



Definition of Adult learning:

Adult learning is defined as ‘the entire range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities which are undertaken by adults after a break since leaving initial education and training, and which results in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills’.¹

The European Commission defines adult learning as, ‘all forms of learning undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training, however far this process may have gone (e.g. including tertiary education).’ (European Commission 2006b, p. 2)

Characteristics of adult learning sectors in Europe: Adult learning is the most diverse of the lifelong learning sectors, and national adult learning systems (where these exist) are complex and heterogeneous. The adult learning sector in Europe is vast, fragmented and diverse and is different from Member State to Member State.²

In the UK, the term adult and community learning is widely used. Learning takes place in a wide range of settings and is aimed at adults who may not normally participate in education and training. It is often a collaboration between local authorities, community based organisations and traditional providers and covers structured adult education classes taught by professionally qualified teachers; unstructured activity that leads to learning; informal courses delivered in the private sector; independent study online; and self organised groups.

Some learning happens in very short episodes and some happens over a full year or even longer. This kind of learning can be delivered by public, private or voluntary sector providers or organised by people for themselves through face to face groups, online communities or personal projects.

Adult and community learning provides opportunities for people to develop new interests, improve their confidence and wellbeing, support their children’s learning and interact positively with people from disparate backgrounds.

Adult and community learning offers personal choice, personal responsibility and personal empowerment. It engages people through their interests in relaxed and welcoming classes that contribute to community wellbeing and social inclusion. Without this kind of learning, many people would never get started in learning or realise their full potential’.³

¹ Final report for: Study on European Terminology in Adult Learning for a common language and common understanding and monitoring of the sector (July, 2010), p. 6

² Final report for: Study on European Terminology in Adult Learning for a common language and common understanding and monitoring of the sector (July, 2010), p. 7

³ New Challenges, New Chances: Next Steps in Implementing the Further Education Reform Programme (August 2011), p23