

# Older People and Lifelong Learning: Choices and Experiences

**Project grant holder:** Alexandra Withnall

## Aims

The overall aim of this project was to identify and examine the factors that affect the extent to which older people become, or remain, engaged in lifelong learning, and the outcomes this has for their lives. Specific aims were:

- 1 To make a contribution to theoretical understandings of lifelong learning by foregrounding the role of learning in the post-work period of life;
- 2 To formulate and to test a conceptual model of the causes of, and pathways to, involvement in learning activity, both formal and informal, in later life using a life course approach;
- 3 To assess any outcomes that involvement in learning activities of any kind might have for the quality of older people's lives;
- 4 To develop research strategies that integrate both the researchers and older people themselves into the research process;
- 5 To involve relevant interest groups and potential research users in the interpretation of implication of findings for the development of educational policy and practice.

## Significance

The promotion of a culture of lifelong learning is a cornerstone of government educational policy, and this is reflected in recent reform of the post-compulsory education system and efforts to widen participation. However, older people seem to be largely excluded from this vision; recent educational policy documents generally make only scant mention of those who are post-work in the sense that they are no longer primarily concerned with earning a living or with major responsibilities for raising a family. Indeed, little is known about older people's experiences of learning and education across the life course or the circumstances that affect choice and opportunity for involvement in different types of learning activity in later life. It would also be useful to have a better understanding of older people's perceptions of the outcomes of their learning activities for the quality of their lives in order to inform future policy and practice – not just in educational circles but also among those involved in the provision of care for older people.

## The work carried out

- Focus group discussions with 10 groups of older people who were taking part in different types of formally organised learning activities in different contexts around the UK.
- Construction of a model to illustrate pathways to, and influences on, older people's learning activities across the life course.
- Questionnaires to test this model to a further 100 older people (50 currently taking part in formally organised learning, 50 'non-participants'). Thirty-eight were returned by participants, 42 by non-participants. A sentence completion task, 'Learning is....' was included and attempted by 69 respondents in all.
- In-depth interviews with 50 of the above were carried out by a trained team of seven older people themselves in locations across the UK. Thirty-five older people (21 participants, 14 non-participants) agreed to be interviewed.
- Analysis of 20 learning logs to be kept by a further 20 older people over a three-month period. Nine people achieved this over a one/two-month period.



Never too old to learn

## Project schedule

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>Stage 1 (months 1–3)</b>   | Literature review. Recruitment of older people for interview team. Begin training booklet.   |
| <b>Stage 2 (months 2–10)</b>  | Selection of focus group sites. Negotiation of access. Focus group meetings. Analysis and feedback to focus group participants. Construction of conceptual model             |
| <b>Stage 3 (months 11–18)</b> | Location of new group of those participating/not participating in learning activities. Testing of model through two questionnaires including pilot. Analysis and comparison. |
| <b>Stage 4 (months 19–28)</b> | In-depth interviews with older learners from above groups carried out by specially recruited interview team. Learning logs despatched. Analysis of data.                     |
| <b>Stage 5 (months 29–30)</b> | Preparation of final report and agreement on initial dissemination strategies.   |
| <b>Month 31 to date</b>       | Continuing dissemination of findings at seminars, conferences and through publications.  |

## Research team

The grant holder was Alexandra Withnall (University of Keele, January to September 2000; University of Warwick, October 2000 to June 2002).

Lesley Hart (University of Strathclyde) and Joanna Walker (Pre-Retirement Association) acted as external consultants.

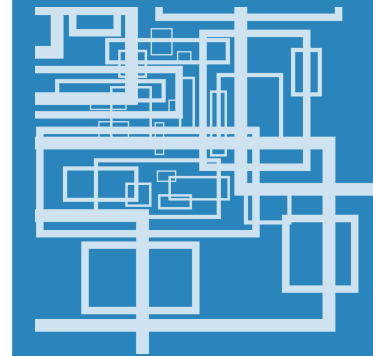
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## Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves over 30 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and will continue to 2008/9.

**Learning:** TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

**Outcomes:** TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

**Lifecourse:** TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

**Enrichment:** TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

**Expertise:** TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research-informed policy and practice.

**Improvement:** TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

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