

## References

- 1 Jarvis, Peter (2000). *Learning in later life: An introduction for educators and carers*. London, Kogan Page, ISBN 0 7494 33981.
- 2 Withnall, Alexandra and Percy, Keith (1994). *Good practice in the education and training of older adults*. Studies in Educational Gerontology 1, Aldershot, Arena, ISBN 1 8574 22589.
- 3 NIACE Older and Bolder programme; Withnall, Alex; McGivney, Veronica and Soulsby, Jim (2004). *Older people learning: Myths and realities*. Leicester, NIACE.

## Useful Organisations

- 1 *National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)*, Older and Bolder Initiative, 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE, Tel. 0116 204 4200/1, [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk).
- 2 *Senior Studies Institute*, University of Strathclyde, Graham Hills Building, 40 George Street, Glasgow G1 1QE, Tel. 0141 548 4828, [www.cl.strath.ac.uk/ssi.html](http://www.cl.strath.ac.uk/ssi.html).

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# Learning in Later Life

Your job may involve supporting older adults. This article describes some characteristics of older learners, some assumptions that are made, and suggests ways to maximise learning potential.



Older adults represent an increasing percentage of the Scottish population but are consistently under-represented in all forms of education and training provision. This under-representation cannot be fully explained by older adults' lack of interest in or lack of ability to learn, as there are many examples of older adults' very positive and successful involvement in learning. Older adults represent a very heterogeneous section of the population and generalisations about their learning needs, interests and abilities can be misleading.

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**Older adults' health and fitness varies widely from the super healthy to those with chronic conditions and disabilities. Most people have to cope with a degree of hearing or sight impairment as they age. Often neither of these is serious or causes major problems regarding learning, and simple changes may make major improvements to the learning experience.**

Make allowances for the most typical conditions by:

- producing publicity and learning materials in at least a 10-12 font
- being careful of colour combinations which may be attractive but less easy to read
- minimising background noise in the learning centre
- making sure that the learning centre can be physically accessed by older students with disabilities
- ensuring computer screens can be easily read and that there is access to appropriate keyboards for those with conditions such as arthritis
- encouraging students to move about regularly if they have been sitting at a computer screen for a long time

**Poorer memory is also sometimes quoted as a reason for older people not being effective learners (often this is said by older people themselves).**

Tutors should be sensitive to this and be prepared to:

- explain the difference between short and long term memory and give reassurances about learning potential (if poor memory appears to be a problem or a perceived problem).
- encourage students to devise appropriate learning strategies to compensate for any real or perceived memory lapses.



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**There is some research evidence that indicates that pace of learning for older people is slower than for younger people. The research, however, is not conclusive and there are many differences amongst individuals.**

Tutors should be aware of this and:

- not equate slower learning with less effective learning
- adjust the pace of learning to suit the student

**The current generation of older adults tend to be less IT literate than younger generations. They have not grown up with computers and their experience of them may be limited.**

This is clearly a generalisation, but in any case:

- always check on IT literacy levels
- always offer extra help especially at the beginning of a learning programme
- be aware of how to change the settings on a computer to help those who are visually impaired, eg, making the cursor bigger

**Older adults may not have undertaken any structured learning for a number of years. They may lack confidence, they may not understand current learning jargon e.g. SVQs. They may link formal learning programmes to formal examinations.**

To alleviate these concerns tutors should:

- spend time with the potential learner explaining learning options and what will be involved in terms of time and effort
- stress the benefits that work and life experience bring to learning
- describe any forms of assessment that are offered/required and what, if any, qualification may be achieved
- offer taster sessions to allow older adults to try out new topics and to find out what type and level of learning suits them best
- try to link assessments to the student's 'reality' so that they do not seem alien and threatening

For many older people there is an important social dimension to learning and older adults can be attracted into learning as much for social as for learning reasons

**Motivations for learning amongst older adults vary widely and may significantly affect their choice of study. Traditionally, older adults have primarily been attracted into learning for personal development and enjoyment reasons. Learning programmes for older adults have thus been aimed at those in full-time retirement and have had a strong leisure component. Currently, however, there is a small but growing number of older adults who wish to learn for work-related reasons.**

Therefore, tutors should:

- not take it for granted that older adults will naturally choose non work-related learning topics
- spend time with potential older learners to identify the main learning motivations and thus choose an appropriate learning option
- encourage a 'can-do' ethos

**For many older people there is an important social dimension to learning and older adults can be attracted into learning as much for social as for learning reasons. Peer group support can also help make learning more effective and sustainable.**

Good advice, though not exclusive to this age group, is to::

- provide a welcoming environment with an area where students can socialise
- experiment with group learning

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