

Tom Schuller • David Watson

# Learning Through Life

Inquiry into the Future for  
Lifelong Learning

Summary



This is a summary of *Learning Through Life*, the main report of the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (ISBN: 978 1 86201 433 6).

The full report is available from:

Email: [niaceorders@omsg.co.uk](mailto:niaceorders@omsg.co.uk)

Website: <http://shop.niace.org.uk>

Phone: 0870 600 2400



© 2009 National Institute of Adult Continuing Education  
(England and Wales)  
21 De Montfort Street  
Leicester  
LE1 7GE

Company registration no. 2603322  
Charity registration no. 1002775

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without the written permission of the publishers, save in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

NIACE has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

You can find NIACE online at [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)

Designed and typeset by Creative by Design

Cover design by Book Production Services

Printed and bound in the UK by Flexpress Ltd

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Learning Through Life: our proposals</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What's wrong with the current system?</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Learning expenditure and participation</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Ten recommendations</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Inquiry Commissioners</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Inquiry Secretariat</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Inquiry supplementary papers</b>	<b>11</b>

# Learning Through Life

## Summary

### Introduction

We begin from the premise that the **right to learn throughout life is a human right**. Our vision is of a society in which learning plays its full role in personal growth and emancipation, prosperity, solidarity and local and global responsibility. The Inquiry's task has been to formulate a longer-term strategy to achieve this vision. We underpin this with concrete recommendations at different levels. We have not proposed a rigid blueprint. Our aim is to set an agenda for lifelong learning that will make sense for the next quarter-century.

By 'lifelong' in this report we mean from cradle to grave: the Inquiry's thinking has included the implications for early childhood education and for schooling. However, our primary focus is on adult learning, and on adults returning to learn. Learning can occur in education or training institutions, the workplace (on or off the job), the family, or cultural and community settings. We use 'learning' to refer to all kinds of formal education and training (whether or not they carry certification). We also include informal modes of learning to some extent, provided these have a degree of organisation and intention. Therefore, our broad definition is:

*Lifelong learning includes people of all ages learning in a variety of contexts – in educational institutions, at work, at home and through leisure activities. It focuses mainly on adults returning to organised learning rather than on the initial period of education or on incidental learning.*

The Inquiry's work will continue. The ideas and proposals contained in this report and the Inquiry's supplementary papers are feeding into NIACE's own programme of work, and into collaboration with a wide range of other bodies. To join the debate, please contact us at [lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk](mailto:lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk).



Professor Tom Schuller  
Director, IFLL



Sir David Watson  
Chair, IFLL Commissioners

The Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning was set up in 2007 as an independent Inquiry sponsored by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). During the Inquiry, experts from government, business, academia, trade unions, public services, providers, the third sector, and learners have come together with the Inquiry's Commissioners to identify a broad consensus for the future of lifelong learning in the UK, informed by over 250 evidence submissions.

**Learning Through Life** is the main report from the Inquiry. It is nested in approximately 30 supplementary papers published on the Inquiry's website: [www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk](http://www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk).

## Learning Through Life: our proposals

The UK's current system of lifelong learning has failed to respond to the major demographic challenge of an ageing society, and to variety in employment patterns as young people take longer to settle into jobs and older people take longer to leave work.

We make ten recommendations for a lifelong learning strategy which will mark out the UK as a true pioneer in this field. Pages 6 to 9 supply detail.

**1. Base lifelong learning policy on a new model of the educational life course, with four key stages (up to 25, 25–50, 50–75, 75+)**

*Our approach to lifelong learning should deal far more positively with two major trends: an ageing society and changing patterns of paid and unpaid activity.*

**2. Rebalance resources fairly and sensibly across the different life stages**

*Public and private resources invested in lifelong learning amount to over £50 billion; their distribution should reflect a coherent view of our changing economic and social context.*

**3. Build a set of learning entitlements**

*A clear framework of entitlements to learning will be a key factor in strengthening choice and motivation to learn.*

**4. Engineer flexibility: a system of credit and encouraging part-timers**

*Much faster progress is needed to implement a credit-based system, making learning more flexible and accessible with funding matched to it.*

**5. Improve the quality of work**

*The debate on skills has been too dominated by an emphasis on increasing the volume of skills. There should be a stronger focus on how skills are actually used.*

**6. Construct a curriculum framework for citizens' capabilities**

*A common framework should be created of learning opportunities which should be available in any given area, giving people control over their own lives.*

**7. Broaden and strengthen the capacity of the lifelong learning workforce**

*Stronger support should be available for all those involved in delivering education and training, in various capacities.*

**8. Revive local responsibility...**

*The current system in England has become over-centralised, and insufficiently linked to local and regional needs. We should restore life and power to local levels.*

**9. ...within national frameworks**

*There should be effective machinery for creating a coherent lifelong learning strategy across the UK, and within the UK's four nations.*

**10. Make the system intelligent**

*The system will only flourish with information and evaluation which are consistent, broad and rigorous, and open debate about the implications.*

## What's wrong with the current system?

The UK system currently has many strong features. Compared with most European countries, we have high participation rates in education and training, and quite high levels of flexibility in formal education. The spirit of discussion during the Inquiry was thoroughly optimistic and positive. However, we identified several systemic blocks to the development of a longer-term strategy for lifelong learning.

- Initial education does not serve as a secure foundation for lifelong learning.
- The demographic challenge: the balance of opportunity and support for learning through different stages of life is wrong.
- The system does not recognise the increasingly diverse transitions into and from employment.
- Educational inequalities accumulate over the life course to an unacceptable extent.
- For all the rhetoric, a high-skilled economy is not yet in prospect.
- Finding a way through the system is complex, opaque and demotivating for too many.
- The governance of the system is over-centralised,<sup>1</sup> insufficiently stable and does not trust its professionals enough.
- Inadequate infrastructure: buildings, technologies and services are not well integrated.
- The 'system' is not sufficiently intelligent, i.e. it does not create and use information as well as it might in order to innovate and improve.

## Learning expenditure and participation

The Inquiry's analysis of the current system is informed by studies of lifelong learning expenditure and participation.

### Expenditure

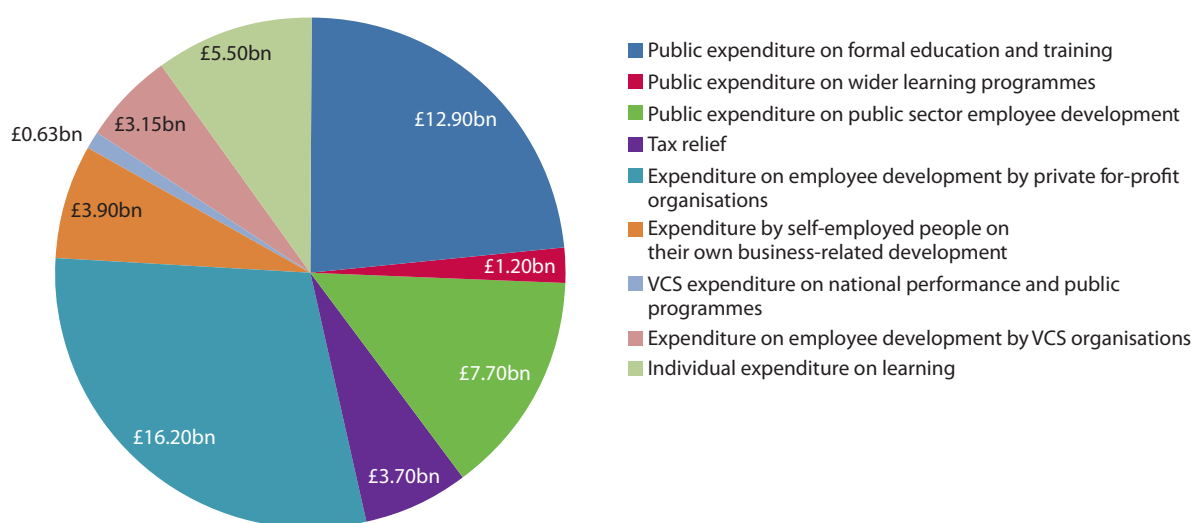
Our calculations bring together, for the first time, total expenditure on post-compulsory learning, including by government, employers, the third sector and individuals. This investment is heavily skewed towards young people (18–25), and those who succeed initially.

- Total expenditure on adult learning provision amounts to approximately £55 billion or 3.9 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).
- Roughly £26 billion of the total is spent from the public purse; £20 billion on training by private and non-profit organisations; £9 billion by individuals, including the self-employed.
- The scale of public subsidy on vocational training is large; our estimate is that the various forms of tax relief amount to £3.7 billion.
- Of the £15 billion spent on teaching provision and student support for colleges and universities, the weighting is heavily in favour of young, full-time students.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an example of variation within the UK; this comment applies to England, but not to the devolved administrations of the UK.

**Figure 1:** Expenditure on costs of learning provision (£ billion), 2007–08



Note: VCS = Voluntary and community sector

Source: IFLL

## Participation

We survey participation trends over the last ten years. The persistent conclusions are:

- Participation is very closely related to social class. The higher up your socio-economic position is, the more likely you are to take part in learning.
- Attachment to work also appears continually as a powerful factor. Even being in a low-ranking job gives you a better chance of learning than being out of the labour market altogether.
- The younger you are, the more likely you are to participate. The age pattern is one of direct decline, far greater than could be explained by any age-related decline in individual capacity.
- Having a disability is a major barrier to participation.
- Overall participation levels are high by European standards, but the average duration of formal education and training is relatively short.

**Table 1:** Current or recent participation in learning by age and gender, 2009

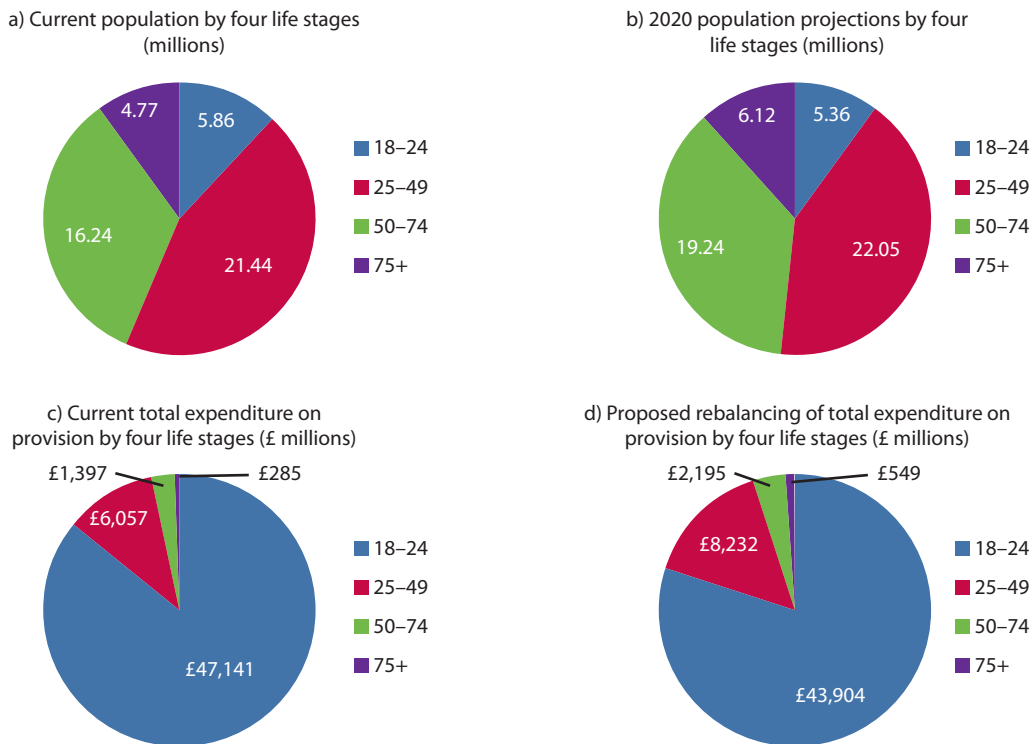
Age	18–24	25–49	50–74	75+
<b>Total sample</b>	64%	44%	30%	13%
<b>Men</b>	66%	41%	29%	12%
<b>Women</b>	62%	46%	30%	13%
<b>Weighted base</b>	533	2,146	1,686	464

Source: NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey, 2009

We combined the analyses of expenditure and participation in order to develop a picture of how resources are distributed over the adult life course. Using our four-stage model this gave us an overall picture of the current distribution, and of how it might be in 2020.



**Figure 2:** a) Current population and b) 2020 population projections (millions); c) current total expenditure on provision and d) proposed rebalancing (£ millions)



Source: IFLL

## Ten recommendations

The details of our ten recommendations are set out below:

### 1. Base lifelong learning policy on a new model of the educational life course, with four key stages (up to 25, 25–50, 50–75, 75+)

*Our current approach to lifelong learning is not responding adequately to two major trends: an ageing society and changing patterns of paid and unpaid activity.*

- A genuinely lifelong view means that a *four-stage model* – up to 25, 25–50, 50–75, 75+ – should be used as the basis for a *coherent systemic approach to lifelong learning*.
- People in the first stage (up to 25, but starting for our purposes at 18) should be looked at as a whole, with all of its members having claims to *learning and development as young people*.
- Learning in the second stage (25–50) should aim at sustaining productivity and prosperity, but also at building strong family lives and personal identity. This is part of a *new mosaic of time* with different mixes of paid and unpaid work and learning time.
- For those in the third stage, *training and education opportunities* should be greatly enhanced. Policy, including learning policy, should treat 75 as the normal upper age limit for economic activity (not linked to state pension age).
- The emergence of the Fourth Age means that we urgently need to develop a more appropriate approach to the curriculum offer in later life.
- 25, 50 and 75 should be identified and used as *key transition points*, each requiring access to advice and guidance about life planning.



## 2. Rebalance resources fairly and sensibly across the different life stages

*Public and private resources invested in lifelong learning amount to over £50 billion, but their distribution does not match our changing economic and social context.*

- We need public agreement on the criteria for fair and effective allocation of resources for learning across the life course.
- As a start, we propose a very broad goal: to shift from the current allocation ratios of 86: 11: 2.5: 0.5 across the four stages outlined above, to 80: 15: 4: 1 by 2020. This means approximately *doubling the proportional support for learning in the third and fourth stages.*
- To counter any sense that we favour age segregation, we recommend redoubling efforts to support *family and intergenerational learning.*

## 3. Build a set of learning entitlements

*A clear framework of entitlements to learning will be a key factor in strengthening choice and motivation to learn.*

We need a clear overall framework of entitlements, with two key categories: general entitlements and specific ‘transition’ entitlements.

### a) *General entitlements*

- A *legal* entitlement of free access to learning for all who need it to acquire basic skills, i.e. literacy and numeracy, up to Level 1.
- A *financial* entitlement to a minimum level of qualification needed to be able to play a full contributing part in society; this is currently Level 2, but will rise and change over time.
- Both these entitlements should extend to all, regardless of age.
- A *‘good practice’* entitlement to learning leave as an occupational benefit to be developed flexibly and over time as part of mainstream employment conditions.

### b) *Specific ‘transition’ entitlements*

These should be designed to help people use learning to make potentially difficult transitions, for example guaranteeing access to learning for those leaving prison or institutional care, moving between areas or countries, or retiring. The transition entitlements can be developed flexibly over time.

- c) These entitlements should be underpinned by *infrastructure guarantees*: to universal access to advice and guidance (currently being developed in the adult advancement and careers service), and to a minimal level of digital technology (currently broadband at 2Mbps, but this will rise and change).
- d) Funding of entitlements should be channelled through a *national system of Learning Accounts*, giving individuals the maximum control over how they are used. The Learning Accounts should be set up by the State for people reaching their twenty-fifth birthday. Fifty per cent of the public contribution to the Child Trust Fund should be allocated to this.

### 4. Engineer flexibility: a system of credit and encouraging part-timers

*Faster progress is needed to implement a credit-based system, and to support people to combine study with other activities.*

- We should move quickly to implement fully a coherent system of credits as the basis for organising post-school learning.
- The funding for learning (both fees and student support) should be based on these credits and should not discriminate against part-time provision or part-time students.
- There should be greater fairness and consistency in funding for further and higher education.

### 5. Improve the quality of work

*The debate on skills has been too dominated by an emphasis on increasing the volume of skills. There should be a stronger focus on how skills are actually used.*

- We need increased understanding of the kinds of work environment which encourage formal and informal learning as a means of raising performance and productivity.
- There should be a clearer set of standards for gauging employer engagement with learning. Claims to corporation tax relief for training should be linked to these standards.
- Data on training performance and expenditure, including on learning leave, should be published in the organisations' annual accounts of publicly quoted companies.
- Licence to practise requirements should be used more widely to promote the raising of the level and use of skills.
- Procurement policy should be used to drive up levels of training along the supply chain.

### 6. Construct a curriculum framework for citizens' capabilities

*A common framework of learning opportunities should be created, aimed at enhancing people's control over their own lives.*

- An agreed framework for a citizens' curriculum should be developed, built initially around a set of four capabilities: digital, health, financial and civic, together with employability.
- In every area there should be a minimum local offer which guarantees access to the citizens' curriculum, locally interpreted to meet diverse needs.

### 7. Broaden and strengthen the capacity of the lifelong learning workforce

*Stronger support should be available for all those involved in delivering education and training, in various capacities.*

- There should be a broad definition of who makes up the lifelong learning workforce, including school teachers and early years practitioners, and learning support staff.
- The work of union learning representatives and community learning champions should be further promoted and supported.
- Other people who play or could play roles as learning 'intermediaries' in 'non-educational' fields such as health, probation or citizens advice should be identified and supported.

## 8. Revive local responsibility...

*The current system (in England) has become over-centralised, and insufficiently linked to local and regional needs. We should restore life and power to local levels.*

- Local authorities should lead the development of lifelong learning strategy at local level. They should develop the local infrastructure, including links to non-educational services such as health.
- FE colleges should be seen as an institutional backbone for local lifelong learning, with a predominantly local focus.
- Local strategies should embrace cultural institutions – including voluntary organisations, libraries, museums, theatres and galleries.
- Local employer networks should be promoted, as part of strengthening a culture of learning in and out of work.
- The idea of Local Learning Exchanges (LLEs) should be developed to connect people as socially networked learners, and to provide spaces for local groups to engage in learning.
- Higher education institutions should commit themselves to joining in local strategies for lifelong learning, and to disseminating their research knowledge to the community.

## 9. ...within national frameworks

*There should be effective machinery for creating a coherent national strategy across the UK, and within the UK's four nations.*

- A single department should have the lead responsibility for promoting lifelong learning, with cross-government targets for lifelong learning.
- There should be a cross-departmental expenditure study as part of the next Comprehensive Spending Review, identifying cost efficiencies from a coordinated approach to lifelong learning.
- An authoritative body should be established to oversee and scrutinise the national system of lifelong learning, with suitable arrangements in the devolved administrations.

## 10. Make the system intelligent

*The system will only flourish with information and evaluation which are consistent, broad and rigorous, and open debate about the implications.*

- A three-yearly *State of Learning* report should be published, covering major trends and issues, including evidence collected by and submitted to international bodies.
- Routine use should be made of external comparators, including a benchmark group of countries, together with a one-off OECD review of the UK's lifelong learning strategy.
- We need stronger and broader analysis of the benefits and costs of lifelong learning over time, and systematic experimentation on what works.
- There should be regular use of peer review and of inspections, and of 'learner voices'.

## Inquiry Commissioners

The Inquiry Commissioners have given very generously of their time, continuously developing and refining the Inquiry's proposals. They met on ten occasions between September 2007 and June 2009, including a 24-hour residential. Several of the Commissioners were themselves authors of thematic or sectoral papers.

**Professor Sir David Watson, Chair of the Commission**

Professor of Higher Education Management, Institute of Education, University of London

**Professor John Field**

Director, Division of Academic Innovation and Continuing Education, University of Stirling

**Professor Bob Fryer CBE**

Former Chief Learning Advisor, Department of Health

**Leisha Fullick**

Pro-Director (London), Institute of Education, University of London

**Dr Helen Gilchrist CBE**

Former Principal, Bury College

**Clare Hannah**

Head of Organisational Development, EWS Railways

**Professor Teresa Rees CBE**

Pro-Vice Chancellor, Cardiff University

**David Sherlock CBE**

Former Chief Inspector of the Adult Learning Inspectorate

**Nick Stuart CB**

Chair, NIACE Company Board

**Tom Wilson**

Head of Organisation and Services, TUC

## Inquiry Secretariat

Tom Schuller (Director); Fiona Aldridge; Hanya Gordon; Emily Jones; Stephen McNair; Helen Plant; and Jenny Williams.

Alan Tuckett, NIACE's Chief Executive, acted as adviser throughout.

## Inquiry supplementary papers

All of the Inquiry supplementary papers are available to download from the Inquiry website: [www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk](http://www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk)

### Thematic

- McNair, S. (2009) *Demography and Lifelong Learning: IFLL Thematic Paper 1.*
- Mauger, S. (2009) *Technological Change: IFLL Thematic Paper 2.*
- McNair, S. (2009) *Migration, Communities and Lifelong Learning: IFLL Thematic Paper 3.*
- Field, J. (2009) *Well-being and Happiness: IFLL Thematic Paper 4.*
- Schuller, T. (2009) *Crime and Lifelong Learning: IFLL Thematic Paper 5.*
- Fullick, L. (2009) *Poverty Reduction and Lifelong Learning: IFLL Thematic Paper 6.*
- Williams, J. and Wilson, T. (2009, forthcoming) *Work and Learning: IFLL Thematic Paper 7.*
- Fryer, B. (2009, forthcoming) *Lifelong Learning, Citizenship and Belonging: IFLL Thematic Paper 8.*
- Plant, H. and Ward, J. (2009, forthcoming) *Lifelong Learning and Sustainable Development: IFLL Thematic Paper 9.*

### Context

- Williams, J., Aldridge, F., and McNair, S. (2009, forthcoming) *Lifelong Learning Expenditure, Participation and Funding Models.*
- Mountfield, H. (2009, forthcoming) *Age Discrimination and Education: A Legal Briefing Paper.*

### Sector

- Claxton, G. and Lucas, B. (2009) *School as a Foundation for Lifelong Learning: The Implications of a Lifelong Learning Perspective for the Re-imagining of School-age Education: IFLL Sector Paper 1.*
- Simpson, L. (2009) *The Private Training Market in the UK: IFLL Sector Paper 2.*
- Lochrie, M. (2009) *Lifelong Learning and the Early Years: IFLL Sector Paper 3.*
- Brighouse, T. (2009) *A Lifelong Learning Authority: IFLL Sector Paper 4.*
- Sandbrook, I. (2009) *A Learning City Perspective: IFLL Sector Paper 5.*
- Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2009) *Collaborative Local Learning Ecologies: Reflections on the Governance of Lifelong Learning in England: IFLL Sector Paper 6.*
- Howard, U. (2009) *FE Colleges in a New Culture of Adult and Lifelong Learning: IFLL Sector Paper 7.*
- Watson, D. (2009) *Lifelong Learning and the Future of Higher Education: IFLL Sector Paper 8.*
- Lamb, P. and Taylor, C. (2009) *The Impact of Learning as a Family: A Model for the 21st Century: IFLL Sector Paper 9.*
- Innocent, N. (2009, forthcoming) *How Museums, Libraries and Archives Contribute to Lifelong Learning: IFLL Sector Paper 10.*

### Public value

Sabates, R. (2009) *The Impact of Lifelong Learning on Poverty Reduction: IFLL Public Value Paper 1.*

Matrix Knowledge Group (2009a) *Lifelong Learning and Crime: An Analysis of the Cost-effectiveness of In-prison Educational and Vocational Interventions: IFLL Public Value Paper 2.*

Matrix Knowledge Group (2009b) *Lifelong Learning and Well-being: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Adult Learning and Subjective Well-being: IFLL Public Value Paper 3.*

Bynner, J. (2009) *Lifelong Learning and Crime: A Life-course Perspective: IFLL Public Value Paper 4.*

Jenkins, A. (2009a, forthcoming) *Mental Health and Well-being in Older Adults: IFLL Public Value Paper 5.*

Jenkins, A. (2009b, forthcoming) *Neighbourhood Skills and Children's Attainment: IFLL Public Value Paper 6.*

### Further work

Clyne, P. *et al.* (2009, forthcoming) *Learning from the Past.*

Gallacher, J. *et al.* (2009, forthcoming) *Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning: The Scotland Perspective.*

Mauger, S. (2009) *Horizon Scanning and Scenario Development: The Future of Learning Infrastructures.*

Nolan, P. *et al.* (2009, forthcoming) *Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning: The Northern Ireland Perspective.*

Plant, H. (2009, forthcoming) *Summary of Learner Consultations.*

# Learning Through Life

## Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning

This is the summary of Learning Through Life, the main report of the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning.

The full report is available from:

Email: [niaceorders@omsg.co.uk](mailto:niaceorders@omsg.co.uk)

Website: <http://shop.niace.org.uk/>

Phone: 0870 600 2400