

College Based Adult Learners in the Liverpool City Region Report

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**Deborah Fish (Evaluation and
Impact Manager)**

Any queries about this report should be directed
to Deborah Fish - deborah.fish@liverpool.ac.uk

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Introduction

This report is an investigation into the outreach needs of learners studying in colleges in the Liverpool City Region. Published research on adult learners often discusses particularly local issues they are facing – with increased responsibility than the typical young learner, adults are more likely to face challenges with transport, finding time to study, and balancing finance as well as education. This research aims to understand whether the issues faced by adults in the Liverpool City Region are the same as those reported in the research, and therefore whether outreach needs to be tailored to the specific needs in the region.

The questions this report aims to address are:

- Do adult learners in colleges in the Liverpool City Region have the same outreach needs as those already identified in published work?
- What are the best ways to address the outreach needs of adult learners in colleges to benefit the learners, the colleges and other Higher Education Outreach providers?

Understanding published outreach needs

There is research on the needs of adult learners studying in further education colleges already available, however this is significantly smaller than that available for young learners. A recent Literature review (Hume, Styrnol & Gongadze, 2021) found only a small number of evaluated studies relating to adult learners, most of which had “weak evidence”. The review outlined many different challenges faced by adult learners, some of which are possible to start to address through outreach (e.g. understanding the student finance they are eligible for), and others are not (e.g. timetabling taking childcare into account). The following section describes the barriers and facilitators to accessing higher education for adult learners identified in a range of published works (Hume, Styrnol & Gongadze, 2021; Pennacchia, Jones & Aldridge, 2018; Hubble & Bolton, 2021; Wainright & Marandet, 2010; Hume, 2020; Butcher, 2020; Brunton & Buckley, 2020).

Systemic Barriers to accessing Higher Education faced by adult learners in the literature

These barriers are not able to be addressed by outreach as they are built in to the higher education system. However, targeted information, advice and guidance regarding the support available to overcome this barrier may help the learner access higher education.

| Barrier | Explanation |
|------------------|--|
| Cost | Without financial support, most adult learners would not be able to take part in higher education, particularly those on lower incomes. The tuition fees and student loan repayment rules need to appear affordable to someone in their thirties who is worried about paying for their mortgage or rent, child care and personal transport. Fees need to look like a safe investment for an adult learner from a disadvantaged background as they are more likely to be debt averse than an 18-year old from a wealthier background. |
| Childcare | Childcare is a particular concern for female adult learners. Lack of support with this reduces their flexibility and impacts their finances. Childcare worries contribute to barriers in attending courses outside of school hours. Childcare is also required for making time available for independent study. |
| Courses on offer | The courses on offer need to be right for the learners’ personal disposition, interest and level – if it is too difficult then there are knock-on effects to the learners’ confidence for future learning. |

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| | <p>The subjects available also need to be relevant to adult learners. When asked, potential adult learners were most interested in psychology, business and computer science.</p> <p>In 2019/20, mature learners (over 21 at time of entry) made up over 50% of students studying subjects allied to medicine or education. There were low levels of adult learners studying media, creative arts and design, physical sciences, maths, biological sciences and languages.</p> |
| Timetables | <p>Timetabling of classes is often a concern for adult learners. This is particularly the case for those with caring and child care responsibilities, as timetables are released too late and therefore clash with other commitments, or the sessions are scheduled too early or too late, and can involve staying at their HE provider outside of school hours.</p> |

Learner based barriers to accessing Higher Education faced by adult learners in the literature
These barriers do not affect all adult learners. Many of these barriers could be addressed through high quality information, advice and guidance.

| Barrier | Explanation |
|---|---|
| Family | <p>Learners' place in their family or home life can present barriers to accessing higher education. This could be their duty or responsibility to contribute to the household income or that in order to succeed they would need to depend on friends and family for support, both practically with childcare and transport, and for emotional support. Adult learners are also more likely to face changes in health conditions and family circumstances than younger learners.</p> |
| Lack of awareness | <p>Many adults lack awareness of what courses and support is available at higher education. Information is often not easy to navigate, particularly for those who have not got recent experience of learning, and information needs personalising to the complex barriers that many adult learners face – tailoring to different language abilities, cultural backgrounds and previous experiences is important. The lack of personalised IAG for adult learners contributes to feelings of powerlessness, being stuck, and of the system being opaque. Support is often required in understanding the routes from informal, free learning to formal, fee-paying credit-bearing learning to university-based provision.</p> <p>In a study on part-time adult learners, there were concerns about the difficulty of accessing clear, up to date information on maintenance support, a particular concern given fears around the affordability of higher education.</p> |
| Self-belief and confidence; Previous bad experiences with education | <p>Many adult learners report lower self-belief and confidence in themselves as learners. Much of this has been attributed to negative prior learning experiences in secondary school and having a long break from learning.</p> <p>Adult learners have reported feeling anxious that they will not be able to keep up, and experiencing imposter syndrome. This can often lead to reliance on assignment feedback for affirmation of their abilities and sense of belonging.</p> <p>The research emphasises the need for inclusive support which acknowledges the impact of adult learners' time out of education, including building confidence in their own abilities to succeed, and helping them engage with academic language and their tutors.</p> |
| Social disconnect | <p>Adult learners may face social disconnect in two ways. One is whilst at college or university, where they sometimes struggle to fit in: holding back in seminars to avoid seeming over-enthusiastic; struggling to make social connections due to age differences, and having a lack of presence on campus due to their other responsibilities.</p> |

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| | They may also start to have a social disconnect from their support network outside of education as they start to build a new identity as a learner and drift from other identities that may have been more important to them in the past. |
| Low/no prior qualifications | Linked to the negative experiences of education above, often a major barrier for adult learners progressing to higher education is that they lack the qualifications required for entry on the course. In 2019/20, 13% of higher education students aged over 21 had low prior educational attainment of level 2 or below. |
| Disabilities, health conditions and mental health problems | Adult learners are more likely to have disabilities than young learners, with higher rates of mental health conditions, long-standing illness, D/deaf and partial hearing, wheelchair use and mobility issues, as well as having multiple disabilities. This leads to barriers in difficulty accessing physical learning spaces, increased time spent worrying about benefit assessments and changes to benefits, and an increased need for high quality, flexible provision. |

The barriers identified above intersect with each other. Many adults missed out on higher education at age 18 as they experienced life disruptions and have no choice but to engage as older adult learners. Learners who have not undertaken learning for at least three years often face the most complex and cumulative barriers.

Intrinsic motivators to accessing Higher Education for adult learners in the literature

The reason many adult learners access Higher education is often personal to their circumstances and goals. This section explores common themes in why adult learners access education.

| Motivator | Explanation |
|----------------------|---|
| Career goals | Many adult learners progress to higher education with career goals in mind. In many of cases, it is less about getting a job and more about gaining a promotion, earning more money or enhancing job security. Parents report that higher education encourages them to think beyond their children and caring responsibilities and more about their own future. This motivation is more common in younger adult learners, who describe being on the path to a desired way of life, new career or betterment of a current career; compared to older adult learners who tend to describe pursuing educational achievement for its own sake. One paper identified that the most important motivator for adult learners was that participants perceived learning to be a way of achieving goals and outcomes they had reason to value. |
| Social relationships | Although often seen as more important to young learners, building social relationships is still an important motivator for adult learners. Higher education is seen as enabling mixing with new people, providing something new to talk about, and something to focus on outside of family. Students particularly value the opportunity to connect with other mature students and the encouragement from outreach staff and tutors. |
| Health and wellbeing | Some adult learners have the perception that higher education would be beneficial to their mental health, providing a sense of purpose, allowing them to be “useful” and improving their confidence – particularly in relation to how they are seen by other people. Learners who are driven not by career goals, but personal impetus, describe notions of self-improvement and wanting to prove they can achieve. Those learners that overcome the challenges highlighted above gain confidence in themselves. |
| Momentum | Momentum is important in facilitating and motivating learning. It is seen as more straightforward to progress to the next level of their course as initial |

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| | barriers have already been overcome. However, this can be disrupted if a new barrier emerges, for example cost implications. |
| Role modelling | There is a high level of aspiration in adult learners, however, adult learners have reported a need for inspirational role models to enable them to imagine that higher education is possible for them. A motivator mentioned in multiple sources is the desire to be a role model. This is particularly important for those who have children – motivation is linked to notions of good parenting and offering a productive role model to their children. This motivation is strong in women, particularly lone mothers, who are more likely to want to construct an identity and aspirations to pass on to their children. |

Extrinsic facilitators to accessing Higher Education for adult learners in the literature

The motivators outlined above are often not enough to have an adult learner progress to higher education. Facilitators from their communities or support network are needed to remove or reduce some of the barriers they face.

| Facilitator | Explanation |
|---------------------------|---|
| Flexible learning | A key concern for adult learners is how they access their education. The option to learn online facilitates learning to overcome mobility issues and childcare for some. Hume (2021) showed that prospective students had a strong preference to learning with online or blended learning (although this research took place in January 2021 so lockdowns were still affecting the UK, attitudes may have changed since). However, online learning is not universally preferred – face to face learning provides the impetus for some to remain invested in learning, and allows for the separation between home and learning identities. For face to face learning, adults preferred smaller courses and smaller commutes, as well as consideration for the timetabling mentioned above. |
| Employer support | Employers are often a key facilitator to education. Employers making time available for study, covering costs and raising awareness of education linked to job roles are important. However, trials encouraging people to sign up for various workplace training did not yield significant increases in take up so more exploration of this factor is needed. |
| Support from institutions | In order to succeed in education, support is required from both the higher education institution and the wider ranging community support. This could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheap or free childcare • Information, advice and guidance from several sources – institutions, personal relationships and support networks • Help to learn how to learn – embedding study skills into access courses • Designated staff members to support adult/mature learners in HE The key concern is that their chosen course is available in an accessible and affordable mode with authentic progression possibilities. |

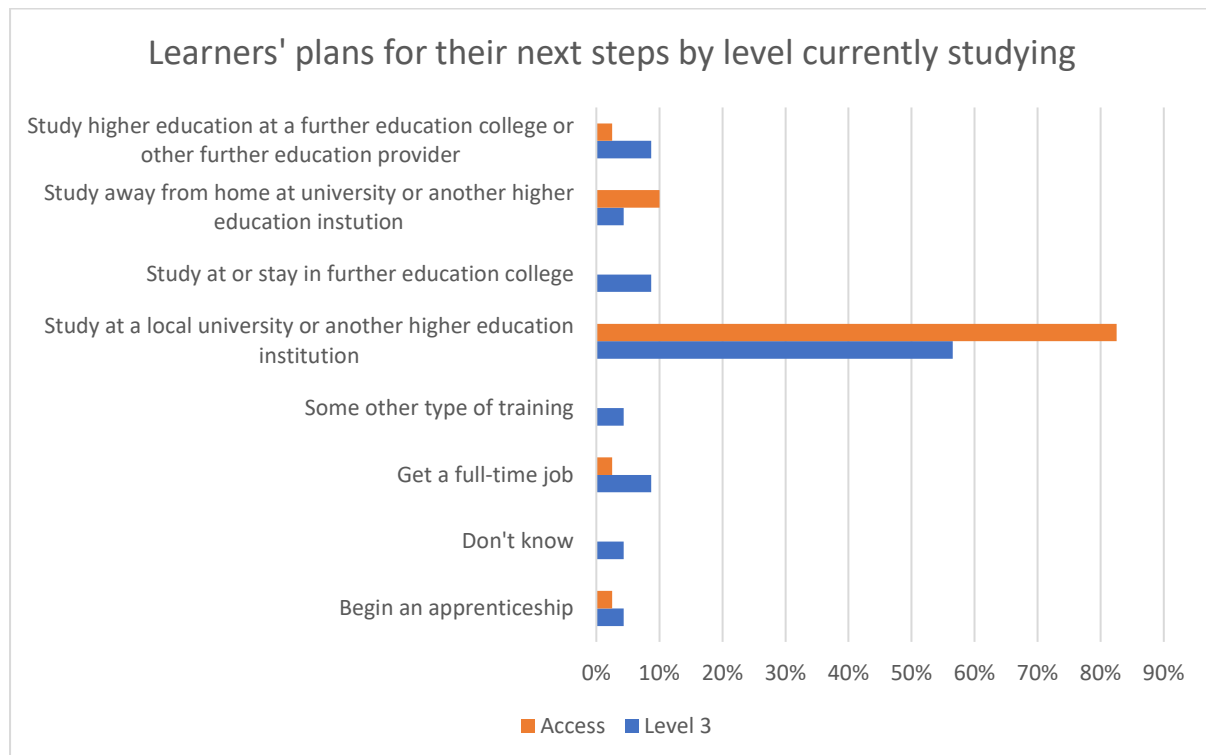
What did local learners say that they needed?

Survey results

In February 2022, local colleges were invited to share a survey to their adult learners about their intentions and their attitudes to certain aspects of Higher Education. The aspects covered were linked to the barriers and facilitators discussed above. A full list of questions asked can be found in appendix 1.

Responses were received from 71 learners across two colleges. 52 of these learners were studying level 3 or access courses at College 1, and the remaining 19 were studying courses from level 1 to level 3 at College 2, although 11 were studying a level 3 course. Just under half of the respondents were aged 19-24, 21% were under 30 and 18% were under 40. As the bulk of responses are studying an Access to HE course, the results from this survey will not be applicable to all adult learners studying at colleges in the region.

When asked what they wanted to do next, three quarters of respondents wanted to attend higher education. The bulk of these (65% of the total) wanted to study at a local university or higher education institution, with very few wanting to remain at a further education college. Learners not on an Access course were less likely to expect to apply to higher education, with 63% of respondents said they would definitely apply or were very likely to apply, compared to 75% of Access learners. Only 7% of learners wanted to get a job as their next step. The figure below shows the break down for Access learners and other level 3 learners.



Learners were asked how important they felt certain aspects were in relation to higher education. The objective of these questions was to identify where learners felt outreach was required. The aspects were based off the barriers and facilitators in the literature discussed above. Learners generally felt all aspects were important, but varied in how strongly they felt about them.

The least important aspects to learners were social integration, accessing independent careers advice and understanding how different pathways linked to learning style preferences (between 42 and 60% classed these as very important). The aspects learners identified as the most important varied depending on the course the learner was on. Learners on all courses identified that financial support was very important (71-77%). Learners not on Access courses felt that they wanted to know about the different types of courses at higher education (74%) and how to have a good work life balance (71%), whereas Access learners felt that understanding how study skills can be transferred (80%) and why personal wellbeing is important (80%) were more important factors.

Learners were then asked whether they felt that there was anything that should be covered by outreach programmes but was not mentioned above. Nine learners responded to this question. Three learners mentioned that finance was particularly important, especially understanding how it links to any prior qualifications they have. Three learners talked about understanding the support they may be able to receive, including mental health support and disability support. One learner mentioned that the support available at college and university may be different and it was important to understand how to access this in a new environment. Two learners mentioned skills – one asked for information on skills that they would use in student life at university, and one for how to implement what they have learned into the working environment. Finally, one learner asked for support with the UCAS application.

We also asked learners what they felt the college was already covering and therefore they did not need additional support with. The responses to this question were mixed. Of the 24 respondents, 3 felt that everything had been covered by their college. All of these learners were studying Access courses. However, 16 learners did not feel that this information had been covered by their college. For those that provided further explanation, learners felt unsure on how credits and applications worked; student finance; and work life balance. They also mentioned the need for consistent and early timetables and further pastoral support as the college was stretched thin.

Finally, learners were asked how they might be supported to engage with careers and education information. 8 learners responded to this question. Three felt they had all the information they needed. Four learners wanted more information provided in college, with ideas such as mature guest speakers, career days and a lesson on how to access information. The final learner said they would like to access this information online.

Interview results

Two interviews were carried out to aid in contextualising the survey results. One interviewee was studying a level 3 course at college 2, and the other was studying a higher national certificate at college 1. The learners discussed the barriers and facilitators they had looking at entering higher education. The two interviewees were at different stages in thinking about their next steps and the support they needed.

Learner 1 was studying a level 3 course. They were keen to enter higher education, however did not know which course they wanted to pursue. The reasons they gave for wanting to enter higher education were that they felt it was time to progress from level 3 and wanted to think about getting a job. The reasons they gave for not progressing were focussed on barriers faced due to their disability. They felt that universities would not be able to support them with their condition in the same way that they have received from their college.

Learner 2 was studying a Higher National Certificate. They returned to education wanting to re-specialise after a successful career and a break due to having a child. A major inspiration for this

learner returning to education when they did was seeing a documentary where a celebrity spent time over the lockdowns upskilling in their specialism, which helped the learner feel less shame in returning to education. The learner did face some issues accessing their course due to confusion in the college as to which level of course would be best for them, as they started off on a level 2 course and felt that was too low. The learner was then directed to the course leader for the Higher Education course and discussed what the course involves and how to access finance.

In terms of support for accessing their next step, both learners discussed the opportunities available at college. Learner 1 felt they needed more information on what university is like, and had attended a campus visit that they had found very useful in terms of understanding what a day at university is like compared to college. Learner 2's main concern pre-entry was finance, and not understanding that student loans do not entail having to "take out like £60,000 then have to pay it all back within two years".

Learner 2 also discussed the transition back into education after a 20-year gap. They felt that coming back into education was a shock as there were many things that they had not used before, or there was a different way of working, particularly the increase in paperwork required in receiving and completing assignments.

Both learners would have benefited from more tailored information, advice and guidance. Learner 2 needed more guidance on the correct level of course to access, and Learner 1 wanted more in-depth information than is available on websites, including what experience and preparation they need before applying for higher education.

Summary

Overall, this research shows that adult learners in the Liverpool City Region have similar outreach needs to those already identified in published work. The areas of particular interest to focus on from both the literature and local research are:

- Student finance – learners need to understand what financial support they are eligible for and how to access this.
- Courses – learners need to understand what studying at higher education involves and how this may be similar or different to courses at lower levels. This is also important for setting expectations for learners entering the college.
- Study skills – many learners feel that the transition back into education can be a big jump so support is required for this transition. This may involve traditional study skill support e.g. how to take notes in lectures, but also in learning how to be a student
- Flexible learning and support – the survey results highlighted work life balance as important to learners. This can be linked to childcare needs. The higher rates of disability in adult learners, and the gap in education that many have had also means that they may need more direct support when studying.

It is important to note that aspiration for attending higher education is high in adult learners in colleges. This research shows that removing the barriers to access and supporting them in their studies both before entry and after they arrive is more important than raising aspiration. Much of this support could be done via partnership with colleges and university outreach.

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Appendix 1 – list of survey questions

Section 1: About you

This section asks questions about you so that we can ensure our support is targeted where it is most needed.

1. Which college do you attend? * Mark only one oval.
 - The City of Liverpool College
 - Riverside College
 - Wirral Metropolitan College
 - Hugh Baird College
 - St Helens College
 - Knowsley Community College
2. What level course are you studying? Mark only one oval.
 - Entry level
 - Level 1
 - Level 2
 - Level 3
 - Other:
3. What course are you studying? e.g. Level 3 Hairdressing Year 2
4. Do you study full time or part time? Mark only one oval.
 - Full time
 - Part time
5. Which age bracket are you in? Mark only one oval.
 - 19-24
 - 25-30
 - 31-40
 - 41-50

- 51-60
 - 61+
6. Do you have children or other dependents? Mark only one oval.
- Yes
 - No

Section 2: Your opinions on Higher Education

This section asks about higher education. You usually have to be 18 or older to take a higher education course such as a degree or higher apprenticeship. These are usually taught in universities, colleges, specialist institutions like art schools or agricultural colleges.

7. When you finish your current studies, what would most like to do next? Mark only one oval.
- Get a full-time job
 - Get a part-time job
 - Begin an apprenticeship
 - Study at or stay in further education college
 - Study higher education at a further education college or other further education provider
 - Study at a local university or another higher education institution
 - Study away from home at university or another higher education institution
 - Some other type of training
 - Don't know
 - Other:
8. How likely are you to apply to do a higher education qualification (e.g. HND, HNC or BSc/BA) in the future? Mark only one oval.
- Definitely won't apply
 - Very unlikely
 - Fairly unlikely
 - Fairly likely
 - Very likely
 - Definitely will apply
 - Don't know

Section 3: Your priorities for Shaping Futures

This section asks what your priority is for three themes of work that Shaping Futures could deliver to you in your college.

(all questions had the following options: Very important; Fairly important; Neither important or unimportant; Fairly unimportant; Very unimportant)

9. How important do you feel the following are in terms of knowledge of higher education for adult learners?

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| The different types of courses at Higher Education e.g. vocational vs academic, degree vs HND, apprenticeship vs university |
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| The social aspect of Higher Education e.g. meeting new people from diverse backgrounds, meeting like-minded people |
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| What financial support you are eligible for and the steps to take to access this support including scholarships, bursaries, supplementary funding (DSA, childcare grant etc), and university/college specific funds |
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| Further support whilst studying at HE or FE e.g. academic support, disability services, childcare |
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| Possible long-term benefits of a higher education qualification e.g. higher average graduate earning, more job opportunities |
|--|

10. How important do you feel the following are in making informed decisions about future education choices for adult learners?

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| Action planning to prepare for your next steps |
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|---|
| How different Level 3/Higher education pathways can be linked to learning style preferences |
|---|

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|---|
| How you can access impartial careers advice |
|---|

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|---|
| What to consider when choosing a course e.g. course length, content, professional accreditation, facilities, assessment style |
|---|

11. How important do you feel the following are in gaining the skills to succeed in education and beyond?

| |
|---|
| How your current study skills and transferable skills are relevant and beneficial to future study and careers |
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| What study techniques may work well for you |
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| How to have a good work life balance |
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| Why personal wellbeing and resilience is important |
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12. Is there anything you think should be covered by a programme like Shaping Futures but is not mentioned in the questions above?

13. Reflecting on the questions above, is there anything you think is already covered by your college or other providers and does not need further support offered?

14. A lot of information is already available on education and career options. What, if anything, would help you engage with this information?

SHAPING FUTURES

The Merseyside Collaborative
Outreach Programme



Contact us

You can contact us by
email admin@shaping-futures.info
or www.shaping-futures.org.uk

    [@shapingfutures_](https://twitter.com/shapingfutures_)

