



Motivations, Aspirations & Barriers to Adult Learning

A Further & Higher Education perspective in Wales

Mark Jones (Director at Higher Plain Research and Education) in partnership with the Learning and Work Institute Cymru

February 2021

Learning and Work Institute

Patron: HRH The Princess Royal | Chief Executive: Stephen Evans
Director for Wales: David Hagendyk
A company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales
Registration No. 2603322 Registered Charity No. 1002775

Sefydliad Dysgu a Gwaith

Noddwr: Ei Huchelder Y Dywysoges Frenhinol | Prif weithredwr: Stephen Evans
Cyfarwyddwr Gymru: David Hagendyk
Cwmni cyfyngedig trwy warrant a gofrestrwyd yn Lloegr a Chymru
Rhif cofrestru 2063322 Rhif cofrestru elusen 1002775



Published by National Learning and Work Institute (England and Wales)

Company registration no. 2603322 | Charity registration no. 1002775

Learning and Work Institute is a new independent policy and research organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion.

We research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, we transform people's experiences of learning and employment. What we do benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy.

www.learningandwork.org.uk

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

[@LearnWorkCymru](https://twitter.com/LearnWorkCymru) (Wales)

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without the written permission of the publishers, save in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

CONTENTS

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	5
Current understandings of Adult Learning	5
Research Design	9
Findings & Analysis	12
Motivations to start adult learning.....	12
Barriers & Challenges to starting adult learning.....	14
Barriers & Challenges to continuing in Education.....	16
Previous Educational Experiences	18
Support Needs for Adult Learners	20
Outcomes & Benefits to Adult Learning.....	22
Future Motivations & Aspirations from Adult Learning.....	25
Recommendations & Implications for Future Development.....	26
For Welsh Government	26
For higher education institutions	26
Conclusions	27

About Learning and Work Institute

Learning and Work Institute is an independent policy, research and development organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion.

We research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, we transform people's experiences of learning and employment. What we do benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy.

Stay informed. Be involved. Keep engaged. Sign up to become a Learning and Work Institute supporter: www.learningandwork.org.uk/supporters

About Mark Jones

Mark is director at Higher Plain Research and Education and former Associate Professor of Education with over 22 years' experience working with people in the community with the last 11 years' within Higher Education specialising in pedagogy, reflective practice and education research with marginalised groups using inclusive qualitative research. Mark is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and professionally qualified youth and community practitioner. You can contact Mark at higherplainresearcheducation@gmail.com and or can follow his work at: <https://www.higherplainresearchandeducation.co.uk/>

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the staff and organisations that supported this research and our engagement with their student community and these were: the Department of Adult Continuing Education at Swansea University; University Wales Trinity St. David's in partnership with Monkton Primary Pembroke; and the Art and Design Department at Gower College.

The project adopted an emerging approach to data collection and analysis using a Pictorial Narrative Approach and without the skill of Eleanor Beer, that element of the project would have been lacking and so we are grateful to her expertise and support during this project.

A special thanks to the College of Arts and Humanities at Swansea University and the Welsh Government for supporting the funding of this research in partnership with the Learning and Work Institute Cymru.

Our final and most important acknowledgement is reserved for the students who shared their inspiring stories and experiences with openness and honesty, showing how powerful adult learning is in transforming lives for students and their friends and families. Those who shared their experiences have helped us to better understand how Further Education and Higher Education needs to develop to be a truly inclusive environment for adult learners.

Current understandings of Adult Learning

The [current policy for Adult Learning in Wales](#) was released in 2017 and uses the term 'Adult community learning' (ACL) defined as flexible learning opportunities for adults, delivered in community venues to meet local needs. While it seeks to embrace learning opportunities in the wider adult learning sector, it is primarily focused on local authority and FE (Further Education) providers delivering adult learning through the Welsh Government grant for community learning. In that sense it is a narrowly defined policy and does not encompass the broader range of providers and potential interventions. The Adult Learning in Wales Policy (2017) proposes that ACL in Wales should focus on Essential skills such as Communication and Numeracy, Digital skills, and Employability skills so people are ready for work. This policy followed the [Estyn report on ACL in Wales \(2016\)](#) which provided a number of clear concerns about sustainability, vulnerability of funding, and a lack of coherent strategy for improving the employability skills of adults in Wales.

The ACL policy for Wales also supports the vision outlined in the [Well-being of Future Generations Act \(2015\)](#) and there is need for ACL providers to create a learning environment that develops greater agency within community learners so that they can make informed choices and support themselves and the future of their own families and communities. The ACL in Wales policy (2017) promotes that learning is for all adults and should support the needs and engagement of older learners as well as younger adult learners. The structure of the provision should

ideally offer introductory 'hook' courses and the [need for short courses and 'bitesize' provision](#) has been further supported by Alistair Jarvis the chief executive of Universities UK in 2019 in an article he wrote for the Guardian.

The Adult learning in Wales policy includes both Further Education and Higher Education(HE) with the latter not seeming to have as much focus as the level 1-2 'essential skills' education. The Welsh Government's remit letter to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) references the need to ensure a focus from HE institutions on developing links with community learning provision as part of their civic mission. Within the Higher Education context there has also been a renewed call that widening access should be meaningful and explore options for the integration of those at the margins of society ([Evans, et al, 2017](#)). Indeed, when they examined this pattern within a Welsh context, they found that despite a public and policy drive to widen participation and access to HE in Wales, the internal culture and narrative can become 'entangled' and actually resulted in re-enforcing the status quo of inequality and hierarchy with the focus remaining on the more traditional and profitable young student demographic at the expense of developing non-traditional student participation such as adult learners. Evans et al (2017) conclude that this is a particularly pressing issue and more needs to be done if greater equality and widening access is to be truly achieved across all demographics of society towards enhanced employability and life opportunities. This is further supported by the general reduction in adult learning provision and student uptake within the Welsh Higher Education sector excluding the Open University in recent years.

[The Learning and Work Institute's adult participation survey \(2019\)](#) has found a decade of reducing numbers of adult learners to its lowest rate for 23 years of just 33% who have taken up opportunities in the last three years and 38% who stated they had done no learning since leaving full time education. This clearly highlights the need for a greater understanding of how more adults can be engaged to decide to take up learning.

People's motivations to learn are complex but can be related to personal, social, economic factors, and previous experiences of education. It seems that there is understanding in adult learners that engaging with education can support improved health, well-being and social relationships, as well the more obvious development for work and career progression.

The influences on people's propensity to participate in learning in adult life are formed early. This learning identity is shaped by a complex combination of factors or 'Triggers' including: family; community learning culture; previous and length of school and education experiences; expectations of work; and age with sharp declines in later years of life. Perhaps surprisingly however, access to technology has only limited influence. Worryingly, the 2019 Learning and Work survey found that the most significant reason and barrier to not learning within the last 3 years was due to lack of interest (18%) with work and time pressure (15%) remaining high as with

previous years findings. However, 28% also stated that nothing was preventing them from engaging with adult learning and this suggests that there is need to better promote the benefits and relevance whilst also reducing the barriers to adult learning.

Key motivations for adult learners could be viewed as being termed either Intrinsic or Extrinsic. Extrinsic motivations for learning include; job progression, supportive social networks; availability of appropriate learning; access to effective information, advice and guidance; availability of funded or free learning; and national campaigns raising awareness of the outcomes of learning. Intrinsic motivations were particularly strong across accounts, and were connected with health and wellbeing (mental and physical), confidence, and the enjoyment of learning that may connect with previous experiences; a desire to make new friends and expand social networks.

Key life events can also motivate people to engage with learning such as: a new job, parental responsibility, seeking promotion, redundancy, children leaving home, divorce, retirement, and bereavement. It seems that around 40% of adults say that they are learning for personal development or work-related reasons with a further 15% citing education or progression, with fewer than one in 10 saying that it is not their choice.

Barriers to learning were often complex and numerous and included people; in receipt of benefits; with disabilities and health conditions; single parents; whose first language is not

English. These could be removed if there were appropriate practical and circumstantial factors in place to facilitate learning such as support with cost, childcare, employer support and awareness of opportunities that are available through effective communication on the internet and through public engagement in their daily lives and settings.

A clear way to support motivation to engage with adult education is supporting learners to gain a clear understanding of the values and outcomes of education and that these are effectively and accessibly communicated. The other needed development for adult learning to remove potential barriers to engagement is it needs to be flexible and offer out of work hour options, blended learning opportunity with use of online learning.

The post-16 & adult learning sector is also currently in a period of great transition and change further magnified by the current Covid-19 pandemic which has required a quick, evolving, and agile response from all learning providers. There has been a shift to embedding more online learning as an immediate response to maintain some continuity for learners with a more general movement to blended learning for September 2020 to support both face to face and online learning environments offering appropriate support whilst supporting health guidelines and practice. There is general agreement that the UK Higher Education approach to the learning

environment will never be the same again and this evolution has much support from students and to some degree academics alike ([Guardian, 2020](#)).

Despite clear indication that some have enjoyed and thrived during this shift to online learning it has provided challenges for providers and learners. For many the digital divide has been brought into sharper focus and the crisis has had an impact on more vulnerable individuals and communities as learning has moved to online and blended delivery, these learners have faced significant challenges in terms of access to technology, affordability and losing face to face contact and tutor support. In many cases these are the learners and target groups of adult community learning who have generally wanted and needed more traditional approaches and styles to the learning environment that the online environment doesn't, at least as a first experience, really offer and this causes fear, barriers and challenges to potential adult learners' engagement and uptake of learning opportunities. There is a strong argument that blended learning is the needed and inevitable direction for education especially within a HE environment but the approach to blending and the model of delivery is vitally important to not further disenfranchise and

create increased barriers and challenges for adult learners at a time when adults are increasing choosing not to (re)engage with education and lifelong learning ([McKenna et al, 2019](#)). Therefore, arguably for adult learning the immediate and medium-term need will be one that requires the development of more blended learning to suit community learners, the support and development of staff to embrace different ways of working and collaboration across sectors to share the best approaches and pedagogy.

The need for education during and post-Covid-19 will require more thought and care around health and wellbeing and unfortunately due to the economic impact of the pandemic there will be a greater number of the working population lacking a job, job opportunity or having experienced a loss of job. In a Welsh context the Welsh Government have acknowledged this and released the [Covid-19 Resilience Plan](#) for the Post-16 Sector to support the recovery of education and skills in Wales.

The recovery following Covid-19 will be undertaken at a time of change within the ACL sector, including changes to the funding methodology for local providers and the decision of the Minister to support the creation of a 'central, national body which has a strategic overview of community based adult learning across Wales, and can ensure a consistent and equitable offer for all.'

Wales has to commit and adapt and it must support adult learners in re-engaging with adult learning across all levels to support Wales and the economy in recovering but perhaps more importantly supporting adult learners in the realisation of their goals and aspirations and the re-kindling of the pure empowerment of education. Alun Davies the then Minister stated in The Adult Learning Policy from Welsh Government in 2017 that "Adult Learning has benefits much broader than skills. We

want to encourage all adults to enjoy learning. The value of Adult Learning lies in its potential to reach individuals 'close to home', particularly those who might not otherwise engage in learning. ... We believe that this is an important and worthwhile investment in individuals and communities."

Since the publication of this policy, the current Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams made a commitment to explore [how a right to lifelong learning could be developed](#) in 2019. The commitment highlighted the need to invest in skills which people need throughout their lives, for individual, societal and economic benefit. Providing a clear pathway for access to appropriate learning opportunities will be integral to securing a positive future for Wales and its citizens post pandemic.

In summary, there is a clear need for those that provide adult community education to develop programmes that meet the needs of local communities and support their development so that they have more enriched lives, better work opportunities, and the support to gain greater personal agency and reach their full potential. To be able to effectively achieve these aims the FE and HE sector needs a much clearer understanding of the motivations, barriers and aspirations of adult learners at a variety of progression points as well as the support needs during transition between progression points whilst in education.

There is currently no specific recent research in a Welsh context on adult learning motivations, barriers, and aspirations and there is a lack of understanding on the Further Education and more specifically the Higher Education context as it has perhaps been neglected in research, policy and practice in favour of Level 1 & 2 essential skills promotion and understanding arguably due to such skills relating more directly to skills needed for employment and supporting the economy.

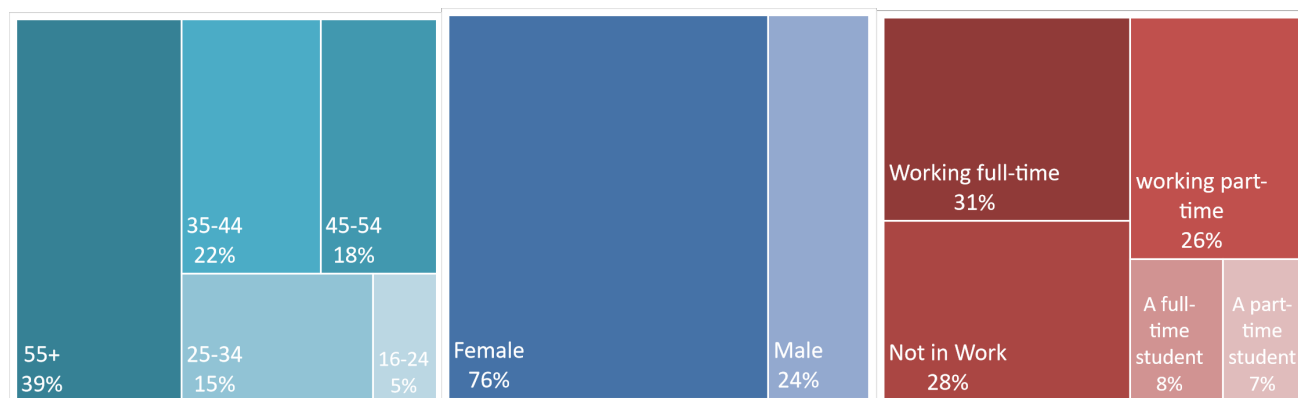
This research project has been funded to offer greater understanding and coherence of the issues for Further Education and Higher Education across south Wales regarding adult learners studying at level 3 to 6 in two University's and one FE College. This research is therefore timely as it will support our collective understanding of the motivations and aspirations of adult learners, the barriers and challenges they face, and the opportunities for future development the FE and HE sector has to better engage, support and educate adult learners in a Welsh context.

Research Design

This project was underpinned by hybrid approach of participatory action and community engagement and learning ensuring that adult learners were partners in this research. Therefore, the methods adopted, are informed by a qualitative approach that seeks to inform policy and practice within Further Education and Higher Education. This was supported by a short nation-wide survey of adult learners' views to support a more quantitative understanding of the motivations,

aspirations, and barriers to adult learners engaging with education with over 200 responses and the demographic of the responders can be seen below in Chart 1.

Chart 1: The overall breakdown of survey respondents



The data collection methods employed involved four focus groups that were facilitated across south Wales. The use of focus groups enabled the participants to have an active voice in the direction of the conversation whilst supported by discussion points regarding key findings in previous research. The focus groups were composed of 6-12 members and captured the views of learners at different levels of study; groups consisted of level 3, 4, 5 & 6 learners from Gower College, UWTSD, and Swansea University.

The initial [findings of this research were presented at the Learning and Work Institute's conference in 2019](#) using a workshop approach to involve the adult learning sector in discussing the findings and creating the responses and recommendations that are needed to support adult learning in Wales.

Qualitative methods are an accepted approach to researching the social sciences and offering rich understandings of the human condition. [Sandberg and Ugjelvik \(2016\)](#) point out that, 'story telling' is nothing new and is in fact a facet of our humanistic behaviours that helps us to make sense of the world we inhabit. This study used an emergent and innovative method of conversation capture for the focus groups called 'Pictorial Narrative Mapping' ([Lapum et al., 2015](#)).

Therefore adopting the Pictorial Narrative approach enabled the members in the focus groups to vocalise their response whilst observing the analyst draw her interpretations of their views. This approach worked really well in that it captured the discussions clearly and in a way that the focus group members could see and therefore relate to. It was clear the process and approach was positive with all members thanking us for the opportunity and real excitement with the pictorial analysis. The analyst was given the schedule of questions/themes at the start of the engagement events and was then able to capture what was discussed in the moment by focusing on a key phrase or response to a question from one of the

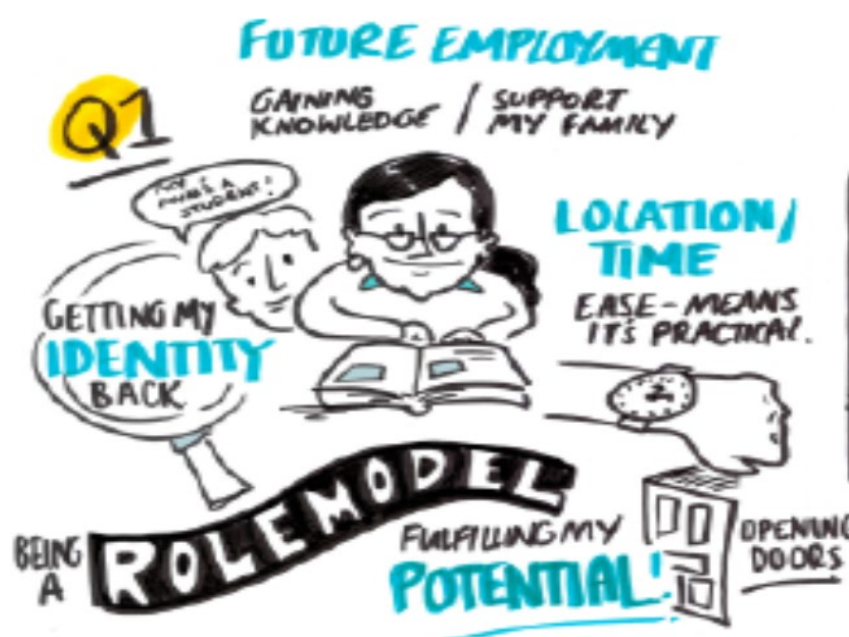
researchers. These key themes were then narrated in real time to directly capture the discussions of the group.

The outcome of this layered approach to data analysis not only resulted in a detailed and rich capture of the lived experiences and expertise of the participants but also supported the empowerment of the participants who fed-back that it had been a positive and rewarding experience to have 'really been listened to' (focus group member from first focus group) and 'what a great way to show what we have talked about.' Moreover, this approach as it was 'live' also motivated people to comment, acknowledge and start new threads of conversation which meant immediate triangulation of data analysis which is something that has been identified as bringing about increased trustworthiness of the findings ([Glaw, et al., 2017](#)).

Findings & Analysis

The focus groups explored nine areas of interest that were found within the literature relating to the motivations, barriers, aspirations and experiences of adult learners within further and higher education. The findings and analysis of these nine discussion areas are discussed below within seven themes using the nationwide survey to offer further insight and support where appropriate.

Motivations to start adult learning



All of the focus groups offered a similar variety of motivations to start education as an adult learner and these align clearly with the previous literature discussed and carried out by the Learning and Work Institute (2019).

The reasons and motivations for starting learning again as an adult that were discussed with the most passion and importance were the more intrinsic reasons. Therefore a clear motivating factor for the adult learners involved in the focus group to start education again was from those closest to them such as family and friends. This was almost always positive in respect of showing their family, specifically younger members and own children that they could 'do' education again and act as a positive role model and make their family and friends proud of them; there was also the notion of developing greater self-respect and self-worth as if in some cases this wasn't strong before engaging with adult education. There was a strong narrative that learners wanted to reach their full potential and 'go back & better myself' providing future opportunity for employment or progression within their employment as it 'opened up doors for a more secure future.'

There were a few members across the groups who due to previous experiences and close family relationships were motivated to access adult learning to prove people wrong and ‘show them I could.’ The few members that explained this stated that they had been made to feel ‘stupid’ and ‘too old’ to go back to education. Therefore, for some, adult learning was a way of showing they could learn as an adult and proving this to significant others.

For all members their engagement with adult learning also provided the chance to have ‘something back for me’ and many described adult learning as a way of ‘getting my identity back’ and it was also a real motivation to simply learn new knowledge and skills.

A lesser motivation for most but still significant in that all focus groups highlighted this as a motivation when engaging with adult learning was the want for new social opportunities and how this would support their own health and well-being. The socialisation element to engaging with education as an adult was generally provided by adults within the age ranges of 45 plus with some of the youngest focus group members also stating this as a motivation; interestingly adults aged 30-45 did not really have socialisation and or health and well-being as a significant motivation to engage with adult learning.

The Wales wide survey carried out as part of this research support the focus group findings to some degree and provided more quantifiable trends in regard of the motivations for learning (see Table 1 below). Interestingly, work and career was the most significant motivation followed by leisure or personal interest without specific capture of more intrinsic motivations captured in the focus groups highlighted above. The survey also found that learning for work-related reasons was the most reported motivation for both genders, at 50 and 46 percent for men and women respectively.

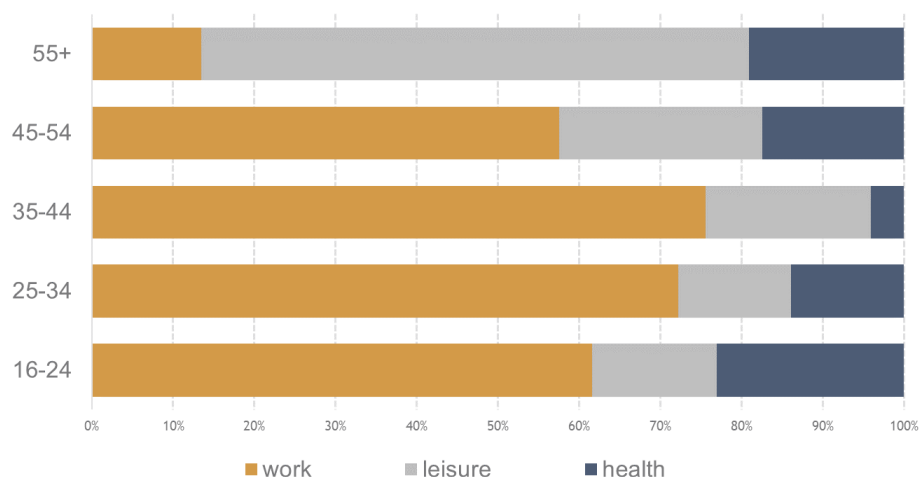
Table 1 shows respondents’ motivations for learning. The most common reason or motivation was “for my work and/or career”.

Table 1: Motivation for learning

	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
For my work and/or career	108	55%
For leisure or personal interest	90	46%
For my health and well-being	34	17%

When analysing the motivations for learning by age group the significance in motivational factors changes showing some age related trends (see Chart 2 below). It is clear that learning for work-related reasons peaked in the 35-44 age range at 76 percent and that learning for leisure increases with age, peaking at 67 percent, for those aged 55 and over which both compliment the focus group findings.

Chart 2: Motivation for taking up learning, by age group



Barriers & Challenges to starting adult learning



Adult learners can face a number of barriers and challenges when deciding to start learning as has been found in previous research. This research project found that adult learners in Wales construct their experiences in similar ways to the experiences of adult learners from the wider UK.

Upon engaging with and trying to start learning the main challenge and barrier could be labelled as 'Access' in terms of finding and accessing the right course and associated information, fulfilling the entry requirements and if there was an interview process, accessing the university environment, the setting and time requirements and travelling to and from the university.

There were clear anxieties about how they would be perceived during any interview and initial face to face engagements with many stating that they felt they were the 'wrong social class' for university and that they 'felt too old and stupid' for university or college. The university 'system' was seen as a 'big scary thing' and many stated that if their course was not delivered in the community then they would never have started the course due to the fear of the university setting and feeling 'judged' and 'looked down on' due to their age, class and how they looked different to a 'normal' student which was described as 'young, 18 to early 20's and middle class.'

There were also, as stated, more practical access issues in starting learning such as travel to and from the university or college, the timings of classes, the cost or funding available for the course, and responsibilities and costs for family and or child care. It was clear that if there was not appropriate family support and or accessible and cost effective child care then this had a significant detrimental effect on whether an adult would start their learning journey. This was also true for the cost of the course and all members of the focus groups stated that if the course was not free or supported by a subsidy, grant, or funding then they would not have started the course despite their interest in it. Finally, and less of an issue for most was the challenge of travel and cost of travel to meet the needs of the course with some stating that if the course was not in the community and the travel was to the main university or college campus then it would be too much of an issue in terms of time and cost to start the course that they were interested in.

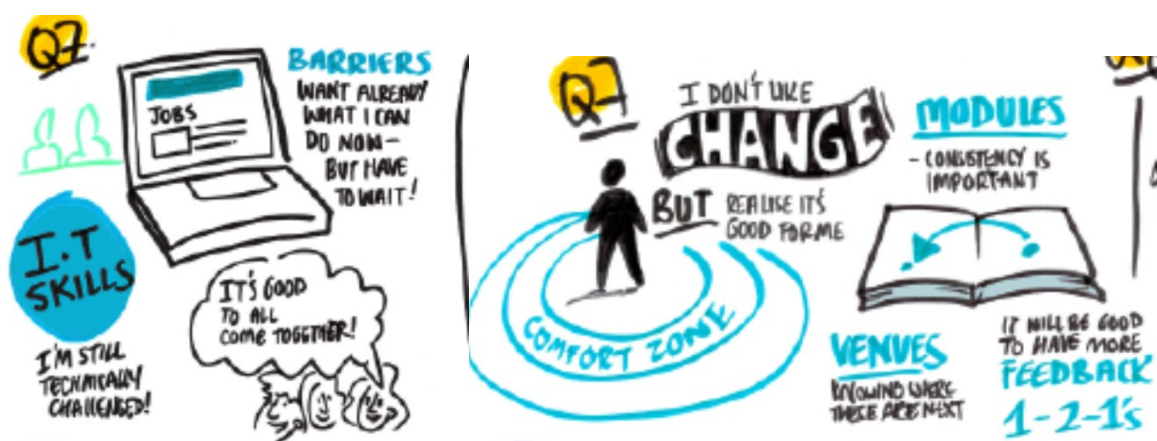
A few members from one focus group stated that they had never experienced any barriers or challenges to starting their education in college and that it was an easy transition; this was not a common experience but worthwhile to note that some adult learners do not seem to have negative or challenging experiences when engaging in learning.

The survey results supported the focus group narratives as can be seen from Table 2 below which shows respondents' reported barriers to learning. The most common barriers were finding the time to attend classes, paying for the course, finding the right information, accessing information and advice, and confidence.

Table 2: Barriers to entry of learning

	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Finding the time to attend classes	53	29%
Paying for the course	50	28%
Finding the right information	42	23%
I wasn't confident about starting something new	42	23%
Finding a course that I could access	36	20%
Accessing information and advice	30	17%
Finding suitable childcare	14	8%
I couldn't get the time off work	9	5%
I was concerned about how it might affect my welfare benefits	7	4%

Barriers & Challenges to continuing in Education



Once adult learners have started their education they also expressed experiencing a variety of challenges and barriers to continuing within it. There was a general construction that even though they were 'in' education now there was still continued fear and anxiety associated with being able to continue and successfully complete

their learning and always felt 'out of my comfort zone.' It was common that many stated that 'University is still scary,' that the campus was intimidating, and that they felt they didn't really fit in and were seen as 'outsiders.' Interestingly the college group did not express this as readily with only a couple of members of the focus group stating some level of continued anxiety and worry of being in further education.

A common characteristic across all groups was the pressure of trying to 'juggle everything' and having enough time to do everything else with responsibilities to family, friends and work (where applicable) in conjunction with attending the course and completing the academic work of researching, reading and completing assessments within submission deadlines.

The survey found that the barrier and challenge of time increased with the qualification level (22% for level 3-5 and 26% for level 6-8 respectively) but lack of confidence with being an adult learner and the education decreased with level of study with 19% of learners citing confidence as a barrier for levels 3-5 but only 5% reported this from level 6-8 indicating that perhaps for many there is a personal transformation that happens between level 5 & 6 of study as a learner will start their final level of study on a degree programme.

Those within higher education also stated that there was ongoing stress relating to their funding for future years study with continual need for proof and evidence of qualifying for student status. The stress experienced was further impacted if a learner failed or needed an extension for assessed academic work as it meant that formal progression to the next year of study was sometimes delayed due to university progression boards being held close to the new academic year. This often meant having funding agreed during the first few weeks of the new semester and caused increased anxiety and worry which did not support a positive and calm start to a new academic year.

There was also a clear over-arching view from the higher education focus groups that university quite often does not meet adult learners' needs. The members of the focus groups believed that they should have access to better feedback on assessed work involving more opportunity for face to face verbal feedback and that all feedback should be quicker to support opportunity to develop on areas of knowledge and skills in preparation for the next assessment. It was also highlighted that the continuity and quality of modules is not always similar and that some learning could be excellent and high quality with quick timely feedback and support whilst others did not offer such a positive learning journey.

It was also evident that some adult learners wanted access to better employability advice and guidance so they could plan and work towards future life goals. There was acknowledgement that in most cases it was available but that it was sometimes at times that were not suitable and that they had to ask about such services and

were not informed of them and other student support services within the university. There was a general experience that the broader realities and experiences of adult learners were not really catered or supported for such as guidance and advice on studying for a degree whilst you have children, are married, need to work and pay a mortgage. Again, the strong narrative was that universities are set-up for 18-21 year olds and part-time adult learners just were an afterthought at best and often completely over-looked in terms of appropriate support services.

The survey compliments the focus group 'picture' to some degree and found that adult learners found appropriate and accessible information a barrier for all age groups but that increased with age. Information barriers were therefore the most prominent barrier to learning for both the 45-54 and 55+ age groups (at 43 percent and 49 percent respectively) which reflected the views of a significant proportion of the same age demographic of learners in the focus groups.

Finally, there were a number of members across all focus groups that stated the expectations, development and frequency of use of new technology was a barrier and challenge to remaining in education. There were many that used the term 'technophobia' or 'technically challenged.' Those that provided this illustration stated they were aware the use of such technology was needed and supported future life skills but also believed that better support could be given by courses to develop such skills so adult learners were not disadvantaged in their engagement with the learning environment and it was not a barrier to remaining in education.

Previous Educational Experiences



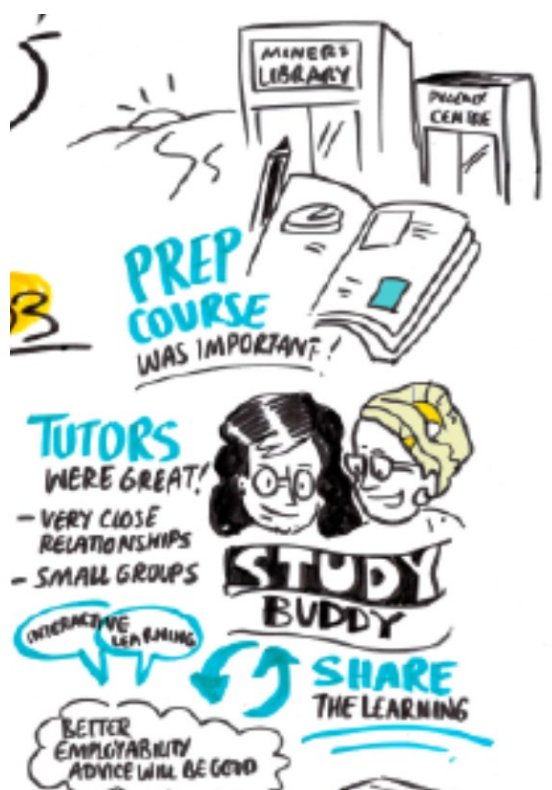
A common reflection for adult learners is that previous educational experiences are not positive and have negatively impacted on them during that time and had future consequences on their life decisions with many being fearful and 'not believing in education' and the notion of committing to education throughout the lifespan and 'lifelong learning.'

The members of the focus groups in this research were predominantly not different to previous such findings with many hating primary and secondary school. There were common themes of feeling isolated and stupid with many also experiencing social awkwardness and bullying of peers and for some teachers including the experience of physical punishment for their behaviour and non-engagement with the learning environment. Many shared how they hated the way that they were taught as it was real to life and in school there were only right and wrong answers and that you were made to feel negatively if you were wrong. Getting the answer wrong was often very public and in many ways a humiliating experience causing distress and anxiety. This made some intentionally disengage from even trying to learn and 'acting out' and 'acting up to my mates for laughs' as a way of dealing with the classroom culture. There were also some members that felt that they were not ready to learn and 'it was the wrong time for me.'

Some of the members also stated that they had received diagnosis of dyslexia later in life and that during school their disability was not recognised and or supported. They stated such relief and comfort in getting the diagnosis and it allowed them to understand that 'I wasn't thick or stupid' and that there really was a valid reason why they struggled at school.

There were still some members across all focus groups that really enjoyed school and 'loved all of it' as it offered positive learning and social experiences. Almost all of the focus group members that went to college expressed having a much happier and fulfilling time. Members discussed how they felt they were more readily treated like real people with much higher levels of respect from teachers and peers making for an overall more enjoyable experience.

Support Needs for Adult Learners



Adult learners were clear about what support they wanted and needed to succeed within further and higher education and largely this related to remedying the barriers and challenges they faced when entering and remaining on the course or programme of study.

The most dominant support encompassed the learning environment and needing that to offer a culture and approach that created a feeling of safety and security for learners. To achieve these needs members of the focus groups stated they wanted to learn within a community setting with high quality tutors that offered an interactive and supportive approach to learning and teaching. This meant teaching in smaller groups of 8-14 learners where taught content was discussed rather than presented with an open and informal group dynamics so learners felt safe and could grow in confidence voicing their ideas and opinions and feel respected and valued during the learning process by both peers and tutors.

The second most important aspect of support from the perspective of members in the focus groups was the need for ongoing support from significant others. This included a main focus on family members with friends a second wider community of support. Interestingly adult learners also stated that through engaging with adult learning their fellow peers had gradually become an integral and positive support mechanism for wanting to continue with education and to some degree many even stated they wouldn't stop now as they didn't want to let their peers down and not be

able to support them as they continued on their learning journey; there was a real sense of learning communities being created in adult learning and having greater strength and resilience due to this.

As discussed earlier many explained that they really needed access to appropriate advice and guidance services so they could make informed life choices and have confidence that what they were currently learning could lead to a new future and be able to plan effectively to support this whether it was continuing with education, for example with a master's degree or towards a new career and employment.

A significant amount of higher education learners also believed that they would not have been able to start a full degree programme if it was not due to the fact that they had completed a short and or introductory course first as it provided the confidence, skills and experiences to show that they could succeed within a higher education environment. Many of the learners who shared this view said such courses really 'made me feel I can do this' and gave them the push they needed to take that next step towards a full degree.

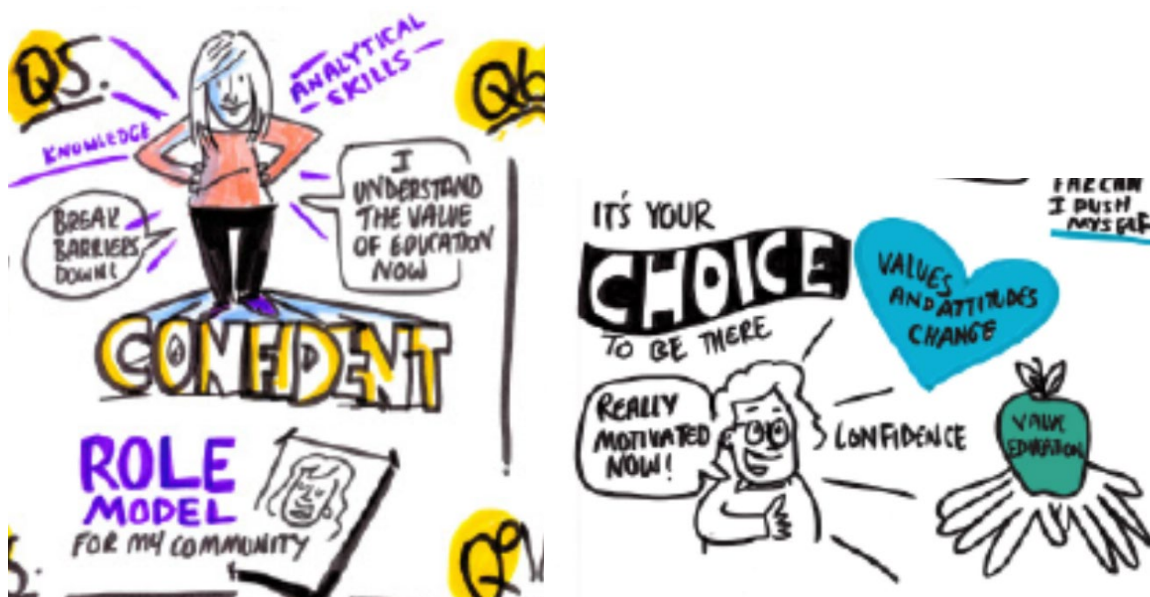
Table 3 shows reported forms of support and encouragement while studying for all participants from the survey. The most reported support/encouragement was that the learning location was close to home (49%), followed by having good information and advice (36%). The other significant support needs were the time of learning to fit around family or work (35%), tutor encouragement (30%), family and friends (29%), free course (26%), and family encouragement (22%). These findings mirror the narrative from the focus groups and suggest that support needs for adult learners are multi-faceted and there needs to be a range of support mechanisms and conditions for learning for an adult learner to realise their aspirations for engaging with education.

Table 3: Support & encouragement of learning

	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
It was in a location that was close to home	96	49%
I had good information and advice	71	36%
It was a time that I could fit around work or family	69	35%
I was encouraged by the tutor	58	30%
I talked to a friend/family member/supporter	56	29%

I didn't have to pay for the course	50	26%
My family encouraged me to start	43	22%
I had a go at some taster sessions before I started	26	13%
I had support to help with paying for the course	25	13%
I had access to childcare	8	4%

Outcomes & Benefits to Adult Learning



The inspiring personal stories of adult learners in this research are colourfully evident from the vibrant drawings and writings above and the power of adult education is clear to see with a whole variety of benefits and positive outcomes.

The main outcome shared amongst almost all of the members was a sense of pride and confidence not felt before and a newfound respect for self and own self-worth. Many identified of becoming role models for their children, partner or friend and that this has given them greater self-belief for the future with many expressing 'I feel empowered and ready for life' with a much increased motivation and positive mind-set for their future life goals and aspirations.

The notion of being more prepared for future life also created strong narratives that adult education provided excellent opportunity to develop critical thinking and analytical skills, gain knowledge, with a much deeper understanding and awareness of society, politics and the world around them. There was a significant number of members who stated that adult education had changed them, their values and

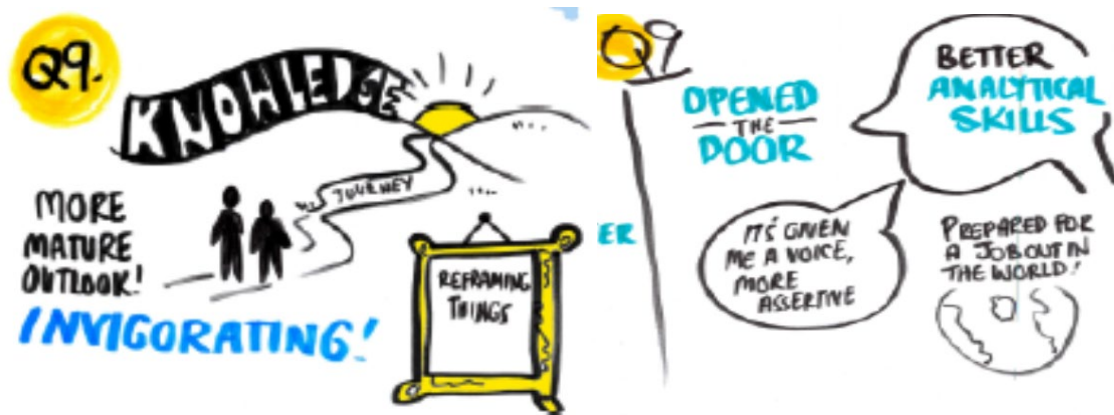
attitudes and that this was really positive as they saw the world in quite small and fixed terms previously and now the world had ‘opened up to them.’ Members did not use the words ‘personal agency’ but when this was reflected to all groups they agreed that their personal agency had dramatically increased and that the value of education to them was they were better able to navigate their lives and support their family and friends in doing so too.

Another common experience was that adult learning had provided an excellent social experience where learners made new significant friends and these relationships were strong because they had supported each other to grow and change as a community during the learning process.

The survey offers further insight into the benefits to adult learning and Table 3 below shows respondents reported benefits from adult learning. The most common response was the benefit of “new skills and knowledge” (90%), followed by improving confidence (53%) and making new friends on the course (53%).

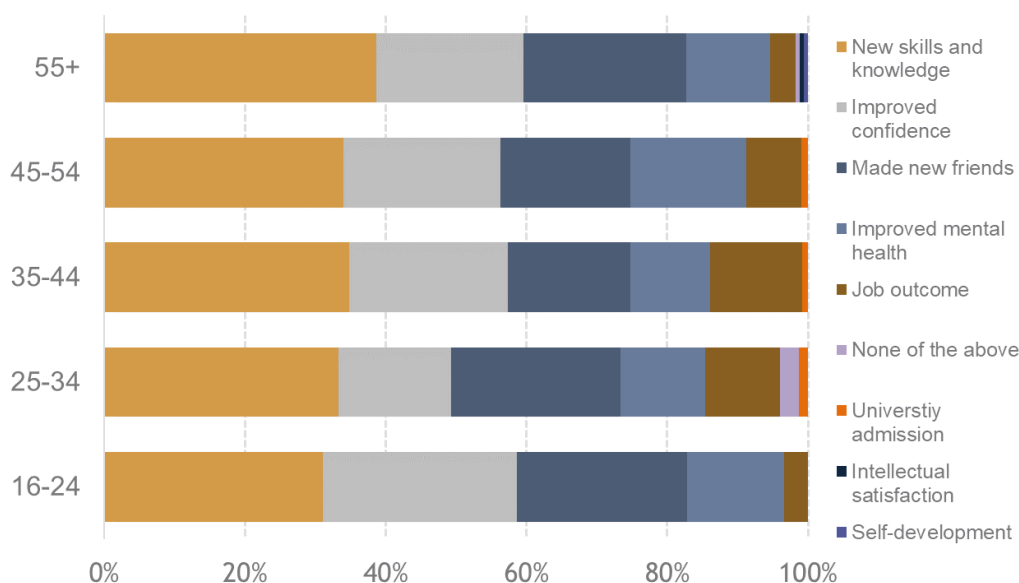
Table 4: Benefits from adult learning

	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
I have new skills and knowledge	178	90%
It has helped to improve my confidence	104	53%
I have made new friends on the course	104	53%
It has helped to improve my mental health and well-being	64	32%
It has helped me to get a better job than I had previously	25	13%
It's helped me get a job	13	7%
None of the above	3	2%
I have a place in University	3	2%
intellectual satisfaction	1	1%
Self-development	1	1%



The survey responses found similar trends to the focus groups across all age groups with skills and knowledge, confidence, and new friends being the most reported benefits. The benefits relating to employment and a job outcome were most reported in age groups 25 - 54 with the 35 - 44 age range responding the highest for this at 13%.

Chart 3 Benefits of learning by age groups



Future Motivations & Aspirations from Adult Learning



When discussing future motivations and aspirations there were several key shared narratives that all composed to a central theme, members experiences as an adult learner was not the end of a journey but the start of a longer lifelong journey of development and learning. Many did state that they wanted to complete their studies but this was the start of the conversation not the end point of it.

Most of the focus group members were looking forward to more education and or getting a job or a better job. Future was not just constructed as education or

employment though and the feeling across the groups was that future education and employment would come as long as there was a continued focus on developing self.

The most powerfully voiced aspirations were to continue to be a positive role model to family and friends and to continue to support peers on the course. There was agreement that to achieve this they needed to keep feeling positive and having continued self-respect, self-worth and use of the knowledge and skills they had developed over the duration of their learning. Many felt that they had to carry on with learning as they had rediscovered themselves and or found new identities and they needed to 'carry on finding myself because I felt lost before and I don't want to be that person again.'

Recommendations & Implications for Future Development

For Welsh Government

1. Working with the adult learning sector, the Welsh Government should develop and publish a new lifelong learning policy. This should be far broader than the current Adult Learning Policy and encompass all parts of the adult learning sector (including FE and HE institutions). The purpose of the policy should reflect the purposes of the new school age curriculum, ensure a consistent all age education pathway, and make links between lifelong learning and other public policy areas.
2. Recognising the evidence of the impact of learning on health and well-being, there should be strategic engagement between the adult learning sector and public health agencies to maximise the benefits to individuals and communities. This should include extending social prescribing routes into learning opportunities.
3. Build on the success of Adult Learners' Week and support year-round, nationwide campaigning and social action to communicate the benefits of adult learning and the opportunities that exist to engage.

For higher education institutions

4. As part of their commitment to their civic mission, universities should be encouraged to develop marketing strategies that engage whole communities within community settings and offer opportunities on campus to reduce the stigma, barriers and fear of a university as well as clear guidance and support in accessing adult learning.
5. Engage more effectively with adult learners and offer introductory and short programmes/courses in community settings that build confidence, trust and skills needed for the HE environment (these could be credit bearing and used for entry onto degree programmes).
6. Investment in sector wide professional development to upskill the adult education workforce. This should include development of training on the needs of adult learners in terms of pedagogy and support services and this

should be for academics, senior management teams, and student services including the Student Union.

7. Colleges and Universities to work in partnership with the Student Union and adult learners to better analyse and meet the needs of adult learners so that student support services can be developed to meet their needs, contexts and lived experiences (including child care services).
8. Provide informal and social learning environments offering discursive learning in small groups using a blended learning pedagogy with a strong component of face to face learning, teaching and assessment support and feedback.
9. There is a need for better advice and guidance on future opportunities in education, training and or employment for adult learners with the consideration of embedding such opportunities within the programme curriculum as a core/compulsory learning area.

Conclusions

The pandemic is changing the way higher education is being delivered across Wales and the rest of the UK. However, the fundamentals of how providers can better engage with and support adults have remained constant. The answer lies in outreach and engagement, multiple entry points into learning, a distinct blended learning pedagogical approach and an upskilling of the adult education workforce, and a year-round, whole system approach aimed at inspiring adults. This all needs to be brought together through a coherent plan for lifelong learning, which will build on the new vision for the post-compulsory system published by the Welsh Government.

After a decade of decline there is an opportunity to build new and sustainable routes into higher levels of learning for adults in Wales. The challenge is now more urgent with the economic and social consequences of the pandemic being felt in communities across Wales.

Appendix



ADULT LEARNERS FOCUS GROUP



ADULT LEARNERS FOCUS GROUP



ADULT LEARNERS FOCUS GROUP

