ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS IN
THE CONTEXT OF INCORPORATION OF INSTITUTES
OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Final Report

by

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MAY 2000
This document presents the final report prepared by external researchers and as such any views it contains are not necessarily those of the Department for Employment and Learning.
Executive Summary

The purpose of the proposal is to investigate how Institute managers can address communities in order to make long term provision which will meet the needs of adult learners.

A total of 7 Further Education Institutes participated in the study and 33 courses (11 of which were selected for an interview phase), 10 class tutors and 7 Institute managers, formed the sample group from which the data was obtained. The research framework embraced both quantitative and qualitative methodologies which were employed at a number of levels within the project design. The study sought the views of under-represented adult learners, who were defined as ‘adults over 25 years of age who had not accessed learning opportunities since leaving compulsory education’. Student responses were examined in terms of the individual’s attitude to learning, perceived barriers, course experience and suggested improvements. The views of class tutors and Institute managers, interviewed from the selected Institutes, provided information on the involvement of FE Institutes in adult education planning and provision.

Although a diverse student group took part in the study, their educational experiences tended to be quite positive. It was clear from the results that class tutors played a significant part in adult students’ perceptions and experiences of further education, as there were recurrent descriptions of tutors’ style of teaching. This was characterised as being supportive, helpful, guiding and encouraging, where flexible and varied methods of delivery were utilised in the learning environment. The importance of the educator’s approach was highlighted further in the finding that attitudinal preoccupations were dominated by concerns about study skills, time management and fear of failure. Students commented on lengthy absences from education, which meant they might not cope with modern structures of assessment, that were not in use when they attended school. The association between previous school experiences and expectations of FE courses is an important factor for consideration. The results from the current study found that males from non-selective schools reported previous negative school experiences to be the most
significant barrier to returning to education. In this respect, more active learning methods that engage the student in their own learning experience might reduce the likelihood of confirming expectations that further education is dominated by traditional methods. This raises the need for relevant staff training that encourages a person-centred teaching style and support for staff in terms of their continuous professional development.

The social component of learning was also emphasised by participants who believed that fellow students offered encouragement, support and the motivation to continue with the course. The experiences recorded in the current study indicate that learning is not perceived by adult learners as purely instrumental and they mention potential benefits at a number of levels, for both self and others. Similarly, learning outcomes were not measured solely in terms of qualification by adult students; but instead they also cited opportunities to experience accomplishment, build on self-esteem, help one’s family, provide a focus in life and create choices.

An exploration of the potential and perceived barriers to learning revealed that a number of recommendations could be put forward that would help improve adult education provision. These included: more one-to-one tutoring; improved childcare provision; imaginative career guidance; supervised Information Computer Technology training; widened funding opportunities beyond Adult Basic Education and special needs courses, with greater attention being paid to the importance of physical space by having an adult friendly environment.

Special needs provision in FE Institutes was examined, and it emerged that there was a need for greater distribution of services across all Institutes. Courses offered to students with disabilities should be ability levelled to take account of social, cognitive, educational, physical and medical needs. This may serve to reduce way reduce misplacement which was viewed by Institute managers and representatives from outside agencies as having detrimental effects on the student’s perception of their learning ability. In addition, disability awareness training was recommended by representatives responsible for special needs provision, for both staff and other student groups in order for them to have a greater understanding of issues affecting
disabled students. Furthermore, this may help special needs students integrate into a mainstream education environment.

Institute level planning, provision and delivery of adult and community education was explored through the responses of class tutors and Institute managers. There was a consensus among managers that current structures and approaches used to plan adult education courses are not appropriate as they do not allow for the flexible and somewhat unstable nature of adult and community education. The inadequacies of existing methods are evidenced at a number of levels, and, particularly, in respect of monitoring and evaluation procedures, the need for more adaptable financial formulae, performance indicators that can be translated for comparisons with other areas of Institute business and a more flexible decision-making process that can accommodate continuous change within a demand-driven model of adult and community education.

The clearest trend emerging from the data obtained in the study was the importance of community based provision, which offered learning opportunities in a friendly, familiar and convenient location. Community type provision as described by adult students, tutors and managers in this project, was synonymous with an adult friendly environment, which is characterised by a ‘safe’ space that is comfortable, friendly, local and informal, with flexible, motivated and accommodating staff. Adult education offered at a community level could engage learners by introducing education through taster courses, which eventually might lead them down the pathway to mainstream education. It would, at the very least, mean that groups of adults who might otherwise be excluded from education could have the opportunity to engage in a learning culture that has become increasingly lifelong.

* It should be noted that this report is produced by the research team and as such any views expressed in the report are not necessarily those of “the Department”.
Aims and objectives

The aim is:

To examine the different methods of addressing the learning needs of adults in order to improve further education provision.

The objectives are:

To examine the strategic approaches adopted by further education Institute managers in planning for adult learners;

To identify current incidences of successful practice in relation to promoting adult learning in community contexts;

To investigate these contexts, including partnership aspects, in order to develop understanding of how Institute managers may best plan for adult learners through an analysis of the attributes of successful practice and identification of inhibiting factors;

To examine the cultural, ideological and attitudinal factors which shape the responses of adults to further education provision;

To assess the resource implications of planning for adult learners;

To provide recommendations for policy and practice in adult education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions serve as a basis for proposing recommendations in the strategic planning of adult education provision. They are intended to inform current practice by highlighting areas for improvement, which might be translated into initiatives through Institute business plans. The recommendations refer to a number of pertinent issues that were indicated by the results and are presented below:
Adult learners

1.1. Recruitment strategies should be designed to more effectively engage under-represented groups such as:

1.1.1 males from non-selective schools;

1.1.2 adults returning for the first time since leaving compulsory education;

1.1.3 adults affected by the ‘benefits trap’;

1.1.4 potential participants in rural areas; and

1.1.5 adults with a negative perception of education.

1.2 Perceived barriers to learning should be addressed by Institutes, with particular attention being paid to barriers that are logistical in nature. These include:

1.2.1 improving childminding provision and facilities for parents wanting to access learning opportunities in FE;

1.2.2 providing resources, especially electronic resources in ‘safe’, familiar environments, where adults can develop self-confidence among like-minded peers and where supervised support is available;

1.2.3 reducing fees for courses that are above the level of ABE;

1.2.4 planning course fees to take account of potential students affected by the benefits trap;
1.2.5 addressing distinctions made between part-time and full-time students to ensure adults with part-time student status are not discriminated against by having flexible opening hours for libraries and IT suites; and

1.2.6 employing more imaginative career guidance methods so that adult learners have a clear indication of possible progression routes and the potential benefits of selecting particular courses.

1.3 An awareness of the perceived attitudinal barriers faced by adults returning to education should be developed among Institute staff, in order to improve the quality of guidance and support offered to adult students. Barriers to be taken account of include:

1.3.1 the external commitments of adult learners;

1.3.2 perceptions of personal ability;

1.3.3 individuals’ self-confidence; and

1.3.4 time management and study skills.

1.4 The importance of physical space in the educational experience of adult learners should be considered by Institutes when planning the provision and delivery of adult education courses. An adult friendly environment should offer the following:

1.4.1 a friendly environment;

1.4.2 comfortable, homely and informal surroundings;

1.4.3 convenient, familiar locations; and

1.4.4 accommodating, flexible staff.
1.5 Adult learners in this study identified key factors which best defined the most suitable teaching/learning methods for adult students. Based on this, the teaching style most appropriate for adults should be:

1.5.1 supportive;

1.5.2 characterised by active learning methods;

1.5.3 flexible and accommodating;

1.5.4 utilising the life experiences of adults in the learning environment;

1.5.5 employing diverse teaching methods; and

1.5.6 adult orientated, with less emphasis placed on traditional techniques.

1.6 Special needs provision requires an accurate assessment of the learners’ social, cognitive, physical and educational needs to try to ensure that there is an appropriate fit between the individual’s needs and the course selected.

1.7 The distribution of special needs courses should be sought in terms of availability and quality of provision across FE Institutes so that there is an appropriate response to needs identified in a specific area. Particular attention should be paid to educational provision in rural areas for students with disabilities.

1.8 Disability awareness training should take place in Institutes for staff and students to tackle misconceptions associated with disability and to increase awareness about issues affecting special needs students.

1.9 The availability of an adult friendly environment should also be central to the provision of special needs courses, with additional attention paid to specific
Institutional planning

1.10 Adult education provision should be improved to allow for greater access at locally based centres, where this is financially viable.

1.11 Genuine partnerships should be sought and developed between FE Institutes and community groups.

1.12 The importance of physical space and attributes of an adult friendly environment should be central to the development and implementation of adult education programmes. The characteristics of an environment that facilitates learning includes:

1.12.1 comfortable, relaxed surroundings, which are conducive to learning;

1.12.2 respect for adult students;

1.12.3 good pastoral care and support;

1.12.4 locally based provision;

1.12.5 courses which are demand-driven; and

1.12.6 flexible management structures.

1.13 Recruitment strategies should be refined to ensure that under-represented groups have opportunities to engage in learning. Steps to ensure that adult education is more inclusive should include:
improving advertising in areas where under-represented groups are located;

devising more effective marketing techniques to target under-represented groups;

addressing misconceptions associated with learning among these groups;

establishing learning needs and meeting the demands of potential learners;

building genuine relationships with groups and offering locally based provision; and

maintaining and developing links made with under-represented groups currently engaged in adult and community education programmes.

Careers guidance should be developed to incorporate more imaginative techniques that can offer adult learners clear and consistent information on learning outcomes and progression routes.

As adult education courses are predominantly part-time, special funding and fee remission may be available to part-time students, in relation to childcare provision and transport.

The training needs of staff who deliver adult education courses should be addressed to include:

training on more relevant careers guidance that is appropriate to mature students;
1.16.2 counselling skills that can be used to support and guide the learner through difficulties that influence their educational experience at Institute; and

1.16.3 ICT training to ensure that adult students can be offered supervised support when developing ICT skills.

1.17 Institute tutors should be offered support and supervision as a forum to assess and re-assess their own professional practice and needs.

1.18 A more flexible model of learning is required to accommodate the volatility of adult and community education. This model should be developed to include:

1.18.1 a re-assessment within management structures of how learning is defined by adult students, with an increased awareness about the role that accomplishment rather than accreditation plays in the educational experience of adult learners;

1.18.2 a decision-making process that can accommodate the less structured approach needed to develop and initiate adult and community education courses;

1.18.3 more sensitive monitoring and evaluation methods;

1.18.4 more appropriate performance indicators that can translate the success of adult and community courses in terms of traditional indices used for other areas of Institute business; and

1.18.5 financial formulae that are adaptable within unstable and malleable structures which characterise adult and community education.
1.19 The distribution of resources, in particular, electronic resources, should be more consistent and widespread to include outcentres and rural based provision.

1.20 The sharing of good practice should be encouraged across the education and training sectors.

1.21 The introduction of Individual Student Learner Agreements (ISLA’s) should be tailored to accommodate the different needs of adult students and their individual circumstances.

1.22 The quality of accreditation for adult courses should be on a power with the quality for national standards.

1.23 Adult Basic Education should be attended to more closely by FE Institutes, and continuous support should be provided so that; (3.1.7)

1.23.1 Staff delivering Adult Basic Education (ABE) should be appropriately trained and experienced in working with ABE students;

1.23.2 Awareness should be promoted within management structures of the role of ABE in adult and community education in the present climate of lifelong learning;

1.23.3 Strategies should be developed at management level to promote ABE within the community and vehicles for dissemination should be utilised to dispel myths about basic education and promote the role of ABE in education and domestic environments; and

1.23.4 Institutes should be encouraged to accept ABE as a serious part of Institute business, alongside other more traditional courses which have proven financial worth.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the growth in adult learning.

The “silent explosion” (Belanger & Tuijnman, 1997:1) in the demand for adult learning in recent years has led to an inevitable recognition by the government and international agencies that adult education is a central feature in a reflexive society dominated by a knowledge-intensive economy. A number of trends have contributed to the rediscovery that individuals’ knowledge, skills, creativity and initiatives are of primary importance. The pace of information and telecommunications technology has demanded a continued “upskilling” in the labour force (Ainley & Bailey, 1997:109). In more general terms, the need to understand technologies will be “a necessary prerequisite of active participation in civil and democratic society” (National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning: NAGCELL). The changes in people's occupational experiences may also explain the increasing demand placed on adult education, as a greater number of the workforce are on part-time or fixed-term contracts, self-employed or working for small organisations (Kennedy, 1997). At a domestic level, the key role that technology plays in the home and a rise in the amount of leisure or non-work time over the life span, add to this further. It is, therefore, clear from these trends that education is both a social and economic issue which can no longer be considered a “once-for-all” experience (Belanger & Tuijnman, 1997:7). The educational biographies of individuals must, instead, be lifelong.

1.2 Policy developments

Internationally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD: 1996) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO: 1995) have acknowledged the importance of lifelong learning in their official policies on education. Nationally, the publication of the government's Green Paper: The Learning Age (1998), demonstrated their commitment to their proposed vision of a learning society. In the foreword to this document David Blunkett expresses the significance of education and learning as a necessary tool for participation in economic, cultural and social life thus; "as well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make our’s a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship".
A number of government proposals for education and employment are inter-linked and provide the foundations for achieving the ‘Learning Age’. These include Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs), a University for Industry (Ufi), Credit Frameworks, Pathways to Success and Learning Works. It is however, the intention to deconstruct the barriers in further and higher education that has perhaps generated the most interest and apprehension. The aim is to create a further and higher education system which is more inclusive, accessible and co-operative. The key to achieving such a desired goal is to widen, not simply increase participation of those who have been 'socially excluded' and to make Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) a single system which both address the skills agenda and could 'bring people to the starting line' (Baroness Blackstone, 1998: cited in Response to Kennedy Consultation: NIACE).

1.3 Policy developments in Northern Ireland
In response to the Green Paper, DENI and T&EA published in February 1999 a major policy document which sets out a 12 point action plan and related targets for the next 3 years to take Northern Ireland a long way towards a new culture of lifelong learning. This action plan is supported by considerable additional funding. The key aims and objectives of the Lifelong Learning policy include: increasing provision; widening access to education and training; meeting the skills needs of the regional economy; providing information, advice, guidance and support; developing flexible education, training provision and opportunities for progression; and improving quality and raising standards. It is intended that by addressing these themes the breach between the ‘knowledge rich’ and ‘knowledge poor’ might be narrowed by encouraging a habit of continuous learning throughout life. In accordance with the key aims, a range of new initiatives has been put in place to ensure wider access to tertiary education from previously under-represented groups and to promote access to adult basic education.

1.4 Adult literacy in Northern Ireland and the Moser Report (1999)
These initiatives have been developed in the context of increasing concern about the standards of basic literacy and numeracy and the Moser Report (1999) articulates the evidential basis for such concerns and sets out proposals for improvement. The report recommends that priority should be given to addressing the needs of adults below Level I in literacy and below Entry Level in numeracy as this “is the threshold of functional literacy and functional
numeracy” (ibid:4) and is stated to include 22% of adults in Northern Ireland. The levels are drawn from the system of categorisation employed by the Office for National Statistics in the British section of the International Adult Literacy Study (Office for National Statistics 1997). The categories are different from the categories used by the Basic Skills Agency but in comparing the different methodologies, Moser concluded that “some 29% of adults have have low literacy skills …this means that these adults have not yet acquired the literacy skills necessary to achieve a key skills qualification at level 1 or the skills required to be at Level 4 of the National Curriculum” (Moser, 1999: Appendix A).

The findings from Northern Ireland in relation to literacy (NISRA, 1998:7/8) indicated that 24% of the population of working age performed at level 1 on the prose scale (similarly on the document and quantitative scales) and on all three scales there were “no significant differences in the overall distribution of literacy skills between Northern Ireland and Great Britain as a whole”. When compared to other countries it was noted that: “Relative to other countries, Northern Ireland had a more uniform distribution across the skill levels and although the majority of the population were at the middle skill levels, large proportions of the population were also at the lowest and highest levels. In overall terms, the distribution of literacy skills in Northern Ireland was similar to that in other English speaking countries” (ibid: 58/59).

It was noted that “religious affiliation is an important socio-demographic characteristic in Northern Ireland” (ibid:73) and that the government is committed through the New Targetting Social Need (New TSN) agenda to reducing differences by directing resources towards groups and areas in greatest need. The literacy data was, therefore, analysed in terms of the two groups and it was concluded that: “On all three literacy scales, Protestants had higher mean scores than Catholics and Catholics were more likely to perform at the lowest literacy level than Protestants” (ibid:74). In order to further investigate these differences, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency commissioned two research reports. The findings from the reports are complex but suggest that the community differential was largest for the 46-65 age cohort and smallest for the 16-25 age cohort but that differentials have been decreasing over the past decades.
1.5 Educational guidance and support for adults in Northern Ireland and the role of the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA)

In Northern Ireland, DENI/T&EA response to the need for supporting the education of adults was articulated through the Lifelong Learning paper (1998). One proposal from the paper was that a Basic Skills Unit should be set up to support the development of basic education wherever it is delivered, including the workplace. This unit is now in the process of being established by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA). The further education sector is strongly placed, through links with business, to participate in the development of basic skills in a workplace setting. The Moser recommendations (Moser 1999:54) regarding workplace programmes are far reaching including the provision for seed funding for companies, finance for day release for workers at Level 1, and parity funding for such programmes in line with further education funding.

EGSA is tasked with the operation of the Peace Fund Support Unit and is responsible for dealing with applications relating to Measure 3 of the Employment sub-programme, “Administering the Accessibility and Quality of Training, Education and Employment Services”. In the period 1996-1997, a total of 55 projects have been funded, addressing a wide range of adult groups such as persons with disabilities, the unemployed, women, ex-prisoners and vocational trainers (see EGSA, 1999 for full details).

The Moser recommendations for the unemployed state that all New Deal clients should be assessed and should be offered “effective provision to improve their skills if below level 2” and that “training should be provided for all Personal Advisors so that they can identify basic skill needs and encourage the take-up of basic skills where this is necessary” (ibid:54). The T&EA has commenced the New Deal for 25+ and “participants who have been out of the labour market for some time and who are considered likely to benefit from a short programme of literacy and/or numeracy training, can undertake a short programme (up to 2 weeks) of training in these areas” (T&EA: 1999:10). Persons who are considered to need intensive training can, with the agreement of their Personal Advisor, undertake a longer period of training. As part of New Deal, adults (person aged 25 and over) are being offered opportunities "to improve their employability through a period of education and training” (ibid:16) The educational course must be employment-related, last no more than a year and be vocationally relevant (up to NVQ level 3 or higher in exceptional circumstances).
1.6 Accreditation procedures: Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) and the role of the Northern Ireland Open College Network (NIOCN)

Community provision has been recognised as instrumental in securing a large number of adults’ first step on the ladder of learning. There has been a growing emphasis placed by Government on community education courses leading to recognised qualifications. The Northern Ireland Open College Network (NIOCN) has had a central role to play in providing accreditation for courses, especially at the pre-vocational level. The goal of NIOCN is to enable adults to build a portfolio of credits taken from varied learning experiences that will eventually be accredited to a national standard. This pathway to learning may be crucial in engaging under-represented adults who would not traditionally take part in formal learning.

Adult education, particularly at the basic levels, requires flexible modes of accreditation to enable adults to progress through the educational system. The Northern Ireland Open College Network (NIOCN) “was set up as an independent accreditation service in 1995” and “has 134 organisations in membership, including both voluntary and statutory agencies”. The organisation “exists to provide formal and acceptable accreditation for educational and training experiences which would not otherwise have been validated”. Since 1995, “the number of learner registrations has been rising steadily and currently stands at over 5000 per year” with “over half of the registered learners” aged between 26-45 years of age, which is the key age group when attempting to improve the employability of learners. Female learners make up more than 80% of of the total number of registrations in each year (NIOCN, 1999:2). It is further stated that “the highest proportion of course credits is at levels 1 and 2 which emphasises that the Network is meeting the needs of those who are returning to learning after having obtained few or no qualifications while in full time education” (NIOCN, 1998:2). NIOCN is supported through European Social Funds, DENI and the University of Ulster (NIOCN, 1998).

Flexibility in terms of enabling adults to build qualifications through credit accumulation, has been identified by the Standing Advisory Commission for Human Rights (SACHR, 1997:35) as an equality of opportunity issue and SACHR has recommended that a “credit culture” should be created. Accordingly, an accreditation and transfer framework for Northern Ireland
has been set up (NICATS) under which credit will be awarded for the successful completion of modules within a qualification which can subsequently be transferred.

1.7 The role of the Worker’s Education Association (WEA) in adult education

Learning Works (1997) lists nine characteristics of good practice and proposes that “the different elements of good practice need to be seen as a whole and should underpin and drive organisational culture, strategy, structure and practice” (p.84). The ways in which learning is communicated in the new era of individualisation means that providers need to find fresh and innovative methods of teaching and learning. The approaches adopted by educational institutions must, inevitably, address existing barriers which prevent inclusiveness for all learners. An example of such an approach is that of an organisation (the Worker’s Education Association) highlighted by the FEFC for the ‘very good provision for socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged adults’ (FEFC inspection report, 1995). It is stated in Learning Works that the WEA’s approach to adult education is characterised by a number of key strategies. These include: effective partnerships with community-based organisations; a good base in the community; links with statutory bodies (social services, health, education and local government); flexible and imaginative approaches to learning; bringing education services to the learner; learners involvement in the decision-making process related to their learning activities; valuing all types of learning at a variety of levels and the use of technology in new areas.

It is stated by the WEA that the core of their activities is to find ways in which educational disadvantage can be tackled by “reaching out to where people are.....and making learning convenient and welcoming” (WEA UK Annual Review, 1998: WEA). The approach adopted by WEA which is evidenced in the variety of projects they have for the workplace, family and community, provides an example of practice from an adult education provider. The WEA has existed in Northern Ireland since 1910 and, in 1993, “the WEA in Northern Ireland voted to become a limited company” while still maintaining “close co-operative arrangements with the other areas of common interest, particularly those to do with educational policy” (WEA, 1999a). The WEA is funded through student fees and grants from a range of bodies including DENI (Further Education and Community Relations Branches) and the European Union (WEA, 1999b).
In 1998-99, the WEA had 11796 students enrolled, over half in the “Local Learning” category which is designed “to make the idea of a learning culture a reality at community level” (WEA, 1999b:5). The recent Annual Report notes that DENI announced a “compact with the WEA” (ibid) entailing an increase in direct funding “in return for agreed outputs” and it is concluded that the additional resources “are considerable and finally allow the possibility that many of the initiatives which we have pioneered on short-term funding can now be put on a more secure basis”.

The WEA has commented on the fact that male students enrolled on courses are in the minority (22%) and has organised seminars intended to disseminate research and stimulate broader discussion on this issue.

1.8 The New Opportunities Fund (NOF)

The New Opportunities Fund (NOF) was established as a new Lottery Distributor by the National Lottery Act (1998) to “make grants to health, education and environment projects under initiatives to be specified by the Government” (New Opportunities Fund, 1999:2). Community access to lifelong learning is a new initiative which is under development and the NOF is to undertake consultations which are to be completed by the end of 1999. The Northern Ireland New Opportunities Fund will be responsible for the development of lifelong learning initiatives in Northern Ireland and has allocated 4.5% of total funds to Northern Ireland for lifelong learning.

1.9 The development of Access Courses

Adults require opportunities for progression to higher education and a mechanism for kitemarking access programmes has been established within the UK through a process for authorised validation. The University of Ulster is an Authorised Validating Agency (AVA) for ‘Access Courses’ for adults (University of Ulster’s QAA review, 1999). The Agency is a collaborative mechanism of the University and a number of further education Institutes designed to provide quality assurance for Access Courses to higher education. The AVA was first recognised by the Access Courses Recognition Group of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) from 1990/1 and the licence was renewed indefinitely following a joint Higher Education Quality Council (HEDC, now the Quality Assurance Agency) /AVA periodic review in 1993. When
the AVA was first recognised, 186 students were enrolled on five access courses. Currently (1998/99 enrolments) there are 22 Access programmes in operation with 855 part-time enrolments and 102 full time enrolments, giving a total of 957 students. In terms of content, 13 are general Foundation Studies for Mature Students, while 2 are concerned with science and technology. In addition, there are 4 Certificate in IT Studies and Professional Development for Women courses and 3 Certificate in Women’s Studies courses. Altogether 11 Institutes of FE/HE are involved in delivering 18 of the courses. In addition, 2 further courses, on science and technology and IT and Professional Development for women will be operational in 1999-2000 (UU, 1999).

The Queen’s University of Belfast first validated Access Courses in 1989 and in 1992, new regulations were introduced to standardise course structures and the Certificate in Foundation Studies award was introduced. The validation and monitoring of Access Courses is managed by the Entrance Requirements Sub-Committee, which reports to the Council of the University. Faculties provide support and guidance through a team of assessors and course team meetings are convened to review courses. Enrolments have increased from a total of 135 students in 1996-97 to 223 students in 1998-99 (QUB, 1999). Courses are offered in Institutes of further education and theological Institutes. The curriculum range includes Humanities, Social Science, Physical Sciences and Theology.

1.10 Adult Education in Further Education sector

The role which FE will play in delivering a system that offered lifelong learning to all has been documented in the Kennedy report: Learning Works (1997). This paper provides guidelines and makes recommendations on the need for FE to become more inclusive and, thereby, addresses the learning divide. It has been argued that the Further Education sector is “the least understood and celebrated portion of the education world” (NIACE). Ainley and Bailey (1997:121) state however, that it (FE) is a “unique national resource” because “no other sector of education in the country has diversified its offer of courses in order to serve such a wide range of students”. At present, the FE sector in the UK caters for 4 million students, of which 80% are adults. In Northern Ireland, 38% of the total FE student body of 85,669 is aged 26 or over, demonstrating that there is considerable room for growth in the adult sector (DENI, 1998). Despite FE's traditional role of accommodating the needs of students with a variety of vocational and non-vocational courses, there are under-represented
groups which must be encouraged to partake in a learning society where education is a “weapon against poverty” and “a source of social vitality” (Kennedy, 1997:4). She asserted that the needs of under-represented groups should be a significant part of the participation issue and monitoring is required to ensure that the relevant groups are being targeted. As Kennedy (1997:15) has pointed out in her report, a wider cross-section of the community, specifically “those who are not fulfilling their potential or who have underachieved in the past must be drawn into successful learning”. The methods by which these can be obtained are embedded in the recommendations of Learning Works.

The NI lifelong learning strategy acknowledges the significant role that the FE sector has to play in achieving and maintaining learning throughout life. This has been demonstrated by the guarantee of funding for a further 8000 full-time and part-time places by September 2002. In addition, a FE Incentive Fund will be established in order to reward those Institutes which have an increase in the number of adult learners participating on vocational courses in specific skill areas. The T&EA has highlighted 6 important skill areas, which are central to the success of the regional economy:

- computing
- construction
- electronics
- manufacturing engineering
- software engineering
- tourism and hospitality

One of the most vital issues facing the further and higher education system is the need to provide support for the growth of Small to Medium Businesses (SMEs) through staff development in business enterprise. The recent policy document on lifelong learning published by DENI and T&EA has articulated the following key aims: (DENI, 1999:2)

[to] provide a more coherent relationship between education and training provision and the skill needs of the regional economy;
[to] enhance collaboration between education and training providers and the world of business and industry;

This need is clearly illustrated by research studies into manufacturing quality in Northern Ireland. For example, it has been shown that German businesses had four and a half times
more staff qualified to a higher education level (Hitchens, Wagner, & Birnie, 1989), while Roper and Hoffman (1993) found skill differences to be crucial in understanding different levels of productivity. The Northern Ireland Small Business Survey (1999) demonstrates that SMEs are encountering problems in locating skilled/trained employees, as the most recent survey shows that 30% of businesses were experiencing difficulties in this respect. While the figure is reduced from the high point of 36% in 1995, “a larger balance of manufacturing companies reported difficulties regarding ‘lack of skilled/trained employees’ and …these shortages are most likely to be occurring in the science, engineering and computing professions” (Ibid:15). In some ways the Northern Ireland educational system exhibits some of the more problematic aspects of the GB context in terms of underachievement and vocational skill development. It is critically important therefore, to radically review the opportunities for educating SME staff given the rapid pace of change in business (Bessant, 1991) and the pressing demands of global competition: “The choice is stark, either educating, training and developing members of an information-skilled society, empowered to compete in global markets, or providing the workers for an industrial sweatshop” (BT, 1996:6).

Equally there is a need to support agribusinesses in light of the traumatic changes that the farming communities have faced and to address the ways in which agriculture can be improved and diversification assisted. In order to address geographical areas where people may have experienced marginalisation, the Lifelong Learning paper proposes that additional places are being made available on agri-food courses with the purpose of responding to the needs of the agri-food industries and rural communities in Northern Ireland.

Greater flexibility and innovation will be required when recruiting adult students, although the incorporated status of Institutes may offer a framework within which to achieve this. Sargant et al (1997) reported that there was a gap between Northern Ireland and all the other UK regions sampled in the proportion of adults involved in learning. For example, 28% of NI respondents claimed current participation in learning as opposed to 38% in Scotland, 44% in London and 37% in Wales, while NI repondents were less likely to express future intentions to take up learning than any of the other regions. It should be noted though that there is little substantial data or information on adult learning in NI and the region has only participated in one UK-wide survey of adult learning. Furthermore, the assessment of adult learning is extremely complex as definitions of learning may vary and, in practice, different surveys have
had different emphases (e.g., Sargent et al 1997, Chapter Two). Adults may participate in a range of community activities such as church study sessions, union meetings, community discussion groups, political party debates, which they do not perceive as involving learning. A complete assessment of adult learning in Northern Ireland will require studies designed to focus on community definitions of learning and the mapping of community networks and possible learning outcomes which may have been unrecorded in the past.

1.11 Funding
NIACE believes that the link between poverty and educational achievement is as clear as that of poverty and ill-health. There has been acceptance from the government that a structural approach to disadvantage is necessary, with a statement in the White Paper, "Excellence in Schools" that; "To overcome economic and social disadvantage and to make equality of opportunity a reality, we must strive to eliminate, and never excuse, under-achievement in the most deprived parts of the country".

The relationship between under-achievement and disadvantage has been discussed in a study by Gallagher, Shuttleworth and Gray (1997:79) where it is claimed that "low educational attainment appears to be intimately entwined with household-level deprivation and the inter-generational transmission of inequality". Those who are educationally disadvantaged are also likely to be economically disadvantaged. Widening participation must be considered within a framework of available funding. NIACE has also called for the redistribution of funding for post-16 education alongside the promise of new money in order to achieve the extensive objectives proposed by the government. In addition, NIACE has emphasised the drawbacks of short-term funding and believe that “significant reliable funding over a period of time” is necessary to ensure that lifelong inclusive learning is realised. Kennedy (1997:9) argues that “investment in FE is one of the most cost-effective ways of tackling the cumulative effects of learning failure. It is undoubtedly the best way to remedy past deficiencies”. As mentioned in section 1.3 funding is being made available to Institutes in Northern Ireland in order to increase adult student places and encourage learning to take place in specific skill areas. This is an important development in the light of evidence, which indicates that local authority spending in NI is much lower than in England and Wales. Pullinger (1997:58) found that continuing education represented 9.8% of the total educational budget in NI, but accounted for 13% in Wales and 16% in England.
1.12 Partnerships
The way forward will necessarily involve the development of partnerships and collaboration between providers in order to agree ways of best responding to learner needs. The dilemma for FE institutions is to meet the demands of the market as a viable business while maintaining public service values that are central to community cohesion. Kennedy suggests that although this is one of the “wicked” (p.5) problems the education sector faces, some kind of a “synergy” (p.5) must be achieved to find a balance between these two forces. A key recommendation in Learning Works is the enactment of a national network of strategic partnerships, which would co-operate to promote learning throughout society. Partnerships though can be difficult to construct and develop. It is important that they are relevant and effective in delivering education to adult learners. It is, however, possible that partnerships can provide the structure and support for individual schemes which can benefit the wider community (Kennedy, 1997).

DENI and T&EA have strongly recommended that collaboration takes place between Institute providers and other agencies, such as businesses, schools, community and voluntary groups, to ensure that adults can be offered “the best possible opportunities to access education and training” (Lifelong Learning: A New Culture for All: 23). In addition, a Strategic Collaboration Fund will be made available to encourage links between community groups and employers as a way of developing partnerships which best reflect needs at a local level.

It must be acknowledged that funding and widening participation are inter-linked. The recurrent problem of funding is highlighted in Learning Works and a number of relevant strategies are proposed. It should be recognised that “funding is the most important lever for change” (NIACE: Response to Kennedy Consultation).

1.13 FE and the community
It has been argued that FE Institutes have a tradition of responding to community demands (Hall, 1994). Despite this, Learning Works makes a further recommendation that community involvement in FE planning needs to be greater as current community influence on FE provision has been described as “more informal and ad hoc” (Kennedy, 1997:41). Kennedy has added that community voices need to be represented at the planning level so that Institutes
can be made aware of what provisions are required and how FE can adequately respond to those demands; furthermore, widening participation as a route to social cohesion and economic prosperity must embrace both the wider community and the labour market.

1.14 Incorporation

A key issue in the funding debate is Incorporation. Under the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), FE Institutes in England and Wales became corporate from April 1993 and as a result, became responsible for the management of the Institute. Institutes are also required to: supply the goods instrumental to an educational service; set guidelines to pay staff; buy and sell land; obtain commercial contracts and borrow and invest. The movement of FE into free market competition has had varying support. Ainley and Bailey (1997:114) argue that two lessons can be learnt from this experience. The first is seen as a warning to avoid “the predictable outcome of contract funding as a reducing unit of resource leading to closures and mergers”. The other is a choice to be made by government, to apply incorporation to the entire education sector using a “voucherized system of learning credit linked to a learning bank” (ibid: 114).

Incorporation in England, Scotland and Wales provided a model for Northern Ireland's FE sector and its movement towards self-governing corporate status. This took effect from 1 April 1998 under the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. Preparation for this move had been ongoing with Institutes gaining relevant experience under the Local Management of Colleges Schemes. Responsibilities in part for finances, personnel and property/buildings were already being undertaken by Northern Ireland's 17 Institutes. An additional factor in building the foundations for incorporation was the knowledge and expertise of Institutes in using the Computerised Information Management of Further Education in Northern Ireland (CIMFENI) System.

The emergence of incorporation can be traced back to the 1989 Education Reform Order (NI). Institutes gained more responsibilities for their management at this stage. Recommendations made by DENI in 1992 by a Review Group, following the publication of "Signpost for the 90s" and "The Road Ahead" resulted in amalgamations among Northern Ireland's 24 Institutes. There was a reduction to the present seventeen existing Institutes of further and higher education. The decision to go corporate was taken in 1995 after a review of the
administration of education in NI by DENI. Michael Ancram's (the then Education Minister) announcement on 7 September 1995 marked an official proposal to make FE Institutes self-governing. The timetable for implementation was released on 12 June 1997, when the education minister, Tony Worthington MP, signalled the government's legislative intentions on this issue. The 1 April 1998 deadline was backed by a £1.5m budget for implementation and the establishment of a non-statutory consultative body to aid this process.

The minister stated that by introducing Incorporation he "did not intend to promote a market competition, but increased self-governance, in a developing and co-ordinated strategy, within which Institutes will have both the freedom and circumstances to develop particular approaches in response to the overall plan for the sector and the needs of their area" (Tony Worthington, Policy Speech, 12 June 1997: The NI Institutes' Consultative Forum: 8). The self-governing status of Institutes was hailed as an important step in promoting lifelong learning. The unique character of the FE sector which claims to offer an education service regardless of gender, age, religion or ethnic origin, was cited as placing Institutes in a privileged position to promote the government's vision of a new learning age. This culture of lifelong learning is central therefore to the social and economic competitiveness of NI and to the quality of life experienced by its inhabitants.

1.15 Barriers to participation
In order to widen participation, it is imperative that the barriers to participation are recognised and understood. It has been argued that these can be divided into three main types (Cross, 1982).

-Situational barriers refer to the influence of circumstance or factors which effect a person's life (e.g., family structure, economic prosperity, cultural identity).
-Institutional barriers can include the cost of education, programme availability, entrance requirements and pathway availability.
-The third type of barrier is dispositional in nature. This concerns the individuals’ attitudes and values towards learning.

Other research studies have delineated barriers into similar categories. Valentine and Darkenwald (1990) in one of the earliest quantitative studies of non-participation, stated that
there were internal and external deterrents which prevented people from taking adult education classes. Beder (1989:81) in the Iowa study of non-participation found two main “constellations of influences” affecting the participating decision. These were structural and attitudinal. Despite these distinctions, it is important to take account of the interaction between the factors (Belanger & Tuijnman, 1997) and the contribution that each makes individually. Cross (1982:106) argues that dispositional barriers are ‘probably under estimated in adult education survey data’. Belanger and Tuijnman (1997) also note that the biggest obstacle is likely to be attitudinal.

With a growing trend towards a demand-focused approach to education where individual needs and aspirations must be facilitated, the attitudes shaped by a person’s educational experiences must also be understood. It has been found for example, that the strongest predictor of participation in adult learning is early school experiences (Doray & Arrowsmith, 1997). In a meta-analysis of adult-literacy programmes, Wikelund, Reder & Hart-Landsberg (1992:106) noted that “undereducated participants and potential participants tend to perceive and experience the adult education programme…as extensions or continuations of the school programmes in which they have previously experienced failure, loss of self-esteem, and lack of responsiveness to their personal needs and goals”.

In order to encourage under-represented and undereducated groups to engage in lifelong learning, providers and policy-makers must ensure that the learning environment and pathways to learning are not constructed within formal models of schooling. One of the first steps is to determine who the under-represented groups are. They have been defined in the Green Paper as:

- unskilled manual workers
- people without qualifications
- unemployed people
- some groups of women
- refugees and some minority ethnic communities
- older adults
- people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- offenders and ex-offenders
- people with literacy and/or numeracy difficulties
Although there are differences in relation to the needs of under-represented groups, there are similar obstacles, which they all might face. These have been outlined in Learning for the Twenty-First Century (Fryer, 1998); shortage of money for course fees and related expenses; lack of confidence; lack of outreach provision; lack of tutorial support when studying; lack of personal support; courses organised at inappropriate times and in inaccessible places. The introduction of Individual Learning Accounts, the Community Learning fund and contributions from Charitable trusts will hopefully help disadvantaged groups overcome the financial barriers they so often face when trying to participate in learning. These funds will be administered by both NIACE and the Basic Skills Agency. NIACE has also stated that more clarity is needed by the government on how barriers, specific to each group, can be overcome. WEA, for example, have particular projects for target groups that address their needs. These include; Return to Learning programmes for unemployed men and women, Off to Work programme for unemployed people with learning difficulties, Homelink Project offering computer access to people with disabilities and a Women and Health Course.

The strategies used to achieve the motivation and engagement of these groups in a learning society need to change radically and institutions should incorporate inclusive definitions of learning, which reflect the variety and diversity of needs and motivations (Fryer, 1998).

1.16 The role of FE providers

At the Institute level, providers must take account of a number of factors which come into play when addressing participation. NIACE suggest that management groups, staff, governing bodies and elected representatives should review these factors. That means examining and profiling the needs of communities, the strategies used to contact and engage under-represented groups, outreach work, curriculum design, curriculum delivery, teaching methods, the use of new technologies, financial support for learners and student tracking. By assessing all of these, the findings can be included in ‘strategic and curriculum planning, quality assurance, staff development and set and monitor targets to widen participation’ (NIACE). An integral part in achieving this huge task is the delivery of efficient and effective teaching, alongside good management practices. The provider must operate in the role of enabler and teacher as facilitator. The factors listed above refer mostly to institutional considerations. Although these are not the only barriers likely to be encountered by adult
learners, it is important that FE providers shoulder the main responsibility for tackling them (Kennedy, 1997).

1.17 **Educational guidance, information and support**
There is a strong emphasis on finding ways to engage under-represented groups in education so they can partake in lifelong learning as part of a learning society. The educational experience, however, does not stop at the enrolment stage. It is equally important to provide support during, and at the end of a course. Learning Works recommends that a “national entitlement to information, advice and guidance for all should form part of the national strategy for post-16 learning” (p.89). As stated in this document, a possible route to success in meeting the demands of learners more effectively, is to arrive at the ‘best fit’ between those demands and available opportunities. It is very important that this happens, as one of the main barriers to participation is finding the appropriate course to take, once the option of learning has been taken (Tamkin & Hillage, 1998).

The necessity for informed choice is taken for granted in everyday life as it allows citizens to make decisions based on evidence rather than speculation. Choices in education are no different. Citizens need to know what opportunities exist, where they are, how they can be obtained, how much it costs and what practical help is given; e.g., child care provision. These are major questions or concerns that people have and that should be readily answered by education advisors. The information itself, however can only serve as the “building blocks for their [the learner] decision-making” (Kennedy, 1997:91). Good quality and easily accessible guidance and support are needed to steer the person towards making a realistic choice, while recognising their own needs and potential. Central to this is the realisation of the needs of adults who are in danger of social exclusion from the labour market. Clayton (1999) asks how these individuals “can be helped to overcome barriers to access, and what guidance and counselling can usefully do to prepare users to move into education, training and employment” (p,305).

In response to the recognition of the importance of guidance and advice, the government has launched a free national telephone information service called Learning Direct. Advice is offered on what learning packages are available to suit individual needs (FE for the New Millennium, DfEE).
The response from DENI and T&EA articulated in their Lifelong learning document will be to create a “regional network of educational guidance centres across NI linking into the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) and with other social partners” (p.40). This is intended to “widen access to education and learning opportunities and to help people to choose the learning that is most appropriate to their needs” (p.40). It is crucial though, not to overestimate the self-confidence and motivation of potential learners, who must possess awareness about what educational guidance is available and the determination to explore ideas they may have.

If information, guidance and advice is to be an integral part of promoting lifelong learning, then imaginative methods need to be employed to bring advice to the community in a non-threatening and open manner. Although enrolment of potential learners is a necessary step towards an inclusive learning society, guidance and counselling must be offered throughout the course as continued support may serve as a method of maintaining motivation and preventing student withdrawal.
2. **Methodology**

The aim of the research project is to examine different modes of addressing the learning needs of adults in order to improve further education provision. For the purpose of the study, the term "adult learners" is interpreted as referring to the post-25 age group.

The sample for the project consisted of 300 adult learners, 10 class tutors and 7 Institute managers, who were selected across the different Institutes of further and higher education. In addition, 5 Education and Library Board Officers who had a past responsibility for adult education were also selected to participate in the project.

Further clarification of the sample of adult learners to be included in the research, was provided by the project steering group. A number of different course types and stratifying variables, such as gender or employment status were proposed. The factors determining selection are outlined below, with the corresponding courses listed alongside. The case studies part of the methodology focused on courses drawn from the 7 participating Institutes, which referred to 10 courses that were involved in a further interview phase. The table below gives information on the courses selected for the interview phase and the stratifying variables on which selection was based.
### Table 1:
Case study courses and variables which determined course selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of course</th>
<th>Stratifying variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NVQ III childcare</td>
<td>Vocational/partnership/rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A vocational course for persons working in childcare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh start for women</td>
<td>Women/urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory course for women involving computers, maths and English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Opportunities</td>
<td>Unemployed/foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation course based on maths, English, social studies and history</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents as co-educators</td>
<td>Women/Community/urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting parents to assist children with homework</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science Access Course</td>
<td>Access/partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access Course with physics, chemistry and biology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Basic Education</td>
<td>Basic education/men/unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic English comprehension and vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE social and environmental studies</td>
<td>Employed/Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying lifeskills to understanding social and environmental issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers and IT</td>
<td>Employed/Information technology/partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSA CLAIT course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSA National Skills Profile</td>
<td>Special needs/partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifeskills for special needs students with IT and English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities &amp; Social Science Access Course</td>
<td>Community/rural/partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access Course in psychology, sociology and history</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Accessing the Community</td>
<td>Special needs and Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifeskills orientated towards employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* After the initial phase a further special needs course was selected.

The study sought the views of adults who were returning to learning for the first time, since leaving compulsory education. Despite efforts made to secure a sample of first time returners, a large number 181 (60.3%) had attended one or more courses previously. As a result, a sample of 119 (39.6%) first time returners was surveyed.
The research was designed to assess the needs of adult learners by examining issues that arose at the student, tutor and manager level, which could be translated into strategic recommendations for improved provision in adult education.

As a result, a research framework was designed to take account of the multiple objectives outlined in the project and comprised of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The methodologies used are listed below in a summary table, alongside the respective sample size for each group:

**Table 2:**

Summary table showing methodologies used and the corresponding sample size for each group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>300 adult learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews (phase 1)</td>
<td>60 students randomly selected from participating courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 class tutors from 10 case studies selected across the different Institutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Institute managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Education and Library Board Officers who had a past responsibility for adult education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews (phase 2)</td>
<td>Interviews with special needs students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Institute managers took part in follow-up interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 special needs careers advisor from T&amp;EA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 liaison officer who acts as a link worker between FE Institutes and day centres for adults with special needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.1  Procedure

2.1.1  Questionnaire administration
The questionnaire provided biographical information about adult learners who participated in the study and examined the attitudinal factors and personal attributes that may have shaped their learning experience. A total of 300 adult students received the questionnaire. Initially, 10 courses were chosen and nominated as case studies. In addition, a further 23 courses were selected in order to reach the administration target of 300 questionnaires. Selection for the additional courses followed the criteria presented in Table 1. A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix 1 of this report.

2.1.2  Interviews

2.1.2.1  Students
The 10 case studies represented the sampling frame from which 60 students were selected for interview. It became necessary, though, at a second interview stage to select another special needs course in order to have a more accurate representation of the views of this particular student group. As a result, the final number of adult students interviewed totalled to 64 (27 men and 37 women) from 11 courses. The protocol for adult learners (excluding the 2 special needs courses) consisted of 7 questions, which drew upon key issues raised in the questionnaire. In this respect, the aim of the interview phase was to provide more in depth information about factors influencing students’ educational experience in further education. A different interview protocol was developed for adult students on the special needs courses. The purpose of this was to explore issues that were specific to adult learners with disabilities in order to have a clearer indication of their experiences at FE courses in a mainstream education environment. The protocols for each of the different interviews are presented in the Appendix 2 of this report.
2.1.2.2  Class tutors
The class tutors from each of the case study courses were interviewed about their experience of teaching adult learners in FE Institutes. Questions were also asked about training requirements specific to adult education provision. The questions aimed to uncover the key constituents of a learning environment that is conducive to adults.

2.1.2.3  Institute managers
A detailed protocol was given to a manager or head of school from each of the Institutes. The interview covered a wide range of issues including; adult education provision; guidance and support; staff development issues; strategic planning and IT. The interviews with Institute managers aimed to examine the strategic approaches employed by Institutes when planning provision for adult learning.

2.1.2.4  Education and Library Board Officers
The interviews with ELB officers were designed to provide a historical overview of strategic developments that paved the way for the incorporation of Institutes and planning for adult learners in the context of independence. An officer from each of the five Boards who had a past responsibility or involvement for adult education provision was interviewed.

2.1.2.5 Special needs provision
During the course of the project it became clear that additional information needed to be obtained in relation to students with special needs. In consultation with the steering group, a special needs careers advisor from the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA) was interviewed to assess guidance and support offered to students with disabilities, specifically what career is available, the degree to which courses offer occupational progression and how courses encourage personal and social development. In addition, a representative from social services who acts as a liaison officer between day centres and FE Institutes was consulted.
2.1.2.6  Follow-up interviews with managers

The steering group for the project felt it would be beneficial to get feedback from Institute managers about comments adult learners made about their educational experience. Consequently, 4 Institute managers from the original sample of 7 were presented with a preliminary summary of comments taken from interview data for the 64 students and their responses were sought.
3. Results

The results section of this report has been structured to enable the reader to focus on the salient topics arising from the research project. It became clear in the analysis of patterns emerging from the information obtained that the research was dominated by three main issues. These were:

- Characteristics of adult learners
- Institute level provision and planning
- Community considerations

Analysis and discussion of the information arising out of the qualitative and quantitative methods used in the study has been presented under the headings listed above.

3.1 Characteristics of adult learners

The analysis of data has been organized under the sub-sections outlined below:

- Demographic factors
- Attitudinal issues
- Perceived Barriers
- Course experience
- Areas for improvement

3.1.1 Demographic and biographical information

3.1.1.1 Gender and marital status:

The background information on adults who took part in the study revealed that the majority of participants were female; 67.7% (203), while 32.3% (97) were male (Figure 1). A large section of the sample were either married or cohabiting; 61% (183). This referred to the majority of females; 67% (136), whereas there was a more even spread across the single; 44.3% (43) and married/cohabiting; 48.5% (47) categories for males (Figure 2).
3.1.1.2 Employment status:

Information on employment status indicated that many of the adults were in employment; 42.3% (127) (Figure 3). These results showed higher male participation in employment; 60.8% (59), compared to women; 33.5% (68). The category ‘Looking after family/home’ was selected by 36% (73) of women. It was found that 65.4% of adults in the employed group, worked full-time, whereas, 29.9% were in part-time employment. It should be noted that 4.7% did not answer this question. In addition, 86.4% of employed males had full-time jobs, with 6.8% working part-time. Female employment status revealed that 47.1% of women in this group were employed with 50% working part-time hours.
Additional analysis indicated that 25.7% (77) of the total sample of adults taking part in the project were married/cohabiting and in employment. Other categories with high numbers of responses included: single and employed; 14.7% (44), married and unemployed; 12% (36), married and looking after home/family; 19.3% (58).

Figure 3: Pie chart showing employment status of adult students who participated in the study.

The demographic data on employment status revealed that a large number of adult learners were unemployed women. This might highlight the importance of having learning goals, whether for career purposes or as part of a future educational plan.

3.1.1.3 Dependent children:
The number of adults who said they had dependent children [i.e. children under 16 and those aged 16-18 in full-time education], represented 59% (177) of the total sample. This response was made by 40.2% (39) of males and 68% (38) of females. It was found that adults most commonly reported having 2 dependants. Additional analysis highlighted that 38.4% (68) of adults with dependants said they were looking after home or family. It was shown that 66 of the 68 adults were women. Similarly, women represented the overwhelming majority of parents who were unemployed. They made up 27 of a group of 34 adults who stated they were not in employment.
3.1.1.4  **Lone parents:**

A question about lone parents revealed that nearly a quarter of adults identified as having dependent children were lone parents. This referred to 22.6% (40) of the parent group that consisted of 177 adults. Further analysis disclosed that 90% (36) of the lone parents group were female. It is interesting to note that 47.5% (19) in the lone parent group reported that they were divorced/separated. In addition, 30% (12) stated they were single, 12.5% (5) were widowed and 10% (4) indicated that they were married/cohabiting. The employment status of adults in the lone parent group showed that 42.5% (17) were looking after home or family as an exclusive occupation. Furthermore, 20% (8) said they were employed, while 27.5% (11) of lone parents stated they were unemployed. Most lone parents, therefore, (70%) were not in waged employment.

3.1.1.5  **Educational background and academic attainment:**

Participants were asked at what age they left full-time education. The mean for the sample was found to be 16.7, with the median at 16 years. The youngest age at which one of the adults in the study left school was reported as 11. At the other end of the scale, 2 participants stated that they had not left full-time education until they were 25 years of age.

As expected, adults who said they left school at primary level, did so under the age of 15. It was found that 4 men and 6 women did not continue with their education beyond primary level. Interestingly, one woman who attended grammar school said she had left school at the age of 11, while 2 other women reported leaving selective education when they were 15 years of age. No males stated that they had stopped their full-time selective education before the age of 16. In comparison, 5 men reported leaving secondary school at 14 years of age and a further 11 males left secondary education at aged 15. Similarly, a higher number of women who received their education in non-selective schools, reported leaving full-time education before they were 16. It was found that 2 females from this educational background did not continue beyond the age of 14, while 19 women in this group left school at aged 15. **In addition, no male who attended secondary school continued his education beyond 18.** It was revealed though, that a number of their female counterparts did seek further education after they were 18 years of age. The data shows that 6 women in this category left full-time education when they were 19, 1 female participant stated she was 20 when her full-time education was completed and 2 other females in this category finished their education at 21.
years of age. A similar pattern of results emerged for women who reported receiving an education at selective schools: 6 continued their education until they were 19, 1 said she was 20 and 2 of the females reported being 21. Another 3 women in this group stayed in full-time education until they were either 22 or 23 years of age. The pattern of progression for women is different from the male pattern: women from selective and non-selective schools have similar patterns of progression in terms of the additional years spent in further education.

It should be noted though, that 72.3% (217) of the total sample stated that they had attended non-selective schools.

It was discovered that 60.3% (181) of the sample had attended a course previously. Furthermore, 70.2% of this group attended secondary level education, 26% went to grammar school and 3.8% left full-time education at primary level. It emerged that 54.8% of men and 60.4% of women who attended secondary school reported that they had been on a course prior to the present one. In comparison, 85% of males and 56.6% of females who received a selective education had attended another course prior to taking the one they were on. All the men who left school at primary level and half the number of women in this group attended previous courses. There were a wide variety of courses that were recorded by students as having attended prior to their current course, alongside the dates and locations of these courses. Some examples are provided in the list below:

Course type
RSA Clait Certificate
GCSE English
RSA Certificate in Information Technology
Certificate in Community Care
City & Guilds (unspecified content)
Word Processing levels I + II
NVQ in administration, level 2
City and Guilds Beauty and Hairdressing
City and Guilds Electronics
City and Guilds Catering
Theatre studies

It is clear from the list of courses that some adults in this sample tended to be involved in certified courses. It would be reasonable to assume that acceptance on to these courses would require a certain level of educational attainment, in order to benefit from taking the class. This might raise the question about other adults who do not have the level of education required to reap any benefit from doing a course and who, instead would require courses at a more basic level.

3.1.1.6 Fee payment

The majority of adults in this project paid fees for their attendance on a course. The amount paid ranged quite widely, from as little as £1.00 to as much as £450.00. It also emerged that the majority of people identified in the different employment status categories paid fees for their course. It should be noted that 82% of adults who were unemployed paid something towards their fees. Similarly, 85.5% of participants who stated they were looking after family or home contributed to part or paid all of their fees. A very small percentage of employed adults in the project reported that their employer paid for some or all of the fees for the course they were attending. This represented 22.1% of the employed group, with an equal representation of men and women. The amount that employers contributed also varied widely from £75.00 to £500. Some respondents did not state the exact figure, which was given by their employer, but may have reported that the majority or full fees were paid.
3.1.2  **Attitudinal information**

3.1.2.1  **Guidance and support**

Adult students were asked about their attendance at an Institute interview with a member of staff prior to gaining entry onto their chosen course. It was found that 54.3% (163) of the sample did meet with an Institute tutor before starting their desired course, while 44.7% (134) stated they did not participate in an interview at the Institute. It should be noted that no distinction was made between a compulsory interview as part of the Institute selection procedure for a course, or a meeting that served as a means of personal self-selection onto a course.

Participants were also asked about tutor feedback and support. A large percentage; 83.3% (250) indicated that they received good feedback and support. This response was given by 82.5% (80) of males and 83.7% (170) of females in the total sample. Some of the comments made by adult students in response to this question are presented below.

3.1.2.2  **Examples of comments**

“They were very helpful and encouraging with time and patience and were very supportive”.

“They said that I could do the exams and encouraged me because other single parents had done the course and went on to full-time employment”.

“Everything was explained to me before hand in detail. There was lots of support and advice during the year”.

“This was disappointing”.

“I was given advice about the course and what it would entail”.

A question that asked about human and physical resources provided further information on the guidance role of class tutors. Adult students were asked about what kinds of support they received from tutors that assisted their study. A positive pattern of responses emerged for this question. **It was clear that tutors played a pivotal role in the educational experience of adults by providing help and encouragement, reassurance and direction, constant support and feedback, alongside being understanding and listening to problems.** These words and phrases were repeatedly used to describe what adults found most helpful about the support they received from tutors. The comments that emerged from the questionnaires
highlighted two main avenues of support provided by tutors. The first was in the form of more educationally oriented support and advice, which deals with course content and syllabus requirements. Examples of comments made by students in this respect include: “Excellent support and they [tutors] breakdown the questions so they are easily understood”, “The tutor is more than willing to explain everything, very helpful, very encouraging”, “Suggested reading and gave subject guidance”.

The second avenue of support could be viewed as addressing the personal and social needs of the student. Participants continually referred to the encouragement, reassurance and listening skills of tutors, which in turn appeared to have a positive impact on their self-esteem, confidence and belief in their own ability. Some of the statements made by students in the questionnaire about the tutors role include: “The power to believe in myself”, “Encouragement that made me believe in my own abilities”, “Very helpful and sympathetic, patient and gave advice”, “Excellent well informed support which is helping to increase my confidence”.

A similar question asked about what kinds of support peers had offered that had assisted the adults’ learning on the course. Participants’ responses to this question highlighted the positive impact that peers can have on the educational experience of their fellow students. It was clear that a collegiate spirit among students helped maintain the motivation to continue with the course and build confidence through shared support and encouragement. Examples of the comments made by adult students in response to this question include: “Constantly urging me to continue the course and have confidence in myself”, “Support is very important from peers and friends, to compare work, to get guidance and support from each other”, “As a class we encourage each other, point out mistakes and make friendships”, “We give each other moral support”.

3.1.2.3 Anticipated benefits of participation on a course
Adults’ expectations and anticipated benefits of taking the course were also examined in the questionnaire. A large number of items were proposed as being potentially beneficial. The data has been represented graphically in Figures 4 and 5 in Appendix 3. It was revealed that the item ‘It will improve my knowledge base’ was the most important benefit students expected to gain from doing the course. Other items which were rated very highly included:
‘It will provide access to a qualification’ and ‘It will allow me to acquire new skills’. The least important item as rated by adults in this study was ‘Improvements in effectiveness at home’. It should be noted though, that a higher percentage of both single and married/cohabiting women considered the last item more important than men in either of the corresponding categories. Further analysis also revealed slight differences between the responses made by first time returners and those who had attended courses previously. The table below has ranked the responses of these two groups, based on what was found to be the most important items.

Table 3: Table showing ranked responses for first time returners and adults with previous attendance at Institute, in terms of anticipated benefits of taking a course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st time returners</th>
<th>Adults with previous attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It will provide access to a qualification</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will refresh my knowledge and skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help improve my job prospects</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will allow me to acquire new skills</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will encourage me to do other courses</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will improve my confidence</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will be able to learn about new technologies</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me communicate more effectively</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help my help my children</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will improve my knowledge base</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me form friendships</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me to help others</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvements in effectiveness at work</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me to help my community</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvements in effectiveness at home</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most notable difference between these two groups was in their rating for the item ‘It will improve my knowledge base’. The adults who had not attended courses prior to the one they
were presently on, rated this item as 10th in order of importance. In comparison, participants who had been on other courses attached most importance to this item. The most important benefit that adults returning for the first time expected to gain from the course was ‘It will provide me with access to a qualification’. Knowledge acquisition was viewed, therefore, as a significant benefit to adults with prior attendance, while, refreshing knowledge and skills was rated more highly by 1st time returners. Both groups agreed that ‘Improvements in effectiveness at home’ was not an important benefit they expected to gain from doing the course.

3.1.3 Perceived barriers to participation

The results for this question have been illustrated in Figures 6 and 7 in Appendix 3. The item ‘No child minder’ was rated most frequently by adults, as the most significant barrier. It should be pointed out though, that 41% of women and only 2% of men rated this barrier as very important. As illustrated in the table below, men ranked ‘No child minder’ last out of the 15 items, whereas women rated this as the number one barrier. In addition, women who were identified as looking after family/home gave the highest percentage of responses for this item in the female group, 19.7%. A further 11.8% of employed and 7.3% of unemployed women perceived ‘No child minder’ as a significant barrier. The item described as ‘Too many other commitments’ ranked as the second most important barrier reported by adult learners. A small gender difference was also observed for this item, with 27% of women and 19.6% of men who rated this as a considerable barrier. Further explorations of the data indicated that employed adults, 52%, found ‘Too many other commitments’ as the greatest barrier, which may have prevented them attending courses previously. This referred to 18% of employed females and 12.5% of employed males. Gender differences between respondents’ ratings of the items in terms of their importance as barriers, are outlined in the table below:
Table 4: Table showing the ranked responses for male and female respondents for each item describing a barrier

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male respondents</th>
<th>Female respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too many other commitments</td>
<td>1  No childminder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees were too expensive</td>
<td>2  Course scheduling was inconvenient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much other work</td>
<td>3  Too many other commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course scheduling was inconvenient</td>
<td>4  Fees were too expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous negative school experiences</td>
<td>5  Too much other work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course location was inconvenient</td>
<td>6  Fear of inability to cope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of inability to cope</td>
<td>7  Course location was inconvenient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning materials were too expensive</td>
<td>8  Learning materials were too expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel difficulties were too great</td>
<td>9  Previous negative school experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowhere to study outside of course</td>
<td>9  Travel difficulties were too great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition from peers</td>
<td>11 No childminder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrewarding experiences at other Institute courses</td>
<td>11  Nowhere to study outside of course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition from partner/family</td>
<td>13 Opposition from partner/family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not wish to be seen entering Institute</td>
<td>14  Did not wish to be seen entering Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No childminder</td>
<td>15  Opposition from peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The responses of 1st time returners and adults who had attended courses previously were compared for this question. ‘No child minder’ was rated most important by learners with previous attendance at Institute, while ‘Too many other commitments’ was awarded the highest number of ratings by adults returning for the first time. This result might be explained by the fact that there were a higher percentage of women with children who had attended courses previously, 60.8%, than female 1st time returners with children, 39.2%. Further explorations also revealed a great deal of variation between the responses of male and female learners, who had attended Institute courses before and those who had not. **The number one barrier rated as most important by male 1st time returners was ‘Previous negative school experiences’**. Additional analysis highlighted that 93% of respondents who rated this item as a significant barrier had attended non-selective schools. In comparison, men with previous attendance reported that ‘Too many other commitments’ might have prevented
them from attending Institute courses previously. Interestingly, male learners from both groups rated ‘No child minder’ as least important.

### Table 5: Table showing ranked responses of first time returners and adult with previous attendance for items listed as possible barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1st time returners</th>
<th>Adults with previous attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too many other commitments</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 No childminder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course scheduling was inconvenient</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 Fees were too expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much other work</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 Course scheduling was inconvenient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No childminder</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 Fear of inability to cope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning materials too expensive</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5 Course location was inconvenient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of inability to cope</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 Too many other commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees were too expensive</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7 Too much other work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course location was inconvenient</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8 Learning materials too expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous negative school experiences</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9 Travel difficulties were too great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel difficulties were too great</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10 Previous negative school experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowhere to study outside of course</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11 Nowhere to study outside of course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrewarding experiences at other Institute courses</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12 Unrewarding experiences at other Institute courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not wish to be seen entering Institute</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13 Opposition from peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition from partner/family</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14 Did not wish to be seen entering Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition from peers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15 Opposition from partner/family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.1.4 Course Experience

#### 3.1.4.1 The educational experience of adult learners on their chosen course

The results for this question are presented in Figure 8 in Appendix 3. Adult learners were asked to rate their experience of the course to date, against items listed in the questionnaire. The participants rated ‘The tutors are helpful’ the highest among the items, with ‘Much guidance and support is given’ and ‘There is enough personal tuition’ rated second and third respectively. Reversed scoring was used for three of the items. Taking this into account, ‘Course content was too advanced’ received more ‘Strongly Disagree’ ratings than ‘The classes are too long’ and ‘There are too many in the class’.
Analysis by gender found very close similarities in how adult students evaluated their experience on the course they were attending. Both male and female learners rated the top three items mentioned above as the items most likely to have described their experiences on the course to date. The pattern of responses from 1st time returners and adults with previous attendance also yielded similar ratings. It was found that ‘The tutors are helpful’, ‘Much guidance and support is given’ and ‘There is enough personal tuition’ were the most positively evaluated items rated by both these groups.

Respondents’ perception of course suitability was also examined in the questionnaire. It was revealed that the majority of adult learners in the study (94.3%) believed they had selected the correct course for them. A very small number did not think they had chosen the most suitable course and gave their reasons as; ‘Too much work’, ‘Given the wrong information by the Institute’, ‘The course I really wanted was not provided’ and ‘I didn’t fully appreciate the work involved in doing the course’.

Despite the personal nature of the responses, there were recurring explanations or descriptions used by adult learners, as to why they felt they had selected the best course for them. These are outlined below, with examples of comments recorded for that question.

3.1.4.2 Recurrent terms used to describe why the learners felt they had chosen the most appropriate course:
- Provides a qualification/access to a qualification
- Relates to my job
- Enjoy the subjects covered
- Help me get a job
- Building confidence
- Provides access to university
- Improve knowledge and develop skills
3.1.4.3 Examples of comments made by adults about why they felt they had selected the right course:

“The course gives me a qualification to complement my work experience”.

“Computers are the way forward in the future and I will be able to teach my son as he gets older”.

“This is my first time to do a course and I really enjoy it. I have learned so much and it has helped me in family and everyday life”.

“It has been so long since I have been at school, I enjoy the course and feel that I am gaining confidence”.

“It will help me go on to university”.

“It has broadened my outlook on many subjects and has inspired me to do other subjects”.

“Because it combined different subjects at one time…it is a combined qualification”.
3.1.5 *Analysis of student interview data*

Interviews were used to explore the pertinent issues arising from the questionnaire data in more depth and to obtain any further information about the dispositional, attitudinal and institutional factors that were shaping the learning experience of adult students at FE Institutes. The ten case studies served as a framework to select learners for interview. As the target sample for the interviews was 60, approximately 6 students were randomly chosen from each of the courses. The characteristics of the interview sample are summarised in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study</th>
<th>Male frequency</th>
<th>Female frequency</th>
<th>Total frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NVQ III childcare</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh start for women</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New opportunities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents as co-educators</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science Access</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABE</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social &amp; environmental studies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers &amp; IT</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Skills Profile</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation course</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Accessing the community</em></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
<td><strong>37</strong></td>
<td><strong>64</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The steering group recommended that a course offered to students with learning difficulties was selected in addition to the ten case studies in order to have a greater representation of adults from this student group.

A number of questions were posed to a selected number of adult learners, in order to explore reasons for: their return to education; the anticipated benefits of participation; their evaluation of the course and to obtain any recommendations students might suggest that would improve the educational experience of attending a further education course.
An analysis and discussion of the interview data is presented for 52 adults from 9 of the case study courses. Interview results for the two remaining courses; ‘National Skills Profile’ and ‘Accessing the Community’ have been presented separately in the section on Special Needs Provision. This is due to a different interview schedule being used for the special needs courses.

3.1.5.1 Why did you decide to return to education?

A number of different reasons were given by adult learners as to why they returned to study. One of the most prevalent reasons stated by respondents was to ‘Improve job prospects’. This was reported by ten of the adult students. A similar number said they ‘Wanted to do something to better themselves’. The desire to get involved in education for this reason was highlighted in a comment made by one lady in the study. She said: “I have enjoyed my time in our community centre participating in this course. This has motivated me into doing more things for myself”. This referred mainly to adult students who had the opportunity to return to education because their family was grown up. In comparison, the desire to do something for oneself was also matched by a wish expressed by some learners to help one’s children and to share in their children’s educational experience. One female participant said her main motivation to return to education was: “To help my children and get a better understanding of their schoolwork”. Adult students who were attending computer or IT type courses often made reference to their desire to learn more about computers and technology so they could understand the schoolwork their children were doing and to be able to help when necessary. For example, a learner on one of the courses selected in the study stated: “I have no computer knowledge and I know that this is the way forward. It will enable me to help my kids when they are working on the computer”. It would appear that there is an awareness about one’s own educational needs, which, for some learners, is reflected in the importance attached to the educational success of their children.

It was apparent during analysis of the interview data that previous school experiences and the fact that some adults obtained few, if any formal qualifications had a significant impact on their decision to take a course. There was a shared feeling of having missed out on the benefits offered to them during compulsory education. One male respondent said he returned to the Institute: “To get the education I missed 10 years ago”. The current value attached to learning by some of the adult students was highlighted in the response of
one women, who reported: “I did not like school and attended a training school at an early age, but I came to realise the importance of education”. This ‘second chance’ would seem to offer adult learners returning to education, the opportunity to benefit not only from the academic rewards of formal qualifications, but social and personal development arising from the learning experience. **This is reflected in a number of responses, which referred to the multiple benefits of improving self-confidence, obtaining qualifications, having better job prospects and helping one’s family.** In this respect, it would appear that adult learners in this study do not perceive learning solely in terms of knowledge and skill acquisition.

3.1.5.2 *Why did you decide to select this course?*

Participants’ replies to this question indicated two very different patterns of response. The first related to adults whose goal was to continue to higher education and enrol on a degree course. The second referred to students who were involved in courses that offered the opportunity to learn, or moreover, ‘brush up on’ the basics in English and Math. In the majority of cases, computer knowledge and IT skills were also included when adults referred to the need to acquire a basic level of education. One student on the ‘Fresh Start for Women’ course explained the benefits of starting with core subjects, such as English, math and computers: “This course is an ideal stepping stone at a basic level”. It was interesting to note that some adult learners who cited attending university as their reason for selecting a course, had not been to the Institute previously. Despite this they chose a course that would provide a route to taking a degree course. In contrast to this, other adults who had not experienced Further Education previously, selected a course with less direct pathways, which aimed to provide the basics for return to study. **The nature of the course itself may in part dictate the likely response of participants of their intentions of enrolling on a degree course, e.g., Access or Foundation type courses. This does not, however, explain the adult learners’ initial reasons for selecting a particular course.**

Convenience of location was a factor cited quite frequently by students as something that influenced their decision to take a course. **The importance of a community setting and the benefits of familiar surroundings appear to impact on an adult’s decision to enrol on a course.** Participants often stated that they attended a class because it was offered in a centre near to where they lived. One man said: “The course is local, in a homely environment and it leads onto doing a degree”. References were also made to a community education worker or
community liaison officer who informed local people as to what was on offer in their local centres or where they could find classes in their community that interested them. Community spirit or ethos was reflected in the responses of some adult learners who said they joined the course based on the recommendations of someone in their community. The response of one male participant highlighted the significance of locally based provision: “Adult learning centres are of extreme importance in any community”.

Other reasons for selecting a particular course were given as: ‘a requirement for work’, ‘catching up on learning missed at school’, and finally, ‘build self-confidence and do something for oneself’. It was also evident that there was a degree of overlap between the responses of individuals to questions one and two in this study.

3.1.5.3 Were there any key issues that arose before joining the course? If so, what were they?

The results indicated that issues which affected adult learners in terms of joining a course were in two forms. These could be divided between attitudinal preoccupations and practical concerns. A large number of references were made to lack of confidence and apprehensions about ability to cope with doing work associated with the course. It was found though, that upon joining the class and meeting other students who had similar worries and expectations, apprehensions encountered prior to attendance were often dispelled. For example, one lady said; “I had serious anxieties about knowing if I should return but the class shared this experience”. Study skills and organising one’s time appeared to cause considerable concern for respondents. Adult learners in this study emphasised the difficulties associated with the actual mechanisms of studying, which they were never familiar with or had not used in a long time. This referred to essay writing, structuring one’s time to get coursework finished and learning how to study. The problems that adult students seem to encounter with the process of studying might only be compacted by the tutors’ failure to acknowledge that adult returners are likely never to have experienced education the way in which most students learn at present. The need to take account of obstacles facing adults choosing to return to learning has been summarised by one female respondent; “Not enough consideration is taken into account of the fact that most adult returners have been out of the education system for a considerable time, maybe 20-30 years and therefore it is taken for granted that everyone knows how to do the
assignments. Some of us, in fact most of us have never done assignments before. Our education was pre GCSE”.

The more logistical type problems referred to issues such as childcare provision, funding and transport. A number of female participants stated that childminding was their primary concern about being able to start a course at Institute. There were related problems of finding a course that fitted in with their schedule or organising childminding to suit the course timetable. One adult student reported that: “Childcare facilities are mostly non-existent. It would be helpful for after-school care for children when attending courses, as it can be difficult to get responsible people to collect and care for your children. This, a lot of the time leads to having to leave courses before they are completed”. A similar view is shared by another female respondent; “A day nursery should be available. Many females find childminding a difficulty and often expensive and this prevents them from going into further education”. The views expressed by adult students in the interviews were put forward to Institute managers, who themselves had participated in an initial interview phase. In response to the issue of childminding, there was a general consensus that more provision was needed. One manager said that adults can be encouraged and included in learning when creches are provided as this helps reduce the stress and worry associated with finding good quality care for one’s children while attending a course. Awareness in one Institute of logistical barriers led one manager to say the Institute was: “Actively seeking to form partnerships with local providers who can realistically help with transport or creche provision. It is important though to engage with partners who can offer financial assistance or make some kind of contribution”. A further suggestion by another manager, highlighted the benefits of a childcare allowance which was built into the structure of some full-time courses. She questioned the possibility of making this available to part-time adult students also. In addition, the difficulties faced by lone parents returning to education was underlined by another manager who said: “Childminding is an even greater problem for single parents everywhere. Those are the people who want to come back and better themselves, but are inhibited in every which way”. The crucial role that childcare provision plays in community education was also emphasized by this manager who revealed that: “Institute management now are beginning to realize that community education is a very important market and part of that is childminding provision”.

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The issue of funding was mentioned by a number of students who expressed concerns about finding money to pay for fees, alongside the financial constraints associated with taking the course. The latter was described as buying books and any other resources needed for the course. Responses made by some of the adult learners were, as expected, dictated by their own personal circumstances. For example, one lady pointed to one situation, which could make her learning experience a very difficult one: “As to the question of fees, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that although I am employed when I started the course I was on maternity leave with the intention of going on to unpaid leave. I got absolutely no help with fees. I will be receiving no income for 34 weeks which is a good chunk of the course. This influences my ability to purchase books as you can imagine. If I did not have a supportive husband I could not undertake the course because of the financial commitment”. This comment highlights the position of women on maternity leave who are not receiving benefits that would have enabled them to get exemptions from fees. It could be argued that this is discriminating against women who take unpaid maternity leave from their job and would suggest that Institutes might need to take account of the needs of this group.

The benefits trap was one issue mentioned by most of the managers. They made reference to the fact that some people are not eligible for benefits due to their partner’s employment status, but are nonetheless in a financially constrained situation, because they are not employed themselves. This may, in turn, deter them from enrolling in a further education class. One manager stated that this form of means testing could be considered as discriminating against certain categories of persons who may not have high incomes. Offering funding to part-time students as well as full-time students has been viewed by one manager as an incentive to learning as she argued that: “Good funding creates motivation and encouragement” and she was concerned that part-time students may be disadvantaged by current arrangements. It is apparent though that some Institutes are aware of the problems that financial constraints can create and the benefits that can be gained by offering funding or reduced fees. It should be noted though, that reduced fees are mainly offered to students enrolling on ABE and Special Needs type courses. It means, however, that not all adult learners get to avail of this help. A comment from one participant in the study highlighted the difficulties associated with the benefits trap and the implication of this when paying for fees: “As a part-time worker and also a student, I find that my income is just above
the poverty line, therefore I get no extra benefits. I find courses other than ABE far too expensive to pay in one lump sum. I would like to see the Institutes offer either lower fees or maybe payments made easier, for example, so much a month or week. I would love to do a QUB Access course either in Humanities or Social Science, but as the fees are way too high, I cannot afford the £210 or £105 prices”.

Transport was a problem reported mostly by adult students in rural areas. There were some Institutes who tried as best they could to organize travel plans for students who had no means of transport. It was apparent that managers were aware of the difficulties that some students, especially those in rural areas encountered with travel. One Institute tried to remedy this problem by reducing the number of days a student had to travel to attend courses that were offered at its main campus. Offering a travelling allowance to adult learners in rural areas was also suggested, as this was something already available to younger students in the same locality. Ideally, courses should be offered in local centres, taking account of particular catchment areas. Transport is a very practical concern which can, for some people, result in exclusion if they have no means of travelling to the main campus or possibly even an outcentre.

3.1.5.4 What do you expect to gain from the course?

Successful completion of the course appeared to be the underlying theme arising from the responses of participants to this question. Furthermore, there was a relationship between why an adult decided to return to study and the expected benefits of participation. Adult learners who had cited university and obtaining qualifications as motives for going back to an Institute, consequently expressed similar views on what they hoped to obtain from taking a course. The long-term outcomes of returning to study were perceived by some of the respondents who spoke about the overall benefits of doing the course. One female learner taking an NVQ III course in childcare commented that: “I hope to keep my job by doing the course and put knowledge into practice”. Looking beyond the short-term benefits of doing a course meant that the individual learner was not the only consideration. For example, one lady signified the importance of completing the course by saying: “I will get qualifications so I can move forward and do something else. If parents have a good job and education then this is something positive for my kids to see”.

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Gaining confidence, skills and knowledge were also listed as expected outcomes, which were perceived as likely to lead to better job prospects and increased career opportunities.

3.1.5.5 What future plans do you have in education after taking this course?

It is clear from the data that the majority of adults interviewed in this study would like to continue their studies, either as an extension of what they are currently doing or by trying something new. **It appears therefore, the desire to learn is present, once the initial step has been taken to return to study. The greater task may however, be encouraging adults to accept the challenge to participate in learning after a lengthy period out of education.** Differences that did exist in relation to what adult learners wanted to do with their knowledge and skills referred to those who intended to seek employment after they completed the course. Despite taking the decision not to continue with education, it seemed that a positive educational experience had given these adults the confidence and skills to apply for a job.

3.1.5.6 How would you describe your experience in FE to date?

Information obtained from the interview data on how students evaluated the course to date confirmed the view expressed by the majority of respondents in the questionnaire. The replies of learners to this question also validated the role that tutors play in ensuring a positive educational experience. A comment made by one adult student highlights this point: “It is a very good experience, tutors are helpful and take away your fears. They give you good guidance and feedback”. Patience, understanding, support and advice are other descriptions that appear to be associated with the teaching style of tutors on these courses. **The impact of peer support on learning has also been recorded, as many participants stressed the importance of friendship making in motivating someone to continue with the course.** The social aspect of learning, which provides an opportunity to make new friends and share information and experiences of the course, was documented repeatedly by students in both their responses in the questionnaire and during the interviews. One interviewee evaluated their experience on the course to date by saying: “It has been a good experience, meeting people, building confidence, socialising and getting involved in things”. **It would appear therefore, that adult students benefit not only on an educational/academic level but view the experience more holistically.**
3.1.5.7 In what ways do you think that this learning experience could be improved?

The suggestions made by adult learners varied depending on the course they attended. There were a number of requests for additional resources both in terms of computers and books. The question of access versus availability arises in relation to resources, as some adults may indeed have access to computers in particular locations on campus, but not necessarily in their classroom. This might be viewed as a barrier in itself, as Institute managers indicated that adult learners are deterred by their fear of computers or not being able to cope among other students in a computer suite. They also point out that adults would feel more confident if there was someone to assist them at all times when they were using computers. This argument was verified by one manager who said: “I feel that with some adult learners, even if resources are provided, there is a fear of computers and not wanting to be embarrassed if something goes wrong with the computer. You will find then that adults would prefer not to use them if there is no one to support or help them with difficulties that arise. Having a technician or demonstrator on hand might help”. Some participants in this study stated that their experience at the Institute would be improved if more resources were available, specifically books. A manager from one Institute suggested that this might be related to adult learner’s associations with their experiences in compulsory education. He reported that: “There is a problem with how book resources are perceived. As adults were given books free at school they tend to think this is what will happen at an Institute and are quite shocked to find that they have to supply the books and stationary themselves”. It is important perhaps not to underestimate the degree to which experiences at school can impact on one’s perception of education and expectations of the learning process. In addition, as a large number of adult returners attend the Institute on a part-time basis, it is necessary to address the perception that resources are not for part-time students. This point was reiterated by one manager who believed that: “it is important to try and create opportunities for them to use resources and Institute facilities and accept that it is alright to do so”.

It should be noted that adults felt that they needed to be able to access computers in a safe context, namely a familiar classroom rather than a computer suite inhabited by computer-competent young people. They expressed the feeling that such a setting, with support from peers and tutors/technicians would greatly enhance their ability to work with computers.
The need for more one to one tutoring was a repeated request made by interviewees in this study. **It was apparent that adult students believed their educational experience would be improved by having more personal attention from the class tutor. This request was combined with a call for additional study or class time.** It would seem that they had developed a thirst for learning and were eager to increase the time being spent at the Institute. One manager also attributes the appeal for more personal tuition to ambition and fear of failure, which he believes are qualities indicative of adult learners. He reported: “Fear of failure is a genuine issue. As returners may have failed in the past, they are much more ambitious than younger students. This can in a way cause some problems, as they expect more and want more one-to-one tuition. Fear of failure is of course related to the need to succeed”.

Issues already highlighted in a previous question were reiterated in responses to this final question. These included child-minding facilities and funding. **There was also a call for better career guidance so students might be more aware of progression routes associated with the course and what possibilities arose after course completion.** One male adult student suggested: “I would like to see a bulletin board in the centre advertising jobs relating to my course. This would let me know what qualifications were needed and would give me something to aim for”. It would appear, therefore, that despite the positive view held by the majority of interviewees, there are suggestions for improvements. These have been outlined in the points summarised below:

- more one-to-one tuition
- imaginative and clearer career guidance on progression routes
- access to IT resources in safe and familiar environments
- supervised support for adults working in IT suites and other locations where computers are available for use

3.1.6 **Special needs provision**

It became apparent during the course of the research there were a number of separate issues that adult students with special needs faced. In addition, the responses made by tutors and Institute managers responsible for special needs provision indicated that this area warranted further attention and exploration within the research project. To this regard, the methodology
was modified to ensure that the salient issues affecting the education experience of this group of adult students were accurately depicted. Furthermore, the provision and planning of courses for adult learners with special needs has also been examined at Institute level, alongside the role of outside agencies such as Social Services and T&EA. An analysis and discussion of the pertinent issues are presented in the following section.

3.1.6.1 The educational experience of adult students with special needs
There were two special needs courses selected to participate in this study. A total of 12 students (6 males and 6 females) were interviewed from these classes. Their responses are outlined and discussed under each of the questions put forward to them.

3.1.6.2 What reasons do you have for taking the course?
Student’s responses to this question indicated that some adult learners had greater clarity in their reasons for attending the course compared to others. **In this respect, there were a number of adult students with special needs whose decision to take the course was influenced mainly by their link worker’s belief that it would be a positive step for them to take.** In one case a male adult learner in this group believed that the course was not suitable for him because it was not appropriately ability levelled to match his needs.

Other students on the special needs course chose the course because it offered an opportunity to meet friends and get out of their day centre. There was an emphasis on becoming more independent and meeting different sorts of people in the Institute. It was also clear that adult learners who were attending these classes wanted to learn more about different subjects, computers in particular. **The desire to acquire skills and develop one’s ability appears to have driven a considerable number of adults with special needs in this study to attend FE courses.**

3.1.6.3 Tell me about the things you have done and learnt on the course?
There was an overall sense of accomplishment emanating from student’s replies to this question. This was in terms of skill acquisition, with descriptions being offered of how their ability to do specific things had developed since joining the course. This was illustrated by one female student who said: “I have become more confident and have made new friends”. Likewise, another adult learner on one of the special needs courses summarised his experience by stating: “I have learned all sorts of things. The tutor is very good and comes to
the centre to ask people what they want to do”. It would appear that there was a feeling among these adult students that the courses were broadening their horizons in terms of the knowledge they were gaining by attending a course.

3.1.6.4 How has the course helped you in everyday life?

Attendance at an Institute course was, for some of the students with special needs, associated with growing more autonomous and being increasingly able to make a greater contribution in the home. For a number of the students this was directly linked to the skills obtained on their course. This was highlighted in the response given by one of the adult learners with special needs: “It helps me a lot, especially the cookery classes. I learnt how to make things and can cook at home”. Similarly, another female student in that class reported: “I can help my mother out more since coming here”. In contrast to these responses, other students attending a special needs course were less clear on the benefits or potential benefits of taking a course. The variation in the types of responses and different evaluations offered by students stresses the heterogeneous nature of disability. In this respect, differences across particular disabilities and between individuals themselves indicate the need to ensure that courses offered to special needs students are ability levelled.

3.1.6.5 What would you like to do after this course has ended?

The variation in the responses made by students might have been dictated largely by the nature of the course they were attending. In the course entitled; “Accessing the Community”, most of the respondents expressed a desire to go into some form of employment and in the majority of cases they had a clear idea of where they would like to work. In comparison, the other course: “National Skills Profile”, it was found that students attending this course were less clear on their future intentions. A couple of adult learners on this course did feel they would like to go further and learn other skills. It might be argued, therefore, that the aims and objectives of the course itself could direct students down a particular path, whether that may be education or employment.

3.1.6.6 Representatives in the area of special needs provision

Issues were raised by Institute providers and outside agencies involved in the provision of education services for adults with disabilities. Despite the different backgrounds and remits
for these organisations or agencies, a number of common themes emerged which served to highlight key issues in this part of FE provision. The salient points are discussed under subheadings presented below.

3.1.6.7 The needs of the learner

Differences in the personal, social and educational needs of adult students with disabilities compared to learners without disabilities highlighted the need for greater consideration by providers to ensure that they can access learning opportunities most suitable to their needs. The importance of accurately assessing a learner’s social, cognitive, physical and medical needs were emphasised by a liaison officer for Social Services, whose job was to act as a link between Institutes and Day Centres. **She believed that the misplacement of adults on courses not appropriate to their ability level could have detrimental effects on the learner and on their perception of education.** The issue of individual differences was raised earlier but warrants additional attention. A representative from T&EA stressed that 4 key factors needed to be considered when providing for disabled adults in education. These were; personal care (e.g. toileting), support in learning (e.g. communication of subject matter or skills), transport and integration (e.g. fitting into new surroundings). **It is clear that considerable planning is required at a number of levels to guarantee both access to learning opportunities and support through continued involvement in education.**

3.1.6.8 Institute provision and planning in relation to special needs courses

It was apparent from the various representatives interviewed about special needs provision that there was an inconsistent pattern of provision for this group of adult learners across different Institutes. **To this end, there was a call for greater cooperation between Institutes and other relevant agencies as a means of improving provision both in terms of availability of courses and the quality of existing services.** There was an unwillingness expressed by one of the representatives interviewed who believed that day centres battled with some Institutes for special needs adults to have access to learning at particular Institutes. **In addition, an emphasis was placed on provision within rural areas.** It would appear that there is a need for improved distribution of services across Institutes with specific attention being paid to the level of access for disabled students in more rural locations.
The Institute’s approach to special needs students has been commented on by both Institute representatives and individuals from outside agencies with a direct input in the area of disability and education. **The overall outcome of these comments was to recommend that Institutes engage in disability awareness training.** It was proposed that raising awareness about the needs of students with disabilities among both staff and students would help create a more friendly, open environment that was conducive to learning for adults with special needs wanting to access learning opportunities at a FE Institute. **It might be suggested that increasing awareness and understanding about disability in Institutes could lead to better integration of special needs students into the less than familiar environment of mainstream education.**

Planning to accommodate disabled students also requires structural or logistical considerations, which need to be taken in tandem with meeting their social and educational needs. **In this respect, the design of physical space and access to facilities present Institute planners with an important task.** These factors form an integral part of the quality of the educational experience of this student group. Furthermore, preparing a perspectus of available courses that are suitably ability levelled may add to other important tasks, such as staff training and support.

### 3.1.6.9 Progression

The role of individual differences in disabilities has been referred to at various points in this section. The significance of this has not been underestimated by the respondents who were interviewed about special needs provision in FE Institutes. In terms of progression for adults attending special needs courses, difficulties surround quantifying learning outcomes as students in this group differ very much at an individual level and also by the type and nature of their disability. **Accurate assessment of an adult’s ability at the initial entrance stage may improve the match between their needs and the content of a suitable course.** Similarly, progression may also require a reassessment of a student’s needs at different points in time. For some adults this may be linked to employment, while for others continued learning or a combination of both might offer the most appropriate pathway for them.
3.2 Institute level planning

The role of Institutes in the educational experience of adult learners was examined at two levels. The tutor’s contribution to this experience was assessed through interview, whereby ten different tutors from the selected Institutes were asked about their involvement in adult education. The responses are discussed in the first part of this section.

In addition, an objective of the research project was to examine the strategic approaches adopted by further education Institute managers in planning for adult learners. In this respect, an analysis of interview data pertaining to seven Institute managers was conducted and the results are discussed in the final part of this section.

3.2.1 The role of the educator in adult education provision

A total of ten class tutors were interviewed, which consisted of four males and six females. The questions put forward to tutors and a discussion of the results are presented below:

3.2.1.1 Assess the suitability of your learning environment and explain how it relates to the needs of adult learners?

The attributes of a suitable adult learning environment were described by some of the tutors. The remainder of responses added further information as to what was least conducive to learning.

Features such as: comfortable rooms, tea and coffee facilities, homely, very informal, and no chalk and talk were listed by tutors as what they perceived to be most appropriate for adult students in their learning environment. An assessment by one tutor of her teaching space highlighted the importance of childcare facilities and emphasised a community location. She reported that: “This is an ideal environment because it is convenient for mothers and toddlers and there are childcare facilities. They [the students] are in their local community and the centre has a good physical environment”. Similarly, descriptions of what was considered not to be an adult friendly environment were put forward by tutors. For example, one female tutor pointed out that: “The room we use at the moment is not ideal because it is formally set out”. There were also suggestions that adult students need their own space and ideally
their own room. One tutor explained further that this helps prevent mature students from feeling isolated and provides a space where they can share concerns with like-minded adults. It was also found that despite the fact an adult friendly environment was described by some tutors, they indicated that there was a lack of resources. Tutors recommended that availability of resources would make their teaching setting more conducive to learning.

It would appear therefore, that an adult friendly environment refers to a friendly space which enables adult students to share their experiences in a place which is informal, comfortable and convenient and good support is provided by flexible staff.

3.2.1.2 What kinds of resources are there available?
The range of resources available to tutors varied greatly in terms of type and amount that were accessible to them. One tutor reported only having the use of a flipchart, while others listed a number of different resources. For example, the tutor of an ABE course stated what resources were available to her in the room she taught. These included: “An OHP, flipcharts, computers, large screen, video and T.V., books and handouts and looked facilities for secure storage of student’s work”. In a number of cases, tutors made reference to resources available on the main campus or other parts of the building, which adult students could make use of. A point highlighted in the previous section indicated that adults tend to be apprehensive about their ability to use resources and tend not to utilise what is available to them. This might be even more difficult for adult students whose class is situated in a community setting, but resources are located on the main campus. It would appear that there is a need to address adult learner’s perceptions about resources and to find ways of dealing with their apprehensions and misgivings about using Institute resources. Alternatively, these difficulties might be overcome by improving resource allocation, especially at venues outside the main campus. As indicated before, adult students would appear to need a friendly space in which their confidence can grow through guidance and support.

3.2.1.3 What kinds of personal/professional development have you found relevant to your professional role?
This question was designed to provide information on the different forms of personal development appropriate to the tutor’s role as an educator (financed by the tutor) and also the
professional development experienced by tutors (resourced by the Institute). **There were tutors who had taken part in training or development outside Institute which they had funded themselves.** These were considered by them to be directly related to their **capacity as a tutor.** An awareness about one’s own need for personal development and involvement in lifelong learning was highlighted by the response of one class tutor who said: “I have ongoing counselling for personal growth to make me more aware of my personal issues. I also attend training sessions held in the centre and believe teaching is a learning process and you need to know your limitations”. It was also found that tutors had self-funded some courses that were directly relevant to their role because their Institute would not pay for them to do the course. This was especially true for part-time tutors. Part-time status was also raised in relation to Institute based training. In some Institutes, part-time tutors were not included in training days, as they were not full-time members of staff. **Recent changes in the definition of “Associate Lecturer” status will mean that many more part time further education staff will be recategorised with the result that they may have access to additional opportunities for professional development.**

Professional development organised by the Institutes themselves formed the second part of this question. These ranged from different departmental courses to more specific training that is a requirement in order to teach a course. Some courses, such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Further and Higher Education were specifically mentioned as being directly relevant to teaching adults. In comparison, tutors commented that other courses could be adapted to suit an adult teaching environment. Skills acquired from working in adult education were also considered as part of a tutor’s professional development and tutors expressed the view that such skills should be recognised and valued. It may be that these skills could be identified and mapped against National Standards to facilitate recognition for tutors and enhance the possibility of progression.

### 3.2.1.4 What kinds of staff development do you need?

This question subsequently highlighted important considerations for strategic planning. **The primary request made by tutors was for more counselling courses and career guidance training.** The need for the counselling courses was explained by one tutor who stressed the impact of adult’s personal and social problems on their educational experience at the Institute. He stated that: “More courses are needed for training in counselling skills, so we can be better
equipped to deal with adults’ problems. Adult courses are plagued by dropout rates so I feel that counselling can help stop that”. This comment was endorsed by another tutor who reported that: “Most of the time in teaching you are in a counselling or listening role”. The supportive role of tutors was validated by student reports in both the questionnaire and interview data. It is apparent therefore, that tutors are aware themselves of the need to be more than an educator, while adult learners also acknowledge the benefits of a person-centred style of teaching. Furthermore, requests for training in IT and computer skills were made, which tutors felt, would put them in a better position to help adult returners acquire basic skills especially in computing.

3.2.1.5 What inhibits and facilitates adult learning in this Institute?

The dual purpose of this question served to highlight what tutors perceived as factors conducive to adult learning and those which were considered to be deterrents. There was a consensus among tutors on what facilitated learning by adult students. The key constituents were:

- the flexibility of tutors and Institutes;
- good levels of pastoral care and support;
- locally based provision;
- not being treated like schoolchildren;
- respect for adults;

One tutor endorsed a number of these elements by saying: “The flexibility of staff, flexibility in the timetable and being able to communicate with adults at their level all help to facilitate adult learning”. Similarly, another tutor stressed the importance of providing pastoral care. She reported: “In this centre there is good pastoral backup and good support in an adult atmosphere”.

The antithesis of an adult oriented teaching environment was outlined in the responses of tutors to the other part of this question. Inhibitors of learning for adult students ranged from poor quality teaching, lack of resources, insufficient funding, no childcare facilities, poor transport to inadequate career guidance. One tutor reported that: “A good teacher will help the student to unlock their abilities and establish a rapport with the student”. As before, great emphasis has been placed on the supportive and accommodating role of the educator. The other items listed as deterrents could be considered as structural or
institutional barriers. These referred to issues such as funding, transport facilities, childcare/creche facilities, curriculum design and marketing/advertising of courses. In this regard, strategic planning by Institutes should attend to possible inhibiting factors that affects the quality of adult education and work toward solutions that both increase provision and improve existing services.

3.2.2 A management response to adult education provision

Institute managers from the selected Institutes participated in interviews as a means of providing information on the strategic approaches employed by Institutes when planning for adult education provision. A discussion of the points raised by the seven managers is presented below.

3.2.2.1 What kinds of provision already exists for adult learners in this Institute?
A descriptive account of course availability was offered by each of the Institute managers. This took the form of listing the different course types and range of provision for adult learners. The degree and diversity of adult education courses varied across Institutes. The provision of services at a community level differed from one Institute to the next in terms of the number of courses offered at outcentres used by that particular Institute.

3.2.2.2 How can provision be improved?
The development of adult education services is a strategic consideration for managers involved in Institute planning. A number of different approaches were explored by managers. There was an emphasis on the role that career guidance and support plays in the educational experience of adult learners. A number of managers suggested that improvements were needed in this service, which would guarantee better access for adult returners but that the service would need to be less formal to accommodate the needs of mature students. One manager explained what adults wanted in terms of the most suitable career guidance: “Adult students want to talk to someone they know or someone who has gone through the experience already”.

Funding was also an issue that was raised repeatedly by Institute managers in this project. One female manager felt that funds should be earmarked for areas of social disadvantage and
that it was important to have sustained funding. It was also clear from the interview data that a further funding problem was created at the Institute level. **Managers pointed out that difficulties surrounded adult education and community education in particular in terms of initiating classes.** As one manager explained: “It is very difficult to establish community and adult education classes because funding is often linked to having over 16 students in a class”. **It is apparent that there is a less formal structure associated with adult community education, which may not necessarily fit within the traditional parameters of Further Education.** In this regard, Institute planning may need to take more account of the diversity and flexibility required to implement and maintain community education programmes. A suggestion proposed by one manager verifies this view: “Improvements can be made by being more flexible and for educational management to see that adult learning is demand driven and doesn’t fit neatly within Institute business”. **Furthermore, the development of genuine partnerships at a community level was put forward as a means of expanding links with the community in order to promote and deliver adult education courses.**

3.2.2.3 How does the Institute development plan relate to adult learning?

A clear pattern emerged from the responses to this question, which indicated that current Institute planning models need to be more accommodating towards an adult or community education perspective. Despite the fact the aim of most Institutes’ development plans was to increase the number of students enrolling at the Institute and to further progression routes, difficulties arose in relation to adult education provision. One manager argued that everything within FE was cost-related and learning was measured only in terms of contracts and money obtained. The problems that community and adult education face within a traditional framework of FE with its emphasis on 16-19 year old provision, appear to occur at a number of different levels. For example, in terms of the Institute development plan, one manager commented on the problems encountered when trying to monitor and evaluate adult or community education using the same criteria set for other Institute courses. He said: “In community education it is very difficult to set targets and use performance indicators to predict progression. Adult and community education is not a very stable thing and managers need to take account of the volatility of these”. In addition it has been argued by another manager that despite the large numbers of adults enrolling in community education courses: “It is difficult to get planners and policy makers to accept this as a serious part of Institute
business”. **Difficulties surrounding acceptance of adult provision within mainstream FE might partly be explained by the less formal progression routes that a large number of the courses take, in that the outcome indicators for course completion are not measured by qualifications.** This point was explained by one manager who observed that: “Adult education is not always about accreditation but accomplishment”. It is perhaps, necessary for this redefinition of learning to influence management decision-making processes in order to help planners reassess the framework used to devise strategic approaches to education provision.

It should be acknowledged though that DENI/T&EA Lifelong Learning document states that increasing provision in FE Institutes will “require all Institutes to be flexible and innovative” (p.16) especially when trying to increase the number of mature students enrolling in courses. In relation to this aim, an FE Incentive Fund will be available to those Institutes who improve adult participation rates. **In addition, the Lifelong Learning strategy has emphasised the importance of acknowledging and rewarding individuals’ life experiences and knowledge through accreditation.** This point arises out of one of the key aims of the strategy which is stated in its action plan: “to ensure greater ease of progression through the system of qualifications” (p.12). Logistical barriers such as childcare provision were repeatedly mentioned by students as a significant barrier to participation and this particular barrier was raised quite often by managers who were interviewed in this study. It was clear that more resources need to be made available so that childcare was not such a considerable problem encountered by students. The DENI/T&EA strategy states that “there will be consultation on a regional strategy in order to raise the quality of childcare and make childcare more affordable and more accessible” (p.5). **There was a recognition in the document that one of the biggest obstacles to accessing education for parents was finding affordable, good quality childcare, which is similar to the views expressed by different participants in this study.** Institute managers have also spoke about the need for genuine partnerships. This idea has also been emphasised in the Lifelong Learning strategy where the local strategic partnerships can be developed to meet local needs and interests. The document states that the partnerships should be reflected in Institute development plans and as part of a Institute’s review of policies on widening participation. **It would appear therefore, that the recommendations proposed in the strategy document address some of the issues raised by Institute managers in the present study.**
3.2.2.4 How can the Institute increase the number of students enrolling adult education courses?

There was an overwhelming emphasis on community involvement as a means of improving adult enrolment in FE Institutes. Institute managers pointed to the importance of building trusting relationships with communities and suggested a step by step approach to adult education that is offered in a community setting. This was proposed by one manager who stated: “This can be done by moving into the community more and provide sample courses in the community first as a way of encouraging adults into the main Institute”. Partnerships with community groups and bursaries for funding were further suggestions of how education provision might be improved in communities as a way of increasing the numbers of adults participating in learning. An indirect method to tackle enrolment was put forward by one manager who believed that by engaging adults in the education of their children, the interest and motivation to learn for oneself might be created. An example of such a course, ‘Parents as Co-educators’ was selected as one of the case study courses in this research project.

3.2.2.5 Who does the Institute see as under-represented learners and what strategies does the Institute employ to contact and engage the under-represented?

There were a variety of different groups listed by managers as under-represented learners. A substantial level of agreement was observed among managers as to who the Institute perceived to be in this category. The groups were described as: the long-term unemployed; travelling communities; women in the home; male unemployed; adults without qualifications; underachievers; Asian and Chinese communities; disabled groups; lone parents; prisoners; young offenders and women in non-traditional subject areas. Education and community education officers were suggested as groups who would be employed to contact and engage adults in education. This point was reiterated by another manager, who did not think that advertising as a sole strategy was an effective method of recruitment. As before, direct involvement with community groups was stressed. Comments made by managers would indicate an awareness of who under-represented learners are, but this is not enough. Effective strategic planning is required to ensure that these groups are not excluded from a culture of lifelong learning.
3.2.2.6 What are the teaching/learning methods best suited to adult learners?

There was a consensus among managers that the responsiveness of the tutor to the needs of adult learners was a necessary quality for teaching mature students. **The most appropriate teaching style for adult students was characterised by a flexible, supportive approach, which is person-centred.** It would appear that tutors are required to go beyond the traditional role of the educator. This is highlighted in a comment made by one manager who stated: “The Institute needs tutors who are willing to go one step further and try to get students back, post work out to them and make a lot of personal contact”. It was also clear that managers believed that tutors should use a variety of different methods when teaching adult students. **Central to this was the necessity to move away from ‘chalk and talk’ and engage students in their own learning experience through activity-based learning and creative teaching methods.** In addition, group work was favourably proposed by Institute managers, as this offered adults the opportunity to work with peers, share ideas and develop friendships.

3.2.2.7 What staff development activities have taken place to address the suitability of teaching/learning methods for adult learners?

It would appear from managers’ comments that training specifically related to the teaching of adult students was geared more towards tutors of special needs or ABE classes. **In the main, staff development was confined to three training days held annually.** There were a number of managers who indicated that informal/social events took place, which enabled tutors to meet and discuss their work. Overall, the need for more relevant training and money to support training was something that the majority of managers called for. This is an important consideration for Institute planners if adult education is to have a pivotal role in further education provision. This study has highlighted the significant contribution that tutors make to the educational experience of the adult learner. In this regard, the training needs of tutors must be a primary concern when Institutes are planning adult and community education programmes.

3.2.2.8 How are teaching/learning methods used in adult education classes monitored and evaluated?

Interviews with Institute managers indicated that different formal procedures were used to monitor and evaluate teaching/learning methods. These included: appraisal systems, lesson
plans, team meetings, reviews and student evaluations. It is clearly important for managers to review the principles underpinning these procedures and how they needed to be adapted to support the flexible, less traditional teaching style that seems to best suit the needs of adult students. **It may be necessary to have a reformulation of these methods so that more sensitive monitoring instruments could be employed in Institutes.**

3.2.2.9 How can this Institute benefit from the successful experiences of other Institutes and agencies?

Managers adopted a sceptical stance in their responses to this question. This is possibly explained by an acknowledgement by some managers of the increased competition among Institutes. As one manager pointed out: “There is too much competition between Institutes because of the Government’s push on funding”. This could be viewed as an acceptable comment based on the current model of incorporation, where financial accountability is of primary concern to Institute planners. There were positive suggestions by some managers of how exemplars of successful practice might be used to improve provision. One manager proposed study visits and establishing links with other agencies as a means of learning from effective working systems. Competitiveness is a complex issue that requires considerable attention, if Institutes are to realistically engage with each other co-operatively. **Given the closer institutional relationships which may be established between educational and training provision, in the future, it will be important that procedures are devised for enabling good practice to be shared across the educational and training sectors.**

3.2.2.10 How is new technology used to promote learning and assist learners?

Institute managers indicated that in most cases IT provision existed, although this might vary across centres. Computer suites and mobile IT units were made available to students in Institutes and managers emphasised that students were encouraged to use these resources. The use of computers to support the learning experience of students with special needs was stressed by a number of managers who believed that IT could promote learning and aid skill development. It was clear though, that managers were aware that provision could be ‘patchy’ and the use of computers did depend on whether they were relevant to that particular course. A number of the Institutes had the facility of a mobile IT unit, but this was not available at all Institutes. This facility is especially important for courses offered at outcentres, where there may be less access to electronic resources. **Discussion of student**
interview data highlighted that adult learners might prefer to use resources in an adult friendly environment, as opposed to computer suites situated at the main campus. Making resources available to adults in their learning environment might help address this issue further.

3.2.2.11 What do you see as your role in addressing adult learners’ needs?

The responses of managers to this question differed mainly at two levels. The first referred to a small number of managers in the study who described their role in strategic and procedural terms. In this regard, tasks which they were responsible for in the Institute were listed and these included: strategic planning, accreditation, monitoring teaching and budget control. The second type of response points to the personal contribution managers felt they could make in response to contingencies. For example, one manager believed that he needed to be “Open minded and have sympathetic ear” when working in adult education. Others also suggested steps that need to be taken in the future planning of adult education based on what they felt was an important consideration in adult education provision. In this respect, one manager proposed that: “recruitment policies need to change so that Institutes can use a new breed of teacher/tutor/trainer”. Another manager highlighted that the traditional decision-making process in Institutes did not fit within the model of community/adult education. This manager argued that adult learning is demand driven and therefore decisions needed to be made quickly by management to accommodate this demand. It would appear that the overall responses of managers indicate that significant changes need to take place within Institutes so that: “Adult learning to be taken seriously at all levels”. This comment was reiterated by another manager who described the primary management task as being: “To challenge people to have a different perspective in relation to adult learners”. The data obtained for this question would therefore suggest a strong commitment by managers to reconceptualising their role within the developing context of adult education and a strong awareness of the need to continuously re-appraise current policy and practice in the light of the identified needs of adult learners.
3.2.3 The level of congruence among the responses of the adults, tutors and Institute managers.

There was substantial agreement between the different groups that participated in the study, in relation to a number of key points. Barriers affecting adult participation in further education were examined and the views of adult students and Institute representatives were obtained. It was clear from the data that Institute managers recognised the impact that logistical barriers could have on adults returning to education or deciding to return. These mainly referred to childcare provision, funding and transport. Adults in the study highlighted the need for greater provision of childcare facilities and was rated by women as the main barrier to participation. Managers accepted that greater provision of creches and childcare support was required if learners were to engage effectively in adult education courses. It should be noted though that manager’s opinions on childcare provision were largely obtained at a second interview phase, when a selected number of managers responded to key points raised by adult students in this study.

The issue of funding was raised by both Institute managers and students, but in somewhat different ways. A degree of similarity was observed between student comments on financial constraints associated with taking the course and responses that were put forward by some managers on difficulties adult’s faced when taking further education courses. The benefits trap was acknowledged by some Institute managers as having a negative affect on adult participation. There as also an acceptance among a number of managers that an alternative method of means testing be devised which assesses fee payment for Institute courses. A number of students in this study indicated that they could only afford courses that had reduced fees and sometimes this only referred to ABE courses which were at an unsuitable level for them. Institute managers emphasised the need for genuine partnerships that might be used to establish bursaries for community based education and seek funding opportunities that support the local provision of courses. In this respect, managers interviewed in this study referred to funding in strategic terms, whereas adult students emphasised personal financial barriers that affect participation.

The attitudinal preoccupations that influenced adults’ experience on the course was acknowledged by a much smaller number of Institute managers in comparison to other
barriers that have been mentioned above. Adult students repeatedly referred to fears about their ability to cope with tasks, how to develop study skills and manage their time. **Greater congruity was observed between class tutors and adult students in this respect, as tutors appeared to be much more aware of the needs of adult students and any trepidations about returning to education.** This awareness among adult educators was demonstrated in their approach to teaching, which a large number felt must be person-centred and non-traditional, so adult do not feel they are returning to a school environment. **The need for an adult friendly environment which has supportive and understanding staff was reiterated by both adults and class tutors.** It was evidenced in the results that this type of teaching style and approach to adult learning is already taking place in a large number of the classes that participated in this study. It should be noted though, that managers did express an awareness of the need for educators to take on a more counseling role when working with adult students because of the external pressures that can affect their educational experience at the Institute. The flexibility of tutors in terms of their style of teaching and the teaching/learning methods they use was emphasised by Institute managers. **To this end, managers and tutors agreed that the traditional role of educators is less effective when teaching adults. It would be fair to say that one of the best examples of similarity in response between students, tutors and managers, refers to the teaching style of educators and role of the tutor in adult education.** The social aspect of learning for adults was endorsed by adult students in the present study. The role that peers play in motivating and maintaining other student’s interest in the subject was found to play a central part in the educational experience of students. The importance of peers was acknowledged by some class tutors, but was mentioned less frequently by Institute managers.

### 3.3 Community involvement in adult education and considerations for improving adult participation in learning opportunities.

The overall analysis and discussion of results leads to the conclusion that community based education is pivotal to enhancing access for adults in FE Institutes. Consequently, greater community involvement in adult learning is important if FE providers are to build and further develop trusting relationships with community groups. This section draws-out the salient points alluded to in the previous sections.
3.3.1 A Community Education Model

It is clear from the comments made by both Institute representatives and adult students that the delivery of adult education needs to be reconsidered within a different frame of reference from the traditional approaches associated with a 16-19 year old cohort. A demand driven approach to strategic planning is required by Institute management in order to meet the requests of adult learners in the present climate of lifelong learning. It was made quite clear by a number of managers interviewed in this study that radical changes need to occur within FE provision if adults are to be encouraged to become engaged in a process of learning suited to their needs and circumstances. In this respect, courses cannot be a “set menu” as one manager pointed out. She believed this type of approach would not work but, instead, proposed that relationships needed to be built as a means of opening up communities and offering learning opportunities. In contrast to main campus provision which might be defined within a much more static framework, community education appears to require flexible and responsive planning by Institutes to ensure that adults learn about things that interest them at a particular point in time, in a convenient and familiar location. It would seem therefore, that a community education model is characterised by a less structured approach to planning which, in part, is dictated by the adult learner’s requests of how and where to learn. A shift in focus away from the traditional 16-19 year old market in FE provision may also force Institute planners to reassess how learning is defined by adult learners and not view education solely in terms of accreditation, but to value adult students’ need for accomplishment.

3.3.2 Financial planning

It was evident in the responses of managers that changes need to take place in terms of financial formulas and performance indicators presently used by Institute management. These did not fit within a community model of education that demands flexibility, investment and commitment. A number of managers interviewed in this study pointed to the inadequacies of current procedures in which most elements of Institute business are cost related and performance is calculated using traditional indices. In community education, courses might not always attract the 12 plus people required to enroll before courses receive verification that they can commence. The monitoring and predicting of performance is also affected in the
same way, as common criteria could not necessarily be applied to all courses being offered at a community level. As one manager pointed out in a previous section, “Adult and community education is not a very stable thing, so managers need to take account of the volatility of these”. It would appear then, that sensitive monitoring instruments are required within community education, alongside more amenable financial formulas, which can accommodate less stable types of provision within FE.

3.3.3 Physical space: A friendly environment

It emerged from the data that the physical space in which courses were provided played an important part in adult students’ learning experience. Comments made by students indicated that locally based provision was an added advantage to attending courses and quite often increased the appeal of a course. In a similar vein, a number of managers and tutors highlighted the significance of offering courses at community based centres. One manager indicated the possible long-term benefits of providing classes for people in their local environment by suggesting: “Begin with taster courses which can build confidence and this might lead onto more academic type courses and eventually into mainstream education”. Central to this appears to be the security that a safe space can offer, which in turn fosters confidence. A comfortable, informal, homely environment which is located in a familiar community setting would seem to summarise what managers, tutors and learners in this study have described as an adult friendly environment. In a large number of cases this description was reflected in current community based provision or seen as a key factor when recommending future improvements.

3.3.4 Partnerships

The development of partnerships between communities and FE Institutes were proposed by a number of Institute managers, who believed these would foster stronger ties between the two and provide an opportunity for genuine relationships to evolve. In this respect, greater communication about the needs of communities should in turn improve the quality and relevance of provision. The data obtained throughout the research study clearly indicated a need for the requests of the adult learner to be met and for Institutes to offer locally based courses of interest and benefit to the community. Partnerships between Institutes and
communities may provide a forum for negotiation, co-operation and development, to ensure that the educational needs of the community are met and learning across the life span is encouraged, which can become an acceptable part of community life.

3.3.5 Past ELB responsibilities and implications for community links

The small number of persons interviewed is representative, in numerical terms, of the relatively small number of Education and Library Board officers involved in strategic monitoring and development of adult education provision. Since, however, some staff were seconded from Institutes and had returned to Institutes, and the interviewees, still within the ELBs had moved on to other duties, their responses are recollections rather than descriptions of current responsibilities. With this caveat noted, the responses provide two sources of information. Firstly, the officers were able to give an account of the context and background to the current adult education provision. Secondly, since the ELBs have current responsibilities for nursery/primary/secondary educational provision and the Youth Service, the information is important with respect to understanding the kinds of relationships with the community, Institute managers may wish to forge in the future. The report has demonstrated that an understanding of the educational background of adults is crucial in planning provision and it is clear that, while Institutes have been separated from ELBs, appropriate relationships between the sectors can assist in the development of integrated services.

These following views, for example, indicate concern from the ELBs regarding the fate of adult education under incorporation:

- Concern about how adult education would be maintained and protected
- Perception within the Board that adult education and ABE would be dropped because of lack of sufficient funding
- The Board fought against incorporation
- Board believed that Institutes would become commercial entities
- Board felt that incorporation would put strain on links between Institutes and schools who were now in competition
Institutes are required, as a result of incorporation, to become more responsive and commercially aware, and the ELB perspective is valuable insofar the need to maintain links with the schools sector is emphasised. School leavers will become adults within a few years and it may reasonably be surmised that they will find it easier to access further education if they have had some contact with Institutes during their period of schooling. In GB, post-incorporation, there has been considerable debate concerning the different funding formulas applicable to students studying the same courses in schools and Institutes with resulting competition between the sectors which may not be in the interests of learners. Although there is no systematic research to illuminate this area, it has been frequently reported in the educational press that, in GB, Institutes have been deterred from accessing schools for recruitment purposes. This kind of competitive behaviour may or may not exist in Northern Ireland but it would be wise to be aware of the implications of a hiatus between the secondary sector and FE at a time when the term “joined-up thinking” has a certain currency.

The ELB officers indicated, furthermore, that the range of ELB responsibilities was a factor in initiating and sustaining partnerships and the following comments demonstrate the extent of liaison with different interested groups:

- Inter-board officers group for curriculum and staff development for FE sector
- Partnerships formed within the Board
- Worked with youth service, sports development officer, advisor for travellers education
- A steering group which consisted of representatives from EGSA, women’s centres, WEA, training organizations and officers within the Board
- EGSA
- Community trusts, community groups and the youth service

There is no doubt that Institutes will be involved in partnerships with some of these groupings but there may be links which have been weakened in the initial stages of incorporation. For example, many travellers may be marginalised within our society and may not respond to ordinary methods of recruitment to Institutes and links with the statutory sector may help to enable FE staff to be introduced into cultures where there is suspicion of outsiders. Equally, links with the Youth Service which is involved with persons who are on the brink of adulthood or who are adults, could be fruitful in enabling Institutes to access young persons in
a wide range of working class areas and, in certain circumstances, Youth Centres could be utilised for Institute courses. Again, while Institutes may be involved in some of these areas, the cost of initiating contact may be reduced through effective liaison.

These points and others were reinforced by ELB comments on how they would respond if they were again given responsibilities for adult education:

- Work towards much better interfaces within the Board
- Want an effective training forum within the Board
- Encourage an Inter Board Officers Group that would include people from adult and community education
- Want a more valid strategic plan on a NI basis
- Start working earlier on AE and ABE provision
- Concentrate more on community organisations and their links with Institutes
- More training for staff
- Develop links with local councils
- Better control over funding
- Greater access to European money which is dominated by T&EA
- Adequate earmarked funding for AE and FE with specific emphasis on development
- Support innovative work in this area
- Create Northern Ireland solutions to Northern Ireland problems
- Use ICT as a means of attracting men and especially Protestant men, who are a very under-represented group
- Have more practitioners on the ground
- Minimise competition, for example, the WEA would see other providers as rivals. More open learning centres are needed
- Strengthen the link between community groups and the Institutes
- Provide better transport and childcare facilities, especially transport for the disabled

The reference to links with the councils is worthy of noting, particularly as EU funding is often channelled through this route. **Moreover the reference to a specific group (Protestant men) emphasises the need for geodemographic analysis of populations with a view to identifying groups who should be targeted for inclusion.** Since current
University funding formulas have incentives relating to geodemographic identification, it may be that this will be a feature of future FE formulas. **This issue of a “valid strategic plan on a NI basis” clearly needs to be noted as, again, it will be important to ensure that competition serves to enhance rather than diminish the impact of Institute policies.** The comment on creating “Northern Ireland solutions to Northern Ireland problems” highlights the need for a precise focus on the need for policies designed to address local contexts rather than a reliance on imported models for adult education. The comment may appear to state the obvious but, on further reflection, may indicate a profound need to reconceptualise provision for adult education with a fresh vision informed by evidence from service users.

Other comments on issues to be considered were:

- Wide range of access to accreditation and probably greater quality control in adult education
- Needs to be some clarity about community education, especially in relation to progression routes

Quality control in relation to accreditation will probably be a key theme in future policies as adults progress, in greater numbers, to higher education. Currently, there has been a transition from the traditional position where Institute certification was issued to the current position where more formal modes of accreditation are employed. Many Access Courses, as indicated in the introduction, are accredited by universities and the decision by the QAA to examine AVAs will possibly sharpen practice in this area. Other forms of accreditation, particularly those which are not currently easily amenable to external scrutiny, may require further review and consideration by Institutes. As adult education develops the clients will want clear reassurance regarding the standard of the awards they have received. In addition, adults will require accurate information on progression. **Since many Institute careers staff will have been focused on preparing students with traditional qualifications for higher education, there will be a need for staff development to re-orientate staff towards consideration of the variety of routes to progression.**

**Overall there is a message from the ELBs regarding the advantages to be gained through mobilisation of all available community resources to further the development of**
adult education and equally a warning against the possibility of fragmentation of provision and lack of co-ordination across the FE sector.
4. Conclusions

This project incorporated different methodologies as a means of identifying the needs of adult learners. The research framework was designed to ensure that the data obtained represented a number of different perspectives on the provision of adult education in FE Institutes. Quantitative information, in the form of questionnaires administered to adult students, was validated by qualitative responses given at interviews by adult learners from a selected number of Institute courses. In addition, pertinent issues highlighted by Institute representatives enriched the results by providing viewpoints from those directly involved in the delivery and planning of provision. The large number of conclusions that were drawn from the data could be attributed to the different sources of information and the interwoven patterns that emerged from the analysis of the participants’ responses from both the qualitative and quantitative data. Owing to the large amount of data obtained from the research, conclusions have been organised under separate headings, similar to the results section.

4.1 Key findings in the analysis of data for adult learners

Despite diversity in the sample of adult learners used for this study, their educational experience at the Institutes tended to be quite positive. Some questions posed to the participating adults aimed also to provide information for recommending improvements in provision. In this respect, conclusions could be drawn from both the positive and less affirming comments put forward by adult students.

It was the intention of the research project to sample under-represented adults who were considered not to have attended an Institute since leaving compulsory education. There was however, a large number who were not returning for the first time, but had attended courses previously. The role that prior educational experience can play was also evidenced in the responses of adults to questions about the perceived usefulness of the course and their reasons for attendance. Students who had previously participated in courses, placed greater emphasis on knowledge acquisition, whereas, refreshing knowledge and skills was rated more importantly by first time returners. In terms of barriers, it was revealed that male students who attended non selective schools and who were also in the first time returners
category, reported that ‘previous negative school experiences’ was the most significant barrier to going back to education. Furthermore, this finding was verified by results from an earlier question which found that male learners who attended secondary schools had not continued their education beyond 16 years of age. **It would be fair to assert that this group of adults (males attending non-selective schools) needs to be targeted more effectively by the Institutes in their recruitment strategies, if males who had a secondary level education are to access learning opportunities beyond the age of compulsory education.**

The analysis of interview data highlighted two clear trends in relation to factors perceived to be creating barriers to learning. Attitudinal preoccupations were expressed in terms of adult students’ fear of failure and apprehensions about their ability to cope with the demands of the course. **Learners’ trepidations about the course were dominated by concerns about study skills and time management.** This perception might be linked to previous school experiences where traditional teaching styles predominated. It may be fair to say that adults might have expectations of encountering such methods on their return to education. **Some participants made references to a lengthy period of absence from education, which in itself created an uneasiness about returning to learning.** It is very important, therefore, for tutors not to confirm these expectations, but instead utilise more flexible learning strategies and active learning techniques, so that the psychological distance between teacher and student is minimised. **Engaging the adult in their own learning through activity, variety and participation will probably enhance the quality of the experience, while increasing the likelihood of maximising understanding and retention of the subject matter.** It was apparent from tutors’ responses in this study that ‘chalk and talk’ was removed as much as possible from their approach to learning. **The pivotal role that delivery plays in the student’s educational experience serves to highlight that a significant emphasis needs to be placed by the Institutes on appropriately designed training for staff.**

Students repeatedly commented on the positive role of the tutor and how supportive and accommodating they were. Similarly, peer support provided a valuable service of shared encouragement and motivation to continue with learning through an alliance of common difficulties and concerns. This social side of learning offers a feeling of togetherness that enables learners to face the challenges of a new experience. **Learning with others, as opposed to alone, means that emotional and intellectual support is available which**
allows the learner to have experiences beyond their present level of knowledge and skill.

Barriers faced by returners in logistical terms formed the second most visible trend in an analysis of the data. These most commonly referred to childcare provision, funding and transport. The importance of these factors in determining whether adults could or could not attend a course was stressed by a number of participants who felt that more attention should be paid by Institutes to these structural elements that are instrumental in enabling the learning experience to become possible. In comparison to attitudinal barriers which are often determined by the personal characteristics of the learner, logistical issues are more easily quantified and, potentially, amenable to being controlled to some degree by the Institute.

Suggested recommendations were put forward by respondents and these included:

- more one-to-one tuition
- improved childcare provision
- imaginative career guidance
- supervised IT training
- widened funding opportunities beyond ABE and special needs classes.

The area of special needs provision received individual attention owing to the different interview schedules used to explore the learning experiences of adults in these classes. The views of representatives involved in the educational provision of disabled adults were also examined.

It was evident from the data that the ability and needs of students attending special needs courses were determined at an individual level, resulting in a need for ability levelled provision to accommodate the individual in the group. Two special needs courses participated in the study and it became clear that the experiences of students were influenced by the nature of the course with its specific aims and objectives. In this respect, one course had a particular orientation towards accessing the community and used this as the title for the course. There was a desire among adult learners on this course to gain employment, mainly part-time, when the course was completed.
The importance of ability levelled courses was highlighted by representatives from FE Institutes, social services and T&EA. They held a prevailing belief that misplacement of special needs adults within further education could have detrimental effects on the students’ perception of learning and their own ability to become engaged in learning. Planning effective and appropriate provision was acknowledged as integral to the success of any program, but was not something that all Institutes were involved in. It was indicated that the distribution of services within FE for disabled adults needed to be widened so that access could be improved. Particular mention was made of adults with special needs in rural areas who were perhaps at even greater risk of exclusion due to availability of provision and the associated logistical issues, such as transport.

It should be noted that DENI have identified a process for assessment in their Good Practice Guide for Institutes of Further and Higher Education entitled – “Support for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities”, that is central to fostering an appropriate learning and support environment for students with disabilities. The process identified in the document emphasises the importance of making the curriculum available for all learners and the necessity for the “…..identification of needs to underpin a learner-centred approach to the development of support and curriculum design and delivery” (p.27). Individualised Student Learning Agreement as outlined in the document emphasises the key aspects of the learner’s needs and how these can be identified and monitored.

Disability awareness training was proposed by all of the representatives interviewed, as this would help create a more amiable environment where staff and students alike had greater understanding and awareness of issues affecting disabled learners in a mainstream education system. This may in part aid the integration process for special needs students, while addressing the perceptions and attitudes of other adult learners in FE Institutes. The DENI report “Support for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities” also highlights the necessity of staff development. It states: “If an Institute wishes to promote and facilitate the development of provision of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities it must ensure staff have the skills, knowledge and commitment necessary to establish and maintain an effective learning environment” (p.21).
4.2 Institute level planning

The role of FE Institutes in the provision of adult education was examined by interviewing individuals involved at the delivery level (tutors) and those responsible for strategic planning and organisation of provision (managers). This method offers the benefits of being able to construct a more holistic view of further education provision, in addition to providing managers with the opportunity to respond to comments made by adult students interviewed in the study.

4.2.1 Adult educators

The responses of tutors provided a wealth of information on the factors that are likely to most successfully facilitate adult learning. A summation of the comments made by tutors enabled a descriptive account to be compiled of what constitutes an adult friendly environment. This referred to a safe space that is informal, comfortable, friendly and convenient. The support and understanding of flexible and accommodating staff was also highlighted by tutors in their assessment of a suitable learning environment for adults.

The training needs of tutors were examined and it was evident that there was a requirement for more counselling-based courses and career guidance training. Tutors interviewed in this study believed that a caring or counselling role had become an integral part of their job and created needs for this kind of staff development. The occupational and personal demands experienced by mature students are likely to impact on their educational experience, requiring substantial tutor support. The comments put forward by tutors indicate that problems affecting the lives of adult students outside of the Institute put a strain on their learning experience. As a result, tutors often find they have to adopt a listening or counselling role, in order to guide and support the individual through the course. It would appear therefore, that some tutors in the participating Institutes are aware of the need for a person-centred approach to teaching and indeed utilised this method as a matter of necessity.

Responses recorded for tutors verified earlier reports made by adult students who identified barriers at both a structural and personal level. Class tutors highlighted the fact that learning
is inhibited by inappropriate traditional teaching methods, lack of resources, insufficient funding and inadequate careers guidance. **These factors are compounded by a learning environment which is structured, formal and where traditional teaching methods dominate in the classroom.**

4.2.2 Institute management

The improvement of provision was considered by managers in relation to a number of issues. One aspect of this was career guidance and support which managers felt need to be more informal as a way of ensuring greater access to advice and support for adult students. **References were made to the importance of this at pre-entry, entry and exit levels where ongoing available guidance can form an essential part of the learning experience by providing information and advice that allows the student to assess and reassess their learning needs.**

Funding was a recurrent issue raised by Institute managers who indicated that adult and community education was particularly affected in funding terms by traditional formulas used to calculate budgets. The lack of stability in adult and community courses means that these costing methods may not be the most effective. Progression routes may be less clear and class size may not always fulfil the requirements set by the Institute. As a result, performance indicators used to assess and evaluate courses in the Institute might be less suitable. **It would appear therefore, that more sensitive and flexible methods are needed if evaluations of adult and community courses are to be interpreted by managers and appropriate comparisons are to be made with other courses.** This lack of fit between more traditional structures and the somewhat unpredictable nature of adult and community education demands a reformulation of current practice. **A belief was expressed by a number of respondents that adult education was not considered as a serious part of Institute business, despite the large numbers enrolling in classes.** This might be explained by the inability of adult provision to be reconciled with existing structures and practices in further education. Developing ways to address this issue may therefore help adult education courses to become a more embedded feature of Institute provision.
Increasing enrolments for adult students was a responsibility that managers felt would be most effectively tackled by building up genuine partnerships with communities as a means of involving adults in learning opportunities that can be perceived as a benefit to themselves and their community. Time, effort and investment were viewed by managers as necessary requirements when trying to engage adults in learning. Offering sample courses in communities was proposed as an initial step that might secure continued involvement in education. **It would appear therefore, that community based provision is considered as the most viable route to increase the numbers of adult students accessing Institute courses.**

The delivery of adult education was examined by managers who assessed the suitability of teaching/learning methods most appropriate to adult learners and what this then meant in terms of the training needs of class tutors. There was a consensus among managers that the responsiveness of the tutor contributed significantly to the learning experience of the adult student. A person-centred approach to teaching was also acknowledged by tutors as most suitable for adult learners. In this respect, educators are required to be flexible, accommodating and supportive of the students’ educational and personal needs. The traditional role of the educator may no longer meet the additional demands placed on the tutor by the learners. **The nature of adult learning means that, factors such as the varying learning styles of adults and their need for a social component in the learning environment have become important considerations in terms of delivery.** Both an awareness and acceptance of this by management is a necessary step to ensuring that staff training is designed with these factors in mind. Changes in training, however, should be matched with coinciding adaptations of current appraisal and monitoring systems.

### 4.3 Community involvement in adult education and considerations for improving adult participation in learning opportunities.

**It could perhaps be argued that one of the clearest trends emerging from the results is the significant role that community based provision plays in planning for adult learning.** Adult students, tutors and Institute managers evidenced this at a number of levels. The nature of adult learning for example was characterised in this study as demand driven, informal, with an emphasis on convenience, both in terms of location and scheduling. The familiar and
often safe community type setting was regularly associated with the most suitable learning environment where adults preferred to access learning opportunities. Tutor and Institute managers confirmed the importance of locally based provision, which offered familiarity and safety, while accommodating the needs of adults interested in education. Recognition of the importance of community involvement in adult education provision was also matched with an awareness of the need for improved planning and an acknowledgement that current procedures for monitoring and evaluating performance may not be the most appropriate. The lack of fit between community type provision and other areas of Institute business was viewed by some managers as highlighting a need for greater acceptance of community and adult education among strategic planners in FE. It would appear that steps need to be taken to ensure that community involvement in adult education provision is afforded the time, commitment and resources by Institute planners in order to maintain and improve on existing provision. The present study suggests therefore, that locally based provision is one of the most appropriate vehicles for recruiting adults into further education courses.

4.4 Institute Strategy

Institute staff were not always able to articulate whether successful practices were the result of Institute strategic intervention or whether they were the outcome from accumulations of individual efforts assisted by professional reflection on organisation and pedagogy. It was, therefore, not always possible to distinguish between formal strategies, informal strategies and structured aspects of positive practice. Given the loosely coupled nature of many educational institutions, it may not always be desirable to make stark distinctions since successful institutional strategies, may, in many cases, emerge from the interactions in Institutes when staff share experiences and offer their observations on practice to colleagues. Nevertheless, it was apparent that staff who were interviewed were, generally, working within a framework of policy.

It was apparent, however, that where adult students, in the study, reported that they had encountered a structured and designed adult learning environment, that Institute strategy had been instrumental in constructing this context. The importance of considering the kinds of environments that will appeal to adults is, then, an important issue for managers to
consider. From a different perspective, however, it is also crucial that the whole Institute environment is accessible to adults and the development of adult centres from which students are unwilling to progress to the main Institute environment is a danger to be avoided.

The study demonstrated the value of strategic partnerships with community organisations in enabling Institutes to make contact with particular bodies of students and tailoring programmes to suit their needs. The appointment of a member of staff as a community liaison officer may be one way in which Institutes can maintain a strategic focus on the need for links with communities.

It is also important to note the link between the findings reported in this report and other key documents that inform adult education policy and practice. There were a number of pertinent issues that arose from the information obtained in the present study that were reflected in the key aims of DENI/T&EA Lifelong Learning document. These referred in particular to improving the participation rates of mature students; recognition and awarding adults’ life experience and knowledge through accreditation; expanding links with groups in the community sector; building partnerships; raising standards in relation to the quality of childcare provision; its accessibility and affordability in line with the national childcare strategy; promoting flexible delivery; which includes advice; guidance and learning support for students; and engage under-represented groups at a community level. Both Learning Works and The Learning Age, which stressed the importance of reaching out to and engaging the ‘learning poor’, also endorsed the last of these points. Community groups may offer the first opportunity for potential learners to access learning and put them on the ladder of education. Furthermore, The Learning Age acknowledged the need for independent, good quality educational guidance that would support and guide students in their decision to take the course or courses most suitable to their needs, so that students are less likely to drop out of courses. DENI/T&EA strategy recognises the importance of good quality guidance and on-going support. In this respect, by 2001, a network of educational guidance provision across NI linking with EGSA and other partners will help ensure that individuals will be able to access information about learning opportunities and get advice about what is most suitable to their needs.
The Recommendations section of this report provides a list of strategies which Institutes may wish to study and which have been identified through an analysis of the evidence provided by students and staff.
5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions serve as a basis for proposing recommendations in the strategic planning of adult education provision. They are intended to inform current practice by highlighting areas for improvement, which might be translated into initiatives through Institute business plans. The recommendations refer to a number of pertinent issues that were indicated by the results and are presented under their corresponding headings. The section in the report from which the recommendations emerge is also included at different points in section 5.

Adult learners

5.1. Recruitment strategies should be designed to more effectively engage under-represented groups such as: (3.1.1.5, 3.1.5.3, 3.1.3)

5.1.1 males from non-selective schools;

5.1.2 adults returning for the first time since leaving compulsory education;

5.1.3 adults affected by the ‘benefits trap’;

5.1.4 potential participants in rural areas; and

5.1.5 adults with a negative perception of education.

5.2 Perceived barriers to learning should be addressed by Institutes, with particular attention being paid to barriers that are logistical in nature. These include: (3.1.5.3, 3.1.5.7, 3.1.3)

5.2.1 improving childminding provision and facilities for parents wanting to access learning opportunities in FE;
5.2.2 providing resources, especially electronic resources in friendly, familiar environments, where adults can develop self-confidence among like-minded peers and where supervised support is available;

5.2.3 reducing fees for courses that are above the level of ABE;

5.2.4 planning course fees to take account of potential students affected by the benefits trap;

5.2.5 addressing distinctions made between part-time and full-time students to ensure adults with part-time student status are not discriminated against by having flexible opening hours for libraries and IT suites; and

5.2.6 employing more imaginative career guidance methods so that adult learners have a clear indication of possible progression routes and the potential benefits of selecting particular courses.

5.3 A clearer awareness of the perceived attitudinal barriers faced by adults returning to education should be developed among Institute staff, in order to improve the quality of guidance and support offered to adult students. Barriers to be taken account of include: (3.1.5.3, 4.2.1)

5.3.1 the external commitments of adult learners;

5.3.2 perceptions of personal ability;

5.3.3 individuals’ self-confidence; and

5.3.4 time management and study skills.

5.4 The importance of physical space in the educational experience of adult learners should be considered by Institutes when planning the provision and delivery of adult
education courses. An adult friendly environment should offer the following: (3.1.5.2, 3.2.1.5, 3.3.3)

5.4.1 a friendly space;

5.4.2 comfortable, homely and informal surroundings;

5.4.3 convenient, familiar locations; and

5.4.4 accommodating, flexible staff.

5.5 Adult learners in this study identified key factors which best defined the most suitable teaching/learning methods for adult students. Based on this, the teaching style most appropriate for adults should be: (3.1.2.2, 3.1.4.1, 3.1.5.6, 4.1)

5.5.1 supportive;

5.5.2 characterised by active learning methods;

5.5.3 flexible and accommodating;

5.5.4 utilising the life experiences of adults in the learning environment;

5.5.5 employing diverse teaching methods; and

5.5.6 adult orientated, with less emphasis placed on traditional techniques.

5.6 Special needs provision requires an accurate assessment of the learners’ social, cognitive, physical and educational needs to try to ensure that there is an appropriate fit between the individual’s needs and the course selected. (3.1.5.6)

5.7 The distribution of special needs courses should be sought in terms of availability and quality of provision across FE Institutes so that there is an appropriate response to
needs identified in a specific area. Particular attention should be paid to educational provision in rural areas for students with disabilities. \(3.1.6.8, 4.1\)

5.8 Disability awareness training should take place in Institutes for staff and students to tackle misconceptions associated with disability and to increase awareness about issues affecting special needs students. \(3.1.6.8, 4.1\)

5.9 The availability of an adult friendly environment should also be central to the provision of special needs courses, with additional attention paid to specific facilities in the learning setting that are dictated by the physical requirements of disabled students. \(3.1.6.8\)

Institutional planning

5.10 Adult education provision should be improved to allow for greater access at locally based centres, where this is financially viable. \(3.2.1.5, 3.3.1, 4.2.1\)

5.11 Genuine partnerships should be sought and developed between FE Institutes and community groups. \(3.2.2.4, 4.2.2\)

5.12 The importance of physical space and attributes of an adult friendly environment should be central to the development and implementation of adult education programmes. The characteristics of an environment that facilitates learning includes: \(3.2.1.5, 3.3.1, 3.3.3\)

5.12.1 comfortable, relaxed surroundings, which are conducive to learning;

5.12.2 respect for adult students;

5.12.3 good pastoral care and support;

5.12.4 locally based provision;
5.12.5 courses which are demand driven; and

5.12.6 flexible management structures.

5.13 Recruitment strategies should be refined to ensure that under-represented groups have opportunities to engage in learning. Steps to ensure that adult education is more inclusive should include: (3.2.2.4, 3.2.2.5, 3.2.2.11, 3.3.1, 3.3.4)

5.13.1 improving advertising in areas where under-represented groups are located;

5.13.2 devising more effective marketing techniques to target under-represented groups;

5.13.3 addressing misconceptions associated with learning among these groups;

5.13.4 establishing learning needs and meeting the demands of potential learners;

5.13.5 building genuine relationships with groups and offering locally based provision; and

5.13.6 maintaining and developing links made with under-represented groups currently engaged in adult and community education programmes.

5.14 Careers guidance should be developed to incorporate more imaginative techniques that can offer adult learners clear and consistent information on learning outcomes and progression routes. (3.2.2.2, 4.2.2)

5.15 As adult education courses are predominantly part-time, special funding and fee remission may be available to part-time students, in relation to childcare provision and transport. (3.1.5.3)
5.16 The training needs of staff who deliver adult education courses should be addressed to include: (3.2.1.4, 4.2.1, 4.2.2)

5.16.1 training on more relevant careers guidance that is appropriate to mature students;

5.16.2 counselling skills that can be used to support and guide the learner through difficulties that influence their educational experience at the Institute; and

5.16.3 ICT training to ensure that adult students can be offered supervised support when developing ICT skills.

5.17 Institute tutors should be offered support and supervision as a forum to assess and re-assess their own professional practice and needs. (3.2.2.7)

5.18 A more flexible model of learning is required to accommodate the volatility of adult and community education. This model should be developed to include: (3.2.2.3, 3.3.1, 3.3.2, 4.3)

5.18.1 a re-assessment within management structures of how learning is defined by adult students, with an increased awareness about the role that accomplishment rather than accreditation plays in the educational experience of adult learners;

5.18.2 a decision-making process that can accommodate the less structured approach needed to develop and initiate adult/community education courses;

5.18.3 more sensitive monitoring and evaluation methods;
5.18.4 more appropriate performance indicators that can translate the success of adult and community courses in terms of traditional indices used for other areas of Institute business; and

5.18.5 financial formulae that are adaptable within unstable and malleable structures which characterise adult and community education.

5.19 The distribution of resources, in particular, electronic resources, should be more consistent and widespread to include outcentres and rural based provision. (3.1.5.7, 3.2.1.2)

5.20 The sharing of good practice should be encouraged across the education and training sectors. (3.2.2.9)

5.21 The introduction of Individual Student Learner Agreements (ISLA’s) should be tailored to accommodate the different needs of adult students and their individual circumstances.

5.22 The quality of accreditation for adult courses should be on a par with the quality of standards for national awards.

5.23 Adult Basic Education should be attended to more closely by Institutes and continuous support should be provided so that; (3.1.7)

5.23.1 Staff delivering ABE should be appropriately trained and experienced in working with ABE students;

5.23.2 Awareness should be promoted within management structures of the role of ABE in adult and community education in the present climate of lifelong learning;

5.23.3 Strategies should be developed at management level to promote ABE within the community and vehicles for dissemination should be utilised to dispel
myths about basic education and promote the role of ABE in education and domestic environments; and

5.23.4 Institutes should be encouraged to accept ABE as a serious part of Institute business, alongside other more traditional courses which have proven financial worth.
6. References


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7. APPENDICES
Appendix 1

Addressing the Needs of Adult Learners

CONFIDENTIAL

Dear Sir/Madam,

The University of Ulster is carrying out research on behalf of the Department of Education for Northern Ireland. The following questionnaire is designed to provide information that will help the Department of Education address the needs of Adult Learners in the future.

It would be greatly appreciated, if you would take the time to complete this questionnaire and to answer the questions as fully as possible.

The information that you provide will not be seen or used by anyone other than the researchers involved in the project. The researchers will treat all the information in the strictest confidence. The researchers will ensure that no individual will ever be identified.

In anticipation, let me thank you for your co-operation.

Further and Higher Educational Research Unit
University of Ulster
To be completed by those aged 25 or over. If you are not yet 25, please return this questionnaire uncompleted.

Please answer the following questions.

1. State the name of the college you are attending

2. Sex
   Male ☐ Female ☐

3. Date of Birth
   Day ☐ Month ☐ Year ☐

4. Marital Status
   Single ☐
   Married/Cohabiting ☐
   Divorced/Separated ☐
   Widowed ☐

5. What is your present status?
   Employed ☐
   Unemployed ☐
   Looking after home/family ☐
   Student ☐
   Retired ☐
   Other ☐

If “Other” please specify

If “Employed” please state occupation as fully as you can

Is this
   Full-time ☐
   Part-time ☐
6. Do have any dependent children? (i.e. children under 16 and those aged 16-18 in full-time education).

   Yes ☐ No ☐
   If ‘Yes’ how many?

7. Do you have any other dependants who live with you?

   Yes ☐ No ☐
   If “Yes” who are they? (e.g., parents or grandparents).

8. Are you a Lone Parent?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

9. What type of accommodation do you live in?

   Owner-occupied ☐
   Rented ☐
   Other ☐

   If “Other” please specify

10. At what age did you leave full-time education?

11. Type of school attended?

   Selective (Grammar) ☐
   Non-selective (Secondary) ☐
12. Have you completed any other course since leaving Secondary/Grammar school (excluding the current course)?

   Yes ☐  No ☐

   If “Yes” please specify
   Location
   Course
   Date completed

13. What is the title of the course you are currently undertaking?


14. If the course is not in the College building, where is it located (e.g. Community Centre)?


15. How many hours of tuition do you have per week? (i.e. Contact with course tutors).

   1 hour or less ☐
   More than 1 hour, up to and including 2 hours ☐
   More than 2 hours, up to and including 3 hours ☐
   More than 3 hours, up to and including 4 hours ☐
   More than 4 hours, up to and including 5 hours ☐
   Other ☐

   If “Other” please specify


16. What distance do you have to travel to the course?

   1 mile or less ☐
   More than 1 mile, up to and including 2 miles ☐
   More than 2 miles, up to and including 3 miles ☐
   More than 3 miles, up to and including 4 miles ☐
More than 4 miles, up to and including 5 miles
Other

If “Other” please specify

17. What mode of transport do you use to get to the course?

Own Car
Bus
Train
Bicycle
Walk
Other

If “Other” please specify

18. Did you have to pay fees for the course?

Yes    No

If ‘Yes’ how much per year?

£

What methods of fee payment did you choose?

One lump sum
By Instalments over the term(s)
At the beginning of each term
Other

If “Other” please specify

What other methods were offered to you?

Please specify

If employed, did your employer contribute to the course fees?

Yes    No
19. Did you take part in an interview with a member of college staff to discuss your previous achievements and capabilities?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, what kinds of advice and support did you find most helpful?


20. Is there a college tutor to whom you relate and who gives you good feedback and guidance?

Yes ☐ No ☐

21. Did the college specify any entry requirements for the course?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If ‘Yes’ what were they?


22. How were you made aware of the existence of the course?

It was advertised in a local newspaper ☐
A friend told me about it ☐
I attended an Open Day ☐
I saw it in the college prospectus ☐
I received a leaflet “through the door” ☐
Other ☐

If “Other” please specify


23. Please rate the items below, indicating how important they were in influencing your decision to take the course?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not very Important</th>
<th>Not at all Important</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was interested in the subject</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friends are attending the course</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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</table>
I wanted to learn more about the subject
It will help me get on
I can make friends there
It gets me out of the house
Catching up on learning missed at school
It relates to my job

24. Please rate the items below in terms of their importance in relation to the benefits you expect to get from the course?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not very Important</th>
<th>Not at all Important</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improvements in effectiveness at work</td>
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<td>Improvements in effectiveness at home</td>
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<td>It will help me to help my children</td>
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<td>It will help me to help my community</td>
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<td>It will help me to help others</td>
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<td>It will improve my confidence</td>
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<td>It will help me communicate more effectively</td>
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<td>It will help me form friendships</td>
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<td>It will provide access to a qualification</td>
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<td>It will improve my knowledge base</td>
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<td>It will refresh my knowledge and skills</td>
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<td>It will encourage me to do other courses</td>
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<td>It will allow me to acquire new skills</td>
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<td>I will be able to learn about new technologies</td>
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<td>It will help improve my job prospects</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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If "Other" please specify

Human and physical resources:
25. What kinds of learning resources (e.g. college library/library outside of college/work areas/resource centre/community facility/resource) did you find most helpful in assisting your study


What kinds of support did you receive from your tutors that assisted your study.

Did you find support from your peers (friends on the course) helpful. If so, could you please explain how it was of assistance?

26. Please rate the items below in terms of their importance in relation to the barriers that may have prevented you attending other courses previously?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
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<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not very important</th>
<th>Not at all important</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No child minder</td>
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<td>Fees were too expensive</td>
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<td>Course location was inconvenient</td>
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<td>Course scheduling was inconvenient</td>
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<td>Nowhere to study outside of course</td>
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<td>Too much other work</td>
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<td>Too many other commitments</td>
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<td>Learning materials too expensive (e.g. books)</td>
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<td>Travel difficulties were too great</td>
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<td>Opposition from partner/family</td>
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<td>Fear of inability to cope</td>
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<td>Did not wish to be seen entering college</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opposition from peers</td>
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<td>Previous negative school experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unrewarding experiences at other college courses</td>
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</table>

27. Please rate the items below with regard to your experiences of the course so far?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is enough personal tuition</td>
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<td>The tutors are helpful</td>
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<td>The classes are too long</td>
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</table>
Materials are presented interestingly
We are given time to do work on our own
There are too many in the classes
A wide range of subjects is covered
Material is detailed enough
There is easy access to computers
Course content is too advanced
Much guidance and support is given

28. Do you think you have chosen the right course for you?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If “yes”, why is it the right course for you?

If “No” why did you finish up doing the wrong course?

I was given the wrong information by the college ☐
I misunderstood the information given by the college ☐
The course wasn’t explained in enough detail by the college ☐
The course I really wanted was not provided ☐
I didn’t fully appreciate the work involved in doing the course ☐
Other ☐

If “Other” please specify

What type of course would you prefer?

29. What do you intend to do after the course is completed?
If you wish to provide us with further information, either expanding on a previously asked question or drawing our attention to something new, please use the space below to do so. Before doing so however, would you please check that you have not missed any of the earlier questions.
Many thanks for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Appendix 2

Interview schedule for students
Why did you decide to return to education?

Why did you select this course?

Were there any key issues that arose before joining this course?
If so what were they?

What do you expect to gain from the course?

What future plans in education do you have after taking this course?

How would you describe your experience of FE in this college to date?

In what ways do you think this learning experience could be improved?

Interview schedule for special needs adults
What reasons did you have for taking the course?

Tell me about the things you have done and learnt on the course?

How has the course helped you in their everyday life?

What would you like to do after this course has ended?

Interview schedule for representatives working in the area of special needs provision
What kinds of choice are available to clients with learning difficulties?

How are the courses related to occupational progression?

What opportunities are available for personal and social development?
Interview schedule for managers
- What kinds of provision in the areas mentioned below already exists for adult learners in this college?
  - guidance and counselling throughout the learning process and for future progression
  - tutorial support
  - course availability and accessibility
- How can provision in these areas be improved?
- How does the college development plan relate to adult learning?
- How can the college increase the number of people enrolling in adult education courses?
- Who does the college see as underrepresented learners and what strategies does the college employ to contact and engage underrepresented learners?
- What are the teaching/learning methods best suited to adult learners?
- What staff development activities have taken place to address the suitability of teaching/learning methods for adult learners?
- How are teaching/learning methods used in adult education classes monitored and evaluated?
- How can this college benefit from the successful experiences of agencies and other institutions?
- How is new technology used to promote learning and assist learners?
- What do you see as your role in addressing adult learners needs?

Interview schedules for tutors
- Assess the suitability of your teaching environment and explain how it related to the needs of adult learners.
- What kinds of resources are there available?
- What kinds of personal/professional development have you found relevant to your professional role?
- What kinds of staff development do you need?
- What inhibits and facilitates adult learning in this institution?
Interview schedule for Education and Library Board Officers

- Describe the historical context of adult education provision within this Board?
- What were the priority themes identified by this ELB and how were these addressed?
- What objectives were set for the themes, in relation to your own role and function within the Board?
- How successful was the Board in achieving these objectives?
- Did you work in partnership with anyone else in the Board to achieve the objectives?
- Did the Board have a strategic plan specific to the development to adult education? If so, how did FE colleges fit within the aims and objectives of the plan?
- How did incorporation impact on your role and what was the Board’s response to this development?
- If you were given the opportunity to have responsibilities for adult education in the Board again, what changes would you make to your role?
- How have previous strategic developments in adult education in Northern Ireland informed current practice and policy?

Interview schedule for managers: Revisiting the Issues

Could you provide comments on the following issues which arose from comments made by students?

Logistical issues
  - childminding
  - funding course fees
  - transport

Personal and attitudinal issues
  - age, fear of failure, confidence, reservations about ability

Resources
  - computers
  - library

Support and guidance
  - progression to further study or employment
  - personal tutoring and support
Appendix 3

FIGURE 4: Graph showing adult students’ expectations of participation on the course.

FIGURE 5: Graph showing adult students’ expectations of participation on the course.
FIGURE 6: Graph showing adult students’ ratings of barriers that may have prevented prior participation on college courses.

FIGURE 7: Graph showing adult students’ ratings of barriers that may have prevented prior participation on college courses.
Figure 8: Graph showing adult students’ evaluations of their experience on the course to date.