Taken from:
Learner Motivation and Barriers to Participation in Post-16 Learning

A Brief Review of the Literature

LSDA

February 2003

www.lsneducation.org.uk/research/centres/
14/7/07
Barriers to participation in learning

29 This distinction between external and internal barriers to participation is useful for helping us understand what affects individual motivation. There have been a number of authoritative surveys of the range and types of factors that act as barriers to participation. There is a large body of work by McGivney identifying a range of barriers and work by Herbert and Callender (1997) and Callender (1999) specifically on financial and practical barriers to participation. Literature reviews by Hillage and Aston (2001) on adult learners and less recently by Brooks (1998) on young people (aged 16-19) and Maguire et al (1993) summarise the factors and observe that understanding of these factors as barriers is relatively well-established.

30 It is difficult to tell from the literature precisely which type of barriers are most important in affecting levels of participation. Socio-economic circumstances are now fairly well-established as correlating with academic attainment and participation in learning (Youth Cohort Study 1997 and other years; Scottish School Leavers’ Study by Lynn 1994).

31 Financial issues have received considerable attention in light of the Kennedy report and the work of Callender, although Callender herself notes that an individual’s financial circumstances can be used as a socially acceptable reason for non-participation, masking other issues. However, evaluations of the impact of Educational Maintenance Allowances suggest that their operation had a significant impact upon post-16 participation amongst 16-18 year olds. Callender’s own conclusion on this matter, which is echoed in a number of other pieces of literature, is that the availability of financial support has been shown to be an incentive; lack of it a disincentive.

32 There is a great deal of support for the importance of situational factors in acting as barriers to participation. McGivney, reviewing her own decade-long experience of researching adult participation in learning believes that there has been little change in the nature and extent of personal barriers to learning participation during the time that she has been researching.

“There is little to suggest that factors in the 1990s differ greatly from those in the 1980s”. The reasons most frequently given are still invariably the practical ones to do with immediate circumstances: income; time; ill health/disability; place of residence; lack of transport.

33 These views are supported by Bowman (2000), amongst others, who observes that family responsibilities still constitute one of the greatest barriers for people who want to engage in education and training.
Several commentators observe that it is sometimes far easier for individuals to cite situational factors such as lack of time or money or lack of interest or motivation to learn than admit to feelings of apprehension of fear of failure. (Herbert and Callender 1997) Whilst most institutional and policy strategies for widening participation have addressed practical obstacles, other personal barriers are less easy to deal with. McGivney (2001) herself states that nothing has changed to make her change her view that the major barriers to participation are attitudes, perceptions and expectations, although life situations and materials circumstances also play a part. This view confirmed by the research of others, including O'Rourke (1995) and Tonks (1999), cited in McGivney (2001).

The barriers to learning fall into four main groups:

**Structural factors**
A large number of sources emphasise that economic, social and political factors have a powerful influence upon participation. Within this category of barrier are academic ability, social class, employment status and state of the labour market.

**Policy-related factors**
Legislation and the configuration of funding mechanisms can act to proscribe or restrict public funding from supporting certain types of learning which might be more attractive to non-traditional learners (Sand 1998). While only one piece of the literature reviewed makes this point, a number of other commentators make similar points in other ways when warning policy-makers against constructing policy around their own assumptions rather than what really motivates and attracts learners, such as informal rather than formal learning and the opportunity to access equipment, rather than the desire to pursue and achieve a qualification.

**Supply-related or institutional factors**
The factors cited below are referred to again across the range of literature which concerns itself with barriers to participation. However, one author (Martinez 2001; Martinez and Munday 1998) argues for institutional behaviour and practices being of particular importance in influencing the extent to which learners persist and complete their programmes. His argument centres around evidence from a study of 9000 learners which found that withdrawn students do not differ markedly from continuing students in terms of social profile. Rather, withdrawn students are most strongly differentiated from continuing students in terms of:

- attitudes towards college-related issues;
39 The research noted that financial hardship did not seem to be strongly associated with decisions to drop out. It is difficult to know how much weight to place on this piece of research, as it is not readily supported by the findings of any of the other pieces of literature reviewed.

40 Supply-related or institutional barriers commonly cited in the literature included:

- the complexity of the language and presentation of prospectuses;
- the large variety of programmes and qualifications on offer;
- the uneven distribution of learning opportunities geographically and socially and information on learning opportunities;
- the uneven distribution of workplace learning opportunities;
- disparities in fee levels between learning providers;
- the institutional ethos;
- varying degrees of commitment to widening participation by institutions and marginality of widening participation initiatives within colleges;
- the lack of integration of provision for non-traditional learners with the mainstream and the reinforcement of difference resulting from such approaches;
- unsupported transitions for learners between programmes or learning providers.

41 **Personal and cultural factors (dispositional and situational factors)**

The conclusions arising from Martinez’s research are quite different from that undertaken by Hodkinson and Bloomer (1999). On the basis of a small, qualitative study, they argue that decisions to drop out of a planned college course had as much to do with life outside the college (dispositional and situational factors) and life within it, although they to make recommendations regarding the need for colleges to develop accepting **cultures and to** strengthen student-tutor relationships. Hodkinson and Bloomer also remind readers that the importance of structural, social and economic inequalities should not be forgotten, lending support to the first category of barriers to participation.
Key attitudinal barriers appear to be perceptions of a range of different types of risk:

- economic risks include the perception of loans to study as debt, rather than income; the absence of a guaranteed pay-off; and scepticism about the value of training, perceptions that are re-inforced by being coerced onto training courses as a condition of continuing to receive benefits;

- social and psychological risks include: fear of failure and of being too old to learn; fear especially by men of losing face amongst peers, esp amongst young men; anxieties about leaving familiar territory; and alienation from family and social networks;

With regard to young people, evidence points to decisions to participate being influenced by prior experience of education, with poor experiences or achievements correlating with lower participation rates. Hillage and Aston note that research from Denmark concludes that those who succeed in lower secondary education are more likely to progress on to some form of FE. Equally, they conclude from their review of the literature that there is some evidence to suggest that measures aimed at preventing the young from dropping out of education could be more effective in the long run than remedial measures aimed at re-engaging particular groups, again suggesting that those with more positive experiences of participating are more likely to be more motivated to continue learning.

What we know about what works in overcoming barriers to participation and/or low levels of motivation to learn

The literature is in agreement generally on the types of support which can help to overcome some of these barriers and increase motivation to learn. While most these strategies cannot be said to motivate learners directly, nor by themselves reduce intrinsic reluctance to learn, it is likely that for individuals who are already open to participating in learning, they reduce some of the other institutional, structural and situational barriers to learning and, so, improve disposition towards learning.

Key sources of effective practices include LSDA’s work on working with disadvantaged learners (Taylor 2000a and 200b); good practice identified by the Kennedy Committee on widening participation; McGivney’s overview of effective strategies (McGivney 2001) and Callender’s work on financial support for learners. Other useful practices are found in various evaluations of policy initiatives, including Greenwood and Merton (2001) and Kirk et al (2001). In particular, the Kennedy Committee’s findings were seen to repeat and re-emphasise practice which had long been know to be effective, which is why Kennedy is here considered as an
authoritative source on motivation, barriers and effective strategies for attracting non-traditional learners.

The following approaches or principles seem to be cited fairly regularly as helping to motivate those who have not traditionally participated (and who are unlikely to have achieved a level 2 qualification). However, they are quite vague in their formulation and other good practice literature not reviewed as part of this exercise are likely to develop them in more detail and explain how they might be applied most effectively. (For example see Good Practice in Widening Adult Participation in Further Education Colleges, a report to the Learning and Skills Council by LSDA, 2002). The factors and approaches below have been summarised quickly. For more information, see the sources quoted in the paragraph above.

- pre-entry work, including thorough groundwork, negotiating with community ‘gatekeepers’ and face-to-face contacts, using good outreach skills;

- group targeting, as targeting individuals seems to be relatively ineffective – collective learning is reported as being a key strategy;

- working with and through key intermediaries;

- informal/non-threatening venues – possibly providing learning activities in places established for other purposes;

- informal learning starting points – evidence is that it is often through informal and unrecognised learning that people embark upon more structured learning and helping children to learn;

- low/no cost of courses;

- content negotiated with learners or groups that represent their views;

- content and delivery sufficiently flexible to cater for emerging interests and changing circumstances, and a response to identified interests;

- offered with a range of support services, including financial incentives.