

Information superhighway 'bypassing adult learners' -- new study

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Despite a world of opportunities just a click away, there has been no significant shift in the uptake of lifelong learning over the past decade according to new research.

Pronouncements at government level about the creation of 'a [learning society](#)' where education is the key to a nation's [economic development](#) - the so-called 'knowledge economy' - are not backed by evidence in society, the researchers found.

Although easier access to the internet and faster connections may have facilitated informal learning opportunities, the vision of mass learning is simply a pipe-dream, researchers claim.

Analysis conducted by Dr Patrick White, a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester, suggests that participation in adult learning neither increased nor widened during the first decade of the [21st Century](#).

He said: "Given the rapid development of the Internet during these years – both in terms of capability and accessibility – our findings suggest that online technologies have not fulfilled the promise of their advocates who believed they would break down barriers to learning and expand access to previously excluded groups."

The research, published in the *British Educational Research Journal*, used multivariate analysis to analyse data on more than 47,000 participants

collected as part of annual surveys commissioned by the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE). White concluded that – despite considerable technological change and numerous government initiatives – Britain was no closer to being a 'learning society' in 2010 than it was nine years beforehand.

In every survey year from 2002 to 2010 the majority of adults surveyed said that they had not engaged in any form of learning in the three years before being questioned. Those who had participated, however, were likely to be young, well-educated, economically active and working in skilled, non-manual occupations.

Dr White said: "The research found that respondents who were in occupational classes A, B or C1 (non manual jobs) were between one-and-a-half to two times more likely to have recently participated in recent learning than those in manual or unskilled work. Continuing initial full-time education beyond the age of 16 increased the chances of participation by a similar amount, as did being active in the labour market and being aged under 55 years.

"In contrast, having children in the household decreased the chance of participation by approximately one third."

While those currently participating in adult learning were more likely to report having access to the internet at home, there was no evidence that the internet had enabled groups with high levels of non-participation to re-engage with education.

Said Dr White: "Neither recent participation in learning nor intention to participate in the future increased over the nine survey years and there was no evidence to suggest that the factors most closely associated with participation – youth, early engagement with education and occupational success – had decreased in importance over time.

"Our analysis however, provides further evidence to support the growing body of research that suggests that the 'barriers' preventing educational participation are 'dispositional' and attitudinal rather than only practical, logistical or financial.

"Learning in later life appears to be primarily linked to positive attitudes to education that are usually formed during compulsory schooling. This means that young people who experienced early educational failure or felt alienated by the school system are very unlikely to participate in [education](#) as adults regardless of the opportunities available or potential benefits."

Commenting on the research, Dr Fiona Aldridge, Head of Research at NIACE, said: "There are many challenges highlighted by the research including the crucial need to promote adult learning to adults from all walks of life, who do not believe that learning is for them. We need to overcome the maxim that 'if at first you don't succeed in learning then you never do'. While this is true for far too many people, we also know that thousands of [adults](#) get back into learning every year, defying the norm and reaping the benefits."

More information: Patrick White (2012): Modelling the 'learning divide': predicting participation in adult learning and future learning intentions 2002 to 2010, *British Educational Research Journal*, 38:1, 153-175. [dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.529871](https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.529871)

Provided by University of Leicester

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