

Policy Position Paper

Learning and skills (England)

April 2016

Meaningful opportunities to learn for both work and pleasure should be available to people of all ages. Publicly and privately funded provision should not be inaccessible to people just because of their date of birth.

Key issues

With State Pension ages rising and people having to work for longer than ever, it is vital that all workers are fully equipped with the skills necessary to play a full part in the labour market. Older workers often have different training needs to younger workers, but still need proactive management and investment in their careers. Ensuring access to appropriate training is essential for helping older workers become more productive. Personal development is important regardless of age, and as the concept of a 'job for life' becomes increasingly outdated, individuals of all ages will increasingly need to re- and up-skill in order to remain active in the labour market.

Since 2010 there have been substantial cut-backs in the training budget accessible to older workers, in favour of greater funding for apprenticeships. This has led to a marked rise in older apprentices with nearly 60,000 people aged over 45 starting an apprenticeship in 2014/15, up from approximately 10,000 in 2009/10.^[1] However, the introduction of 24+ Advanced Learning Loans for Further Education (FE) courses in 2013 and related ending of fee subsidies threatens to stifle participation in formal learning among older people, who are often unwilling to incur debt.

The Government has piloted Mid-Life Career Reviews to allow people aged about 50 to get specialist advice on their career options. The pilots found that the vast majority of people benefited from taking part, and that it was a low cost and effective way of engaging them in planning for future work-based needs, and is an important tool in supporting 'Fuller Working Lives'. It recommended the reviews should be extended to everyone aged 50.¹ In December 2014 the Government committed to rolling these out to all 50+ unemployed people, but as yet this has not been actioned. This would be a good starting point for moving towards universal availability.

Community learning is also hugely important for older people, and is proven to benefit both physical and mental health. It can also be used as a tool for increasing participation in wider community life. Community Learning Trusts, which are local

^[1] The FE Data Service 2015, Apprenticeships start statistics

¹ NIACE (2015), Mid Life Career Review, Pilot Project Outcomes Phases 1, 2, and 3 (2013 – 2015)

partnerships offering a range of learning provision to suit local needs, should ensure that they continue to regard older people as a priority group, and the Government must continue to support them. In recent years, budgets have been cut and many courses – delivered through FE colleges and in communities – have ceased without full knowledge of the consequences for individuals and society.

Public policy proposals

- The range of learning options for those in employment who may want – or need – to change careers later in their working life should be extended. With State Pension age increasing being able to re- or up-skill is vital for people of all ages.
- Alongside the introduction of Further Education Loans there should be a comprehensive analysis of the impact on older learners, and subsequent policy review to ensure people aged 50+ are not being dissuaded from taking part in Further Education.
- An entitlement to a Mid-Life Career Review should be given to everyone at about the age of 50, whether they are in work or are unemployed.
- Government departments and agencies involved should work with providers, employers and other stakeholders to develop a coordinated strategy to ensure that older workers' aspirations and the UK's future skills needs can be met.
- As spending on adult learning is reduced and re-directed, the overall level of spend on older workers, and its effectiveness, should be carefully monitored and re-allocated as appropriate to different initiatives. Publicly-funded skills provision for people over the age of 50 must not disappear.
- People of all ages should have the opportunity to learn basic skills. In addition, entry level ICT training should be available to all who need it.
- Age discrimination in the funding, marketing and provision of 18+ learning should be removed (e.g. entitlements for under 25s only; different concessions for people with similar incomes before and after pension age).
- The Government needs to investigate the full potential of lifelong learning for delivering savings in healthcare. Part of the Adult Community Learning budget should be ring-fenced for this purpose.
- The remaining Government spending on Adult Community Learning should be protected, and older people retained as a priority group.
- Higher Education is important to many older people, and finance should be offered on the same terms and conditions as for younger learners.

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