# RESEARCH ABSTRACT

**ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS IN THE CONTEXT OF INCORPORATION OF INSTITUTES OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

The purpose of the research is to investigate how Institute managers can address communities in order to make long term provision which will meet the needs of adult learners.

A total of 7 Further Education Institutes participated in the study and 33 courses (11 of which were selected for an interview phase), 10 class tutors and 7 Institute managers, formed the sample group from which the data was obtained.  The research framework embraced both quantitative and qualitative methodologies which were employed at a number of levels within the project design.  The study sought the views of under-represented adult learners, who were defined as 'adults over 25 years of age who had not accessed learning opportunities since leaving compulsory education'.  Student responses were examined in terms of the individual's attitude to learning, perceived barriers, course experience and suggested improvements.  The views of class tutors and Institute managers, interviewed from the selected Institutes, provided information on the involvement of FE Institutes in adult education planning and provision.

Although a diverse student group took part in the study, their educational experiences tended to be quite positive.  It was clear from the results that class tutors played a significant part in adult students' perceptions and experiences of further education, as there were recurrent descriptions of tutors' style of teaching.  This was characterised as being supportive, helpful, guiding and encouraging, where flexible and varied methods of delivery were utilised in the learning environment. The importance of the educator's approach was highlighted further in the finding that attitudinal preoccupations were dominated by concerns about study skills, time management and fear of failure.  Students commented on lengthy absences from education, which meant they might not cope with modern structures of assessment, that were not in use when they attended school.  The association between previous school experiences and expectations of FE courses is an important factor for consideration.  The results from the current study found that males from non-selective schools reported previous negative school experiences to be the most

significant barrier to returning to education.  In this respect, more active learning methods that engage the student in their own learning experience might reduce the likelihood of confirming expectations that further education is dominated by traditional methods.  This raises the need for relevant staff training that encourages a person-centred teaching style and support for staff in terms of their continuous professional development.

The social component of learning was also emphasised by participants who believed that fellow students offered encouragement, support and the motivation to continue with the course.  The experiences recorded in the current study indicate that learning is not perceived by adult learners as purely instrumental and they mention potential benefits at a number of levels, for both self and others.  Similarly, learning outcomes were not measured solely in terms of qualification by adult students; but instead they also cited opportunities to experience accomplishment, build on self-esteem, help one's family, provide a focus in life and create choices.

An exploration of the potential and perceived barriers to learning revealed that a number of recommendations could be put forward that would help improve adult education provision.  These included: more one-to-one tutoring; improved childcare provision; imaginative career guidance; supervised Information Computer Technology training; widened funding opportunities beyond Adult Basic Education and special needs courses, with greater attention being paid to the importance of physical space by having an adult friendly environment.

Special needs provision in FE Institutes was examined, and it emerged that there was a need for greater distribution of services across all Institutes.  Courses offered to students with disabilities should be ability levelled to take account of social, cognitive, educational, physical and medical needs.  This may serve to reduce way reduce misplacement which was viewed by Institute managers and representatives from outside agencies as having detrimental effects on the student's perception of their learning ability.  In addition, disability awareness training was recommended by representatives responsible for special needs provision, for both staff and other student groups in order for them to have a greater understanding of issues affecting disabled students.  Furthermore, this may help special needs students integrate into a mainstream education environment.

Institute level planning, provision and delivery of adult and community education was explored through the responses of class tutors and Institute managers.  There was a consensus among managers that current structures and approaches used to plan adult education courses are not appropriate as they do not allow for the flexible and somewhat unstable nature of adult and community education.  The inadequacies of existing methods are evidenced at a number of levels, and, particularly, in respect of monitoring and evaluation procedures, the need for more adaptable financial formulae, performance indicators that can be translated for comparisons with other areas of Institute business and a more flexible decision-making process that can accommodate continuous change within a demand-driven model of adult and community education.

The clearest trend emerging from the data obtained in the study was the importance of community based provision, which offered learning opportunities in a friendly, familiar and convenient location.  Community type provision as described by adult students, tutors and managers in this project, was synonymous with an adult friendly environment, which is characterised by a 'safe' space that is comfortable, friendly, local and informal, with flexible, motivated and accommodating staff.  Adult education offered at a community level could engage learners by introducing education through taster courses, which eventually might lead them down the pathway to mainstream education.  It would, at the very least, mean that groups of adults who might otherwise be excluded from education could have the opportunity to engage in a learning culture that has become increasingly lifelong.

## Aims and objectives

The aim is to examine the different methods of addressing the learning needs of adults in order to improve further education provision.

The objectives are to examine the strategic approaches adopted by further education Institute managers in planning for adult learners;

To identify current incidences of successful practice in relation to promoting adult learning in community contexts;

To investigate these contexts, including partnership aspects, in order to develop understanding of how Institute managers may best plan for adult learners through an analysis of the attributes of successful practice and identification of inhibiting factors;

To examine the cultural, ideological and attitudinal factors which shape the responses of adults to further education provision;

To assess the resource implications of planning for adult learners;

To provide recommendations for policy and practice in adult education.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The conclusions serve as a basis for proposing recommendations in the strategic planning of adult education provision.  They are intended to inform current practice by highlighting areas for improvement, which might be translated into initiatives through Institute business plans. The recommendations refer to a number of pertinent issues that were indicated by the results and are presented below:

**Adult learners**

1.1.    Recruitment strategies should be designed to more effectively engage under-represented groups such as:

      1.1.1    males from non-selective schools;

      1.1.2    adults returning for the first time since leaving compulsory education;

      1.1.3    adults affected by the 'benefits trap';

      1.1.4    potential participants in rural areas; and

      1.1.5    adults with a negative perception of education.

1.2    Perceived barriers to learning should be addressed by Institutes, with particular attention being paid to barriers that are logistical in nature. These include:

      1.2.1    improving childminding provision and facilities for parents wanting to access learning opportunities in FE;

      1.2.2    providing resources, especially electronic resources in 'safe', familiar environments, where adults can develop self-confidence among like-minded peers and where supervised support is available;

      1.2.3    reducing fees for courses that are above the level of ABE;

      1.2.4    planning course fees to take account of potential students affected by the benefits trap;

      1.2.5    addressing distinctions made between part-time and full-time students to ensure adults with part-time student status are not discriminated against by having flexible opening hours for libraries and IT suites; and

      1.2.6    employing more imaginative career guidance methods so that adult learners have a clear indication of possible progression routes and the potential benefits of selecting particular courses.

1.3     An awareness of the perceived attitudinal barriers faced by adults returning to education should be developed among Institute staff, in order to improve the quality of guidance and support offered to adult students.  Barriers to be taken account of include:

   1.3.1   the external commitments of adult learners;

   1.3.2   perceptions of personal ability;

   1.3.3   individuals' self-confidence; and

   1.3.4   time management and study skills.

1.4     The importance of physical space in the educational experience of adult learners should be considered by Institutes when planning the provision and delivery of adult education courses.  An adult friendly environment should offer the following:

   1.4.1   a friendly environment;

   1.4.2   comfortable, homely and informal surroundings;

   1.4.3   convenient, familiar locations; and

   1.4.4   accommodating, flexible staff.

1.5     Adult learners in this study identified key factors which best defined the most suitable teaching/learning methods for adult students.  Based on this, the teaching style most appropriate for adults should be:

   1.5.1   supportive;

   1.5.2   characterised by active learning methods;

   1.5.3   flexible and accommodating;

   1.5.4   utilising the life experiences of adults in the learning environment;

   1.5.5   employing diverse teaching methods; and

   1.5.6   adult orientated, with less emphasis placed on traditional techniques.

1.6     Special needs provision requires an accurate assessment of the learners' social, cognitive, physical and educational needs to try to ensure that there is an appropriate fit between the individual's needs and the course selected.

1.7     The distribution of special needs courses should be sought in terms of availability and quality of provision across FE Institutes so that there is an appropriate response to needs identified in a specific area.  Particular attention should be paid to educational provision in rural areas for students with disabilities.

1.8     Disability awareness training should take place in Institutes for staff and students to tackle misconceptions associated with disability and to increase awareness about issues affecting special needs students.

1.9     The availability of an adult friendly environment should also be central to the provision of special needs courses, with additional attention paid to specific facilities in the learning setting that are dictated by the physical requirements of disabled students.

**Institutional planning**

1.10    Adult education provision should be improved to allow for greater access at locally based centres, where this is financially viable.

1.11    Genuine partnerships should be sought and developed between FE Institutes and community groups.

1.12    The importance of physical space and attributes of an adult friendly environment should be central to the development and implementation of adult education programmes.  The characteristics of an environment that facilitates learning includes:

   1.12.1     comfortable, relaxed surroundings, which are conducive to learning;

   1.12.2     respect for adult students;

   1.12.3     good pastoral care and support;

   1.12.4     locally based provision;

   1.12.5     courses which are demand-driven; and

   1.12.6     flexible management structures.

1.13    Recruitment strategies should be refined to ensure that under-represented groups have opportunities to engage in learning.  Steps to ensure that adult education is more inclusive should include:

   1.13.1     improving advertising in areas where under-represented groups are located;

1.13.2     devising more effective marketing techniques to target under-represented groups;

1.13.3     addressing misconceptions associated with learning among these groups;

1.13.4     establishing learning needs and meeting the demands of potential learners;

1.13.5     building genuine relationships with groups and offering locally based provision; and

1.13.6     maintaining and developing links made with under-represented groups currently engaged in adult and community education programmes.

1.14    Careers guidance should be developed to incorporate more imaginative techniques that can offer adult learners clear and consistent information on learning outcomes and progression routes.

1.15    As adult education courses are predominantly part-time, special funding and fee remission may be available to part-time students, in relation to childcare provision and transport.

1.16    The training needs of staff who deliver adult education courses should be addressed to include:

1.16.1     training on more relevant careers guidance that is appropriate to mature students;

1.16.2     counselling skills that can be used to support and guide the learner through difficulties that influence their educational experience at Institute; and

1.16.3     ICT training to ensure that adult students can be offered supervised support when developing ICT skills.

1.17    Institute tutors should be offered support and supervision as a forum to assess and re-assess their own professional practice and needs.

1.18    A more flexible model of learning is required to accommodate the volatility of adult and community education.  This model should be developed to include:

1.18.1     a re-assessment within management structures of how learning is defined by adult students, with an increased awareness about the

role that accomplishment rather than accreditation plays in the educational experience of adult learners;

1.18.2    a decision-making process that can accommodate the less structured approach needed to develop and initiate adult and community education courses;

1.18.3    more sensitive monitoring and evaluation methods;

1.18.4    more appropriate performance indicators that can translate the success of adult and community courses in terms of traditional indices used for other areas of Institute business; and

1.18.5    financial formulae that are adaptable within unstable and malleable structures which characterise adult and community education.

1.19    The distribution of resources, in particular, electronic resources, should be more consistent and widespread to include outcentres and rural based provision.

1.20    The sharing of good practice should be encouraged across the education and training sectors.

1.21    The introduction of Individual Student Learner Agreements (ISLA's) should be tailored to accommodate the different needs of adult students and their individual circumstances.

1.22    The quality of accreditation for adult courses should be on a power with the quality for national standards.

1.23    Adult Basic Education should be attended to more closely by FE Institutes, and continuous support should be provided so that; (*3.1.7*)

1.23.1   Staff delivering Adult Basic Education (ABE) should be appropriately trained and experienced in working with ABE students;

1.23.2   Awareness should be promoted within management structures of the role of ABE in adult and community education in the present climate of lifelong learning;

1.23.3   Strategies should be developed at management level to promote ABE within the community and vehicles for dissemination should be utilised to dispel myths about basic education and promote the role of ABE in education and domestic environments; and

Institutes should be encouraged to accept ABE as a serious part of Institute business, alongside other more traditional courses which have proven financial worth.

*This document is a summary of the full research report, and as such any views it contains are not necessarily those of DEL.*


**Full Report**

Copies of the report entitled 'ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS IN THE CONTEXT OF INCORPORATION OF INSTITUTES OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION', by

> Dr. Katrina Collins, Professor Gerry McAleavy, Dr.Gary Adamson,  of the
> > Further and Higher Education Research Unit, University of Ulster, Jordanstown;
> Mr. John Reid, Newry and Kilkeel Institute of Further and Higher Education; and
> Mr. John Gray, Upper Bann Institute of Further and Higher Education,

 is available from Department for Employment and Learning priced £5.


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