, this strategy does not differentiate between these issues at any life stage. Special needs will necessitate appropriate specific responses.

By ensuring there are effective mechanisms to support learning, alongside an advice and guidance system to assist appropriate entry and progression, providers can use this Strategy to address equally the needs of a school leaver alongside an older adult, a learning-disabled person alongside a high-achiever.

Current Indicators and references

Employment Equality (Age) Regulations

“Any legislation in this area would need to be carefully framed to ensure it prevented harmful age discrimination while enabling beneficial and justifiable age differentiation to continue.”

DfES June 2007 Discrimination Law Review – a framework for fairness Ch9.16

“This department has never funded ... concessions for older learners above the standard public subsidy. Additional concessions for older learners have been at the discretion (and cost) of individual providers. Following the introduction of the new legislation, it will continue to be the learning provider’s decision as to whether to offer these additional subsidies.”

Phil Hope MP (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Skills) 2007

Participation by disadvantaged adults

“Overall participation rates by poorer people are half that of the better off: 27% DEs; 48% C1s; 55% ABs”

“33% of adults have done no learning since leaving school”

NIACE ‘Older and Bolder’ 13th March 2007

Value of mixed-age student body

“Intergenerational, congregate living has many benefits. This type of living arrangement provides a surrogate family for seniors who have lost family and friends over the years. Similarly, it provides a first opportunity for college students to live away from home and learn to manage their own schedules and responsibilities. It also gives everyone involved a variety of socialization opportunities. This is key since we all, at heart, are truly "social animals."

Director of Community Outreach Services, St. Vincent de Paul Center, 2145 N. Halsted, Chicago, explaining the concept of this intergenerational residence for seniors and college students

Participation by Older Adults

“The Learning and Skills Council’s statistical release for October 2006 shows a further significant drop in the number of adult learners – including one in three fewer learners over age 60”.

NIACE press statement of 28th March 2007

“In further education, older people are under-represented, with students over the age of 65 forming just 3.5% of enrolments. This continued absence of older people makes it difficult to overcome prejudices and discrimination.”

“Age Discrimination in Public Policy” 2002
Help the Aged, London N1 9UZ
www.helptheaged.org.uk

“DfES figures show that there are now 33% fewer people over 60 years in FE”

U3A News Spring 2007

“Older adults’ participation rates stand at less than 1 in 5; 19% over-65s are learning; 15% over-75s” are learning”

NIACE

“The latest survey shows that the numbers of learners over 60 have been in steep decline. This is not the way to a learning society What is adult learning doing for the 13% of people over 65 who say that they are always lonely for the 82% who have never used the internet ?

Prof Stephen McNair, Editorial ‘older and Bolder’
Newsletter June 2007 NIACE

Research on Benefits of Learning

Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning

Institute of Education, Bedford Way, WC1H 0AL
www.learningbenefits.net

Occasional Research Papers (various authors)

School of Continuing Education, Birkbeck College, University of London, Malet Street, Bloomsbury London WC1E 7HX
www.bbk.ac.uk/ce/research