

Removing the Barriers to Learning: Exploring Adult Perceptions and Attitudes to Participation in Further Education

Part One: Research Report

FINAL REPORT

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Appendix 1: Bibliography

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We would also like to thank all those who took part in the three surveys and interviews for their participation and willingness to take part.

Thank you.

Notes:

Full methodological details for the study are provided in Part Two: Technical Appendix.

A number of quantitative terms are used in the report. In percentages, the terms correspond as follows:-

- More than 90 per cent - almost/nearly all;
- 75 per cent-90 per cent – most;
- 50 per cent-74 per cent - a majority ;
- 30 per cent-49 per cent - a significant minority;
- 10 per cent-29 per cent - a minority;
- Less than 10 per cent - very few/a small number.

In order to facilitate our research, Omnibus survey participants were categorised into four 'learner' groups. These were:

- Learner – those who are currently enrolled at an FE college;
- Potential learner – those who have undertaken a course/courses at an FE college within the last three years but are not currently enrolled;
- Non-learner with interest – those who have not undertaken any courses at an FE college within the last three years but would be interested in undertaking a course within the next two years; and
- Non-learner with no interest – those who have not undertaken any courses at an FE college within the last three years and have no interest in doing so.

1. Executive Summary

1.1. Introduction

Deloitte, working in partnership with Ipsos MORI, was commissioned by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to research:

- adult perceptions of Further Education (FE);
- reasons for participation;
- barriers to entry; and
- the benefits of participating in non-vocational courses.

This is a summary report, highlighting the key findings.

1.2. Strategic Context

The FE sector plays an important role in raising literacy levels, and up-skilling and re-skilling the workforce necessary for a knowledge-based economy. The current economic climate has led to increased unemployment rates and redundancies. Certain industries within Northern Ireland have been hit hard, particularly those that typically employed low-skilled workers. It is therefore even more important that there is a focus on raising the skills level of the whole workforce to enable progression up the skills ladder. According to Departmental statistics, enrolments are equivalent to approximately one in twenty of the Northern Ireland population participating in FE, indicating that FE has a critical role in helping the broader Northern Ireland economy achieve a skills balance.

Over the past few years, DEL has sought to refocus FE on providing the workforce with the skills necessary to support the economy, with particular focus on skills development in priority skills areas, increasing enrolments at level 2 and 3 and developing essential skills.

Within this context, non-vocational courses are not a funding priority and DEL funding for these courses was capped in 2007/08 to a maximum of five per cent of overall funding awarded to each College. This may have contributed to the recent decrease in enrolments in non-vocational courses, but these types of courses still make up around a 20 per cent of enrolments overall. Enrolments on professional and technical courses have increased.

The benefits of undertaking non-vocational learning are subject to debate. They are frequently associated with personal and social benefits, but the impact on actual learning and skills progression and on engaging those from more disadvantaged areas is less well evidenced. It is within this context that this research has been undertaken to understand the impact of non-vocational learning and how likely it is to lead to progression.

1.3. Summary of Findings

This research involved three surveys conducted by Ipsos MORI:

- a general population survey with 1,004 people;
- a telephone survey with 200 people who enrolled on a non-vocational course within the last year; and
- a telephone survey with 201 people who dropped-out on an FE course within the last year.

The general population survey formed part of Ipsos MORI's monthly Omnibus Survey and categorised learners into four types:

- current learners (currently enrolled on FE);
- potential learners (completed an FE course within the last three years);
- non-learners with interest; and
- non-learners with no interest.

The survey aimed to collect views on attitudes and awareness of FE, reasons for participation, perceived barriers to learning, and benefits of learning. Seventeen per cent of the sampled respondents were either current or potential learners.

It was recognised that the Omnibus Survey alone may not give access to sufficient people who have either taken part in a non-vocational course or dropped out early, so separate surveys were conducted to gather views on reasons for participation, reasons for drop-out, benefits of learning and progression.

Adult Perceptions of FE

Survey results showed there to be a strong awareness of FE provision and a positive attitude towards learning in general, with the majority of people viewing learning as a life-long activity and an important employability factor. FE's role in providing flexible routes to learning and second chances for learning was also recognised. In addition, 67 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that those who go to university are more likely to get a job than those who go to a FE college, indicating that respondents consider FE qualifications to be at least as useful in gaining employment as qualifications gained at higher education institutions. However, recognition of higher education provision in the FE setting was lower than for other types of FE provision - 20 per cent of respondents did not think full-time and part-time degrees were offered at FE colleges.

Motivations for Participation in FE

Reasons for participating in FE were found to be similar whether participants experienced accredited or non-vocational provision. However, those enrolled on non-vocational provision tended to put a stronger emphasis on social motivators with 82 per cent stating they had enrolled 'for fun'. Improved physical health was cited as a benefit experienced by 15 per cent of those enrolled on non-vocational provision.

There was some evidence that socio-economic factors play a part in whether people decide to enrol on a vocational or non-vocational course. The socio-economic analysis of the Omnibus Survey showed that those who chose to enrol on a non-vocational course are more likely to be from a more advantaged background i.e. own their home outright, are lower middle class (C1), middle class (B) or upper middle class (A), and more likely to hold higher level qualifications. Those undertaking accredited courses tended to be from a more disadvantaged background i.e. rent through the NIHE and are more likely to be lower middle class (C1) or on benefits (E).

Why Some Students Drop-Out

The early leavers survey (n=201) found that the positive impact of learning was lessened for those who left early and the most common reasons for drop-out were attributed to perceived poor standards of teaching (12 per cent), health reasons (7 per cent), work commitments (9 per cent) and childcare issues (6 per cent). Despite the largest reason for drop-out being the perceived poor standard of teaching, just five per cent stated that having a different tutor would have prevented them from leaving. Early leavers who stated they were unlikely to continue with their learning cited this was

because they had had enough of learning, had been put off by a bad experience or because of lack of time due to work.

Perceived Barriers to Entry

The cost of courses was perceived as a barrier to entry to a much larger extent by non-vocational survey respondents with 56 per cent citing it as a barrier compared to 15 per cent of those who had not undertaken any learning in the past three years but had considered it. Work and family commitments were perceived as the main barriers for this group. Those on non-vocational courses may be more likely to view the costs of courses as a barrier because around 20 per cent of these courses are run on a cost-recovery basis.

Progression to Further Study

There is some evidence of progression from non-vocational to accredited provision across the surveys and across learner types but the extent of progression is limited. Although the survey of those who had undertaken a non-vocational course in the last year found a high degree of repeated learning (59 per cent had done more than one course), only 10 per cent of respondents overall had gone on to do a course with a qualification at this stage. The Omnibus Survey provided a longer-term view of progression but only a slightly higher rate of progression. Twelve per cent of the potential learners identified through the Omnibus Survey had started with a non-vocational course and progressed to an accredited course. This suggests that while non-vocational learning may promote progression, its impact is not particularly widespread.

1.4. Conclusions

The research has shown there to be a high level of awareness and positive attitude to FE in general. The main barriers to learning, for those who are interested in learning, relate to timing, work, family commitments and cost of courses. These could potentially be addressed and may help to encourage learners to continue or progress. The motivations of those who enrol on non-vocational courses are more likely to be social and health-related than for those enrolling on vocational courses, but there is evidence of progression by a small group of these learners for whom non-vocational learning has been a stepping stone to vocational learning.

2. Introduction

Deloitte, working in partnership with Ipsos MORI, was commissioned by the Department for Employment and Learning to research:

- adult perceptions of Further Education (FE);
- reasons for participation;
- barriers to entry; and
- the benefits of participating in non-vocational courses.

This is a summary report, highlighting the key findings.

2.1 Research Objectives

It has long been argued that lower level, non-vocational courses provide opportunities to help foster and reignite the desire to learn amongst adults although evidence about the extent to which this is true is contested. The aim of this project is to research this evidence and gather new evidence. The terms of reference for the research project were to:

- explore adult perceptions of Further Education (FE);
- examine perceived barriers to entry;
- identify why people participate in FE and why they do not participate;
- examine the extent to which non-vocational courses provide a “hook” for engagement and further study; and
- scrutinise why some adult students ‘drop out’.

For the purposes of this research “non-vocational” learning is defined as FE courses that do not have a qualification attached to them. These are often referred to as ‘hobby & leisure’ courses. Given that approximately one in five FE enrolments are hobby and leisure enrolments it is important to understand how this provision fits with and supports the wider policy aims of the NI government.

2.2 Report Structure

The rest of this report is structured as follows:

- Section 3: Strategic Context - outlines the underlying strategic context for this research in terms of policy and strategy, provides an overview of relevant literature and describes trends in FE participation;
- Section 4: Research Findings - details the key findings from the research; and
- Section 5: Conclusion - summarises the main conclusions based on the findings from the research and implications on the way forward for DEL and the FE Sector.

- Detailed methodological notes, copies of survey questionnaires and a full list of results are provided in Part Two: Technical Appendix.

3. Strategic Context

The FE sector plays an important role in raising literacy levels, and up-skilling and re-skilling the workforce necessary for a knowledge-based economy. The current economic climate has led to increased unemployment rates and redundancies. Certain industries within Northern Ireland have been hit hard, particularly those that typically employed low-skilled workers. It is therefore even more important that there is a focus on raising the skills level of the whole workforce to enable progression up the skills ladder. Enrolments are equivalent to one in twenty of the Northern Ireland population participating in FE indicating that FE has a critical role in helping the broader NI economy achieve a skills balance.

Over the past few years, DEL has sought to refocus FE on providing the workforce with the skills necessary to support the economy, with particular focus on skills development in priority skills areas, increasing enrolments at level 2 and 3, and developing essential skills. Within this context, non-vocational courses are not a funding priority and DEL funding for these courses was capped in 2007/08 to a maximum of five per cent of overall funding awarded to each College. This may have contributed to the recent decrease in enrolments in non-vocational courses, but these types of courses still make up around 20 per cent of enrolments overall. Enrolments on professional and technical courses have increased.

The benefits of undertaking non-vocational learning are subject to debate. Courses are frequently associated with personal and social benefits, but the impact on actual learning and skills progression and on engaging those from more disadvantaged areas is less well evidenced. It is within this context that this research has been undertaken to understand the impact of non-vocational learning and how likely it is to lead to progression.

3.1. Strategic Context

Rising unemployment and decreasing job opportunities in Northern Ireland have led to an increased number of JobSeeker's Allowance claimants. Sectors that traditionally employ lower skilled people have been hit hard during the recession and the job market has been flooded with low-skilled job seekers. Between June 2009 and June 2010 the number of employee jobs in Northern Ireland decreased by 7,120 which largely consisted of decreases in Construction (-3,810) and in the Service Sector (-2,590)¹. Adding to this is the disproportionately large group of the working age population with no formal qualifications (22 per cent of the working age population at April-June 2010² which is higher than the average for the UK (10 per cent)). This has led to a skills gap and the need to up-skill and re-skill the existing workforce to improve economic performance as aspired to in the Programme for Government. DEL has overall lead responsibility for addressing this skills gap and for increasing employment in Northern Ireland. FE is one of the vehicles through which DEL is addressing the skills gap by providing professional and technical education and training.

3.1.1. Overview: Economic Context

Since the end of 2007, claims for Jobseeker's Allowance have grown, there has been an overall fall in jobs since summer 2008 and, despite the UK officially emerging from recession at the start of 2009, the labour market position has continued to deteriorate with

¹ Department for Employment and Learning - *Labour Force Survey* - Labour Market Bulletin 23, 2011

² Department for Employment and Learning - *Labour Force Survey* - Labour Market Bulletin 23, 2011

rising unemployment³. The nature of unemployment is in part structural as it has partly been caused by the economic slowdown and a mismatch between the supply and demand of labourers with necessary skill sets. In 2009, Northern Ireland employment rates were 47 per cent for those with no qualifications, compared to 73 per cent with qualifications at GCSE grade A-C or equivalent⁴. A lack of essential skills such as numeracy, literacy and ICT within sections of the workforce limits the opportunity to obtain, sustain and progress within work.

In addition to this a recent study by Oxford Economics⁵ (2009), found Northern Ireland's concentration of higher qualified persons in the workforce is on par with many of the UK regions. However, Northern Ireland still suffers from a proportionally larger group of the working age population with no formal qualifications (22 per cent in Northern Ireland compared to 10 per cent in the whole UK), which contributes to their relatively low employment rates.

The study concluded that while the Northern Ireland economy is forecast to slow considerably in the downturn and even in the long-run it is unlikely to return to the levels of job growth of the recent past, there will be a significant demand for additional labour to support both expansion of certain sectors such as the financial and professional services sectors, ICT, hi-tech manufacturing and life sciences sectors, and to replace retirees and other leavers from the labour market. The report highlights the need for a “*considerable uplift*” of the skills within the existing workforce.

The recent economic challenges may have had an influence on FE enrolment during recent years. Numbers choosing education and training have risen and this is a possible response to the lack of employment available and high degree of competition in the labour market which demands well qualified applicants.

3.1.2. Overview: DEL PSA Strategic Areas

The overarching aim of the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government (PfG) 2008-11 is to grow a dynamic, innovative economy. DEL supports this aim through a wide range of education, training, skills, innovation and employment provision delivered through a network of providers.

DEL has lead responsibility for two Public Service Agreement strategic areas (PSAs) within the Government spending period 2008–2011:

- skills for prosperity; and
- increasing employment.

These areas set out objectives to support regional economic development and improve the skills base of the Northern Ireland workforce, and to help people fulfil their potential and enhance their employability, particularly where there are difficult economic circumstances.

3.1.3. Overview: Further Education

FE is the main provider of professional and technical education and training in Northern Ireland and the sector plays a central role in raising literacy levels, and up-skilling and re-

³ Department for Employment and Learning – *Skills and the Northern Ireland Labour Market* - Labour Market Bulletin 23, 2011.

⁴ Department for Employment and Learning – *Growing the Economy will Require Skills* – Labour Market Bulletin 23, 2011

⁵ *Forecasting Future Skill Needs in Northern Ireland*, Oxford Economics, April 2009.

skilling the population through enhanced output levels, particularly at level 2 and 3⁶. It has a critical role in helping deliver the related PSA strategic areas for which DEL is responsible. DEL is responsible for the policy, strategic development and financing of the statutory FE sector. It is also responsible for curriculum and qualifications below degree level, with a key focus on the development of adult literacy, numeracy and ICT.

Within the FE sector, key PSA targets (Table 1.1) include those which require focus on priority skills areas, enrolments at Level 2 and 3 and attracting a greater proportion of students from more deprived areas.

Table 1.1 FE PSA Targets 2008-2011

PSA Reference	Target Description
PSA 2-6	Increase the proportion of Further Education enrolments at Level 2 from 29 per cent in 2005/6 to 32 per cent in 2010/11
PSA 2- 8	Increase the proportion of Further Education enrolments at Level 3 from 57 per cent in 2005/6 to 60 per cent in 2010/11
PSA 2- 12	Increase in the quality of FE and training provision as assessed by ETI
PSA 2- 12a	Increase the proportion of Further Education enrolments in Northern Ireland's identified priority skills area from 25 per cent in 2005/6 to 28 per cent by 2011
PSA 2- 13	Increase the proportion of Further Education enrolments that are on the NQF courses from 91 per cent in 2005/6 to 95 per cent in 2010/11
PSA 2- 14	Increase the proportion of Further Education enrolments that are on professional and technical courses from 82 per cent in 2005/6 to 90 per cent in 2010/11
PSA 3- 1	Increase the proportion of FE enrolments from the more deprived Northern Ireland regions, as defined by the Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measures, from 22 per cent in 2005/6 to 24 per cent in 2010/11

Source: DEL www.delni.gov.uk

Key related strategies for addressing these objectives include:

- The DEL revised Skills Strategy (2011), 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures' which set out proposals to deliver on a long-term vision for skills in Northern Ireland. The strategy is focused on enabling people to progress up the skills ladder in order to raise the skills level of the whole workforce, raise productivity, increase levels of social inclusion by enhancing the employability of those currently excluded from the labour markets, and secure Northern Ireland's future in a global marketplace;
- The Further Education Means Business strategy, which sets out a clear remit for FE colleges as being key drivers of local and regional economic and workforce development, playing a vital role in the delivery of the economic vision for Northern Ireland; and
- A joint DEL/FE Sector-led 'stock take' of FE Means Business which is being finalised. This exercise will outline successes achieved to date, consider the extent to which anticipated benefits have been obtained, and identify areas that need to be developed

⁶ DEL Quality and Performance – Board Paper 2010
http://www.delni.gov.uk/quality_and_performance_a_baseline_analysis_may_2010.doc

further to assist with the implementation of the Department's overarching Skills Strategy - 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures'.

It is clear from the strategic objectives of the FE Sector in Northern Ireland and related DEL PSA targets, that non-vocational courses are not a current funding priority for DEL. Numbers enrolling in non-vocational courses have been declining over the past number of years and in 2007/08 DEL capped funding for these courses to a maximum of five per cent of the total Funded Learning Unit (FLU) funding given to colleges. As a result of this and other factors, provision of non-vocational courses has reduced and colleges operate some of these courses on a cost-recovery basis i.e. the cost of the course is paid by the participant.

3.2. Further Education Enrolments in this Context

The number of enrolments in FE has increased over the last three years. This could be attributed to more school-leavers opting to further their education at FE colleges rather than at University (for financial reasons), and more people deciding to re-skill and up-skill. The number of enrolments in FE is equivalent to 1 in 20 of the Northern Ireland population enrolling on an FE course. However, enrolments in non-vocational courses have decreased by 2 per cent over the last two years. This is partly due to the refocusing of FE provision on priority skills areas, enrolments on level 2 and 3 courses and essential skills. Funding provided for non-vocational courses (i.e. hobby & leisure) was capped in 2007/08 to a maximum of five per cent of overall FLU funding awarded to each College.

The FE Statistical Record (FESR) provides a rich source of data about the FE student population and learning activity across the FE sector in Northern Ireland. This statistical information is collated and held centrally by DEL on students enrolled on FE courses each year. It is an important starting point to understand how the FE system is reacting to the economic policy context.

This research aimed to complement the data held with further quantitative and qualitative information. For example, the FESR database does not hold detailed information on the reasons for drop-out and this is often left incomplete or completed with a generic reason such as 'unknown', 'personal reasons' or 'written-off after a lapse in time'. This research has aimed to drill-down into the reasons for drop-out and provide qualitative information to supplement the data held on FESR.

In addition, as the unique learner identification numbers have only recently been introduced, it is not yet possible to easily track students as they progress through the system and up the skills ladder. Therefore, this research also aimed to provide additional information to inform DEL's understanding of student progression.

Analysis of FESR data for the last three years (2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/10) was conducted as part of this research to provide an understanding of the overall profile of:

- students that attended FE courses;
- students that participated in non-vocational courses; and
- students who left courses early.

The purpose of the FESR analysis was to inform survey design but also to have a contextual baseline against which survey findings could be compared. This section provides a summary of the analysis (see Part 2: Technical Appendix for full analysis).

Figure 3.1 General Profile of Students that enrolled on FE courses from 2007-2010



Source: DEL FESR Database

NB: total enrolments were higher, however some student records were incomplete

Analysis of the FESR data set found that:

- the total number of enrolments in FE was 188,109 in 2007/08, 182,873 in 2008/09 and 200,594 in 2009/10. This represents an increase of 6.6 per cent over the three year period. However, there was a dip in non-vocational enrolments between 2007/08 and 2008/09;
- the number of enrolments on FE courses is approximately equivalent to 5 Per Cent of the Northern Ireland population⁷ enrolling on an FE course;
- slightly more females than males enrolled on FE courses over the last three years, however the number of males enrolling has increased by 11 per cent from 2007/08 to 2009/10, compared to an increase of just 2.5 per cent for females;
- the majority of those who enrolled on FE courses over the last three years were single (58 per cent, 59 per cent and 58 per cent);
- a significant minority were either 19 and under (44 per cent, 46 per cent and 47 per cent) or 25 and over (46 per cent, 44 per cent and 42 per cent);
- only a small number of those enrolled had dependent children (8 per cent for all three years);
- nearly all of those enrolled over the last three years were not receiving benefits⁸ (96 per cent, 97 per cent and 98 per cent);
- the number of people who enrolled on an FE course who were employed either full-time or part-time has decreased over the three year period (from 46 per cent in 2007/08 to 36 per cent in

⁷ Population of Northern Ireland = 1,789,000 taken from "Population and Migration Estimates Northern Ireland (2009) – Statistical Report", Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

⁸ however it is possible that not all individuals declared the benefits they were receiving at the time of enrolment

2009/10). The number of unemployed or economically inactive has risen from 51 per cent to 62 per cent; and

- over the three year period, a significant minority of enrollers had either no qualifications (39 per cent, 36 per cent and 38 per cent) or had level 2 qualifications (32 per cent, 37 per cent and 29 per cent).

Looking at the non-vocational course enrolments, the FESR data shows that:

- for each of the three years analysed, non-vocational provision accounted for between 19 and 21 per cent of enrolments (38,012 in 2007/08, 34,296 in 2008/09 and 36,227 in 2009/10);
- the largest proportion of those enrolled in non-vocational courses were aged 65 and over (22 per cent, 21 per cent and 17 per cent) and the majority were female (65 per cent, 66 per cent and 64 per cent). A significant minority (34 per cent, 31 per cent and 36 per cent) were married / co-habiting and a similar proportion were single (32 per cent, 33 per cent, 35 per cent). Almost all did not have dependent children and were not receiving benefits;
- in relation to the highest qualification level on entry of those who enrolled on a non-vocational course, the largest proportion (36 per cent, 26 per cent and 22 per cent) had no qualifications; and
- of those who enrolled on non-vocational courses the main mode of attendance was via part-time non-released courses (51 per cent, 52p and 56 per cent) or evening courses (44 per cent, 44 per cent and 37 per cent).

The FESR data also records when a student does not complete the course and reasons for early drop-out. While this information is limited, it does show that:

- 11 per cent of enrolments did not complete the course. For each of the three years looked at, 55 per cent of drop-outs were female and 45 per cent were male;
- the majority of early leavers were single (between 64 and 67 per cent);
- the majority of early leavers were aged between 16 and 24 (60, 63 and 64 per cent);
- almost all early leavers (95 per cent) were enrolled on an accredited course; and
- information on reasons for drop-out is not consistently recorded, but looking at the year in which the most data is available (2009/10), the top two reasons given for drop-out were: 'written-off after a lapse in time'; or 'personal reasons'. These reasons are inconclusive which further highlights the need for this research.

This information on the general FE population provides a useful benchmark to compare the information received via the three surveys, as well as in the literature review we conducted.

3.3. Literature Review

The literature review highlighted that the key barriers that learners experience at FE include both physical and institutional barriers as well as individual attitudes towards learning, such as: time and family commitments; negative experiences of education; and concerns about completing large amounts of coursework.

There has been little research that explicitly explores the reasons why learners choose to leave courses early. However learner experiences, circumstantial and personal factors are all commonly stated by those who leave early. While financial factors are not frequently identified as a barrier to learning or a reason for dropping out, the cost of learning does impact on learners and is more likely to affect specific groups such as single parent families, learners with a disability and those from black or other non-white ethnic minorities.

In relation to benefits of learning, the research reviewed consistently identifies that learning may have significant personal and social benefits. However, they are frequently unforeseen benefits to learners

as their course choices are made to develop other skill sets. While the predominant learning benefits and outcomes are to do with personal gain and progression, there are benefits to employment and skills for employment.

There is little hard evidence to identify future learning outcomes from undertaking non-vocational learning and whether learners progress from non-vocational to accredited courses. However, opportunities to access a range of course choices result in improved progression into employment and FE, and personal and social benefits such as: improved self-esteem, confidence and learning behaviours such as attendance, punctuality and engagement.

This section provides a contextualised summary of existing literature relevant to the FE sector, which informs the research questions for this study. It has been difficult to cross refer between the data held in the FESR and the literature reviews as the FESR does not currently hold destination data and different terminologies and methods are used in the literature.

Very little literature is available on perceptions of FE and the extent to which non-vocational courses provide progression to engagement and further study. However, four broad areas emerged from the literature review as being relevant to the research objectives:

- barriers and constraints on learning;
- the reasons for drop-out;
- the impacts and benefits of non-vocational learning; and
- progression from non-vocational to accredited learning.

3.3.1. Barriers and constraints on learning

In the literature reviewed, the main barriers that learners may experience in relation to FE are structural (i.e. relating to the FE system and practical considerations) and internal (i.e. relating to perceptions of the learner) factors.

Structural barriers

Access to information – this was an important factor identified in the UK Government White Paper ‘The Learning Revolution’⁹ which identified that it may, at times, be difficult for potential learners to get information about the kind of classes they want to attend and this can be off-putting. A relationship between a lack of information and negative experience of learning is also emphasised in survey findings from the Institute for Employment Studies (DfES, 2007)¹⁰. Findings showed:

- the most common single reason for leaving was that the course was not what the students wanted to do after all or that they changed their mind about it part way through; and
- 43 per cent of those who left courses early reported that their reasons for leaving may have been addressed by more access to information and guidance¹¹.

Receiving no-follow-up contact and receiving no response from requests for information about further courses¹² are further negative factors that were found to act as constraints to learners.

Further discussion about reasons for dropping out of courses will be covered in Section 3.3.2.

⁹ *The Learning Revolution*, DUIS White Paper - 2009

¹⁰ *Institute for Employment Studies*, DfES - 2007

¹¹ *Reasons for Early Leaving and FE and Work-based Learning Courses*, Institute of Employment Studies for DfES - 2007

¹² *WEA Learner Impact Survey*, Worker’s Education Association - 2009

Access to courses - the lack of courses themselves, or available training in the local area, was one of the most common barriers identified by young people aged 16/17 as affecting their decisions at the end of Year 11¹³. A DCSF commissioned study showed the main issues faced by young people who had experienced barriers or constraints relate to finance, transport, availability of provision and awareness of options available to them. Findings included:

- 14 per cent stated that they were prevented from doing their preferred choice of courses;
- 63 per cent report experiencing at least one barrier or constraint; and
- students who are teenage parents, have learning difficulties and/ or disabilities and those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) are particularly likely to experience the availability of particular courses in their areas as a barrier.

Research shows that physical access to buildings which are not adaptable to disabilities¹⁴, and limited opportunities to cater for different learning styles¹⁵ can also constrain learners.

Transport and Travel - transport, college location and the cost of travel are also potential barriers to learners. In a Family Action report, findings included that, on average, single parent families had just £30 a week after paying for essential bills, rent and food, so had limited spare resources to cover the costs of travelling to and from college. 30 per cent of respondents in this study cited the cost of travel as their key barrier to learning¹⁶.

A lack of available public transport and locations of colleges in Northern Ireland were reported as barriers in Frontline Consultants' appraisal of the Essential Skills for Living Strategy (DEL, 2006). However, the appraisal findings did not consistently point to the close proximity of colleges as being a benefit - one reported barrier was the idea of having to attend an essential skills class within the learner's own community. This kind of experience relates to learning attitudes and the perceived stigma of attending a college to improve essential skills, and it is an important point that the journey to education is as much a psychological issue as well as a physical one.

Internal barriers

Time commitment - in the *Pathways to Adult Learning* survey (DfES, 1999), time is the most commonly mentioned obstacle to undertaking further learning. Differences in perspectives were found between learner groups such as non-learners, current learners and potential learners but overall, courses were found to present a significant time commitment that potentially impacts on family and leisure time. Key findings were:

- time because of family commitments was the most mentioned obstacle for those who had not undertaken learning (31 per cent); and
- 36 per cent who had done some learning (within four and a half years) said they preferred to do something else with their time.

Concerns about paperwork - research into learner expectations, experiences and assessment of progress on non-vocational courses (NIACE, 2001), found that participants appreciated the intrinsic value of learning and recognised the economic, social and intellectual benefits. However, they had concerns about the completion of paperwork and saw this as burdensome or detracting from the course.

¹³ *Barriers to participation in education and training*, National Foundation for Education and Research for DCSF - 2010

¹⁴ *Mental Capital and Wellbeing: Making the most of ourselves in the 21st century* – BIS, Foresight for the Government Office for Science, 2011

¹⁵ *Improving outcomes for disadvantaged young people: case studies of effective practice* – Young People's Learning Agency, 2010

¹⁶ *Welfare reform will blight single parents' education potential, warns charity*. TES Connect - TES FE, 2010, <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6058893>.

The feeling that paperwork is 'burdensome' is pertinent in the context of the NI Executive's key literacy-related PSA targets, which include increasing the number of adult learners achieving a qualification in literacy, numeracy or ICT skills by 90,000 in 2015¹⁷. If paperwork and the bureaucracy of assessment is a concern expressed by learners in non-vocational courses, this could also pose a barrier to learning for individuals with low levels of literacy – especially where courses rely on written outcomes as a means of assessment.

3.3.2. Reasons for Early Drop-out

There has been little research that explicitly explores the reasons why learners choose to leave courses early. However, three key themes emerged in the literature.

Learner Experience - in *Reasons for early leaving from FE and work-based learning courses* (DfES, 2007), course-related reasons such as being unhappy with the course choice, the quality of teaching and training, or finding that the course was not what they wanted to do after all were the most common reasons given by learners for leaving their course early.

It is worth noting that early leavers were just as likely as those who had completed their learning in this study¹⁸ to say that they enjoyed learning at school and learning new things, and to be aware of the labour market advantages of learning or training, which suggests that an understanding of the benefits of learning are not confined to those who complete their course.

Issues with the course level are echoed further by learners in the Appraisal of Essential Skills for Living research (DEL, 2006) and in *Progression from Adult and Community Learning*¹⁹, where reasons for dropping out of a course included the level of the course being pitched wrongly for learners at all levels – some reported courses being too basic whereas others felt they were holding the class back or that the course was too advanced.

Personal Circumstances - as mentioned in the previous sub-section, personal and circumstantial reasons for leaving learning were the second-most common reason cited after course-related ones in *Reasons for early leaving from FE and work-based learning* (DfES, 2007). Key findings included:

- 28 per cent of all leavers stated that factors like moving house, health problems or becoming pregnant were reasons for non-completion of courses, and for 25 per cent, this was their main reason for dropping out of education; and
- 20 per cent also cited one or more reasons related to workload, the difficulty of balancing work, family or other commitments alongside study or that courses were held at an inconvenient time or place.

Some groups were identified in this study as being more likely to leave education early. Among learners in the 16-18 year old age group, cases of early leaving were more likely to involve learners from non-white ethnic backgrounds and those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) before starting the course. Among leavers aged 19+, early leaving was more likely to involve learners with a long-term health problem, disability or those studying courses at below level 2.

Financial Barriers - though financial problems in themselves account for a very small proportion of the reasons stated by those who leave education early, the view that financial issues pose a constraint is consistent in the literature reviewed. Peripheral costs such as benefit costs, travel

¹⁷ *Study to see how literacy levels have developed over time*, p15 – Oxford Economics for DEL, 2010

¹⁸ *Reasons for early leaving from FE and work-based learning courses*, DfES, 2007

¹⁹ *Progression from Adult and Community Learning* – NOP Social and Political for DfES, 2004

and childcare are identified by Family Action as impacting on single parents. Out of those surveyed in that study, 40 per cent of single parents cited the cost of tuition as a key barrier and 30 per cent cited the cost of travel as a barrier.

Another factor was that childcare offered may not cover the duration of the course which leads to temporary arrangements *“in the hope that they will eventually get money from the college. When that cannot be paid, some are forced to drop their studies²⁰.”*

3.3.3. Impacts and Benefits of Non-vocational Learning

The reviewed literature emphasised that learning may have significant personal and social benefits. Frequently, these benefits to social skills are unforeseen impacts to learners as their course choices are made to develop other skill sets.

Increased self-esteem and confidence - the wider benefits of participation in non-vocational learning are recognised as improving personal health and wellbeing, raising confidence and self-esteem and developing stronger communities, but is also recognised in terms of the ‘spin off’ benefits such as ‘reduced calls on health and social services budgets’ and fulfilment and happiness from keeping mentally and physically active²¹.

Increased confidence, self esteem and engagement with others or the local community were benefits reported by learners across the literature reviewed. The potential for courses to change individual attitudes towards learning was found in situations where learners previously had negative experiences in education. Such benefits tend to be reported as indirect, as it is likely to be true that learners do not enrol on non-vocational courses specifically to address issues relating to confidence, self esteem or social network.

Due to the lack of specific research, literature on this subject is somewhat out-of-date, however can provide a useful starting point:

- In Pathways to Adult Learning (DfEE, 1999), while non-job related motivators seemed to play a less significant role in initial decision-making about course choices, this contrasted with the findings, that respondents’ reported benefits from learning which were incidental to the ones they sought when they decided to undertake it. For 43 per cent of people on courses, learning had helped to boost confidence and, while only 17 per cent of respondents reported a desire to meet other people as one of the reasons for starting a course, this outcome was reported by over a third.
- For learners in the Progression from Adult and Community Learning (DfES, 2004) research, the indirect benefits on personal and social wellbeing are consistent with the messages that learning increases confidence and self-esteem. For example:
 - 40 per cent of learners on Local Education Authority (LEA) courses experienced benefits to their: social life; ability to communicate; and physical well being;
 - 58 per cent of those interviewed stated that they had experienced increased confidence as a result of their learning; and
 - 39 per cent had become more aware of their abilities and had the confidence to do further learning and overall.

Mental and emotional well being was cited as an outcome by 59 per cent of respondents, but was more likely to be cited by older learners, with responses including a mix of: maintaining ability to

²⁰ Lewisham College sourced in ‘Welfare reform will blight single parents’ educational potential, warns charity’, TES FE Focus published 24.09.10 <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6058893>

²¹ Bill Rammel, House of Commons Hansard written answers- 18 Feb 2008. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080218/text/80218w0090.htm>

think/cope; providing structure or something to do with their time and providing respite from stress or problems with caring activity.

Increased engagement with the local community - in *Building Connections, Getting Involved* (Scottish Government, 2008), the changes identified retrospectively by participants in community learning and development projects tended to be around changes to their perceptions about themselves and what they could do. Common experiences were that taking part in these projects led to: meeting people; making friends; expanding networks; and positive changes to the way individuals interacted with a wide range of people, including those in authority.

3.3.4. Progression from Non-vocational to Accredited Learning

Non-vocational courses are frequently associated with personal and internal benefits to learners but the impact in terms of the accredited learning they go on to do is not clear. Little research is available that documents whether there is a direct relationship between participation in non-vocational learning and going on to do accredited learning.

There is some evidence from a report by the National Child Development Study (2007) to suggest that there is a strong correlation between taking courses not leading to qualifications and eventual achievement of Level 2 qualifications in adulthood²². This paper describes the characteristics of people who return to learning to achieve at least a level 2 qualification, drawing on a longitudinal study - the 1958 National Child Development Cohort Study. Results show that adults who gained level 2 were more likely than those who did not to have been engaged in a range of learning activities at earlier ages, including learning during childhood, staying in education during adolescence and undertaking non-vocational and accredited courses during adulthood.

More generally, it has been suggested that 'non-learners' are more likely to become 'learners' by undertaking, at least initially, job-related learning²³.

What is clear is that learners who take non-vocational courses often do so because they value learning for learning's sake. Learners interviewed for Proof Positive (NIACE, 2001) cited the intrinsic value of learning and opportunity to study without having to take qualifications as the broad benefits of non-vocational learning. That non-vocational learning is often taken for enrichment and 'wider purposes' is consistent in the research reviewed (Progression from Adult and Community Learning, DfES, 2004), though course motivation tends to differ depending on the profile of the learner. In this study learners were predominantly older (55 per cent aged 51 and over) and female (77 per cent), taking learning for stimulus, a rewarding way of spending free time and to 'do something interesting'. Two thirds of learners who had studied in 2001/02 went on to take further courses in 2002/03, with around 10 per cent moving from non-vocational to accredited courses.

In a number of case studies from providers looking to close the socio-economic gap for young people from 14-19 from disadvantaged backgrounds²⁴, a significant proportion of the young people taking part progressed from the initiatives into employment and further education. Two examples from two other training providers serving a similar group based in England demonstrates evidence of progression²⁵:

²² *Who Achieves Level 2 Qualifications During Adulthood?* National Child Development Study, British Journal of Educational Studies, v55 n4 p390-408 Dec 2007

²³ *Pathways in Adult Learning*, National Centre for Social Research for Department for Education and Employment, 1999

²⁴ *Improving outcomes for disadvantaged young people: case studies of effective practice* – YLPA, 2010

²⁵ *Improving outcomes for disadvantaged young people: case studies of effective practice* – YLPA, 2010

- at Greenspring Training, 61 per cent of participants on the Entry to Employment to Apprenticeships programme moved onto apprenticeships, FE or further learning; and
- at Hartlepool FE college, progression rates rose from 52 per cent to 72 per cent from 2005-2009, with 43 per cent of people who attended a 6-week course to target disadvantaged young people in 2009 progressing into Apprenticeships or full-time programmes.

Overall, opportunities to access a range of course choices results in improved progression into employment and FE, and personal and social benefits such as: improved self-esteem, confidence and learning behaviours such as attendance, punctuality and engagement.

4. Research Findings

This research involved three surveys conducted by Ipsos MORI:

- a general population survey with 1,004 people;
- a telephone survey with 200 people who enrolled on a non-vocational course within the last year; and
- a telephone survey with 201 people who dropped-out of an FE course within the last year.

The general population survey formed part of Ipsos MORI's monthly Omnibus Survey and categorised learners into four types:

- current learners (currently enrolled on FE);
- potential learners (completed an FE course within the last three years);
- non-learners with interest; and
- non-learners with no interest.

It aimed to collect views on attitudes and awareness of FE, reasons for participation, perceived barriers to learning, and benefits of learning. Seventeen per cent of the respondents were either current or potential learners.

It was recognised that the Omnibus Survey alone may not have given access to sufficient people who have either taken part in a hobby/leisure course or dropped out early and so separate surveys were conducted to gather views on reasons for participation, reasons for drop-out, benefits of learning and progression.

Survey results showed there to be a strong awareness of FE provision and a positive attitude towards learning in general, with the majority of people viewing learning as a life-long activity and an important employability factor. FE's role in providing flexible routes to learning and second chances for learning was also recognised. In addition, 57 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that those who go to university are more likely to get a job than those who go to a FE college, indicating that respondents consider FE qualifications to be at least as useful in gaining employment as qualifications gained at higher education institutions. However, 20 per cent of respondents did not know that full-time and part-time degrees were offered at FE colleges.

The socio-economic analysis of the Omnibus Survey showed that those who chose to enrol on a non-vocational course are more likely to be from a more advantaged background i.e. own their home outright, are lower middle (C1), middle (B) or upper middle class (A), and more likely to hold higher level qualifications. Those undertaking accredited courses tended to be from a more disadvantaged background i.e. rent through the NIHE and are more likely to be lower middle class (C1) or on benefits (E).

Reasons for participating in FE were found to be similar whether participants experienced accredited or non-vocational provision. However, those enrolled on non-vocational provision tended to put a stronger emphasis on social motivators with 82 per cent stating they had chosen a non-vocation qualification 'for fun'. Improved physical health was cited as a benefit experienced by 15 per cent of those enrolled on non-vocational provision.

The early leavers survey found that the positive impact of learning was lessened for those who left early and the most common reasons for drop-out were attributed to perceived poor standards of teaching, health reasons, work commitments and childcare issues. Despite the largest reason for drop-out being the perceived poor standard of teaching, just five per cent stated that having a different tutor would have prevented them from leaving. Early leavers who stated they were unlikely to continue

with their learning cited this was because they had had enough of learning, had been put off by a bad experience or because of lack of time due to work.

The cost of courses was perceived as a barrier to entry to a much larger extent by non-vocational survey respondents with 56 per cent citing it as a barrier compared to 15 per cent of those who had not undertaken any learning in the past three years but had considered it. Work and family commitments were perceived as the main barriers for this group. Those on non-vocational courses may be more likely to view the costs of courses as a barrier because a high volume of these courses may be run on a cost-recovery basis.

There is some evidence of progression from non-vocational to accredited provision across the surveys and across learner types but the extent of progression is limited. Although the survey of those who had undertaken a non-vocational course in the last year found a high degree of repeated learning (59 per cent had done more than one course), only 10 per cent of respondents overall had gone on to do a course with a qualification at this stage. The Omnibus Survey provided a longer-term view of progression but only a slightly higher rate of progression. Twelve per cent of the potential learners identified through the Omnibus Survey had started with a non-vocational course and progressed to an accredited course. This suggests that while non-vocational learning may promote progression, its impact is not particularly widespread.

4.1 Introduction

In order to research adult attitudes towards FE and reasons why people participate in non-vocational courses, three surveys were conducted.

1. A survey of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population comprising 1,004 interviews conducted on a face-to-face basis. This was conducted as part of the monthly Omnibus Survey undertaken by Ipsos MORI. A section of the survey was dedicated to asking questions relating to:
 - current and potential learners' awareness of provision at FE Colleges;
 - attitudes to FE Colleges of current learners, non-learners and potential learners including whether FE is viewed as a purely vocational place of study and why individuals decide to participate or not participate in FE;
 - perceived barriers to entry to FE; and
 - views of those who had participated in FE of the benefits realised through participation and their likelihood of undertaking further learning.

It was recognised that this survey alone may not get sufficient people who have either taken part in a hobby/leisure course or dropped out early and so separate surveys were conducted to gather views on reasons for participation, reasons for drop-out, benefits of learning and progression.

2. A telephone survey of 201 people who have recently (within the last year) dropped out of FE provision was carried out. Contact details were provided by each of the six Colleges and students were selected at random. The survey included questions relating to:
 - reasons for drop-out;
 - benefits of undertaking learning; and
 - perceived barriers to entry to FE.

3. A telephone survey of 200 people who have recently (completed within the last year) participated in a hobby/leisure course. Contact details were provided by each of the six Colleges and students were selected at random. This survey included questions relating to:
 - reasons for participating in non-vocational courses;
 - benefits of undertaking learning;
 - perceived barriers to entry; and
 - likelihood of progression.

Conducting three surveys enabled specific research to be carried out with both those who had enrolled in a non-vocational course and those who had left an FE course early. It also enabled findings to be cross-correlated.

To aid the survey design process, a number of stakeholder consultations were conducted (see Methodology Section in Part 2: Technical Appendix, for a full list of consultees). Stakeholders were asked for their views on perception and awareness of FE, reasons for participation and profile of students who participate in non-vocational courses, reasons why students drop-out and barriers to entry. The literature review also informed the design.

The remainder of this section sets out the key findings from the analysis of survey responses and, where appropriate, compares this to stakeholder views. An overview of the population profile for each survey has been included and the findings have been summarised under the following themes:

- attitudes and awareness of FE;
- barriers and constraints to participation;
- social and economic benefits of participation;
- reasons for early drop-out; and
- progression.

Full analysis of each survey question is contained within Part 2: Technical Appendix.

4.2 Survey Population Profile

As would be expected, the profile of each survey population varied considerably, however it was generally representative of the overall student enrolment population over the last three years (from FESR). From the Omnibus Survey, those who are currently enrolled in FE or who have been within the last three years (15 per cent) are more likely to be female and younger than those who have not undertaken any learning within the last three years. As the Omnibus survey is statistically representative of the Northern Ireland population, this suggests that 15 per cent of the population have enrolled in FE at some stage in their life.

Omnibus Survey findings showed that out of all the FE courses enrolled on by current or potential learners, 16 per cent were non-vocational. This is broadly consistent with the FESR analysis that found approximately 20 per cent of FE courses enrolled on were non-vocational. The Hobby and Leisure survey respondents were typically female, over 65 years old and retired. While there is likely to be less economic benefit of participation of retired people in learning, the research did find evidence of reported social and health benefits. By contrast, early-leavers tended to be aged 24 or under, single and employed full-time or part-time. The potential economic impact of learning for this group is significantly higher than those who typically undertake non-vocational courses, but the impact has been lessened or not realised because they have not completed the course.

4.2.1 Population Profile of Omnibus Survey

A total of 1,004 people took part in the February 2011 Omnibus Survey which is representative of the Northern Ireland population (details in Part 2: Technical Appendix).

In order to facilitate our research, survey participants were categorised into four 'learner' groups. These were:

- Learner – those who are currently enrolled at an FE college;
- Potential learner – those who have undertaken a course/courses at an FE college within the last three years but are not currently enrolled;
- Non-learner with interest – those who have not undertaken any courses at an FE college within the last three years but would be interested in undertaking a course within the next two years; and
- Non-learner with no interest – those who have not undertaken any courses at an FE college within the last three years and have no interest in doing so.

Figure 4.1 illustrates that:

- the majority of respondents fell into the 'Non-learner with no interest' category and 17 per cent of the sample had some experience of learning in FE;
- there was a spread of learner-types across all social grades (See Part 2: Technical Appendix for a description of Social Grades); and
- the majority of learners (63 per cent) and potential learners (46 per cent) were aged under 30 compared to the majority of non-learners with no interest (54 per cent) who were aged over 50.

From the findings of the Omnibus Survey, it is possible to summarise the key attributes of each learner-type. This is intended to inform planning for the way in which DEL and the FE sector may choose to interact with these groups.

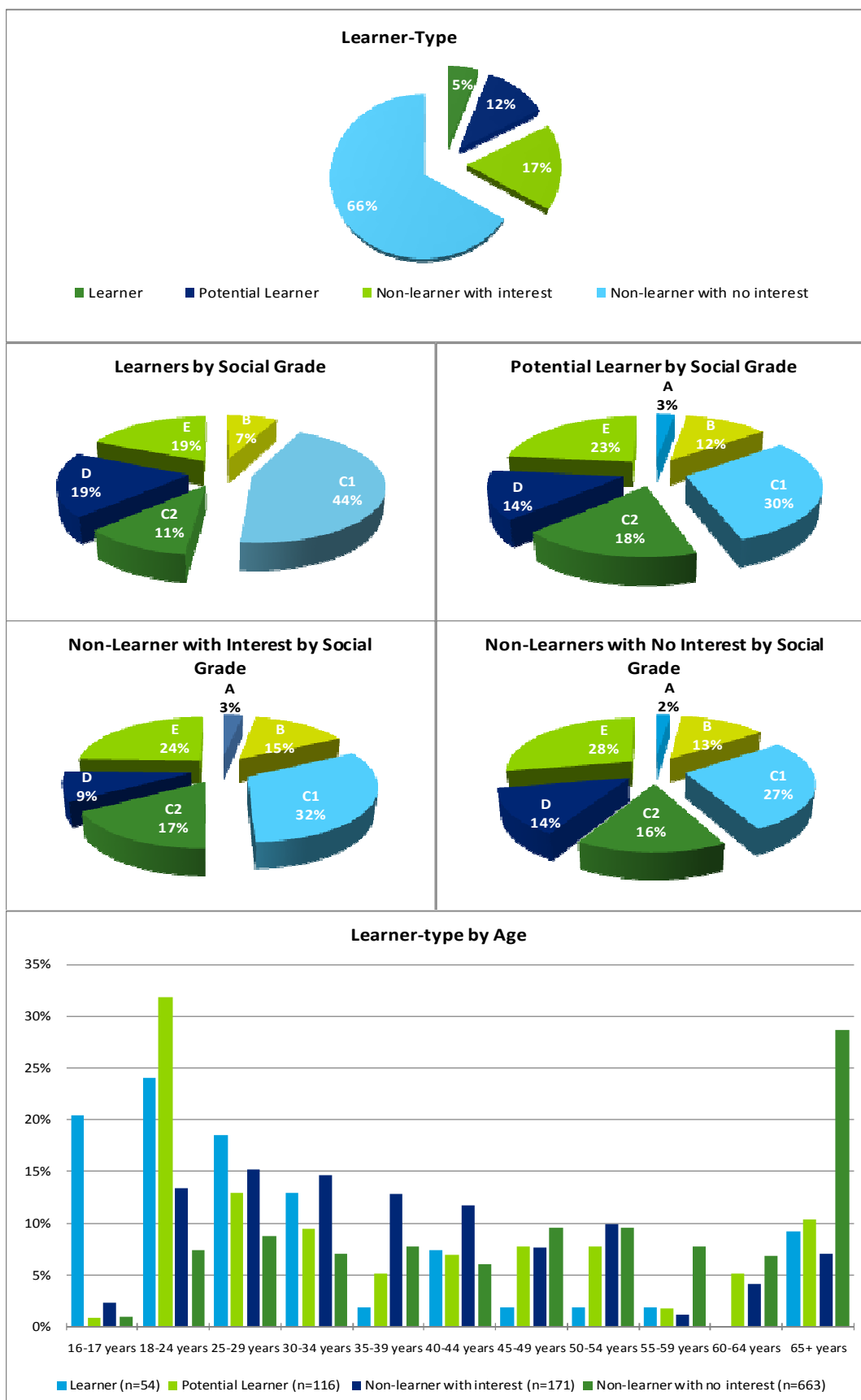
Current Learners: are more likely to be female than male, are mostly aged between 16 and 30, are very unlikely to have responsibility for any dependants other than children, mostly work part-time or full-time, rent through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, are social grade C1 and their highest qualification level is most likely to be GSCE.

Potential Learners: are more likely to be female than male, are mostly aged between 18 and 29, are very unlikely to have responsibility for any dependants other than children, mostly work full-time or part-time, have a mortgage, are social grade C1 and their highest qualification level is most likely to be vocational.

Non-learners with interest: are almost equally likely to be female or male, are mostly aged between 25 and 44, are very unlikely to have responsibility for any dependants other than for children, mostly work full-time or are unemployed, have a mortgage, are social grade C1 and their highest qualification level is most likely to be GSCE.

Non-learners with no interest: are equally likely to be female or male, are mostly aged over 45, are very unlikely to have parental responsibility for any dependants other than children, are mostly retired or work part-time, own their home outright, are social grade E or C1 and are likely to have no qualifications.

Figure 4.1 Learner-type of respondents from the Omnibus Survey



Source: Omnibus Survey February 2011 Note: Social Grade descriptions detailed in Part Two Technical Report (A – Professionals / Senior Management; B- Middle Management / Small Business Owners; C1 – Junior Management / Non-manual; C2 – Skilled Manual Workers; D - semi-skilled and un-skilled manual workers; E – Unemployed / Dependent on Benefits)

It is possible that a learner can enrol on more than one course. In the sample surveyed, there were 54 current learners – 48 of whom had enrolled on one course and six who had enrolled on two courses. Therefore a total of 60 courses had been enrolled on. The majority of these courses were accredited courses (92 per cent) meaning that almost 1 in 10 courses enrolled on were non-vocational. This is consistent with the findings from the FESR data analysis and literature review that approximately 20 per cent of people enrol on non-vocational courses.

Potential learners – defined as having FE experience over the last three years - are likely to have undertaken more than one course. There were 116 potential learners of whom 31 had undertaken more than one course. The total number of courses enrolled on by potential learners in the last three years was 166. The majority of these were also accredited courses (86 per cent) meaning that almost 1 in 7 courses enrolled on were non-vocational. This again is fairly consistent with the findings from the FESR data analysis that approximately 20 per cent people enrol on non-vocational courses.

Socio-economic comparison of accredited and non-vocational learners from Omnibus Survey

The socio-economic information collected from the Omnibus Survey for both current and potential learners (n=170) can be used to look further at the profile of those who are currently undertaking or had previously undertaken a non-vocational course or an accredited course. Out of the 170 current and potential learners, 149 were/are enrolled on an accredited course and 21 were/are enrolled on a non-vocational course (however 2 of the non-vocational potential learners refused to answer the socio-economic questions, therefore the analysis below is based on a population of 19 respondents).

A comparison of 9 socio-economic variables reveals the following differences between the two groups:

Age:

- the largest proportion of non-vocational population were either aged 25-29 or 65 years or above (26 per cent). None were aged between 16-17, 35-39 or 50-54; and
- the largest proportion of accredited population were aged 18-24 (32 per cent). There was a fairly even split across the rest of the age groups (between 4 and 11 per cent), with the exception of those aged 55-59 (1 per cent) or aged 60-64 (2 per cent).

Marital Status:

- the largest proportion of non-vocational learners were married (47 per cent) or single (37 per cent). 11 per cent were widowed; and
- the largest proportion of accredited learners were single (54 per cent). 34 per cent were married and just 3 per cent were widowed.

Gender:

- the majority of both the non-vocational learners and accredited learners were female (68 per cent and 64 per cent respectively).

Housing:

- the majority of non-vocational learners owned their house outright (53 per cent); and
- accredited learners were most likely to either have a mortgage (34 per cent) or rent through NIHE (26 per cent).

Working Status:

- a significant minority of non-vocational learners worked full-time (42 per cent), followed by 26 per cent who were retired. No non-vocational learners stated they were students; and
- 28 per cent of accredited learners worked full-time, 23 per cent worked part-time and 19 per cent were unemployed. Just 10 per cent were retired.

Social Grade:

- a significant minority of both non-vocational and accredited learners fell into the C1 category (37 per cent and 31 per cent respectively);
- a higher proportion of non-vocational learners fell into the middle class (B) or upper class (A) categories (26 per cent and 11 per cent respectively), compared to just 9 per cent and 1 per cent respectively of accredited learners; and
- no non-vocational learners belonged to the working class category (D), compared to 17 per cent of accredited learners.

Highest qualification attainment:

- a significant minority of non-vocational learners had a degree or equivalent (37 per cent) compared to 15 per cent of accredited learners; and
- accredited learners' highest qualification was more likely to be: GCSE (23 per cent) or vocational qualifications (23 per cent).

Area

- the largest proportion of non-vocational learners were from County Londonderry (42 per cent) followed by the greater Belfast area (26 per cent); and
- accredited learners were fairly evenly split across the areas – between 11 and 17 per cent.

Urban / Rural

- the majority of both non-vocational and accredited learners lived in an urban area (63 per cent and 74 per cent respectively).

The socio-economic analysis shows that those who chose to enrol on a non-vocational course are more likely to be from a more advantaged background i.e. own their home outright, are lower middle (C1), middle (B) or upper middle class (A), and more likely to hold higher level qualifications.

Those undertaking accredited courses tended to be from a more disadvantaged background i.e. rent through the NIHE and are more likely to be lower middle class (C1) or on benefits (E).

Figure 4.2 provides a snapshot of some of these socio-economic variables

Figure 4.2 Socio-economic comparisons between non-vocational learners (n=19) and accredited learners (n=149) from the Omnibus Survey



Source: Omnibus Survey February 2011

4.2.1 Population Profile of Non-Vocational Survey

The sample of 200 people surveyed for this research can be viewed as largely representative of the overall non-vocational student population. This is because, from the analysis of the non-vocational enrolment information contained within the FESR, we know that:

- on average across the three years, 20 per cent of those enrolling in non-vocational courses were aged 65 or above. In this survey, 32 per cent were 65 years old or above; and
- on average across the three years, 65 per cent of people enrolled on non-vocational courses over the last three years were female. In this survey 76 per cent were female.

However there are some differences:

- on average over the last three years 34 per cent were married or cohabiting; in this survey 63 per cent were married or cohabiting; and
- the FESR revealed that, on average over the last three years, that the largest proportion of people (28 per cent) enrolled on non-vocational courses had no formal qualifications. However, in this survey the largest proportion of survey respondents stated their highest qualification level was GCSE or equivalent (23 per cent), followed by Bachelor degree (19 per cent), then by no formal qualifications (16 per cent).

In addition one quarter of survey respondents stated that they had a long-term illness, health problem or disability which limits the daily activities or the work they can do.

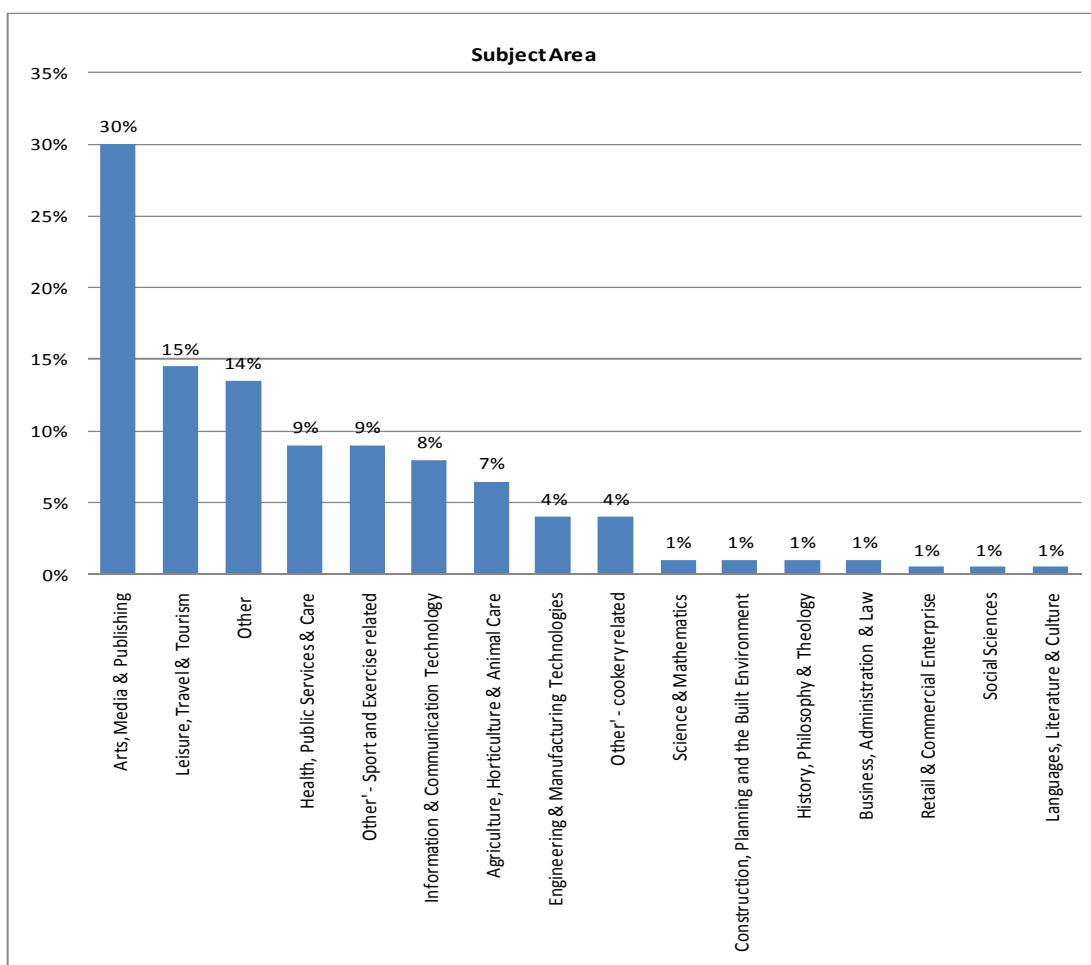
The profile of the non-vocational survey respondents is consistent with the socio-economic analysis of the non-vocational learners identified in the omnibus survey (see Section 4.2.1), which also found this group to be majority female, more likely to have a higher level qualification and married.

This profile is consistent with the feedback received from stakeholders consulted, who stated that those who enrol on non-vocational courses are mostly female and aged 40 or above. One college reported that they are also most likely to have no formal qualifications while another stated that many were highly qualified which may indicate regional variation but it is consistent with the survey findings.

Figure 4.3 below shows that the largest proportion of survey respondents were enrolled on a non-vocational course within Arts, Media and Publishing (30 per cent). Those who selected 'other' were asked to state the subject area. A full list can be found in Part 2: Technical Appendix, however almost half of those subjects quoted under 'other' were sport / exercise or cookery / food related and therefore have been added into Figure 4.2 below.

These types of courses are less likely to be directly associated with economic benefits however, given that the profile of the survey population are mostly retired this is unlikely to be the main reason for enrolling. The reasons for enrolling on non-vocational courses are explored in more detail in Section 4.5.2, and findings do reveal that the main reasons for enrolling are social rather than economic with 4 out of 5 people stating they were doing the course for fun.

Figure 4.3 Subject area of non-vocational courses



Source: Deloitte Non-Vocational Survey 2011

4.2.2 Population Profile of Early Leaver Survey

As shown in Figure 4.4, those who took part in the early leaver survey were likely to be aged 24 or under, female, single, employed full time/part-time or unemployed, and their highest qualification level is likely to be GCSE or A Level. Those who dropped out were most likely to do so after between 5-12 months on the course.

One fifth of survey respondents stated that they had a long-term illness, health problem or disability which limits the daily activities or the work they can do.

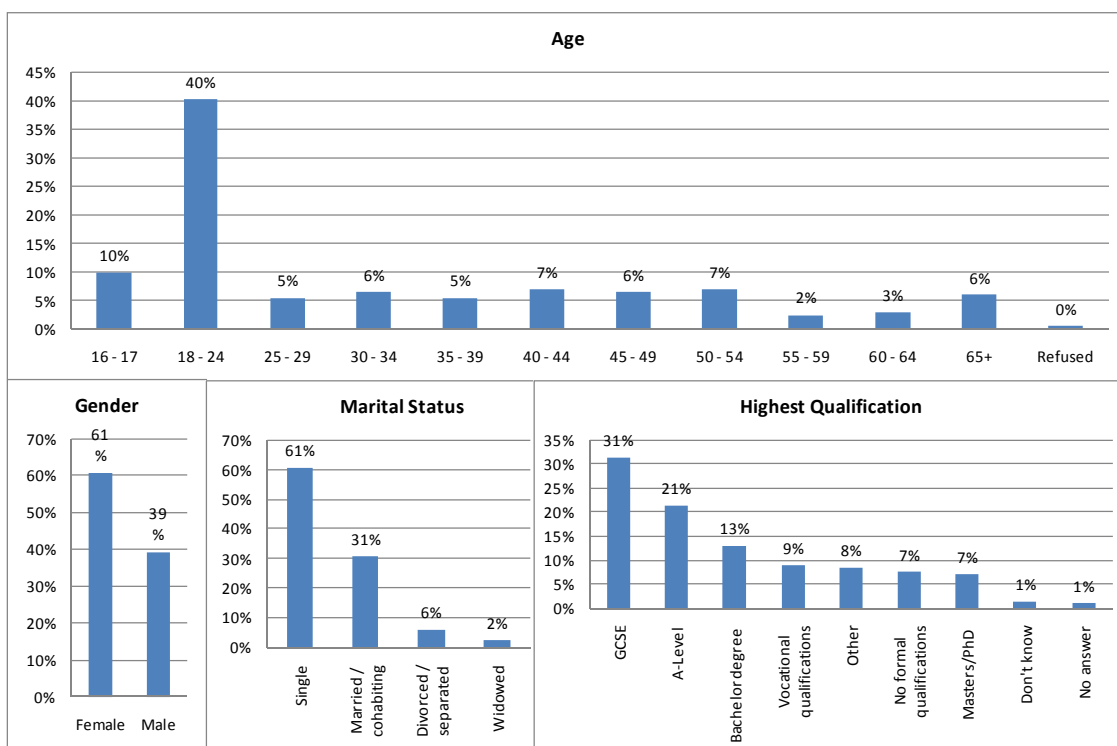
The overall sample of 201 people surveyed for this research can be viewed as largely representative of the overall student population. This is because, from the analysis of early-leavers information contained within the FESR, we know that:

- on average across the three years, 66 per cent of early leavers were single. In this survey 61 per cent were single;
- on average across the three years, 23 per cent stated their highest qualification as GCSE, in this survey, 31 per cent stated their highest qualification level was GCSE or equivalent;
- on average across the three years, 62 per cent of those who dropped out of course were aged 24 or under. In this survey 50 per cent were aged 24 or under; and

- on average across the three years, 55 per cent of early leavers were male. In this survey 49 per cent were male.

A small number of stakeholders held the view that those who dropped out early are most likely to be young people, which is supported by the findings of this survey. Also raised was the point that there are increasing numbers of young people who are neither in education, employment or training (NEETs) and there may need to be more support offered to assist them in making decisions on enrolment and encourage completion.

Figure 4.4 Profile of early leavers

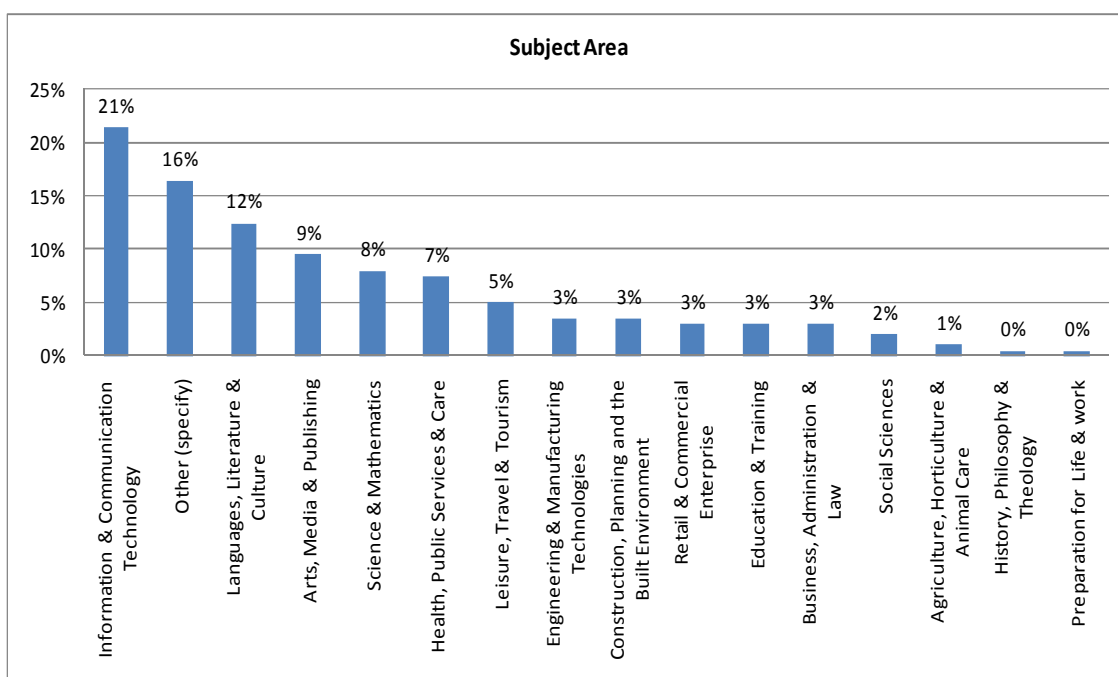


Source: Deloitte Early Leaver Survey 2011

Figure 4.5 below illustrates the subject areas of the courses on which early leavers were enrolled. The largest proportion was enrolled on ICT courses (21 per cent) or 'other' subject areas (16 per cent). Looking at the subject areas stated by those who selected 'other', the majority of courses fell into the following categories:

- Health & Beauty (7);
- Dance/Exercise/Sport (6);
- Food related (4); and
- Joinery or Plumbing (3).

Figure 4.5 Subject area of course enrolled on by early leavers



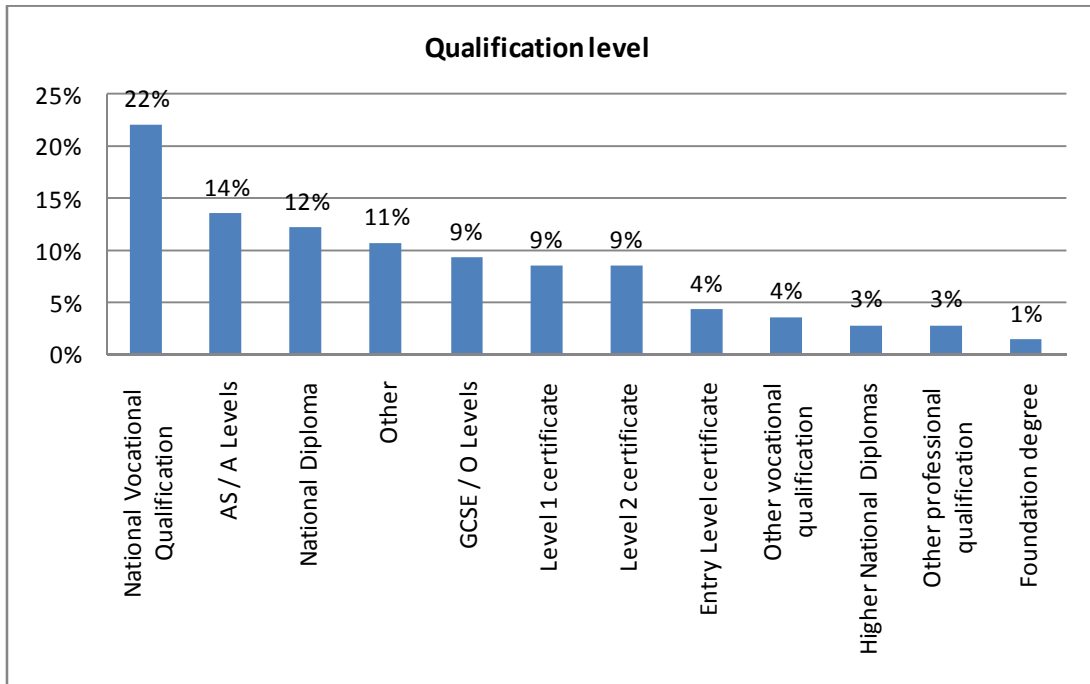
Source: Deloitte Early Leaver Survey 2011

The majority of those who dropped out had enrolled on a course that had a qualification associated with it (70 per cent) and 30 per cent had enrolled on a non-vocational course. This is consistent with the FESR data analysis that found that majority of early leavers (95 per cent) were enrolled on an accredited course, suggesting that those enrolled on a non-vocational course are less likely to drop-out. Of those who had enrolled on an accredited course (n=140), 69 per cent stated that receiving a qualification was important to them. The majority of survey participants (85 per cent) stated that the course they enrolled on was their first choice of course.

The majority of early-leavers (50 per cent) left the course after 5-12 months, 26 per cent left after 18 months or more, and 19 per cent left within the first 4 months.

Figure 4.6 below shows that the largest proportion of Early Leaver survey respondents who were enrolled on an accredited course (n=140), were undertaking an NVQ (22 per cent); A levels (14 per cent); or a National Diploma (12 per cent).

Figure 4.6 Qualification level of course enrolled on by early leavers



Source: Deloitte Early Leaver Survey 2011

4.3 Attitudes and Awareness of Further Education

Survey findings across all learner types revealed that there is a high level of awareness of FE provision and of DEL's priority target audiences for FE. FE's role in providing flexible routes to learning and second chances for learning is also recognised. Provision is viewed as having a strong focus on building skills and on work preparation. Attitudes to learning in general are positive with the majority viewing it as a life-long activity and an important factor in employability. However, there was less awareness of the availability of Higher Education provision in FE colleges.

Take-up of advice that is available for those considering enrolling in FE was generally quite low. The main source of information was from course tutors and this was considered to be helpful by those who availed of it. However, the more readily accessible sources of information such as internet or college brochures were seen as less helpful.

The key points arising from each of the three surveys are set out below.

Omnibus Survey (n=1,004)

- 91 per cent agreed / strongly agreed that FE provides opportunities for people to gain qualifications who would not normally take them.
- 85 per cent agreed / strongly agreed that FE courses prepare you for work.
- 53 per cent agreed / strongly agreed that the standard of teaching at University was typically higher than at FE colleges.
- Nearly all respondents had a good awareness of the types of courses offered at FE colleges, however 20 per cent did not know that full-time and part-time degree courses were offered.

Non-Vocational Survey (n=200)

- 99 per cent agreed / strongly agreed that education is an investment in your future.
- 99 per cent agreed / strongly agreed that learning is something you should do throughout life.
- 83 per cent disagreed / strongly disagreed that learning is only worthwhile if there is a qualification at the end of it.
- 47 per cent agreed / strongly agreed that learning isn't for everyone, however 53 per cent disagreed / strongly disagreed.
- 62 per cent had not been given any advice prior to enrolling, but of those that had, the two most helpful sources were college tutors and careers advisors.

Early Leaver Survey (n=201)

- 96 per cent agreed / strongly agreed that education is an investment in your future.
- 97 per cent agreed / strongly agreed that learning is something you should do throughout life.
- 65 per cent disagreed / strongly disagreed that learning is only worthwhile if there is a qualification at the end of it.
- 52 per cent agreed / strongly agreed that learning isn't for everyone, however 47 per cent disagreed / strongly disagreed.

- 57 per cent had received information prior to enrolling mostly from a college tutor or from a brochure.

The rest of this section looks at these findings in more detail.

4.3.1 Omnibus Survey Findings

The Omnibus Survey was used as the primary vehicle through which to test the general public's awareness and attitude towards FE.

A series of statements about FE was provided, and the overall response to the statements was positive with at least 50 per cent or above of respondents (n=1,004) agreeing or strongly agreeing that:

- FE provides opportunities for people to gain qualifications who would not normally take them (91 per cent);
- FE colleges offer a wide range of courses (91 per cent);
- FE colleges offer a way to learn while working (91 per cent);
- FE courses prepare you for work (85 per cent); and
- the courses offered at FE colleges are more technical than academic (53 per cent).

In addition, 67 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that those who go to university are more likely to get a job than those who go to a FE college, indicating that respondents consider FE qualifications to be at least as useful in gaining employment as qualifications gained at higher education institutions.

This largely reflects the policy position of the Department in relation to FE, in that it aims to provide a wide range of professional and technical related courses that will help people into employment. Considering that the majority of the survey sample was made up of non-learners with no interest in learning, this is an encouraging picture.

However, the survey also revealed a perception that FE is a second choice route to learning for those who do not meet university entry requirements. Seventy-nine per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "people who don't perform as well at school tend to go to FE colleges rather than universities".

There was also a slightly negative response to the statement on quality of teaching, with 53 per cent strongly agreeing or agreeing that the standard of teaching at universities was typically higher than at a FE college, however 21 per cent responded that they did not know.

In addition, nearly all respondents knew that all the types of programmes and courses read out to them were accessible at an FE college, such as:

- a second or further chance for education, training and qualifications;
- training for apprenticeships;
- alternative route to higher education other than school for 16-19 year olds; and
- support for improving literacy and numeracy skills.

The slight exception to this was that 20 per cent of respondents did not think full-time and part-time degrees were offered at FE colleges.

Looking at the responses to “who participates in FE courses”, again the level of awareness was high, with the majority recognising the key target audiences of FE as: school leavers; unemployed people; and ‘people without good qualifications’. Again, this is in line with DEL’s priority target areas for FE encompassing both those continuing their education from school and adults returning to education to improve their qualifications and employment prospects.

Looking across the four learner-types (current and potential learners, non-learners with interest and non-learners with no interest), there was no significant difference between responses.

4.3.2 Non-Vocational Survey Findings

The non-vocational survey tested attitudes to learning and the levels of advice provided / available prior to enrolling.

Findings show that learning is viewed by the majority of respondents as being an important factor of employability and success. The results also showed that the majority believe that learning should be ‘life-long’ and that employers should take responsibility for the learning of their employees.

The majority either disagreed or strongly disagreed that learning is only worthwhile if there is a qualification at the end of it and is only something you do at school.

There was an almost even split between those who strongly agreed or agreed that learning isn’t for everyone and those who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

In relation to advice available prior to enrolling on the course, the majority stated that they had not been provided with any (62 per cent). Of those that had, there were six main sources of information. Table 4.2 shows that the most common source of information was a college tutor (37 per cent) or a college brochure (33 per cent). Participants were asked to rate how helpful they had found each source. Face-to-face sources were rated as the most helpful generally (either college tutor and careers advisor). ‘College brochure’ and ‘internet’ were found to be the least helpful. College brochures or college internet sites are likely to be a first point of contact for people considering undertaking a course and this suggests there is scope for improving the usefulness of the information they contain.

Other sources of information included: Jobs & Benefit Centres (2), library, local paper, open night, receptionist, gardening festival and through personal research.

Out of the 76 people who obtained advice, the majority (91 per cent) stated they had found it easy or very easy to find out what they wanted to know.

Table 4.2 Sources of advice for non-vocational survey respondents

Source	No.	% (n=76)	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Neither	Not very helpful
College tutor	28	37%	89%	11%		
College brochure	25	33%	56%	24%	16%	4%
Family/friend	11	14%	64%	36%		
Other (specify)	9	12%	67%	33%		
Internet	9	12%	44%	11%	11%	33%
Careers advisor	9	12%	78%	22%		

Source: Deloitte Non-Vocational Survey 2011

4.3.3 Early Leaver Survey Findings

As in the non-vocational survey, attitudes to learning and the levels of advice provided/available prior to enrolling were tested in the early leaver survey.

Similar to the non-vocational survey findings, learning is viewed by the majority of respondents as being an important factor of employability and success. The results also showed that the majority believe that learning should be 'life-long' and that employers should take responsibility for the learning of their employees.

Most early-leavers (84 per cent) strongly agreed or agreed that 'you need qualifications to get anywhere these days' despite the fact that the very nature of this group meant they did not complete the course they were on.

Again, there was an almost even split between those who strongly agreed or agreed (53 per cent) that learning isn't for everyone and those who disagreed or strongly disagreed (48 per cent). This more negative view may, again, be due to the fact that they left early and therefore did not realise the full benefits of learning. However, most went on to say that they are likely to undertake further learning in the future, so it does not seem that leaving early has discouraged them.

Looking at the responses by age groups, does not reveal any significant trends with the younger age groups agreeing or disagreeing to the statements in approximately the same proportion as the older groups. The one exception to this is the responses to the statement "Learning is only worthwhile if there is a qualification at the end of it". 50 per cent of those aged 18-24 strongly disagreeing / disagreeing compared to 80 per cent of those aged 25 or over who disagreed / strongly disagreed.

Table 4.3 Attitudes to learning of early leavers

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know/No answer
	%	%	%	%	%
Learning is something you should do throughout life	78%	21%	2%	1%	0%
Education is an investment in your future	76%	21%	3%	1%	0%
If you want to succeed at work you should keep improving your knowledge and skills	70%	27%	3%	1%	0%
You need qualifications to get anywhere these days	65%	19%	10%	6%	2%
Learning makes you more employable	61%	32%	5%	3%	1%
Learning makes it easier to support your children's learning	58%	26%	7%	5%	5%
Employers should be responsible for the training of their employees	44%	39%	13%	5%	1%
Learning in a classroom is easier than learning at home	43%	33%	17%	5%	2%
A combination of online and classroom learning is best	31%	38%	22%	8%	3%
Learning isn't for everybody	27%	26%	20%	28%	1%
The skills you need at work can't be learned in a classroom	23%	22%	37%	17%	3%
Learning is only worthwhile if there is a qualification at the end of it	21%	15%	32%	34%	0%
Learning is only something you do at school	9%	5%	21%	67%	0%
Online learning is better than classroom learning	5%	11%	48%	35%	3%

Source: Deloitte Early Leaver Survey 2011

Participants were asked if they had been given any advice before enrolling on the course. The majority had received information (57 per cent). Of those that had (n=114), there were six main sources of information. The most common source of information was from a college staff member (61 per cent) or a college brochure (23 per cent). Other sources of information

included: employer (2); school; leaflets; open day; by word of mouth; or through personal research.

Out of the 114 people who obtained advice, the majority (92 per cent) stated they had found it easy or very easy to find out what they wanted to know.

4.4 Barriers and Constraints

There was a clear split in relation to perceived barriers to learning across surveys and learner types. Typically those with no interest in learning felt they did not need to learn and nothing would encourage them to do so. Those who did have interest but had not enrolled in any learning within the last three years, stated that time and financial reasons were their main barriers. The non-vocational survey found that course fees were a major barrier as well as finding the time and the location of courses.

The key points arising from the Omnibus and Non-Vocational surveys are set out below. (Early Leavers were not asked about barriers to learning.)

Omnibus Survey (n=1,004)

- The main barriers for non-learners with interest (n=171) were: family commitments (25 per cent); work commitments (25 per cent); financial reasons (15 per cent); and childcare/domestic issues (13 per cent).
- The main barriers for non-learners with no interest (n=663) were: 'don't need to' (53 per cent); age (21 per cent); and 'don't think it is worthwhile' (9 per cent).
- Out of those with no interest, 70 per cent stated that nothing would encourage them to do some learning / training.

Non-Vocational Survey (n=201)

- The main barriers to learning identified were: course fees (56 per cent); family/other commitments (43 per cent); debt concerns (42 per cent); and work commitments (38 per cent).
- Incentives to learning identified were: funding (74 per cent); advice (70 per cent); learning style (59 per cent); and courses held at more convenient places (55 per cent) or times (54 per cent).

The rest of this section looks at these findings in more detail.

4.4.1 Omnibus Survey Findings

Most of the Omnibus survey respondents had not undertaken any FE learning in the last three years (n=834). They were asked to select from a list of barriers what had stopped them from doing a course. There was a clear split between attitudes of those who had considered it (non-learners with interest) and those non-learners that had no interest. For those respondents who did have some interest in undertaking an FE course in the future (n=171), the most frequently selected barriers were:

- hard to find time for learning because of family commitment (25 per cent);
- hard to find time for learning because of work (25 per cent);
- financial reasons (15 per cent); and
- childcare / domestic issues (13 per cent).

For survey respondents who had not undertaken courses at an FE college in the last three years and were not interested in doing any learning (n=663), the most frequently chosen barriers to participation were:

- don't need to (53 per cent);

- age (21 per cent); and
- didn't think it was worthwhile (9 per cent).

Looking at the profile of those who chose the above barriers reveals:

- of those who felt they did not need to undertake learning (n=349), 30 per cent were Social Grade C1 and 23 per cent were Social Grade E. Looking at their highest qualification, 30 per cent had no formal qualifications, followed by GCSE (23 per cent) then by degree (15 per cent) and professional and technical qualifications (15 per cent);
- of those that stated age as a reason for not being interested in undertaking learning (n=141), 70 per cent were aged 65 or over; and
- of those who did not think learning was worthwhile (n=60), 47 per cent were Social Grade E, 37 per cent were Social Grade D and 28 per cent were aged 65 or above.

Those respondents who had no interest in undertaking FE courses were also asked to select from a list, if there was anything that would persuade them to consider undertaking an FE course. The most frequently chosen responses for the non-learner with no interest group were:

- nothing would encourage me to do some learning of training (70 per cent);
- funding to help pay for learning / training (7 per cent);
- time off work (7 per cent); and
- if childcare was available (6 per cent).

Results of the analysis go against previous research in this area that found the main barriers to learning to be family, work and / or time commitments and highlights the considerable challenge of encouraging those who have no interest in undertaking learning. The reasons for not participating given by non-learners with interest, are more consistent with research findings (i.e. finding time to learn and financial reasons). There is more potential, therefore, to capture the interest in learning of those who fall into this latter group. For those who are potentially interested in learning there appears to be a need to establish a clear benefit arising from undertaking learning.

4.4.2 Non-Vocational Survey Findings

Those who took part in the non-vocational survey were also asked to select from a list, reasons why they think people may choose not to undertake learning. The reasons that were selected the most frequently were similar to those selected by non-learners with interest in the Omnibus survey:

- hard to pay course fees (56 per cent);
- lack of time due to family/children/other commitments (43 per cent);
- don't want to get into debt/borrow money (42 per cent); and
- lack of time due to work (38 per cent).

Survey respondents were then asked to consider, from a list, what incentives would persuade them to consider undertaking FE courses. The most frequently selected responses were:

- funding to help pay for learning (74 per cent);

- advice on the type of learning or training I could do (70 per cent);
- learning that suits my style of learning better (59 per cent);
- courses were held at more convenient places (55 per cent);
- courses were held at a more convenient times (54 per cent); and
- learning/training organised in the workplace (50 per cent).

Most of these barriers are to do with lack of advice, location, timing and cost of courses - all issues that could potentially be addressed. Non-vocational survey respondents seem to be more aware of the costs of courses as a barrier and this may be because some courses (around 20 per cent) are run on a cost recovery basis due to the funding cap on non-vocational provision.

The main barriers highlighted in the survey findings, are consistent with the majority of stakeholder views. The most common barriers mentioned were fees and lack of childcare. One stakeholder also mentioned that location can be a barrier as “*people want [education] on their doorstep*”.

4.4.3 Early Leaver Survey Findings

The reasons for leaving courses early, which can also be perceived as barriers, are explored in Section 4.6

4.5 Benefits of participation in Further Education

The main reasons for enrolling on an FE course (i.e. expected benefits) were similar across all learner types and surveys. These were: improved job prospects; improved personal skills; and personal interest in the subject area. However, the Hobby and Leisure Survey findings showed that those who had enrolled on non-vocational courses tended to put less emphasis on improving job prospects and more emphasis on health related benefits such as improved physical well-being. In addition, there is limited evidence of progression into further accredited learning.

By categorising the benefits into: social; health; family; and economic it is evident that current learners tended to perceive more economic-focused benefits while potential learners and non-vocational learners experienced more social type benefits. Early leavers were less likely to mention impact across all four categories.

The key points arising from the three surveys are set out below.

Omnibus Survey - Current Learners (n=54)

- The top three expected benefits for current learners were: to improve job prospects (56 per cent); to improve personal skills (39 per cent); and for personal interest (35 per cent).
- The top three realised benefits for current learners were: improved job prospects (43 per cent); personal interest (22 per cent); and improved personal skills (15 per cent).
- The proportion of current learners who stated that learning had had some or a major impact on four areas of their life was: social life (89 per cent); health (73 per cent); economic life (50 per cent); and family life (39 per cent).

Omnibus Survey - Potential Learners (n=116)

- The top three expected benefits for potential learners were: to improve job prospects (42 per cent); to improve personal skills (44 per cent); and for personal interest (46 per cent).
- The top three realised benefits for potential learners were: improved job prospects (34 per cent); personal interest (25 per cent); and improved personal skills (22 per cent).
- The proportion of potential learners who stated that learning had had some or a major impact on four areas of their life was: social life (72 per cent); health (60 per cent); economic life (49 per cent); and family life (32 per cent).

Non-Vocational Survey (n=200)

- The top three main reasons for enrolling on a course were: to improve personal skills (24 per cent); personal interest (24 per cent); and to improve physical well-being (15 per cent).
- The top three reasons for choosing to enrol on a course without an accreditation were: doing the course for fun (82 per cent); something to do in spare time (73 per cent); and to meet new people (67 per cent).
- The proportion of non-vocational learners who stated that learning had had some or a major impact on four areas of their life was: social life (83 per cent); health (72 per cent); family life (17 per cent); and economic life (13 per cent).

Early Leaver Survey (n=201)

- The top three reasons for enrolling on a course were: personal interest (36 per cent); to improve personal skills (36 per cent); and to improve job prospects (23 per cent).
- The proportion of early-leavers who stated that learning had had some or a major impact on four areas of their life was: social life (46 per cent); health (30 per cent); economic life (21 per cent); and family life (17 per cent).

The rest of this section looks at these findings in more detail.

4.5.1 Omnibus Survey Findings

Within the Omnibus survey both current learners and potential learners were asked to choose their reasons for participation and the realised benefits from a list.

The table below shows that for both groups, the same three responses were the most frequently chosen, but in a slightly different order.

Table 4.4 Expected benefits for current and potential learners – all reasons

Expected benefit	Current Learners (n=54)		Potential Learner (n=116)		Total (n=170)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
To improve job prospects	30	56	49	42	79	46
To improve personal skills	21	39	51	44	72	42
Personal interest	19	35	53	46	54	32

Source: Omnibus survey February 2011

Respondents were then asked, from the same list, to identify the main reason for undertaking an FE course. Again, it was the same three benefits that were identified by both groups of responses, as shown in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Expected benefits for current and potential learners – main reason

Expected benefit	Current Learners (n=54)		Potential Learner (n=116)		Total (n=170)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
To improve job prospects	23	43	39	34	62	36
Personal interest	12	22	29	25	41	24
To improve personal skills	8	15	26	22	34	20

Source: Omnibus survey February 2011

Current learners and potential learners were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of benefit-related statements to understand what benefits had been realised since undertaking the course. The aim of this was to understand if the expected benefits were realised and if there were any unexpected benefits. Findings show that:

- almost all current learners (98 per cent) and potential learners (93 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that so far they had learnt new skills. This is a positive endorsement of FE's role in up-skilling the workforce;
- almost all current learners (96 per cent) and potential learners (94 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge of the subject area had improved;
- almost all current and potential learners agreed or strongly agreed that they had met new friends / new people (96 per cent and 88 per cent respectively);

- a high percentage of both current and potential learners agreed or strongly agreed that they were encouraged to do further training (89 per cent and 77 per cent respectively);
- a higher percentage of current learners (94 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that undertaking learning had boosted their confidence than potential learners (83 per cent);
- the majority of current learners (76 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that undertaking learning had improved their job prospects however just 38 per cent of potential learners strongly disagreed or disagreed with this; and
- the significant minority of current learners (33 per cent) and potential learners (31 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that they are better able to help their child(ren).

Looking at the types of benefits, there are two clear types: economic (e.g. improved job prospects) and social (e.g. meeting new people). In general, a larger percentage of potential learners strongly agreed/agreed that by undertaking learning they had experienced more social benefits and current learners tended to select the more economic-focused benefits. This suggests that there may be a time-related effect on the benefits experienced. Those that have finished their learning have been able to reflect on their experiences and understand more completely the impact it has had on their lives, compared to those who are still learning and are perhaps more optimistic about its potential impact on their job prospects. In addition, the current economic climate is likely to have had an impact on the ability of job-seekers to find employment.

Current and potential learners were also asked if undertaking learning had impacted on their social life, economic situation, family life, and health. Table 4.6 illustrates that:

- the majority of current and potential learners stated that undertaking learning had some impact on their social life (63 per cent and 56 per cent respectively);
- the majority of current and potential learners stated that undertaking learning had some impact on their health (56 per cent and 54 per cent respectively);
- the majority of current and potential learners stated that undertaking learning had made no difference to their family life (54 per cent and 60 per cent respectively), although as shown in the previous section, 75 per cent and 33 per cent did agree that it had enabled them to help with their children's homework; and
- for both current and potential learners there was almost an even split between those who stated learning had made no difference to their economic situation (44 per cent and 49 per cent respectively) and those who stated it had some or a major impact on their economic situation (50 per cent and 49 per cent respectively).

Table 4.6 Learning impacts – current and potential learners

Learner Type	No difference		Some impact		A major impact		Don't Know	
	Current (n=54)	Potential (n=116)	Current (n=54)	Potential (n=116)	Current (n=54)	Potential (n=116)	Current (n=54)	Potential (n=116)
Impact	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Social	11%	26%	63%	56%	26%	16%	0%	2%
Economic	44%	49%	30%	37%	20%	12%	6%	2%
Family	54%	60%	30%	26%	9%	6%	7%	8%
Health	26%	38%	56%	54%	19%	6%	0%	2%

Source: Omnibus Survey February 2011

4.5.2 Non-Vocational Survey Findings

As in the Omnibus Survey, non-vocational survey participants were asked what their main reasons for enrolling on the course were (i.e. expected benefits) and what benefits they had experienced since starting the course (i.e. realised benefits).

The top three reasons given by non-vocational learners for participating in FE were:

- personal interest (49 per cent);
- to improve skills related to the subject (21 per cent); and
- to improve personal skills (21 per cent).

When asked to pick the main reason, out of the 66 participants who responded, the top three reasons given were:

- to improve personal skills (24 per cent);
- personal interest (24 per cent); and
- to improve physical well-being (15 per cent).

This is supported by findings of the Omnibus survey that found two of the top three reasons for enrolling were 'to improve personal skills' and 'for personal interest'. The third top reason in the Omnibus survey was 'to improve job prospects'. However, this response was chosen by just 5 per cent of the 200 non-vocational survey participants.

Those participating in the non-vocational survey were also asked why they had enrolled on a non-accredited course rather than one with a qualification. The majority reported that they had enrolled on a non-vocational course for fun (82 per cent), to fill their spare time (73 per cent) or to meet new people (67 per cent), Table 4.7 below sets out the main reasons for enrolling on a course without a qualification by age.

Table 4.7 Reasons for enrolling on a non-vocational course by Age

Reason	Age groups											Total	
	16-17	18-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64	65+	No.	% (n=200)
Doing the course for fun	5	13	6	3	7	11	4	19	17	26	53	164	82%
Something to do in my spare time	4	8	7	3	4	11	3	15	16	24	51	146	73%
Doing the course as a way of meeting new people	3	12	4	2	2	8	1	16	12	23	50	133	67%
To keep myself busy/occupied	3	11	5	3	2	6	1	13	14	22	46	126	63%
Something I will use in other areas of my life	4	15	4	3	7	9	3	16	14	15	25	115	58%
Curious about the course and wanted to see what it was like	5	13	6	3	5	8	1	11	8	16	25	101	51%
Have all the qualifications I need	3	12	4	1	3	4	2	11	12	14	30	96	48%
Not interested in gaining qualifications	0	2	1	2	0	4	3	9	14	16	33	84	42%
Don't want the stress of exams and / or coursework	2	8	2	1	0	4	1	9	7	11	20	65	33%
The course is a stepping-stone to future learning with qualifications	4	15	2	0	2	1	0	4	1	1	7	37	19%
There isn't one offered in the subject/area I'm interested in	1	3	1	0	0	1	1	4	4	3	4	22	11%
Don't have the right qualifications to get onto an accredited course	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	6	12	6%
Literacy skills not sufficient to get through an accredited course	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	3	1	1	2	11	6%
ICT not sufficient to get through an accredited course	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	3	1	11	6%
Numeracy skills not sufficient to get through an accredited course	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	1	0	9	5%
Worried about failing an accredited course	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	2	7	4%
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1%
Didn't want to do anything too complicated	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1%

Source: Deloitte Non-Vocational Survey 2011

Table 4.7 demonstrates that the top five reasons for enrolling on a course without a qualification were because:

- they are doing the course for fun (82 per cent);
- it is something to do in their spare time (73 per cent);
- they are doing the course to meet new people (67 per cent);
- it keeps them busy/occupied (63 per cent); and
- it is something they will use in other areas of their life (58 per cent).

This is consistent with views from College personnel who stated that the majority of those undertaking non-vocational courses did so to give them something to do in their spare time or to meet new people. In addition to this, three stakeholders also mentioned that one of the main reasons for enrolling is as a 'social outlet' or 'to meet other people'. One stated that this was especially the case for elderly people.

The results also show almost one fifth (19 per cent) of those choosing a non-vocational course do so because they see it as a stepping-stone to future learning with qualifications. Looking at the age breakdown, the majority of these respondents were below the age of 50. However despite this, the evidence of progression is more limited – with just 10 per cent of those participating in the non-vocational survey stating that they actually had progressed onto an accredited course. Progression is looked at in more depth in Section 4.7.2.

There was also a small group of respondents whose reason for choosing a course without a qualification was due to their lack of numeracy, literacy or ICT skills which prevented them undertaking an accredited course (31 in total). Looking at the progression results for this group of respondents reveals that the majority did go on to do further learning (58 per cent, n=31), however just 40 per cent of those (n=31) went to do an accredited course. The Essential Skills Strategy is the vehicle through which DEL aims to improve numeracy, literacy and ICT skills of the workforce, however, the majority of those enrolling in non-vocational courses are retired and therefore may not see the value in undertaking Essential Skills courses even though they are open to all ages.

Looking at the realised benefits, the two most commonly quoted benefits were in relation to knowledge and skills, which is similar to the realised benefits of current learners in the Omnibus Survey. The next two most commonly quoted benefits were social factors, which is similar to the potential learners from the Omnibus Survey. Also similar to potential learners is the comparatively small number of people who had actually experienced job-related benefits compared with the number who anticipated this as a benefit. This may be linked to the recent economic situation.

Each benefit can be categorised into: social; economic; family-related; and health benefits. Survey participants were asked to indicate the level of impact undertaking a non-vocational course had had on each of these four areas of their life. Table 4.8 illustrates that the area that was found to have the most impact (either some or major impact) was on respondents' social life (83 per cent), followed by their health (72 per cent). Impact on family-life and economic situation was found to be very low with just 17 per cent and 11 per cent respectively stating they had experienced some or a major impact in these areas.

Table 4.8 Learning impacts of non-vocational courses

Benefit type	No difference	Some impact	A major impact	Don't know
	% (n=200)	% (n=200)	% (n=200)	% (n=200)
Social	17%	56%	27%	1%
Health	26%	41%	31%	3%
Family	78%	11%	6%	5%
Economic	85%	7%	6%	3%

Source: Deloitte Non-Vocational Survey 2011

Views from stakeholders support the findings that those undertaking non-vocational courses tend to experience more social-type benefits. Three stakeholders all stated that undertaking non-vocational learning can help to build confidence. One also mentioned that it can also be therapeutic for some.

4.5.3 Early Leaver Survey Findings

While early leavers may not have experienced the full benefit of undertaking an FE course, they were asked what their main reasons for enrolling on the course was (i.e. expected benefits).

The top three reasons given by early leavers (n=201) for enrolling on a course were:

- personal interest (36 per cent);
- to improve personal skills (36 per cent); and
- to improve job prospects (23 per cent).

When asked to pick the main reason, out of the 46 participants who responded, the same three reasons were selected most frequently, in the same order.

Despite leaving early, respondents were asked if they had experienced any benefits (selected from the same list of benefits in the Omnibus and Hobby and Leisure survey). The most commonly realised benefit was meeting new friends / people (71 per cent), followed by improved knowledge of the subject (68 per cent) and then by learning new skills (67 per cent).

Looking at the area of their life in which learners had experienced the greatest impact, the findings show that the majority of respondents had noticed no difference in their family life, economic situation or health. This highlights the fact that dropping out of a course early limits the impact that learning can have and therefore it is important to understand the reasons so these can be mitigated against (see Section 4.6). The biggest impact (either major or some positive impact) was found to be on their social life (46 per cent), which is consistent with the majority stating that the biggest benefit had been around meeting new people.

Table 4.9 Learning impacts on early leavers

Benefit type	No difference	Some positive impact	A major positive	Negative impact	No answer	Total
	% (n=201)	% (n=201)	% (n=201)	% (n=201)	% (n=201)	
Social	47%	35%	11%	6%	0%	201
Economic	68%	15%	6%	10%	1%	201
Family	74%	13%	4%	7%	2%	201
Health	60%	19%	11%	10%	0%	201

Source: Deloitte Early Leaver Survey 2011

4.6 Reasons for Drop-out

The Omnibus and early leaver surveys investigated why learners do not complete courses. Health or disability reasons are factors contributing to drop-out rates for both Omnibus Survey respondents and early leaver survey respondents. Perceived poor standards of teaching were highlighted by the early leaver respondents, particularly those who had enrolled on accredited FE provision. Another common drop-out reason for those who had enrolled on non-vocational provision was because the course had been cancelled.

Only one quarter of early leavers had been offered advice and a majority of those who hadn't been offered advice stated that they would have benefited from being offered advice. However, despite this a significant minority stated that nothing would have encouraged them to stay on the course.

The key points arising from the Omnibus and Early Leaver survey are set out below. (As the majority of non-vocational participants had enrolled within the last year, they were not asked this question.)

Omnibus Survey – potential learners (n=116)

- Out of the 116 potential learners, 24 did not complete the course. The top three reasons given were: health / disability reasons (17 per cent); felt they would not succeed (13 per cent); and childcare / domestic issues (13 per cent).

Early Leaver Survey (n=201)

- The top three reasons for not completing the course were: perceived poor quality of teaching (12 per cent of all early leavers); work commitments (9 per cent); and course was changed or cancelled (9 per cent).
- 42 per cent stated that nothing would have prevented them from dropping out.

4.6.1 Omnibus Survey Findings

Within the Omnibus survey, those people who had completed a course within the last three years but are not currently undertaking learning (i.e. potential learners) were asked if they had finished their course. Current learners were not asked this question as it was assumed that they were still completing the course. Out of the 116 potential learners, 79 per cent did complete the course and 21 per cent did not.

Those who did not complete the course were asked about their reasons for dropping out. Table 4.10 sets out the responses given. It shows that most common reason given for dropping out was health or disability reasons or there was no reason. As this was a relatively small sample, this issue has been explored in more depth in the early leaver's survey.

Table 4.10 Reasons for drop out of Omnibus Survey respondents

Reason	No.	% (n=24)
For health or disability reasons	4	17%
None	4	17%
Felt I would not succeed	3	13%
Childcare / domestic issues	3	13%
Social security benefit restrictions	2	8%
Underestimate the time needed to do the course	2	8%
Didn't think it was worthwhile	2	8%
Hard to find time for learning because of work commitments	2	8%
Poor quality of teaching	2	8%
Financial reasons	1	4%
No answer	1	4%

Source: Omnibus Survey February 2011

4.6.2 Non-Vocational Survey Findings

The non-vocational survey did not look at reasons for drop-out as the majority of participants had enrolled in the last year and may not have finished the course.

4.6.3 Early Leaver Survey Findings

Findings from the early leaver survey highlight some of the main reasons why learners do not finish the course they have enrolled on. The top reason was because of the perceived poor quality of teaching with 12 per cent of respondents in total selecting this reason. By looking at the reasons given by those who enrolled on an accredited course compared to non-vocational (see Table 4.11), the quality of teaching seems to be a bigger issue for accredited courses. The most frequently selected reason for drop-out from non-vocational provision was because the course changed or it was cancelled. Finding time for learning because of work commitment was a problem both for those on accredited and non-vocational courses. Those on non-vocational provision were more likely to drop out due to health reasons or because the style of teaching wasn't suitable, compared to those on accredited courses who are more likely to drop out for childcare/domestic issues or simply because they didn't enjoy the course.

Table 4.11 Reasons for drop out for early leaver survey respondents

Reason	Accredited Course (n=140)		Non-Accredited courses (n=61)		Total (n=201)	
	No	%	No.	%	No	%
Poor quality of teaching	21	15%	3	5%	24	12%
Hard to find time for learning because of my work commitments	12	9%	6	10%	18	9%
The nature of the course changed or it was cancelled	7	4%	11	15%	18	9%
The course was not at the right level for me - too difficult	10	5%	6	7%	16	8%
Didn't enjoy the course	9	6%	5	8%	14	7%
Health	8	6%	6	10%	14	7%
Other (specify)	12	9%	2	3%	13	6%
Childcare / domestic issues	12	9%	1	2%	13	6%
Found that the course was not what I wanted to do after all/changed my mind	8	6%	5	8%	13	6%
Style of teaching was not suitable for me	5	4%	6	10%	11	5%
The course was at an inconvenient time	7	5%	3	5%	10	5%
The course was not at the right level for me - too easy	6	4%	4	7%	10	5%
Found a job/place a university	8	0%	0	0%	8	4%
Financial reasons	5	4%	2	3%	7	3%
Felt I would not succeed	6	4%	0	0%	6	3%
Didn't think it was worthwhile	5	4%	1	2%	6	3%
Hard to find time for learning because of my family commitments	4	3%	2	3%	6	3%
The course was at an inconvenient place	3	2%	3	5%	6	3%
Became pregnant/had a baby	4	3%	1	2%	5	2%
Lack of support from college	4	3%	1	2%	5	2%
Underestimated the time needed to do the course	3	2%	1	2%	4	2%
College facilities were not appropriate	2	1%	1	2%	3	1%
No answer	2	1%	1	2%	3	1%
Lack of support from employer	2	1%	0	0%	2	1%
Became unemployed / redundant	2	0%	0	0%	2	1%

Source: Deloitte Early Leaver Survey 2011

Early leavers were asked if they were offered any advice before they left. Only 26 per cent were offered advice. Of those who hadn't been offered advice (n=149) 55 per cent said they would have benefited from being offered advice.

Of those who were offered advice (n=52), only 56 per cent actually took up the advice. The main type of advice offered was around options for after leaving the course (52 per cent), information about the course (28 per cent) and advice to help them stay on the course (28 per cent). The main source of advice was college staff (93 per cent) and this advice was deemed to be either very helpful or quite helpful.

When asked if anything would have prevented them leaving the course, a significant minority (42 per cent) stated that nothing would have prevented them. This may be because, in their view, the reasons for leaving could not have been improved to their satisfaction or that the issues were irreconcilable. Others stated that if the learning had suited their learning style better (12 per cent) or if courses had been held at a more convenient time (7 per cent) they may have been prevented from leaving. Despite the largest reason for drop out being the perceived poor standard of teaching, just five per cent stated that having a different tutor would have prevented them from leaving.

4.7 Progression

From each of the surveys conducted, there is limited evidence of progression. Analysis of the Omnibus Survey responses found that those who are currently enrolled on a course are more likely to consider progressing on completing their current course than those who are no longer learning. However, there is evidence of progression from potential learners who have undertaken more than one course within the last three years.

There is some evidence of progression from non-vocational to accredited provision across the surveys and across learner types. The non-vocational survey found evidence of repeated learning – 59 per cent had completed more than one course – and intention among these learners to participate in further courses in the next two years – 86 per cent. But only 1 in 10 of the non-vocational survey respondents had actually progressed to a course with a qualification. Similarly, the omnibus survey found that 12 per cent of potential learners had started with a non-vocational course and progressed to an accredited course.

Encouragingly and despite dropping out, the majority of early-leavers did show an interest in undertaking further learning in the future.

The key points arising from the three surveys are set out below.

Omnibus Survey – current learners (n=54)

- 76 per cent of those currently undertaking an accredited course (n=50) would like to continue learning when completed and 63 per cent of these would like to progress to a course in the same subject but at a higher level.
- 65 per cent of all current learners stated they would like to undertake further learning in the next two years.

Omnibus Survey – potential learners (n=116)

- 59 per cent of potential learners stated they would like to undertake further learning.
- 33 per cent of potential learners (n=116) had undertaken more than one course, and 12 per cent had progressed either from a non-vocational to an accredited course.

Non-Vocational Survey (n=200)

- 59 per cent of respondents had gone on to undertake further learning, but just 10 per cent had progressed onto an accredited course.

Early Leaver Survey (n=201)

- Despite dropping out, 84 per cent stated they were either fairly or very likely to undertake further learning in the next three years.

4.7.1 Omnibus Survey Findings

Participants who are currently undertaking an FE course (i.e. current learners, n=54) were asked how likely they were to continue learning. This was split into two groups: those who are currently doing an accredited course (n=50) and those who are doing a non-vocational course (n=4). Although this is a small sample of students it provides some indication of intention to progress. (NB. The introduction of the unique learner number into the FESR database, will allow for a larger statistical study to be undertaken on the progression of students.)

The majority of those undertaking an accredited course (76 per cent) stated they would like to continue learning. Those who stated they would like to continue learning were then asked if they would like to continue in the same subject area, a different subject area and at what level. Table 4.12 below illustrates that the majority of those who would like to continue learning would like to undertake a course in the same subject area but at a higher level (63 per cent).

Table 4.12 Likely progression of current learners on accredited courses (n=38)

Subject & Level	% (n=38)
Same subject, same level	0%
Same subject, lower level	0%
Same subject higher level	63%
Same subject, no qualification	5%
Different subject, same level	5%
Different subject, lower level	3%
Different subject, higher level	11%
Different subject, no qualification	3%

Source: Omnibus Survey February 2011, NB: Four students had not yet decided (11 per cent)

Current learners (n=54) were also asked how likely they were to undertake further learning in the next two years. Sixty-five per cent stated they were likely or very likely to undertake further learning. Nineteen per cent stated they were unlikely or very unlikely to undertake further learning and the remaining 17 per cent were unsure. Reasons given for not continuing learning included:

- hard to find time for learning because of work commitments (30 per cent);
- didn't think it was necessary (30 per cent);
- financial reasons (20 per cent); and
- there were no courses that suited their needs (20 per cent).

There was some evidence of progression among potential learners (n=116), 26 per cent of whom had completed more than one course. Twelve per cent of potential learners had started with a non-vocational course and then progressed to an accredited course, and 8 per cent had stated with an accredited course and progressed to courses with a higher level of qualification.

Potential learners (n=116) were also asked how likely they were to undertake further learning. The majority (59 per cent) stated that they would, however a significant minority (41 per cent) said they would not. When asked why they would not be continuing their learning, the following responses were given:

- didn't think it was necessary (38 per cent);
- hard to find time for learning because of work commitments (23 per cent);
- childcare / domestic issues (19 per cent);
- financial reasons (15 per cent);
- hard to find time for learning because of family commitments (11 per cent);

- thought they were too old (8 per cent);
- no courses that suited their needs (8 per cent);
- lack of support from their employer (4 per cent); and
- health or disability reasons (4 per cent).

Those who are currently enrolled on a course (i.e. current learners) are more likely to consider progressing than potential learners. However, there is evidence of progression from potential learners who have undertaken more than one course within the last three years. The majority of those who would consider undertaking further learning would like to progress their learning to a higher qualification level.

4.7.2 Non-Vocational Survey Findings

Participants in the non-vocational survey were asked if, on completing the non-vocational course, they had moved on to undertake further learning. Out of the sample of 200, 59 per cent stated they had. Those who had were then asked what learning they went on to do in order to ascertain if there had been any progression. Table 4.13 below shows that from the 118 participants who had went onto undertake further learning, 17 per cent went onto do a course with a qualification: 14 per cent in the same subject area; and three per cent in a different subject area. Therefore, out of the total sample of non-vocational survey participants (n=200) 10 per cent progressed from non-vocational to accredited learning. However, the majority (90 per cent) did not progress onto a course with a qualification.

The findings from the survey are consistent with the views of the majority of stakeholders who stated that a small number of those who enrol on non-vocational provision actually progress to accredited learning. The survey findings are also consistent with the literature review that found 10 per cent of learners moved from non-vocational to accredited courses. Looking at the total number of FE enrolments per year, if 1 in 10 people who enrol on non-vocational provision do progress into accredited provision, this would equate to approximately 3,500 people per year. Unfortunately it is not possible at this stage to verify this with the FESR data.

Table 4.13 Progression of non-vocational survey participants (n=118)

	Subject Area	
	Same %	Different %
Qualification	14%	3%
No qualification	71%	11%

Source: Deloitte Non-Vocational Survey 2011

Table 4.14 below shows the qualification levels that those non-vocational students who progressed onto a qualified course went on to do. The majority went on to undertake a National Diploma, 'other professional and technical qualifications' (stated as: OCN, BTEC, City & Guilds or Coaching), 'other professional qualification' (stated as: City & Guilds (2) or level 3), or 'other' qualification (stated as: City & Guilds, Level 3 Certificate and "not sure").

Table 4.14 Types of qualifications undertaken by non-vocational survey participants

Qualification level	No.	% (n=20)
National Diploma	5	25%
Other vocational qualification	4	20%
Other professional qualification	3	15%
Other	3	15%
Entry Level certificate	2	10%
Level 1 certificate	1	5%
National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)	1	5%
Foundation degree	1	5%
Total	20	100%

Source: Deloitte Non-Vocational Survey 2011

For the 118 participants who did continue with their learning, the main reasons were the same as the main reasons for undertaking learning generally:

- personal interest (50 per cent);
- to improve personal skills (24 per cent); and
- to improve skills related to the subject (24 per cent).

In addition to this, 25 per cent selected 'other', the majority of these were stated as either because they enjoyed it (15); or to improve skills/knowledge in same subject area (4).

When asked how likely they were to undertake further learning in the next two years, 86 per cent stated they were likely or very likely to. Of these (n=118), when asked why, again, it was the same three reasons that were most frequently quoted: 'to continue my personal interest' (56 per cent); 'to continue to improve personal skills' (27 per cent); and 'to continue to improve skills related to the subject (29 per cent)'.

4.7.3 Early Leaver Survey Findings

Findings from the early leaver survey show that the majority (84 per cent of the 201 early leavers) are either very or fairly likely to sign-up for further learning in the next three years suggesting that they have not been put-off learning. Of those who stated they are very or fairly unlikely to undertake further learning (14 per cent), the main reasons given were that they had had enough of learning, had been put off by a bad experience or because of lack of time due to work.

5. Conclusions

The research has shown there to be a high level of awareness and positive attitude to FE in general. The main barriers to learning, for those who are interested in learning, relate to timing, work, family commitments and cost of courses. These could potentially be addressed and may help to encourage learners to continue or progress. The motivations of those who enrol on non-vocational courses are more likely to be social and health-related than for those enrolling on vocational courses, but there is evidence of progression by a small group of these learners for whom non-vocational learning has been a stepping stone to vocational learning.

5.1 Introduction

This section presents the overall conclusions from the research under the five key research objectives and implications on the way forward for DEL and the FE Sector.

5.2 Adult Perceptions of Further Education

Overall, the findings in relation to adult perceptions of FE were positive. There is a high level of awareness that FE provides a flexible way to access a wide range of learning, and that FE qualifications are at least as likely as those from higher education institutions to enable learners to gain employment. This challenges the perception that FE is seen as offering lower level, technical provision only. The research also revealed positive attitudes towards learning in general, with learning being viewed as an important employability factor and a life-long activity.

However there is still a perception that FE is a second choice for those who do not meet the entry requirements of universities and that standards of teaching in FE colleges are lower than in universities. This links back to the finding that fewer people were aware that some Higher Education provision can be accessed at an FE college.

5.3 Perceived Barriers to Entry

The research has found that the main barriers that learners may experience in relation to FE are largely structural (i.e. relating to the FE system and practical considerations) and internal (i.e. relating to perceptions of the learner) factors. This is consistent with the literature review findings.

For those who have not undertaken learning in the last three years and are not interested, the main barrier is largely attitudinal suggesting that it may be difficult to persuade them to learn. Reasons for this were not explored further within the remit of this research.

For those who had not undertaken learning in the last three years but had considered it (non-learners with interest, n=171), there were three main barriers:

- Work commitments were stated as a barrier by 25 per cent of the sample;
- Family commitments were also stated as a barrier by 25 per cent of the sample; and
- Financial reasons were cited as a barrier by 15 per cent of the sample.

Work commitments and financial reasons were also the main barriers cited by current and potential learners for not progressing further with their learning. Those who did express an interest in learning perceive various barriers which can largely be categorised into: work and family commitments; location of courses; and cost of courses (this was also a particular barrier for non-vocational survey participants). The provision of information on the flexible options available for learners such as part-time/weekend/evening courses, hardship funds and crèche facilities may help to overcome these barriers.

Lack of advice provision can also be seen to stunt the potential progression of students and therefore be seen as a barrier. In the non-vocational survey, the majority of respondents stated they had not been offered any advice before enrolling; however 70 per cent stated that if they had been given more advice on the type of learning they could do it would have encouraged them to progress. In addition, just 26 per cent of early leavers were given advice prior to dropping out. From the experiences of those who had been given advice either before enrolling or before leaving, it was clear to see that face-to-face advice was preferred over online or brochures.

The importance of face-to-face advice prior to completing a course was therefore apparent from the research and, given the high percentage of all survey respondents stating that they are likely to consider learning in the future, it may be worthwhile briefing students as they near the end of a course on opportunities for progression.

5.4 Motivations for Participation in FE

The research found that the main reasons for participating in FE were mostly economic-based reasons such as to improve job prospects. However, those who have completed courses often experienced unforeseen social benefits such as meeting new people. This may be because they have had time to reflect on their experiences. The current economic climate is also likely to have impacted on their ability to secure a job, which may be why less people who had completed their course in the last three years cited improved job prospects as a realised benefit.

There was some evidence that socio-economic factors play a part in whether people decide to enrol on a vocational or non-vocational course. The socio-economic analysis of the Omnibus Survey showed that those who chose to enrol on a non-vocational course are more likely to be from a more advantaged background i.e. own their home outright, are lower middle (C1), middle (B) or upper middle class (A), and more likely to hold higher level qualifications. Those undertaking accredited courses tended to be from a more disadvantaged background i.e. rent through the NIHE and are more likely to be lower middle class (C1) or on benefits (E).

Due to the high percentage of non-vocational enrollers who are aged 65 or over and retired, the benefits of learning are less likely to be economic and more likely to be social and health-related. Those who chose non-vocational courses were more likely to have done so for social reasons with 82 per cent stating they had enrolled 'for fun'. However, despite these predominantly social motivators, the benefits experienced were largely skills-related i.e. improved personal skills. In addition, they also tended to experience more health-related benefits such as improved physical well-being, with 15 per cent stating they had experienced improved physical well-being. This does add some weight to the argument that undertaking non-vocational courses does have "softer outcomes" such as improved physical well-being or meeting new people.

5.5 Progression to Further Study

There was some evidence of progression from non-vocational to accredited provision across the surveys and across learner types, although this was based on a small sample of learners.

Although the survey of those who had undertaken a non-vocational course in the last year found a high degree of repeated learning (59 per cent had done more than one course), only 10 per cent of respondents overall had gone on to do a course with a qualification at this stage. The Omnibus Survey provided a longer-term view but only a slightly higher rate of progression. Twelve per cent of the potential learners identified through the Omnibus Survey had started with a non-vocational course and progressed to an accredited course. This suggests that while non-vocational learning may promote progression, its impact is not particularly widespread.

This finding cannot be easily verified using the FESR database, however it is consistent with the literature review that found 10 per cent of learners moved from non-vocational to accredited courses. Looking at the total number of FE enrolments per year, if 1 in 10 people who enrol on non-vocational provision do progress into accredited provision, this would equate to approximately 3,500 people per year. While this is based on a small sample, it does indicate that there is potentially a group of learners who do use non-vocational learning as a stepping stone. However, due to the age profile of those enrolling on non-vocational courses, the motivations for enrolling are more likely to be social or health related and the majority do not go on to accredited provision. The higher average age of those enrolling on non-vocational provision and their higher qualification level, means that the opportunities or interest in progression or re-skilling/up-skilling is more limited.

In relation to learning in general, research showed that those currently learning are most interested in progressing. Therefore actively targeting advice about further learning to current students may improve the levels of students who actually do go on to higher level courses. This is true of both those enrolled on accredited and non-vocational provision.

Findings from the early leaver survey showed that the majority were also likely to continue with learning in the next three years. Of those who stated they are very or fairly unlikely to undertake further learning (14 per cent), the main reasons given were that they had had enough of learning, had been put off by a bad experience or because of lack of time due to work.

5.6 Why Some Students Drop-Out

The research found that, of those who participated in the early leaver survey, 12 per cent perceived poor standards of teaching to be the primary reason for drop-out of FE courses and 9 per cent quoted work commitments as the main reason. This is particularly so with accredited provision. Given the degree of influence that course tutors can have on student experiences, it may be worthwhile revisiting the mechanisms by which students can raise concerns about perceived poor standards of teaching to ensure that any problems can be effectively dealt with.

In order to cater for those with work / family commitments, the findings also highlight the importance of Colleges continuing to develop as flexible a range of opportunities as possible.

Those enrolled on a non-vocational course are more susceptible to dropping out if a course is changed or re-scheduled which is more likely to happen to non-vocational courses. Where possible, reasons for changing or re-scheduling courses should be addressed and efforts to minimise the number of courses changed / rescheduled.

In addition, while not all students or potential students chose to take up any advice offered, the research did find that there is an opportunity to improve the level and quality of advice available to students considering dropping out. As noted in Section 3 above, face-to-face advice was also highlighted as a means to encourage progression of existing students.

Disclaimer

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