REFLECTIONS ON GUIDANCE AND LEARNING

a study of adults' experience

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A STUDY OF ADULTS' EXPERIENCE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background

This report describes the project which was funded and undertaken by NFER on adult guidance and learning, presents findings and discusses their implications. The overall rationale for the project was to ascertain how important and influential formal and informal guidance and learning support is in the learning culture and experience of adults.

This issue is pertinent for several reasons. Firstly, owing to the profound structural changes which have taken place in recent years in both industry and society, there has been a considerable growth in adults taking up learning opportunities.[1] For example, adult learners now account for three-quarters of the students in the further education sector[2] in England. The increase in adult participation in education throws into sharp relief the potentially crucial role of guidance in helping people to identify appropriate courses and in supporting them during the learning process. Secondly, existing research covered adult learners' individual experience of education and guidance less comprehensively than curricular, organisational and funding issues. As a result, there was a lack of good, research-based evidence on adults' in-depth feelings about their learning programmes, the critical incidents which they experienced during the learning process, how they coped with these and what role formal and informal guidance, and other forms of support, played in helping them to develop and progress.

Thus there was a strong rationale for conducting further learner-based research into the role of guidance in the entirety of adults' learning experiences. The project aimed to contribute to our general understanding of what helps adults to take full advantage of learning opportunities and to throw further light on the key questions of how and to what extent guidance really does make a difference.

Furthermore, the research undertaken has relevance because of the growing interest shown by European and other countries in supporting and encouraging the

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[1]   According to GREAT BRITAIN. DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION (1995). *The Government's Expenditure Plans 1995–96 to 1997–98*, the full-time equivalent number of adults students (people aged over 19) in further education increased by over 17 per cent between 1989–90 and 1993–94. London: HMSO, Cm. 2810, p 46.

[2]   FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL (1995). *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England*. Chief Inspector's Annual Report. 1994–95. Coventry: FEFCE, p 18.

development of a culture of lifelong learning in order to enhance personal development and adaptability and ensure an ongoing supply of appropriately educated, trained and motivated individuals to meet changing labour force requirements. Longworth and Davies (1996)[3] outline some of the main steps being taken world-wide to promote lifelong learning, including the European Commission's European Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996 and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's plan to support human development and lifelong learning.

In Britain, work in this area is now supported by a set of Lifetime Learning targets which form part of the National Targets for Education and Training. In addition, as Gibbs and Maguire (1995)[4] note, the Department for Education and Employment is encouraging Training and Enterprise Councils and Local Enterprise Companies to develop a strategic approach to lifelong learning.

Whilst such strategies and initiatives are important, lifelong learning – the long-term process of stimulating intellectual interest, educational achievement, skills development and acquisition of qualifications – is unlikely to become a reality unless people have access to appropriate guidance and learning support. This may help them to take up relevant courses, maintain motivation, complete their courses and identify suitable progression routes and pathways to other learning opportunities. Accordingly, there is a valid and convincing case for undertaking further research into adults' learning experiences, and the role played by guidance.

1.2   Aims and methods

The specific aims of the project were as follows:

♦   To explore adults' reflections on their learning experiences and the critical incidents or interventions which have had an impact on their entry to study and their subsequent progress and success.

♦   To help assess, by qualitative means, the role and impact of guidance – relative to other course, college and non-college factors – on adults' learning progress and outcomes.

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[3]   LONGWORTH, N. and DAVIES, W.K. (1996). *Lifelong Learning. New Vision, New Implications, New Roles for People, Organisations, Nations and Communities in the 21st Century*. London: Kogan Page.

[4]   GIBBS, B. and MAGUIRE, M. (1995). 'Lifelong Learning and Individual Commitment', *Training Tomorrow*, 9, 7, October.

◆ To provide evidence which would contribute to a greater understanding being achieved of guidance and its place and impact within adult learning programmes in British and other European contexts.

It was decided that a qualitative, illuminative study was most appropriate for undertaking in-depth research into whether learners felt that the guidance and support available met their needs.

1.3 Location

The project was carried out between June and December 1994. Three further education (FE) colleges, located in a 30-kilometre stretch of the Thames Valley from west London to the County of Berkshire, participated in the project. Each of the colleges was multi-sited. About 70 per cent of their enrolments were accounted for by adults (people aged over 19 years), most of whom were studying part-time.

The area selected for the study is an interesting one because it typified the economic boom of the early 1980s, when it was known as 'Silicon Valley' because of the large number of IT and control technology companies which set up or relocated there. Like many areas it suffered company closures and job losses during the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The potential adult clientele includes people working in the retail, service, financial and technology sectors as well as women returners, unemployed craftsmen and refugees.

1.4 Research methods and coverage

The initial phase of the project involved a review of recent literature on adult learning and guidance. This was followed by a programme of fieldwork in the three colleges. The data collection methods used included semi-structured interviews and group discussions with a range of adult learners and interviews with college staff. It was decided to focus exclusively on adults who were enrolled on vocational courses which led to a qualification for whom guidance, or the lack of it, might have serious implications and consequences. A total of 60 adults were involved in the project. Forty-five adults on Access, Business Administration, Electrical Installation, Health and Care, Hairdressing, Beauty and Fashion, and Starting Again courses participated in seven group discussions. In addition, one-to-one interviews were carried out with 30 people, half of whom had participated in the group discussions. They were selected to represent a range of courses and different modes of study and include

adults with a reasonable exposure to the learning process rather than new entrants to courses. The characteristics of the interviewees were as follows:

Gender: 12 were male and 18 were female.

Age: 20 to 29 years – 9
30 to 39 years – 14
40 to 49 years – 5
50 to 59 years – 2

Ethnicity: six adults were from minority ethnic groups including Asian and Afro-Caribbean.

Employment status: 20 were unemployed and the rest had jobs or were self-employed.

Study mode: 17 were part-time and the rest were full-time. The average number of hours per week for which the learners attended college were six for part-time students (the range was 4.5 to 10 contact hours) and 18 for full-time students (the range was 14 to 25 contact hours). Eighteen studied during the daytime and the rest in the evening.

Status: 17 had family, including childcare, responsibilities and three of these were single parents.

The adults were currently enrolled on **ten different courses** as follows: Access, Bricklaying, Business Administration, Early Childhood Education, Electrical Installation, Fashion, Hairdressing, Plumbing, Sports Therapy and Starting Again. All were studying for vocational qualifications and certificates.

Most of the interviewee sample (22) had completed some form of post-compulsory education or training and just over half (17) had gained qualifications before joining the course, including academic and vocational qualifications. About one-third (11) had undertaken courses directly before embarking on their current programmes of study.

The 30 interviewees had a wide range of occupational experience. Their current or most recent jobs included shop assistant, secretary, builder, fitter, childcare assistant and computer programmer.

When the characteristics of the interviewee sample were compared with a profile of the 25,000 adults who annually make enquiries about learning opportunities, it was found that they were broadly similar: the sample included a slightly larger proportion of females (60 compared to 58 per cent), a larger proportion of younger adults (77 compared to 70 per cent) and a smaller proportion of people in paid employment (33 compared to 38 per cent).[5]

A total of **12 staff** were interviewed across the three colleges. The staff included senior managers with strategic responsibility for planning and providing learning opportunities for adults, heads of department, course leaders and guidance personnel.

1.5   Report structure

The structure of the report is based on the **landmark experiences** of adults applying to, and enrolling at, college, starting and progressing with their courses and deciding what to do next. Section 2 examines adults' reasons for wanting to take up a course of study and reports on the provision of guidance for them on entry to college. Adults' experience of learning and their use of different sources of on-course guidance are investigated in Section 3. In Section 4, findings are presented on learners' plans for the future and the role guidance played in this decision-making process. The final section draws out key messages and issues which may help to inform colleges' strategies for supporting adults and ensuring that their learning experience meets their needs.

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5   NIACE (1993). *The Learning Imperative. National Education and Training Targets and Adult Learners. A NIACE Policy Discussion Paper.* Leicester: NIACE, p 28.

2.   PRE-COURSE ENTRY DECISION MAKING AND GUIDANCE

2.1   Learning and studying: influences and reasons

At the outset, it is important to understand the background factors which influence adults' decisions to take up a course of study. This will help to increase awareness not only of the source of their aims and ambitions but also of the extent to which they might need guidance and support. This research found that the critical incidents which acted as a spur to people joining courses brought about changes in personal circumstances which made people think seriously about their future. Redundancy and reduced dependency of children were the two main incidents which had brought people to an existential crossroads where they asked themselves 'What do I do next with my life?'

Other critical incidents which came to light were the personal crisis caused by the break-up of relationships and the economic, political and social pressures to leave country of origin. As a result of these incidents, people wanted to adopt new roles and to prove to themselves and others that they could achieve. Education had personal relevance to the extent that they regarded it as one way of helping them to respond positively to recent changes in their lives and manage the transition to a better future. In other cases, people had thought for several years about taking a course, sometimes to compensate for a lack of educational success earlier in life, and decided that now was the right time. Interestingly, one college manager observed that adults were unlike many teenagers who had drifted to colleges: *'They have a reason to be there.'* The specific reasons and influences for studying and learning identified by the adults who participated in this research are presented and discussed below.

Adults interviewed in this study gave **three main reasons** for deciding to embark on a course of study. These were as follows:

- To gain employment.
- To improve long-term career prospects.
- To enhance personal development and change lifestyle.

Taylor and Spencer (1994) also found from their research that job-related and personal/self-development factors were the main incentives which encouraged individuals to embark on education and training.[6]

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[6]   TAYLOR, S. and SPENCER, L. (1994). *Individual Commitment to Lifetime Learning: Individuals' Attitudes. Report on the Qualitative Phase* (Research Series No 31). Sheffield: Employment Department, pp 18-19.

It is clear that **employment-related reasons** were a major impetus behind adults deciding to take up learning opportunities. In some cases, people wanted to learn new ways of applying existing skills as well as enlarging their skills base in order to get a job in the immediate future. Furthermore, gaining certification was regarded as a priority by many adults, as the following comments from unemployed men taking an NVQ in Electrical Installation indicate:

- *'I've got no qualifications. I've come back to get them.'*
- *'Anywhere you go, they ask you what qualifications you've got. I haven't got any.'*
- *'I need qualifications to get a better chance and better pay'.*

Other interviewees also reflected that in a period of economic recession and industrial restructuring, characterised by the 'downsizing' and 'delayering' of companies and the consequent loss of jobs, it was essential for people to have qualifications and certificates in order to get back into employment. Living on income support, they were hopeful that the courses they were studying would enable them *'to get back into the market and earn money'* and *'open doors and increase options'*. A particular illustration of this concerned four Asian women on a Starting Again course who were aiming to improve their English language skills and obtain office skills in order to gain an administrative or secretarial job.

There were several examples of people deciding to improve their **long-term career prospects**, the second main reason for joining a course. Five people with jobs were studying to get qualifications in order to gain a higher-grade job. For example, one person studying for an Advanced Diploma in Childhood Education said that she wanted to take on more responsibility at work and saw the course as a route to gaining promotion. Another person on the same course said that she had enrolled *'to prove to myself that I can get into management'*. Others pointed out that undertaking training was written into their job descriptions and said that they were taking courses to fulfil this obligation and enhance their skills. Most of the Access Course students wanted to improve their career prospects by going to university to get a degree. Other examples of career development were as follows: one freelance hairdresser wanted to become a sports therapist; one shop worker was dissatisfied with her current post and wanted to gain a higher paid job in office administration; and one woman wanted to start her own fashion business. Each person regarded their course as instrumental in helping them achieve their career goals.

The third main reason given by adults for deciding to enrol on a course was related to achieving **personal ambition and potential**. Their motivation was rooted in an attempt to enhance personal development and realise self-fulfilment. This was particularly true of women returners whose children were now at school and who wanted '*to get into the big wide world*', as one of them expressed it. They viewed their college courses as a bridge between home and work and as a way of helping them to change their lifestyle. As one woman rightly observed, '...*there is more of a continual reassessment of life nowadays*'. Several women considered that their course was enriching their lives and helping to build up their confidence. As one of the Access students remarked, study was a welcome stimulus because '...*I now think education is valuable. I don't see it as a series of rewards, I am always hungry to learn the next thing. It's boredom as well, I get bored.*' Such comments confirm the point made by NIACE that adults '*usually have complex motivations and objectives in engaging in learning*'.[7]

Family and friends were identified as the main influences on decisions to join a course. Work colleagues, supervisors and, in some cases, staff in Job Clubs, Job Centres or the Careers Service were also said to have been influential in this respect. Most of the adults applied to college with a fairly clear idea of the subject area they wanted to study. The information and guidance available and used during the application process and on entry to college is examined next.

2.2   Information and guidance

The main sources of information on courses used by the people participating in the study were as follows:

- Word of mouth, including recommendations by friends and colleagues.

- Interviews with staff in agencies such as Job Centres, the Careers Service or Job Clubs.

- Printed material produced by the colleges, including course leaflets and prospectuses.

- College staff, including advice given when these adults were doing previous courses .

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[7]   NIACE (op. cit.), p 12.

♦ Adverts and articles in newspapers.

Adults' views on the adequacy of the printed course information were mixed. Half of the interviewees felt that they could not comment, mainly because their recollection of the literature was sketchy, or because they had not seen any printed course information. Most of those who had seen information thought that it was adequate and clearly written in language that they could understand. In contrast, learners taking the NVQ in Electrical Installation considered the information provided to be 'obscure and irrelevant' because it did not show how different parts of the programme were linked.

Several suggestions were made about how colleges could improve the printed information they provided on courses. It was suggested that the information should:

♦ promote colleges as adult learning environments, using photographs where appropriate, in order to dispel the widely held assumption that they are mainly places for 16–19-year-olds;

♦ provide more detail on the content of modules and the range of coursework covered;

♦ give a realistic indication of what is expected and how hard the course is;

♦ explain what qualifications, especially NVQs, are;

♦ outline more clearly course fee concessions, including trade discounts, and opportunities for the self-employed to get tax relief on the cost of vocational courses;

♦ give an indication of what additional costs, such as books, kit and clothes, might be incurred;

♦ highlight the relevance of courses to particular careers;

♦ be translated into Tamil as well as Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu;

♦ provide biographies of successful students.

This indicates that there is a need for more effective marketing of courses to adults. A useful suggestion made by one interviewee was that colleges in the Thames Valley should advertise their courses in *Skyport*, Heathrow Airport's newspaper. He added that, as the airport was a major local employer (54,000 people work there), a large potential source of adult learners could be targeted this way. Another interviewee

thought that colleges should augment their marketing by placing more advertisements in trade journals.

College managers said that they were attempting to diversify their course marketing to meet the interests of local people by leafleting community centres and organisations, by running 'roadshows' during Adult Learners' Week, by advertising on local radio and by organising public demonstrations of students' work such as fashion shows.

With adults in mind, managers identified the following 'selling points' for the courses offered by their colleges. They claimed to have the following:

◆　　　committed and supportive staff;

◆　　　up-to-date accommodation and equipment;

◆　　　courses which would enhance self-development and career prospects;

◆　　　regular contact with local employers.

They reflected that more intelligence and information was required to increase their awareness of changing local demographic patterns and to ascertain the learning needs of different groups in the community such as single parents, older adults, the unwaged and ethnic minorities as well as the employees in local companies.

These comments suggest that there was room for improvement in the marketing of courses to provide adults with the level of information and explanation which they required. It is worth noting that, having researched pre-course contact and transition in some depth, McGivney (1996) reported that *'a disturbing number of students enter programmes with insufficient knowledge of and preparation for what it will entail'*.[8]

As expected, adults' contact with college staff during the application and enrolment processes varied. At this stage, guidance was provided through informal contact with college staff, group sessions and individual interviews. Whilst two-thirds of the sample had received guidance at this stage, the remainder said that they had not sought or received any guidance and explained that this was because they had already made up their minds about what course they wanted to do. The people who had participated in group sessions with academic staff said that they were an informative

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[8] McGIVNEY, V. (1996). *Staying or Leaving the Course: Non Completion and Retention of Mature Students in Further and Higher Education.* Leicester: NIACE, p 121.

and efficient way of finding out more about courses and felt that colleges should provide more sessions such as these. Whilst only six people claimed to have been interviewed on an individual basis by college staff, just one person regretted not having had a one-to-one interview saying that *'there should have been one to discuss aspirations and needs'*.

2.3 Enrolment

Whilst enrolling on courses had been straightforward for some, others had found the process to be a dispiriting experience. For example, at one college, a group of four adults on the Business Administration course complained that *'enrolment was hopeless'* because the logistics of finding the right teachers were formidable and, once located, they did not know enough about the course. They also pointed out that the college required payment of the registration and course fees on the day of enrolment, which they had not expected and found difficult to pay. One of the group thought that enrolment was poorly organised, adding that *'I sat all day with my young daughter, it took so long'*. At another college, a group of eight adults revealed that when they were attempting to find out about courses, *'the tutors were very busy, we needed more staff to talk to'*.

Two-thirds of the interviewees qualified for whole or part course fee remission because they were unwaged and in receipt of social benefits. However, they were expected to pay a registration fee of between £10 and £20. They pointed out that they could not have afforded to pay full course fees of £200 or more and acknowledged that the fee remission policies enabled them to take up learning opportunities. Six of the interviewees paid their own fees and, in four cases, employers paid them.

Some of the adults remarked on how their new status as a student was, in itself, an important source of motivation. Nowhere was this better expressed than the person who proclaimed: *'It's great going out and telling people you're a student. It's the kudos involved. Flaunt it!'*

The quality of the learning experience and the level of support and guidance provided during the course for adults attending the three colleges are examined in the next section.

3.   ON-COURSE GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

3.1   Induction

Nearly two-thirds of the interviewees (19) reported that they had received an induction to the college and/or course. Of these, 13 thought that the induction was adequate. Whilst six interviewees said that they received no induction, five could not remember if they had. The induction provided ranged from a one-day introduction to the college and its services to a one-week introduction to the course, including the learning methods used and a talk from student counsellors. The main criticisms of induction were that it:

+   was repetitive and lacked focus;

+   did not fully explain what the course entailed;

+   did not explain how the qualifications being studied for compared with other similar qualifications and for what careers they were relevant.

Interestingly, learners on a nursery nursing course had suggested to staff that an induction module should be introduced for care courses. This idea had been accepted, and the module had been developed and was currently being piloted.

Some of the college staff were not convinced that the induction provided was effective and were of the opinion that its format required further examination. Here it is worth noting that in her research McGivney (1996) found that several sources had suggested '*that induction needs to be a continuing process rather than a single activity at the beginning of a student's experience*'.[9]

3.2   Learning experiences

The learning experiences of the adults who participated in the study were largely positive. They said that they liked the methods of study that were used which were interactive and made them feel fully part of the learning process. A typical comment made by one student was '...*we are encouraged to particpate*', whilst another said that the course '*helps you to interact more and prepare for work*'. Adults also appreciated the way that teachers often used life and work experience as a method of introducing them to areas of study and helping them to learn.

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[9]   McGIVNEY (op. cit.), p. 128.

3.2.1 Methods of teaching and learning

The main methods used were lectures, projects, assignments, discussions and practical demonstrations. Adults, who learned in pairs, in groups and on their own, said that they particularly appreciated the support obtained from fellow learners in a group situation. Hand-outs providing key facts were appreciated. This is an interesting finding in light of the following point made by the Further Education Unit: '*Staff appointed to teach mature learners must have a particular sensitivity to the adult status of their clientele, and need to adopt teaching and learning strategies which build upon the experiences which learners will have gained throughout life.*'[10]

The staff interviewed emphasised that it was important to realise that adults were not an homogenised group and that their individual requirements had to be taken into account. They also explained that it was important to use teaching and learning methods which built up adults' confidence and self-reliance. For example, one head of department stressed that it was '*important for tutors to reinforce ability and to give them a can-do attitude*'. Staff said that initially it was usual to provide a lot of support followed by a gradual empowerment of the individual to take more initiative and a more active role in the learning process. Staff commented that the experience of teaching adults was invigorating because most of them were well-motivated, had tremendous enthusiasm, and, as one head of school put it, '*they will challenge you*'. A course leader observed that as adults progressed in their courses, they moved '*from apprehension to assertiveness*'.

Although a few adults had used learning packs, most had not been greatly exposed to open, flexible or distance learning. It is worth reflecting that, given that these methods expect participants to take a major responsibility for their own learning, it is doubtful whether most of the adults included in this study could have successfully used such opportunities without an exceptionally high level of back-up and support. One head of department commented that some students did not like self-directed learning because '*they feel that they don't get enough learning reinforcement*'. An interesting observation made by one learner was that some adults were frightened of failure and wanted the security of a college-based learning culture. Similarly, an interviewee who had heard that his college was planning to introduce more resource-based learning thought that the education offered would deteriorate as a result because '*you need guidance when learning*'.

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[10] FEU (1994). *Securing Adequate Provision for Adult Learners*. London: FEU, p 29.

3.2.2 Workload

In most cases, the workload was considered to be manageable, although adults with family responsibilities emphasised that it was often demanding and could be stressful. A typical comment was: '...*doing the course takes up a lot of time and I have kids, so it's a case of juggling priorities.*' Another observation was made by a self-employed builder who reckoned that the workload on his Bricklaying course was '*about right, although sometimes it clashes with the job*'. Adults said that the courses were challenging enough to maintain their motivation and helped them to gain confidence, skills and knowledge, though some wanted a greater variety of topics to be covered. Where training in study skills – including how to read texts efficiently and extract key points – was provided, this was valued. This was not surprising given that some of the adults had not been involved in formal education for several years and felt that their approaches to learning were a 'bit rusty'.

3.2.3 Scope for improvement

The learners also identified aspects of their courses which they felt did not wholly meet their needs and could be improved. For example, when one of the courses was modularised, participants noted that teachers were inconsistent because they were uncertain about what assignments to set. A point made by several learners was that, when arranging work, staff ought to liaise more closely to ensure that assignments were spread out more evenly throughout the course so that they could organise their work more efficiently. Another observation was that some courses had 'hidden' hours in that participants were expected to complete assignments in their own time but this had not been made clear before they started the course. As a result, '*you weren't quite sure what you had let yourself in for*', as one Access student put it. Furthermore, the specifications given for assignments were said to be sometimes unclear or misleading.

More specific feedback on the learning process is provided below. The group of learners on a Business Administration course, which was delivered in two-hour blocks, felt that this was too long a period in which to concentrate. They also thought that the teacher–learner ratio of 1:20 was too high and should be reduced to 1:10. Similarly, adults on a Hairdressing course complained that classes of between 30 and 50 were too large. The group studying Electrical Installation wanted the opportunity to gain more practical knowledge and hands-on experience, including going on work placements.

Adults emphasised that the organisation and timing of courses was crucial to their starting and continuing on courses. They appreciated that the **timetabling** of their courses took into consideration their childcare responsibilities. For example, most of the daytime courses were timetabled between 9.30 a.m. and 3.30 p.m., which allowed learners to take children to nursery or school in the morning and collect them in the afternoon.

Overall, learners felt that they had made good progress on their courses. A few expressed concern about whether the qualifications they were studying for would be understood and accepted by employers.

3.3 Guidance and support

On the whole, course leaders and their colleagues were considered to be good at teaching and providing support. The adults made it very clear that contact with teachers was a central ingredient to their learning experience. They explained that they valued having a high level of contact with teachers because in many cases they had been out of formal education for many years and, as a result, they needed to build up confidence in how to learn and having open access to teachers enabled them to gain the help they wanted. A few interviewees thought that teachers were sometimes patronising and did not fully understand their needs. A telling observation made by one person was that staff should realise '*we're not kids, they are dealing with adults who may have grievances and need respect*'.

It should be noted that the adults referred to the teaching staff as **tutors**. It was clear from the interviews and group discussions that the tutor played a dual role as teacher and as an adviser. Whilst in the former role staff acted as imparters of knowledge, as facilitators of learning and as skills trainers, in the tutor role they provided guidance and support relating to academic, pastoral, financial and career issues or referred students to other college services as necessary. **A key finding from this study was that course tutors were pivotal in linking and integrating the learning and guidance processes.** Their knowledge, experience, support and encouragement enabled adults to engage with the learning culture as a whole and to make progress in their particular courses. Adults regarded the relationship with tutors as vital to their development because it gave them a point of reference and advice on how to plan their work and how to study in addition to helping to solve problems and difficulties as they arose.

Research undertaken in Scotland also identified what was called the frontline guidance role played by course tutors and noted that there were few opportunities for relevant staff development to help tutors fulfil this demanding role.[11] Similarly, the Further Education Development Agency drew the following conclusion on the role of the tutor from research carried out on supporting adult part-time learners: *'Most of the learners in the sample indicated that their course or personal tutor was their major source of support and in most cases, this was likely to be the class teacher. Indeed, for many learners, the class teacher may be the only member of college staff with whom they have any contact. Training and support for this role should be provided, particularly if those staff are part-time and themselves unfamiliar with the college, its procedures and the learning support offer.'*[12] The college managers interviewed by NFER acknowledged that, whilst many staff were experienced in teaching adults, there was a need to examine whether further professional development was required in this respect.

In most cases, guidance and support were built into courses through the provision of individual or group **tutorials.** Some staff offered one-to-one tutorials on request via a booking system and these were taken up. Where tutorials were not available, staff provided help on a more informal and *ad hoc* basis. An Access Course Coordinator in one of the colleges drew attention to the importance of regular tutorials, saying *'...the tutorial is the key forum for guidance'.* The Head of Education Services at another college thought that the tutorial system could be strengthened and made more consistent by providing appropriate professional development for staff, some of whom had not been trained to carry out this crucial role.

Another aspect of tutor support was to provide and discuss **feedback** on learners' progress. This was found to be less than comprehensive with just under half of the interviewees reporting that tutors regularly provided feedback on their progress either on an informal basis or in tutorials. There was a request for more and quicker feedback, including reasons for the grades or marks given for essays and assignments. A person on an Early Childhood Education course greatly valued the one-to-one commentary given on completed assignments, which, she said, *'helps to give confirmation that you're doing all right and boosts confidence'.* Elsewhere, a learner on a Brickwork course thought that the system of four-week targets set and reviewed individually by the tutor was very effective.

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[11] MUNN, P. (1994). *Adult Education: Participation, Guidance and Progression.* Interchange No 29. Edinburgh: Scottish Office Education Department.

[12] FURTHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT AGENCY (1995). *Supporting Adult Part-Time Learners in Further Education Colleges.* London: FEDA, p 7.

What forms of **guidance and support** did adults most frequently request? These were as follows:

♦ Course-related, e.g. explanations of course content and help in understanding theory and ideas.

♦ Study-related, e.g. how to structure and write essays.

♦ Assessment-related, e.g. clarification of assignment objectives and explanation of assessment criteria.

♦ Help in understanding technical language.

♦ Help with practical work and methods.

♦ Feedback on progress.

♦ Reassurance in the sense of '*Am I doing OK?*'

In general, the reaction of adults to the on-course guidance provided was fairly positive. For example, Access students at one of the colleges commented that the weekly tutorial was a good source of advice and support provided on both an individual and a group basis. It was described as '*an open forum*' and '*a general workshop*' where any issue, however trivial, could be raised. The subjects covered included how to revise for examinations and how to apply to university. Elsewhere, learners on an Electrical Installation course praised the level of support given by tutors, remarking that they '*are generally good guys and approachable*', adding that tutors often went beyond the call of duty in giving advice during their lunch break. This was echoed in another college where a tutor told a class of evening part-timers to ring her during the day if they needed help. Here it is worth noting Evatt's observation that the provision of learning support for part-time students '*has historically been weak*'.[13] Guidance managers acknowledged that part-time evening students generally had less access to guidance services than full-time day students, especially at some of the more outlying sites.

The main criticism of on-course guidance appeared to be related to the turnover in, or changes to, course staff, which some adults found inhibited continuity of support and the building of effective working relationships. For example,

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[13] EVATT, J. (1995). *Guidance and Funding. The FE Experience.* Leeds: Employment Department, Network News Edition 2, June 1995, p 6.

learners on Health and Care courses at one college complained that they had different tutors for different modules, which made it difficult to establish a close understanding with them. They also pointed out that there was not generally enough time for one-to-one guidance, adding that there was always a queue to meet staff so they felt rushed when discussing their progress with tutors. Furthermore, they regretted that tutorials were often held late in the afternoon *'when we have gone home'*. At another college, adults on a Business Administration course stated that in addition to three 30-minute one-to-one tutorials per academic year, they participated in weekly two-hour tutorials but complained that these had no clear purpose and were just *'padding'*. One person reported that her tutor, who did not teach on the course, *'doesn't know my work–she has no overall view'*.

It is worth noting that the adults participating in the study did not generally seek help from tutors in sorting out personal and social issues such as lack of motivation or stress. Their responses to questions suggested that they were used to being self-sufficient and tended to concentrate requests for help on education-related matters. Only two of the interviewees had used student counselling services, though others said that *'support is there if you want it'*. They had sought help in harmonising their college and domestic responsibilities. For example, the counselling service at one college helped an Access student to negotiate a new timetable with teaching staff which reduced his travel-to-college schedule and enabled him to continue to meet childcare responsibilities and carry out a part-time job. Several of the group discussion participants had arranged appointments with student counsellors and considered the service provided to be very good.

3.4 Material support

College managers, course leaders and guidance personnel emphasised that, compared with younger students, adult learners were more sensitive to, and discriminating about, the college environment, including facilities and resources. All three colleges provided opportunities and workshops for improving basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and IT. None of the adults in this study had used these services. There appeared to be three explanations for this: some considered themselves proficient in these skills; some said that these skills were adequately covered in their courses and therefore they had no need to do additional training; and a few were only vaguely aware of these college services and seemed unlikely to take the initiative to use them.

How adequate did the learners interviewed think the facilities and resources available in the colleges were? Whilst most acknowledged that the colleges were doing their best to provide a learning environment which was adequately resourced, nearly two-thirds (18) thought that there were improvements to be made. The main suggestions were as follows:

- Crèche facilities should be provided to help learners combine childcare and course responsibilities.

- Libraries should hold more copies of key texts.

- More materials and tools are required for practical courses such as Plumbing and Electrical Installation.

- More IT equipment is needed for Business Administration courses.

- More rooms are required for teaching to save time which is wasted walking around college to find accommodation.

As regards the provision of crèche facilities, college managers pointed out that, at a cost of approximately £80,000 per annum, these were expensive to provide. Instead, one of the colleges adopted the alternative strategy of allocating up to £50 per week for childcare to each student who required it. The money was paid directly to registered childminders.

The condition of college fabric and its upkeep made an impression on learners. Comments such as 'there is rubbish in the corridors', 'the rooms are badly equipped' and 'the blackboards should be replaced – you cannot see what is written' were made in group discussions, and a few adults thought that where the environment was poor: 'It doesn't make you want to be here,' as one of them put it. The reality of resourcing constraints was graphically outlined by one learner who complained that 'we're constantly running out of resources – we have one screwdriver between four students'. Another learner reported that there were only 12 kits of electrical tools for a class of 22 students. At another college, people drew attention to the lack of a common room in which adult learners could meet. Some said that they did not feel part of the college because it seemed more geared up for younger students. It emerged that adults worked out their own strategies for dealing with limited access to books and articles at college, which included using local public or university libraries and purchasing their own copies of key texts.

Other observations made about facilities and resources were that there were not enough bays for practical work, that rooms for smokers should be made available, that college canteens were expensive and the range of food was limited, and that more public telephones should be installed. There was a specific issue relating to part-time learners who used the colleges in the evening. For example, refreshment and photocopying facilities were said to be either greatly reduced or non-existent during the evening.

The next section examines adult learners' perceptions of their achievements and the role played by guidance in assisting their transition to other opportunities.

4. OUTCOMES AND PROGRESSION GUIDANCE

4.1 Outcomes

Most of the adults in the study felt that their progress had been satisfactory and considered that they had gained useful outcomes from their courses. *'We're all really pleased with ourselves'* was a typical comment. Although they had not yet completed their courses, the adults were of the opinion that the learning opportunities provided had largely met their needs to date. More practical work in one of the NVQ courses was an unmet need mentioned by a few people. Participants identified a range of benefits which they had gained, including education and personal development as outlined below:

Educational and vocational benefits

- Knowledge and theoretical understanding.
- Practical skills.
- Study skills.
- Interview and recruitment skills.
- Analytical and evaluation strategies.
- Increased ability to concentrate.
- Communication skills.
- Organisation and time management skills.

Personal benefits

- Interpersonal skills.
- Self-analysis skills.
- Increased feeling of self-worth.

Comments such as *'You learn a lot about yourself'*, *'I've learned a lot. Met nice people. I've moved into a learning environment'* and *'I am achieving something and bettering myself'* reveal some of the less tangible, but equally important, benefits which adults had gained from their courses.

Several of the adults pointed out that doing a course was a challenge and made them think through carefully their preliminary decisions about the future. For example, whilst one person said of their course *'It's a test of character'*, another reflected that *'It makes you ask yourself if you are committed to go on to university'*.

College staff emphasised that, in general, adults achieved positive outcomes from their courses. They noted that adult drop-out from courses was generally low

(between five and 15 per cent in the colleges studied) and was less than for 16- to 18-year-olds (the national figure for this age group is between 30 and 40 per cent).[14] The main reasons given by both learners and staff were related to critical incidents resulting from lack of finance and family pressures. For example, changes in family circumstances sometimes led to financial difficulties and occasionally partners or children objected to the amount of time a person was investing in a course, which led them to withdraw. Other reasons mentioned included getting a job and a realisation that study in general, or a particular course, was not appropriate. Guidance managers said that they required better information systems which recorded reasons for adults, especially part-timers, leaving. Adults' commitment was attributed to their maturity and high level of motivation. Furthermore, as one Deputy Principal observed, *'...adults are not going to let their children or employer see them fail'* and, as one head of school noted, *'...they strive for what they want – they don't expect not to be successful'*.

4.2   Progression guidance

Progression guidance, sometimes called exit guidance, is the information and advice provided for people towards or at the end of their current course. Its aim is to help people progress to appropriate educational, training or employment opportunities.

About half of the adults who participated in the study expressed a wish to continue learning and take courses in the immediate future. These intentions were summed up by one person who observed that *'...you cannot stop – you need to continue training'*. Several said that doing their current course at college had influenced them to consider taking other courses. *'It is such a positive experience that encourages you to go on'* was a typical comment. The range of courses that people were interested in taking in the near future included various degrees, the Postgraduate Certificate in Education, Higher National Diploma courses (e.g. computing), NVQs and nursery nursing courses. Most of those who did not want to take another course immediately said that they might do so some time in the future, but for the time being they wanted to consolidate their education and training or get a job and earn money.

Learners were asked to comment on the adequacy of the guidance received as they moved towards the completion of their course. Half of the sample felt that there was a need for better guidance at this stage of the learning process. They wanted advice

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[14]   OFSTED/AUDIT COMMISSION (1993). *Unfinished Business. Full-time Education Courses for 16-19 year olds.* London: HMSO.

on the next step and were interested in discussing employment, education and training opportunities. Whilst some people said that they were able to get help and guidance from tutors, others were not sure from whom to obtain this advice. They indicated that they would appreciate information on the cost of doing other courses and would like to know more about what different courses entailed. Although each of the colleges had one-stop information and guidance centres on their main sites, with dedicated facilities and staff for providing course and career information and advice, not all interviewees appeared to be aware of these services or realised that they could use them. As a result, these services and facilities had not been greatly used by the sample of adults included in this study.

College staff acknowledged that exit guidance required further strategic planning, evaluation and development to assist adults with the important transition to employment or additional education and training, and help them to develop programme strategies. For example, one guidance manager thought that progressive guidance should start earlier in courses and was in the process of organising a higher education conference for students where local universities would be represented.

The next section summarises the key findings from the research and discusses issues for consideration in the provision of learning opportunities for adults.

5.   SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

This research found that adults' decisions to take up learning opportunities in college were influenced in some cases by critical incidents in their lives such as redundancy or changes in family circumstances and roles. In other cases, people had thought for several years about taking a course, sometimes to compensate for lack of educational success earlier in life, and decided that now was the right time. The main reasons given for deciding to enrol on a college course were related to improving immediate or long-term employment prospects or concerned with enhancing personal development and lifestyle. Family responsibilities and lack of finance were identified as the major reasons for adults dropping out of courses.

The main type of **pre-entry guidance** was found to be informal advice gained from family and friends. Another source was work colleagues and supervisors. To a lesser extent, guidance was obtained from college staff and Careers Service, Job Club and Job Centre personnel. Most of the adults participating in the study knew broadly about subjects and courses they wanted to take, though the information available did not fully brief them. Only half of the people interviewed felt able to comment with any confidence on the adequacy of printed college and course material, including prospectuses, course leaflets and newspaper advertisements. Whilst those who gave comments thought that the information was presented clearly, they also made useful suggestions about how it could be improved. In particular, they suggested that the information should promote colleges as learning environments where adults were welcome and were able to achieve and prosper. Furthermore, people wanted more detail on courses, including the amount of work involved, an indication of financial costs and the suitability of courses for specific careers. The clear marketing message was that college and course information should explicitly convey the idea that study was for adults and should give a genuine picture of what it entailed to enable people to make realistic decisions.

There were mixed reactions to **enrolment** which some had found unproblematic but which others had found to be an unhelpful experience owing to poor organisation or a lack of advice and guidance. Although the colleges had recently installed enlarged 'front of house' information and advice centres, there was some room for improvement to ensure that enrolment was a positive experience for all and that, where there was no alternative to mass enrolment, it was adequately staffed by administrative, academic and guidance staff. This research found that adults valued meeting course tutors informally in groups, where they felt sufficiently confident to

ask questions about course content, workload and assessment, for example, prior to enrolment. Where resources are not available to give all applicants a one-to-one interview, the tutor–group exchange approach is an efficient alternative.

On-course guidance and support, though largely valued by adults, varied in scope and quality. One-third of interviewees did not receive any induction to the college or course. Most of those who had been given an induction considered it adequate. The main criticisms were that induction lacked a clear focus and did not provide enough course detail, including the relevance of different courses to careers. This evidence suggests that there is a case for reviewing the content and organisation of induction programmes in order to identify and introduce a minimum entitlement.

This study found that **adults' learning experiences** were largely positive. They particularly appreciated the interactive learning methods used and felt that they had made good progress. Another key finding was that, in practice, on-course guidance and support were integral to the learning process. Often apprehensive and lacking in confidence initially, adult learners viewed their working relationship with course tutors as vital. The main types of guidance and support they sought were either related to aspects of learning, such as how to study effectively, or were concerned with general reassurance. Only a few felt the need to use college counselling and guidance services, which were said to be very good.

The study found that the guidance and support provided by tutors played a major role in, and had a continuing impact on, adults' learning progress and outcomes by helping to build up confidence in their ability, by reinforcing learning gains and by maintaining motivation. In most cases, on-course guidance and support were found to be more influential on adults' development than other course and college factors such as limited facilities and resources. However, sometimes adults' domestic and financial responsibilities created overwhelming difficulties and they dropped out of courses. Better pre-entry guidance could help to reduce drop-out by giving people a more realistic assessment of the personal and financial costs of embarking on a course of study.

On the whole, the adults said that tutors were good at helping them to learn and good at providing support. However, it emerged that in some cases the provision of tutorials was rather *ad hoc* and over half of the adults expressed a desire for more regular feedback on their work. Some staff were aware of this and pointed out that sometimes there was inconsistency in this type of learning support, with part-time

students faring less well than full-time students. The evidence collected suggests that it would be in the interests of colleges and adult learners for managers to review the quality of tutorial systems and investigate how best they can support staff to fulfil their important and varied roles as tutors.

Progression guidance – available towards or at the end of courses – appeared to be less well developed and to have a lower profile than on-course guidance. About half of the adults interviewed wanted better advice on what to do next and, whilst some said that they were able to get the requisite guidance from tutors, others were not sure from whom to obtain this advice. There is an obvious need to inform all learners, whether part-time or full-time, about the availability of information and guidance services which will help them to take crucial decisions on seeking employment, training and educational opportunities.

Finally, this study has shown that the role of the tutor is crucial to the guidance and support provided for, and received by, adult learners. Sustaining and developing tutors' professional expertise will be essential if lifelong learning for all is going to be fully realised. It is vital that training and staff development provided for both part-time and full-time lecturers in the FE sector enable them to acquire the range of skills which are necessary to fulfil the important and demanding role of tutor. This includes providing adults with a structured learning experience, advising them on suitable learning strategies, imparting knowledge, providing adequate feedback on progress and referring learners to counselling and guidance professionals when appropriate.

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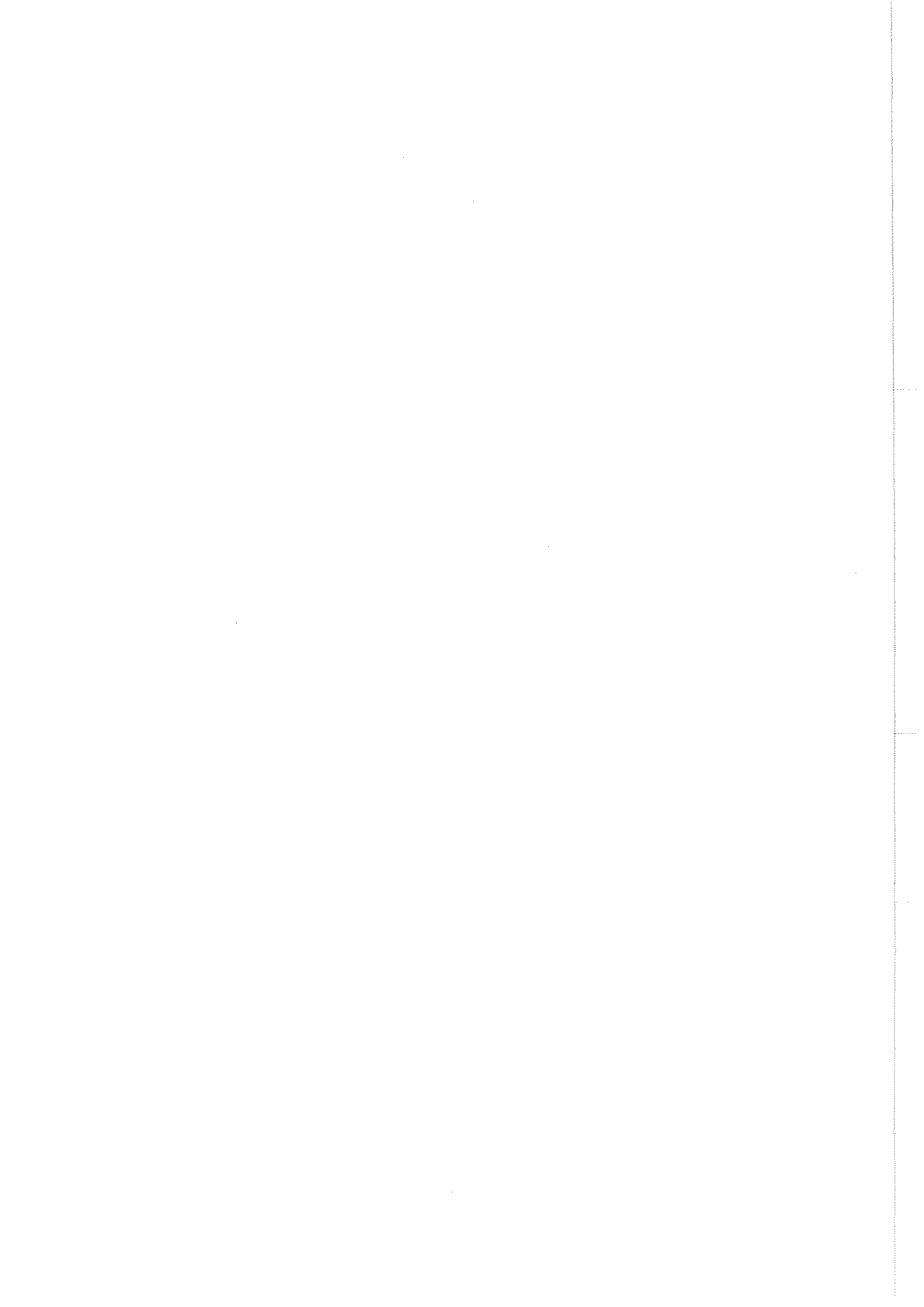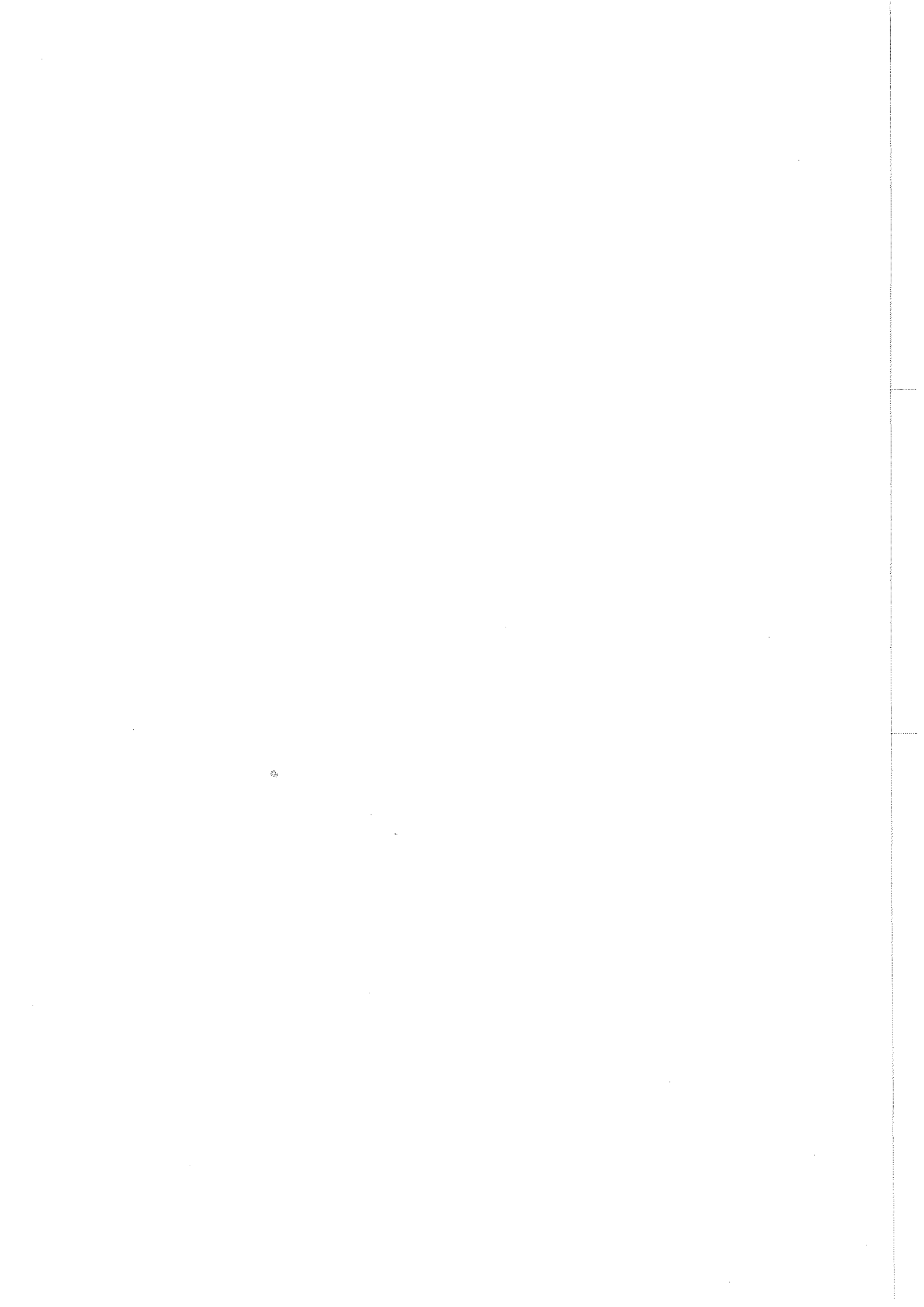
REFLECTIONS ON GUIDANCE AND LEARNING:
a study of adults' experience

Lifelong learning is now widely regarded as having massive potential to enhance national economic prosperity by helping to produce a suitably qualified, educated, skilled and motivated workforce. Facilitating the take-up and productive use of available learning opportunities is therefore of prime importance to the renewal of Britain's skills base and to improving competitiveness. This report provides a detailed study of the role of guidance and learning support and its impact on adults' progress and achievements. Drawing on in-depth interviews and discussions with a wide range of staff and adult learners in FE colleges, the study throws light on the use made of guidance services and on the nature and importance of the learner–tutor relationship. All personnel involved in the planning and delivery of education and guidance for adult learners and related staff development, whether based in colleges, LEAs, TECs, LECs or the Careers Service, will find this report informative in reviewing provision.