

Lifelong Learning in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Modern educational policies place great emphasis on learning in adult life. This is a relatively recent development, and comes partly as a reaction to the impact of rapid technological, scientific and organisational change on all areas of economic, social and cultural life. Across the European Union, governments and others now embrace the goal of lifelong learning as a vital way of tackling the challenges of social inclusion and economic competitiveness. Individuals too are taking an increasing interest in bringing their knowledge up to date and acquiring new skills.

Lifelong learning can be seen as particularly important in Northern Ireland. Today's population is learning to live in new political circumstances; society is changing rapidly, as it is in other modern societies; and the regional economy is particularly vulnerable to competitors elsewhere in Europe and beyond that have with higher levels of productivity. Yet previous analyses of survey data have generally shown that adults in Northern Ireland are less likely to take part in organised learning than are people elsewhere in the United Kingdom (UK) (Sweeney et al, 1998; Field, 1997). This is particularly surprising given that, on average, levels of educational attainment among young people are comparatively high by UK standards, both in schools and at university.



Attitudes towards adult learning

In 2001, the Life and Times Survey explored attitudes towards lifelong learning in Northern Ireland. While the Government has announced a range of new initiatives in recent years that are designed to tackle some major problems, such as poor basic skills in numeracy and literacy, these new policy measures are still in their infancy. Much has been done by providers to widen access to educational opportunities. Yet because adult learners generally make their choices on a largely voluntary basis, understanding their attitudes, perceptions and motives are vital if participation in learning is to grow.

In general, the survey findings suggest that people hold very positive views on adult learning. Eighty six per cent of respondents agreed that learning

in later life opens up another whole new world, and only 2% disagreed. There were little differences between genders and religions (see Table 1). Young people were slightly less positive than those from other age groups.

Technological change is often seen as an important driver of adult learning. Fifty seven per cent of respondents agreed that it is impossible to keep up with all the new technology around at work these days, although a significant minority of 29% disagreed. Both genders were united on this. However, there were sharp divergences by age group, with only 42% of those aged 18-24 years agreeing, rising steadily with each age group up to 66% among those aged 65 years and over. While agreement was stronger among Protestants than Catholics, this may reflect different age distributions among these groups.

Table 1: Attitudes to 'Learning in later life opens up a whole new world for people'

	Women	Men	Protestant	Catholic	No religion	All respondents
Agree	86	86	86	88	83	86
Neither agree nor disagree	8	7	9	7	10	8
Disagree	1	4	2	3	2	2
Don't know	3	4	4	2	6	3

Outcomes of learning

One important factor in persuading people to learn is the belief that it makes a concrete difference to their lives. Only a minority - albeit quite a large one - take a largely instrumental view of adult learning. Thirty-six per cent of respondents believed that doing a course in later life is



only worthwhile if it leads to something useful, like a job or promotion. Just over one half (51%) expressed disagreement. Young people aged 18-24 years were the most likely to take an instrumental view: 46% agreed with this view of adult learning, as against only 31% among those aged 35-44 years. Motivation was markedly more instrumental among men (44%) than women (34%), and among Protestants (42%) than Catholics (32%) and people of no religion (31%).

Civic outcomes seem to be strongly associated with lifelong learning. Fifty seven per cent of respondents agreed that lifelong learning makes people better citizens. Slightly more

men (60%) than women (56%) held this view, and there tended to be more support among older people, reaching a peak among respondents aged 65 years or over (65%). Among the different religious categories, support for this view was lowest among those of no religion (54%).

Respondents were asked whether they thought courses or training necessarily led to a better job or promotion. Most people (70%) accepted this view, which was somewhat more prevalent among men than women, among Protestants than other religious categories, and among middle aged than younger or older people. Generally, people believe that most employers value experience above qualifications, with 47% agreeing and 29% disagreeing; all age groups, religious categories and genders responded in much the same way.

Paying for learning

Any sizeable increase in lifelong learning would have serious financial consequences. While there is broad agreement that taxpayers largely finance initial education at school and college, responsibility for funding adult learning tends to be divided between employers, government and individuals. Life and Times therefore explored who should pay

for different types of learning. There was strong support for increased government spending on lifelong learning. Seventy three per cent of respondents agreed that the government should be spending more on lifelong learning for everyone. Support for increased public spending is higher among the young and declined with age (though it stood at 65% even among the oldest age group). A majority of both main religious groups share this view, with 78% of Catholics supporting higher public spending, and 68% of Protestants. (See Table 2) There is also strong agreement that workers themselves need to take responsibility for learning new skills. Eighty-two per cent took this view, with minor differences only among different sectors of the population.

As discussed earlier, many people think that technological change poses a challenge. When asked who should pay the fees for a worker wanting to attend a two-day computer skills course that would help in their work, 70% named the employer. Another 14% thought that the government should pay, and only 8% suggested that the individual themselves should pay. Broadly, this pattern was reproduced among all groups, though employer support was named more frequently by those of no religion (74%) than either Catholics or Protestants, and by those aged 25-34 years (76%) than other age groups. Interestingly, in view of the individualism that is supposedly associated with the Protestant faith, differences between Catholic and Protestant were insignificant.

Table 2: Attitudes to 'The Government should be spending much more on providing life-long learning for everyone'

	Women	Men	Protestant	Catholic	No religion	All respondents
Agree	73	72	68	78	74	73
Neither agree nor disagree	15	13	17	11	13	14
Disagree	8	12	11	8	9	10
Don't know	5	3	5	3	5	4

Table 3: Attitudes towards free training and courses for particular groups of unemployed

	Lone mothers	Ex-prisoners	People in their 50s	People in their 20s
Strongly in favour	83	57	89	85
Neither in favour nor against	7	16	6	7
Against	5	23	4	7
Other	4	4	2	1

Views were more divided when it comes to paying for academic development. Asked who should support the studies of someone who left school without qualifications at 16, and wanted to take A Levels or an Access course, 60% named the government while 28% named the person themselves. Young people aged 18-24 years were less likely to believe responsibility should lie mainly with the person themselves (18%) and more likely to name the

respectively). Views differed by age, with respondents aged 45-54 years being most likely to think art lessons should be free. Among the three religious categories, Protestants were least likely (55%) to think the class should be free, but only by a small margin.

Respondents were also asked about their views on free training courses for various categories of unemployed people. As shown in

Table 4: Negative responses to 'School taught me the skills and knowledge I really needed later in life' (% disagreeing)

	Women	Men	Protestant	Catholic	No religion	All respondents
School taught me the skills and knowledge I really needed later in life	70	71	70	71	69	70
School opened my mind and made me want to learn	74	79	77	74	74	76

government (72%); people in the age groups between 25 and 65 years were most likely to believe responsibility should lie with the person concerned. Catholics were most likely to see the government as responsible (64%) and people of no religion were most likely to think it was the person concerned (32%). Gender differences were again small.

When it came to personal development, respondents were asked whether painting lessons for retired people interested in art should be free. Fifty-nine per cent thought they should, while 32% thought the person should pay for them. Men were more likely than women to think the person should pay (36% and 29% respectively), and women were slightly more likely to think the class should be free (60% and 56%

Table 3, a majority was in favour of such support in all cases, ranging from 89% support for people in their 50s to 57% for ex-prisoners. In the case of ex-prisoners, support fell to 51% among the 25-34 years age group, and reached a low of 44% among Protestants. Among Catholics, agreement was lower for ex-prisoners (72%) than for lone mothers (80%), unemployed people in their 50s (90%) and in their 20s (89%).

Family and schooling

People's attitudes to lifelong learning are generally very strongly influenced by their schooldays. Those who succeed at school and college are much more likely to take up learning in adult life than those who leave school with the fewest qualifications.

Research also suggests that other family members can play a role in persuading people to learn in adult life (Gorard and Rees, 2002). Results from Life and Times are broadly positive about the role of family, but are somewhat discouraging when it comes to school experiences.

A majority (70%) of respondents did not think that school had taught them the skills and knowledge that they really needed later in life. (See Table 4) Younger age groups were most likely to take this view (76%). Similarly, 76% of respondents disagreed that school had opened their mind and made them want to learn. This view was held by slightly more men than women, and by the younger and older age groups. Protestants took a slightly more positive view than both Catholics and those with no religion.

Most people (80%) believe that their family would encourage them if they decided to take an evening class. Women were a little more likely (81%) than men (78%) to expect encouragement. Nine out of ten respondents aged 18-24 years would expect support, compared with 67% of those aged 65 years or over. Slightly fewer Catholics (79%) than Protestants (82%) expected to be encouraged.

Conclusions

The survey findings send something of a mixed message about the prospects of creating a learning society in Northern Ireland. On the one hand, they suggest that people share an overwhelmingly positive view of the idea and practice of learning in adult life, and see their own family as likely to support them if they took up learning themselves. They were also able to perceive clear benefits from learning; these include both very instrumental, specific advantages to the individual in terms of their job and career

prospects, as well as wider gains for the society in terms of civic engagement and cultural development. Most people also recognised that while somebody else might pay the costs, workers themselves have responsibilities in respect of skills updating.

Yet people were not convinced that school provides an adequate preparation for learning in adult life. Of course, the respondents were adults, who were therefore educated in the past, and who now live with the strengths and weaknesses of the education system in years gone by, rather than as it is today. Nevertheless, this finding is certainly consistent with the view that the Northern Ireland schools system is better placed in respect of formal, largely academic examinations success than in respect of preparation for continuous independent learning in adult life.

The findings on the funding of learning should also give cause for thought. There was strong support for increased government spending, as well as for free training for specific groups of learners. Most people also believed that the costs of training for technological change should be met primarily by employers. This begs the question of whether a learning society can really be achieved without significant growth in individuals' own spending. These findings might be interpreted as sug-

gesting laudably high levels of concern for community and social support. However, they might also be seen as evidence of a dependency culture that is incompatible with the individual independence and autonomy needed to cope with the new fast-moving and unpredictable economic and social world, which faces people with an environment that demands increasing flexibility and adaptability.

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References

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2001, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The Life and Times Survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors at Queen's University (028 90 273034) with any queries.

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Key Points

- Most people in Northern Ireland take a very positive view of adult learning.
- Four out of five people think their families would support them if they took up a course of learning.
- Three quarters believe the government should be spending more on lifelong learning.
- Most people want employers to pay the costs of training to cope with technological change.
- Most people also think that workers themselves need to take responsibility for learning new skills.
- Most people think that their school did not help them prepare for learning in adult life.