
NATIONAL ADULT LEARNING SURVEY (NALS) 2002

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The National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) series is used by DfES to evaluate the effectiveness of their adult learning policies. The NALS series is also used to monitor progress in meeting the National Learning Target for adult participation. The 2002 survey is the fourth in the NALS series; the previous surveys were carried out in 2001, 2000¹ and 1997.

Key Findings

- The national learning target for adult participation has been met. In 2002, 76% of adults aged 16-69 (outside continuous full-time education) had taken part in learning over the last three years, an increase from 74% in 1997².
- Participation levels are considerably lower than average among certain groups, including: people aged 70 and over (28%), respondents with no qualifications (29%), those with basic skills difficulties (52%), and adults living in the most deprived areas (67%).
- Whilst some non-learners had a negative attitude towards learning, 45% of non-learners said they would like to have done some learning. Many faced practical obstacles such as: lack of time due to work and family, financial difficulties, and a lack of knowledge about local learning opportunities.
- 49% of non-learners who mentioned childcare as a barrier to learning said some form of childcare support would encourage them to learn. 90% of those mentioning transport as a problem said transport improvement or assistance would encourage them to learn.
- 70% of adults had used Information Communication and Technology at some point in their life (compared to 67% in 2001). Around 77% of current ICT users use a computer and the Internet at home.
- Most parents did some activities so that their child could 'learn new things or develop new skills'. However, certain groups were likely to have done fewer family learning activities than other groups. These are: parents of older children, those with the lowest qualifications, people with basic skills difficulties, those dependent on benefits, and non-learners.
- Awareness of **learndirect** had doubled since the 2001 survey to 62%.

¹ The NALS 2000 survey has not been published yet.

² The target was actually expressed as reducing the percentage of non-learners by 7%. In 1997, 26.2% of the population were non-learners, so as 7% of 26.2% is 1.9%, the target implies that non-learners should be reduced by 1.9 percentage points to 24.3%. This is equivalent in round number terms of increasing learners from 74% to 76%.

Introduction

NALS 2002 was carried out by the *National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)* on behalf of the DfES between February and June 2002. *NatCen* achieved a 60% response rate and obtained 6,668 face-to-face interviews with adults aged 16 or over in England and Wales. As in the 2001 survey, those over the age of 69 were included to monitor participation in learning among older people. In order to maintain comparability with the 1997 baseline survey where those aged 70+ were excluded, the results for older respondents are usually presented separately.

Learning trends

The survey asked a number of questions about a variety of learning experiences in the previous three years i.e. since February 1999 (or since leaving continuous full-time education), if the latter was most recent. Learning activities were classified either as taught learning, if they involved some formal teaching (including distance learning), or as self-directed learning, if people taught themselves without formal tuition.

In 2002, 76% of respondents had taken part in one or more of the learning activities covered by the survey in the past three years, an increase from 74% in 1997. In population terms, approximately 31 million adults aged 16-69 in England had been involved in learning over the previous 3 years³.

There have been some small changes in participation in different types of learning:

- the proportion of taught learners has risen, with 58% of respondents reporting this type of learning in 1997 and 61% in 2002.
- in the same period there has been an increase in participation in self-directed learning, from 57% to 61%.
- participation in vocational learning has also risen slightly, this was 67% in 1997 and 69% in 2002⁴.

- In contrast, participation in non-vocational learning has declined, from 30% in 1997 to 26% in 2002⁵.

Learning among different groups

NALS 2002 confirmed the findings of previous NALS, as well as numerous other studies of adult learning, that there are consistent variations in participation in learning among different groups.

- Participation in learning tends to decline as age increases: the highest learning participation rates (between 81-85%) were found among those aged 16-49, while only 28% of those in the 70+ group had undertaken some learning in the previous three years. However, the increase in learning compared to previous surveys for those aged 50+ is greater than that for younger respondents.
- A strong link was also found between adult learning and educational background. Less than a third (29%) of adults with no qualifications reported some learning compared to 94% of those with NVQ level four or five qualifications.
- 52% of those with basic skills difficulties reported some learning compared to 83% of those without. People with basic skills difficulties were particularly less likely than the general population to have done self-directed and vocational learning.
- As previous NALS found, participation in learning is closely linked to employment circumstances. The highest participation rates were found among respondents in paid work: 89% of full-time employees, 81% of part-time employees, and 86% of the self-employed had done some learning. The lowest participation figures were found among those outside the labour market, that is retired people (51%) and those unable to work due to a health problem or disability (40%). Participation in learning has gone up since 1997 among the self-employed (from 77% to 86%), respondents looking after a family (from 47% to 52%) and those who have retired (from 43% to 51%). There has been a

³ The survey excluded adults in continuous full-time education.

⁴ Vocational learning was defined as learning, either taught or self-directed, which was started to help with current or future work, paid or voluntary.

⁵ Non-vocational learning was defined as learning, either taught or self-directed, which was not started to help with current or future work, paid or voluntary.

small decline in the proportion of unemployed who reported some learning, from 72% to 68%.

- A link was also found between financial circumstances and propensity to engage in learning. 92% of respondents with a household income of £31,200+ reported some learning, the equivalent figure for those in the lowest income bracket (below £10,400) was 55%.
- A strong association was also found between learning and local deprivation⁶: Participation in learning ranges from 88% in the least deprived areas to 67% in the most deprived ones. However, learning in the most deprived areas has increased more quickly than in other areas since the 2001 survey from 63% to 67%.

Obstacles and incentives to learning

While negative attitudes might influence the behaviour of some non-learners, many in this group faced more practical obstacles, including:

- lack of time due to work (23%), family (28%) and childcare responsibilities (18%).
- difficulties in paying course fees (26%) and fear of losing benefits if they started a course (8%).
- lack of knowledge about local learning opportunities (27%) and sources of learning advice (12%).
- being nervous about going back to the classroom (24%), lacking the necessary qualifications to join a course (21%), concern about not being able to keep up with the course (18%), and difficulties with reading and writing (10%), English (7%) and numeracy (5%).
- around a fifth of non-learners thought they were too old to learn.

While there is a group of non-learners who do not appear to be interested in or motivated to do learning, there is another large group who would like to learn:

- 45% of non-learners would have liked to have done some learning, with the figure being highest among lone parents (62%).
- most would like to have learnt about computing (28%), training for professions (20%) or leisure activities (15%).
- the main factors that would facilitate their learning were funding (21%), advice (20%), if the learning improved job chances (13%) and learning being available at the right times (13%).

Use of and attitudes towards ICT

In 2001 and 2002, the survey explored the use of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT):⁷

- 59% of respondents had a computer at home, up from 55% in 2001, 50% could access the Internet from home - also up from the 2001 survey (45%).
- 70% of adults had used ICT at some point in their life (compared to 67% in 2001).
- current computer use has gone up from 55% in 2001 to 59% in 2002; current Internet use has also gone up from 44% to 51%.
- most people who have used ICT seem to use it frequently: 51% use a computer five or more days a week, the equivalent figure for the Internet is 37%.
- the majority of current ICT users use a computer (77%) and the Internet (78%) at home.
- predictably, ICT use was considerably less likely to be reported by those dependent on means tested benefits (45%) although there seems to have been a considerable increase among this group from 34% in 2001.
- 52% of respondents in the most deprived areas were ICT users, compared with 69% in the least deprived areas. However one of the largest increases in ICT use since 2001 has occurred in the most deprived areas (seven percentage points).

⁶ This analysis was carried out by using the DETR multiple deprivation index, only respondents in England were included.

⁷ The results in this section include respondents of all ages and not only those under 70 as in most of the previous sections.

Family Learning

For the first time in the NALS series, NALS 2002 collected information about family learning. The questions focused on activities parents did with their child so they could help them to 'learn new things or develop new skills,' as well as looking at what parents learnt at the same time⁸.

When looking at the types of activities parents did with their children we found that:

- on average, parents of children aged 3-7 had done seven of the activities covered by the survey with their child, whereas parents of children aged 8-18 had done five activities.
- the most common activities for parents of younger children were: playing (97%); looking at books or reading stories together (95%); helping with drawing, painting and crafts (86%); and helping them to recognise and learn about letters, numbers and shapes (86%).
- the most common activities for parents of older children were: helping with schoolwork (78%); discussing the news or a documentary with them (67%); and helping them to read or consult books, magazines or newspapers (66%).

NALS also looked at the impact of family learning on parents themselves. 83% of parents who had done one or more activity with their child said they had learnt something at the same time; this figure was higher among learners (85%) than non learners (78%).

Information, advice and guidance

NALS 2002 looked at access to information, advice and guidance (IAG) about learning.

Among those who had done some taught learning:

- 94% had received some IAG that had helped them decide to do a specific course.
- the most common source of IAG was an employer (47%), followed by friends, relatives and work colleagues (37%), and educational institutions (12%).

The survey also looked at how the initial contact with the IAG provider had been initiated. 61% of respondents had contacted the IAG provider themselves, whilst 39% had been approached by the IAG provider.

The survey also looked at access to and use of IAG about learning among non-learners:

- 29% of non-learners had received IAG about learning. This was via leaflets (13%), the media (9%), friends relatives and work colleagues (7%) as well as educational institutions (6%).

Awareness of learning campaigns and other initiatives

Respondents were asked about their awareness of various learning campaigns and initiatives.

- 16% had heard of "Adult Learners Week", 7% of "Learning at Work Day" and 3% of the "Family Learning Weekend" with awareness having changed little since 2001.
- awareness of *learndirect* had doubled since the 2001 survey, with 62% of 2002 respondents saying they had heard of it. Use of the service has increased slightly from 4% to 6%.
- 27% of respondents were aware of UK On-line Centres and 2% said they had used the service.

Copies of the full report (RR415) and Research Brief (RB415) are available free of charge by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Peter Vallely, Room N611, DfES, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ.

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⁸ The reference period for family learning was activities done in the last 12 months.