



RSP Raising
Aspirations
Research

Executive Summary



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Attitudes, motivations and barriers to engagement in learning, skills and employment among disadvantaged groups and communities

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1.1 Background

The regional economy is changing rapidly and in the future there will be fewer unskilled jobs, and a greater number of jobs requiring higher level qualifications. In order to meet future skills demand it will be important the whole of the potential workforce is up-skilled and utilised in the economy.

A range of groups and communities, notably young unemployed people, unemployed and low paid adults, specific minority ethnic groups such as Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Black Caribbean people, older people, people with a disability, migrants and refugees, are currently disadvantaged in the labour market. Low levels of participation in employment and learning within these groups reflect a range of interconnected issues and barriers.

1.2 Positive aspirations

For many people within these groups gaining sustainable employment and improving their standard of living is a key aspiration. For women from various backgrounds gaining social and financial independence is a common aspiration. Asian women, lone parents, migrants, and unemployed people all assert high aspirations and recognise the need to learn in order to improve their chances.

1.3 Employability

Many research participants recognised that they need to improve their skills and/or qualifications in order to improve their employment prospects. For example many young people are locked into a cycle of needing work to get experience but needing experience to get work, while lone parents and long-term job-seekers expressed a lack of confidence in their own skills and experience. Many older people had found that transferring their skills from one industry to another was difficult.

1.4 Issues for particular groups

1.4.1 Minority ethnic communities

People from Black Caribbean communities are less likely to hold academic qualifications due to low attainment at school. Problems encountered in the school system such as racism have been a key contributory factor. Increased diversity in the teaching profession, along with increased use of mentors in schools, is felt by respondents to be key to breaking this cycle of low attainment.

Within Asian communities there are significant differences in qualification attainment and employment rates. Rates among people from Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities are much lower than among the Indian community. Within the same community older people are likely to have much lower rates than younger people.

Language barriers not only affect employment, but also parents' ability to help their children at school. School correspondence in community languages is felt to be crucial to increasing parental support. Interestingly, women from Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities had high aspirations. However women from these groups felt they faced a barrier in employers' attitudes towards them, particularly at the recruitment stage. Several had had personal experiences of being refused employment because of wearing a hijab, even though they were qualified for the job.

1.4.2 Migrants

For migrants English language proficiency is key to their successful participation in the labour market. Many are highly qualified professionals, but their lack of English language skills prevents them from working at a level suitable to their skill. ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision is invaluable in enabling these groups to use their skills. Recognition of qualifications from overseas institutions is another factor preventing some migrants, particularly those from outside Europe, from working at a level they achieved in their native country.

1.4.3 Young people

While young people leaving school with no qualifications had a strong desire to do well they felt their previous low attainment and a lack of work experience was the key barrier to progress. Key barriers relate to a lack of locally available learning, training and employment and problems accessing transport to out-of-town employers.

1.4.4 Low paid workers

Low paid workers in short term employment highlighted a lack of locally-available jobs, difficulties in getting through the recruitment process, and displacement caused by large numbers of migrant workers arriving in recent months. Crucially, people felt they had nowhere to go to get advice on careers, learning and work. They had no idea where they could get careers advice and had not received any advice since leaving school.

1.4.5 Unemployed people

Aspirations of unemployed people were more basic and centred on finding employment rather than any particular type of career. They felt, however, that learning could be a viable proposition if it were linked to employment, and if the practical barriers such as costs were overcome. While for sickness benefit claimants as we would expect, the most common barrier is their health, a lack of qualifications, employer relevant skills and experience were also cited.

1.4.6 People with a disability

A key barrier to participation for disabled people is the perception of others towards disability. Previous negative experiences have made people wary and while they are keen to participate in learning they need to be sure that the learning provider will have the appropriate awareness and sensitivity. This is in addition to the physical accessibility issues which need to be dealt with.

1.4.7 Ex-offenders

Ex-offenders felt that that past criminal records were a barrier to their participation in work along with a lack of relevant qualifications, often reflecting poor experiences at school.

1.5 Solutions and triggers to action

‘Triggers’ to engagement in learning were mainly work related and the certainty of helping find employment is by a clear margin the most significant trigger to participation. Key groups such as young unemployed people, Asian women, and unemployed people all said they would be keen to learn if it was clearly linked to employment.

Practical considerations such as the cost of courses and cost of transport being covered were also of significance.

The research has also highlighted the need for more effective information, advice and guidance (IAG) for those within disadvantaged communities to help them access work and learning. Specialist IAG service providers such as Connexions and Learndirect were not frequently used by respondents and friends, family and the internet were the most popular options. There is a widespread belief among respondents that learning provision is not flexible and does not cater for people’s needs. While this may not reflect reality a lack of effective IAG means many people are unaware of what is available.

Many of those who have taken the initiative and begun the process of up-skilling have engaged the support of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in doing so. This particularly applies to those who have been unengaged from learning and the labour market for some time, as well as those with negative experiences of the education system. For these people the VCS provides a link to services provided in a culturally-sensitive and non-threatening environment. Learning is often fully funded, overcoming barriers for those with limited means and based in the local community, which reduces transport barriers.

Voluntary work, which is readily available in the VCS, or third sector, can provide invaluable work experience and a reference for those disengaged from the labour market. We spoke to a number of people who had re-entered the world of work via voluntary work, thereby increasing their own confidence and employability.

It is intended that this research will provide the basis for a debate on the steps that need to be taken to tackle the issues it raises. The table overleaf suggests a series of recommendations for action, linked to the key barriers to engagement in work and learning identified and the relevant national, regional and sub-regional strategies.

Recommendation	Barrier	Strategy
Targeted Learning Brokerage in local communities, as in the Testbed Learning Communities	Lack of IAG	Green Paper
More IAG through JCP and VCS	Lack of IAG	Green Paper
Increased diversity of teaching staff in West Midlands schools	Racism / Mistrust of institutions	Leitch
Use of Mentors in schools to help raise the aspirations of pupils	Racism / Mistrust of institutions	Leitch
Face to face independent IAG service in local areas	Lack of IAG	Leitch , Green Paper
Provision of voluntary work placements through JCP	Lack of work experience	Green Paper, Russell Commission
ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision to be improved - funded, flexible, and high quality	Language	Leitch, Green Paper
Relaxation of 16-hour learning rule	Benefit dependency	Green Paper
Diversity training for employers - particularly focusing on the recruitment stage	Racism	Green Paper
Work-based learning and training: increased use of apprenticeships	Linking learning to employment chances	Leitch, Green Paper

Recommendation	Barrier	Strategy
More funded learning provision	Cost of learning	Leitch
Locally available learning in community venues	Mistrust of Institutions	Leitch
Bridging Courses for those with overseas qualifications	Recognition of overseas qualifications	Leitch
Link VCS to public sector better	Mistrust of institutions / Lack of locally-available learning provision	Third Sector Review, Green Paper, SEU
More access to training for awareness of disability	Attitudes to disability	Pathways to Work - Green Paper
Increased awareness of the provision of learning and IAG by the Voluntary and Community Sector	Lack of IAG / Mistrust of institutions	Leitch, Green Paper
Feedback on job applications for candidates	Lack of work experience	City Strategy
Widely-recognised Skills Passport or achievement record to help individuals communicate their own skills to employers.	Lack of work experience / qualifications	City Strategy
Increased use of voluntary placements within skills shortage industries	Lack of work experience	Leitch, Green Paper, Russell Commission
Skills shortage industries to offer work-related training	Linking learning to employment chances	Leitch

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