

# Reaching the hardest to reach

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## **Introduction**

Research into patterns of adult participation in learning show that despite recent increases in participation in learning in Wales, a clear majority of people (58%) were not and had not participated in any learning activity during the previous three years. Even when those adults reporting past learning are included, almost one third (32%) of adults surveyed in Wales in 2003 did not report any participation in learning after leaving full time education (Aldridge & Horrocks, 2003, p. 5). Given the value placed upon learning on economic, social and health grounds (See for example Deacon, 2002; NAW 2002; Van Wieringen & Attwell, 1999) this pattern of non-participation has inspired a large body of literature examining the range of barriers that might constrain potential learners (see for example Hillage, Uden, Aldridge & Eccles, 2000; McGivney, 1990). This paper will draw upon research conducted in South Wales in order to critically examine what is revealed by an analysis of participation in learning focused upon barriers, and what may be missed.

## **Fieldwork**

The Community University of the Valleys Partnership<sup>i</sup> (CUVP) commissioned the People and Work Unit to undertake research designed to assess the 'True Costs of Community Learning'. The fieldwork for this study was undertaken over a four-month period (November 2004 - March 2005) and included interviews with fourteen CUVP partners and fifty-seven of their learners. The conceptual framework was further developed through the People and Work Unit's own research (see for example Lloyd-Jones, 2005; 2002) and a study in Bridgend for the Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations in partnership with the Community Learning Sub-Group of Bridgend CCET<sup>ii</sup> (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005b)

## **Barriers to learning**

In order to assess the 'True Costs of Community Learning', the People and Work Unit mapped out the types of barriers faced by the different groups of learners that CUVP organisations were working with, and used this as a basis for assessing the costs for both learners and providers in overcoming them (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a). The

types of barriers identified by both learners and providers reflected the National Literacy Agency's (1998) typology:

- Situational barriers linked to the current life circumstances of a potential learners (for example childcare, financial poverty, work commitments);
- Institutional barriers that alienate or exclude certain people (for example admissions policy or the way the benefits system operates);
- Informational barriers linked to a lack of information; and
- Dispositional barriers, rooted in negative attitudes, beliefs or assumptions about learning (for example negative experiences of school).

### **Reaching the hardest to reach?**

An analysis of the profile of CUVP learners conducted in 2002 (CUVP, 2002) indicated that CUVP organisations were successfully working with groups traditionally considered 'hard to reach' (for example young mothers, older learners and economically inactive learners) (McGivney, 1990). The profiles of current learners with CUVP organisations and the interviews we conducted with learners in 2004 and 2005 also indicated considerable success in reaching out to these groups (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a).

Interviews with CUVP organisations highlighted the importance of European Social Fund's Objective 1 programme<sup>iii</sup> in supporting the community based learning they provided. Much of the provision it enabled was free, delivered in communities and offered free or subsidised childcare, helping remove many of the situational barriers that hard to reach groups face (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a). It has been suggested that the focus upon enabling learners to overcome situational barriers may well have contributed to the increase in adult participation in Wales (Aldridge & Horrocks, 2003).

The current emphasis upon removing situational barriers is understandable. For example, it is often easier for non-learners to point to practical barriers such as caring responsibilities than admit to barriers such as fear, and providers often find it easier to respond to these situational barriers (McGivney, 2001). Nevertheless, as the figures cited earlier illustrate, rates of participation fall far short of the Welsh Assembly Government's aspirations for lifelong learning for all (NAW, 2001), suggesting that more needs to be done.

Many of the learners and learning providers the People and Work Unit interviewed during the course of the research for the CUVP emphasised that hard to reach groups face a range of

barriers. In particular, many emphasised the importance of dispositional barriers, such as negative experiences of school, fear and a lack of confidence (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a). This is well documented in the literature (see for example Gorard & Rees, 2003; Crookes, 2001; McGivney, 2001) and suggests that the apparent over-emphasis upon situational barriers may mean that a hard core of non-learners are still not being reached. The following sections of this paper will therefore focus upon the roots of these dispositional barriers and suggest ways in which providers can respond.

### **The roots of dispositional barriers**

The research undertaken by the People and Work Unit (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a; Lloyd-Jones, 2005) indicates that people's decisions about whether to participate in learning, can, as with many decisions in life, be understood in terms of people's expectations of the costs and benefits of their choices. This approach to understanding people's choices is well documented in the economic literature (see for example the edited collection by Coleman & Fararo, 1992). Thus, people choose to learn when the expected benefit, either for themselves (for example enjoyment, financial gain, personal satisfaction) or for others (for example helping our family) is greater than the expected cost. Dispositional barriers then, are rooted in people's calculation that the costs associated with learning will be greater than its value, because, for example, they identified significant costs associated with participation in learning or limited benefits (value).

The research undertaken by the People and Work Unit illustrated that many of the costs associated with learning are not financial in nature. The cost of courses and or travel to providers can be important, but learners in our research identified significant emotional costs associated with their participation in learning (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a). For example, learners with negative experiences of school may have to confront their fear of learning. Again, this is well documented in the literature (see for example Eldred, Ward, Dutton & Snowdon, 2004; James, 2002; McGivney, 1990). In a minority of cases, opportunity costs were also identified. For example, some learners identified the opportunities or activities they had forgone by participating in learning (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a).

An analysis rooted in people's calculations of the costs and benefits of their choices is commonly known as 'rational choice' theory. The appellation 'rational' can be misleading. In particular it does not imply objectively rational decisions, because, for example, people face informational barriers, it is their *expectations* of benefit, or value, and *expectations* of cost, that structure and inform the choices people make about participation in activities such as

learning. The informational barriers which potential learners face mean that these expectations can prove unfounded. For example, learners interviewed in the course of our research for the CUVP were consistently surprised by how much they enjoyed learning, therefore the value of learning was greater and the costs smaller than they had expected (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a).

The research undertaken by the People and Work Unit indicates that people's expectations of the costs and benefits associated with participation in learning are rooted in people's:

- Own experiences of learning (for example of school); and
- The stories about learning they hear from credible sources (for example the stories friends and family tell about their experiences of learning and its value: did they enjoy it? Did it help them find work?) (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a; Lloyd-Jones, 2005).

The informational barriers that potential learners face are well documented in the literature, and are often linked to the attitudes and beliefs of peer groups (Gorard & Rees, 2002; McGivney, 2001). In response, to the implicitly unfounded expectations that potential learners can hold, 'learning brokers' (or for example, 'community champions' or 'change agents') are often promoted as a way of breaking down negative attitudes toward education and learning (LSRC, 2004; McGivney, 2000).

### **The Role Of Institutions**

The research conducted by the People and Work Unit for the CUVP highlighted how institutions can further increase the costs associated with participation in learning, by erecting institutional barriers that can further elevate other barriers (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a). These barriers are well documented in the literature (McGivney, 2001; Hillage, Uden, Aldridge & Eccles, 2000), for example, if people lose benefits by participating in learning, the financial cost of learning increases, which can in turn elevate situational barriers. Unfriendly or intimidating buildings can enhance learner's fear of participation, increasing their emotional costs and elevating dispositional barriers. In contrast, the investment in free courses in the community with childcare helps reduce the financial costs associated with participation in learning. Institutions can also enhance or diminish the value of learning. For example, a local employer, which places a premium upon qualifications, can alter people's expectations of the value of learning (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a; Lloyd-Jones, 2005).

Although CUVP organisations sought to minimise the costs associated with participation in learning, there was no evidence they were able to completely eliminate the costs associated with participation in learning. For example, even when learners we interviewed were, in some cases, unable to identify financial costs, they were still able to identify a range of emotional and opportunity costs associated with their participation in learning. Participation was therefore still dependent upon a calculation that the expected value of participation was greater than the expected costs.

### **Participation, Retention And Progression**

The research undertaken by the People and Work Unit suggests that choices about continuation and progression, are, like choices about participation, structured by expectations of the costs and value of continuation (what might be thought of as retention) and progression. As expectations are informed, in part, by personal experience, the experience of learning that follows a decision to participate is a key factor in shaping choices about whether to continue and complete courses, and whether to progress (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a). In order to ensure that people's experiences are positive, it is important that a learner's first contact with learning is excellent, because this first experience has such a large impact upon not only on that learner's own prospects for continuing and progressing, but also upon the stories they tell and the influence they have upon other people in their communities.

The importance of good quality provision is well documented (see for example, Estyn, 2004) and learners in our research consistently cited factors such as the quality of tuition and the supportiveness of staff as important factors in determining whether they enjoyed learning or not (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a). Nevertheless, there is also evidence that people's skills also shape their experience. For example, those with attitudinal skills such as motivation and self-confidence, communication skills, key skills (Dewson, et al, 2000) and greater self-efficacy<sup>iv</sup> (Bandura, 1997), tend to enjoy courses more and find them easier. Therefore they find that the costs of continuation are lower and its value is higher. This in turn means that they are therefore more likely to continue (McGivney, 1999). Identifying the needs of those who lack these skills and attitudes and providing appropriate support to help them build and develop them is therefore vital.

Choices about progression, which involves a change in the learning experience (for example moving from community based provision to a local college or university), are more reliant on expectations, than choices about continuation. Therefore informational barriers are higher. The research conducted for the CUVP suggests that this step into the unknown may well be

exacerbated by the low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem that many non-learners have (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a).

### **Changing Expectations**

Institutional change and participation in learning are not the only factors that can change peoples' expectations of costs and benefits of participating in learning. The research that the People and Work Unit has undertaken suggests that calculations of the costs and benefits of learning change as peoples lives change (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a; Lloyd-Jones, 2005). For example, young children may increase the costs associated with participation, but as they grow up and ask for help with schoolwork, they can enhance the expected value of learning for a mother wanting to, but unable to help them. In a number of cases, learners we interviewed discussed how they had confronted their fears of learning because, as one put it, 'you'll do anything for your children' (Bowen, Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2005a). Moving in and out of work, and the introduction of new technology (for example being given a digital camera or computer) were also identified by learners as the sort of changes in their life that changed their calculations about the costs and benefits of learning. Expectations can also change as the stories told about learning within a family or community change, learning brokers can play an important role (LSRC, 2004).

### **Conclusions**

This paper has sought to demonstrate that the language and concept of barriers is a useful starting point for thinking about why some people choose to participate in learning, and others choose not to. Nevertheless, an analysis based solely upon barriers, highlights the factors that constrain participation, and we risk losing sight of the reasons why some people would choose to overcome them. Unless we understand the value that people expect from their participation, we will not fully understand why, for example, some people choose to place themselves in what they expect to be deeply uncomfortable situations, overcoming the dispositional barriers that stop many of their peers.

An analysis rooted in barriers may also suggest that it is up to providers to reduce or eliminate barriers, meaning we lose sight of the role of learners in overcoming barriers. Certainly, a situational barrier such as a caring responsibility can be removed through the provision of free childcare, but this is not the only way it can be removed. Someone must ultimately pay the cost of overcoming the barrier, but this need not be the provider, for example, learners may use less formalised childcare arrangements, relying for example upon their children's grandparents. Nevertheless, even when providers want to bear the costs, we found no evidence that they were able to remove all the costs associated with participation. Therefore,

learners will always have to bear some of the cost of learning and are only likely to do so when they expect the value of participating in learning to outweigh the expected costs of that participation. This helps explain why enabling learners to overcome situational barriers such as childcare and poverty, may often be a necessary, but is not always a sufficient condition to realise the aspiration of lifelong learning for all.

Crucially, an analysis of participation that is based upon learners' calculations of costs and benefits cannot be rooted in our own assessments; it must be rooted in potential learners' own expectations of learning (Chambers, 1997). Given the roots of expectations in personal experience, this helps illustrate why for example, people's experiences of school have such a powerful impact upon their choices about participation in learning. As the research suggests that expectations of learning are often unfounded, with learners tending to identify lower costs and greater benefits than non-learners, it may also help explain why past participation in learning is one of the strongest predictors of future participation in learning (Gorard & Rees, 2002). The research also suggests that in disadvantaged communities characterised by low skilled employment, where a relatively low proportions of adults are learning, there are few positive 'success stories' and people's expectations of the cost learning are high and expectations of its value are low (Lloyd-Jones, 2005).

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<sup>i</sup> The Community University of the Valleys Partnership brings together the Higher Education and Voluntary sectors in the West Wales & The Valleys Region and 'aims to widen participation in higher learning by bringing learning closer to home and by making it more relevant to all parts of our communities' [Hhttp://www.cuv.org.uk/about.htm](http://www.cuv.org.uk/about.htm)H [Accessed, 17th May 2005]

<sup>ii</sup> Community Consortia for Education and Training are partnerships established in each of the Twenty Two Local Authority areas in Wales and are designed to bring together people involved in the planning and delivery of post 16 education and training.

<sup>iii</sup> The European Social Fund (ESF) is one of the European Unions' Structural Funds, established to help reduce differences in living standards between the regions of the European Union, by: reducing unemployment; improving and developing skills; investing in industrial or rural areas in decline; and in areas with low economic development.

<sup>iv</sup> Self-belief in their ability to control their lives, the resilience to overcome obstacles and achieve what they want to (Bandura, 1997)