

# Understanding persistence in adult learning

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The paper summarizes recent data on the retention and non-completion patterns of adult students, especially those over the age of 25 who have had a gap since completing full-time education. While data on further and higher education suggest that older learners are less likely than younger ones to complete longer, qualification-bearing programmes, central statistics do not distinguish between students in their early-to-mid 20s, many of whom still have much in common with those in their late teens, and those in their 30s, 40s and 50s whose lifestyles, learning goals and aspirations are often qualitatively different.

The section on retention data is followed by a summary of the reasons for not completing courses commonly cited by adults learning in conventional education settings, and reflection on whether these are significantly different from those cited by younger students and students in open or distance learning programmes. The paper ends with a summary of the kind of factors that might increase adult retention rates in both kinds of learning programme.

For the purposes of this paper, 'adults' are defined as those over the age of 25 who have had a gap since completing full-time education.

Keywords: *Adult students; student characteristics; Withdrawal; Student problems*

## Introduction

The diversity of adults in terms of age, educational attainment and economic, social and personal circumstances, results in patterns of educational engagement that are often considerably different from those of younger students who stay on in full-time study after the age of 16. Whereas the latter usually follow a consecutive, linear learning route, adults' engagement with education and training tends to be intermittent and more varied. After an initial learning episode, an adult's learning journey may come to a temporary halt or meander in any of several possible directions: *upwards*, to gain higher level skills and qualifications; *sideways*, continuing learning at the same level to deepen and consolidate knowledge or to learn something new without the pressure of assessment; *downwards*, engaging in learning at a lower level to further a particular interest or to enhance knowledge and skills; or a '*zigzag*' direction, moving between lower and higher level learning programmes (McGivney, 1999, 2003a).

While many adults do embark on a linear learning pathway in further or higher education, their ability to complete longer qualification programmes can be affected

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by factors that are not shared by younger students who have stayed on in full-time education. First they are more likely to have a range of external constraints arising from their work, domestic and financial commitments. As a result many have to learn on a part-time basis, which means that it takes them longer to achieve their qualification goals. Second, mature students are more likely than younger ones to be living at home and attending an education institution near to their home (or work), which may not necessarily provide the best or most appropriate course to meet their purposes. Third, depending on their age, adults' qualifications may be out of date and some may lack confidence in their ability to succeed in an education or training programme if there has been a lengthy interval since they last engaged in formal learning.

### **Retention rates**

There are several questions that are pertinent to the Open Learning Symposium on student retention. Are the retention rates of adult students different from those of younger students? Are there significant differences in retention rates between different age cohorts? Are the reasons for not completing courses commonly cited by those aged 25 + different from those commonly cited by younger students? And, are the reasons for non-completion of open or distance learning programmes the same as or different from the reasons for non-completion of institution-based learning programmes?

The first two of these questions are difficult to answer as evidence on the retention and non-completion patterns of adults is comparatively limited. Although my own study of retention and non-completion patterns was several years ago (McGivney, 1996), more recent data, studies and reports suggest that little has changed since then in terms of the difficulties involved in obtaining in-depth data:

- A variety of terms is still used to describe the process of early withdrawal from programmes of study (drop-out, attrition, wastage, etc).
- Non-completion is still defined in different ways in different education sectors.
- There is still considerable variation in non-completion levels between different institutions and subject areas, which makes it difficult to generalize across the post-16 sector as a whole.
- There is still a paucity of detailed data on retention, especially that relating to mature students, and limited disaggregation of data according to age. This applies to all education sectors.

### **Higher education**

Although over one half of all students in higher education are over the age of 25, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) performance indicators on retention are split between 'young students' and 'mature students', defined as those under or over the age of 21 on 30 September of the academic year when they

enter an institution. The mature group is split into those under and over 25 years only for employment benchmarks.

A considerable number of mature students are studying part-time and many are in sub-degree programmes. However, HEFCE retention statistics take account only of full-time, first-degree students. Those recorded as leaving before 1 December in their first academic year are not counted and figures are not available for part-time students.

The data on full-time, first-degree students suggest that those aged over 21 on entry are about twice as likely to leave programmes before completion as those classified as younger students. In 1999–2000, for example, whereas 8% of ‘young students’ were no longer in higher education following their year of entry and 3% had gone to another institution, 16% of ‘mature’ students were no longer in higher education following their year of entry and 2% had moved to another institution.

Withdrawal rates of those aged over 21 were particularly high at some institutions—between 20% and 30%, or even higher. A further split between mature students with and without previous higher education qualifications shows that the latter were 3% more likely to have left higher education following their year of entry, with some particularly high rates of attrition recorded at some institutions. HEFCE data also show that both young and mature entrants with non-traditional qualifications had higher non-continuation rates than those with standard A levels (Higher Education Funding Council, 2002).

### **Further education**

In further education over two-thirds of students are over the age of 25, and the majority of these are enrolled in part-time programmes. National retention data, however, are split between students under 19, those aged 19–59 (an age span of 40 years) and those over 60 (Learning and Skills Council, 2002). The data also only takes account of students on longer and qualification-based courses who are still on the programme at certain key (census) dates. Those on non-accredited courses and programmes lasting less than 12 weeks are excluded.

The Learning and Skills Council which has responsibility for further education defines withdrawal as follows:

A learner should be considered to have withdrawn from a programme of study where he/she is known to have made a decision to withdraw from the programme of study, or transfer from a full-time to a part-time programme, or from a part-time to a full-time programme. In addition learners should be considered to have withdrawn where they have not attended classes for at least four continuous weeks, excluding holidays (unless there is auditable evidence of an intention to return). (2002, p. 20)

According to this definition, the non-completion rates of students aged over 19 on full-time full-year programmes in 1999–2001 were approximately 3–4% higher than the rates for those under 19 years old (Learning and Skills Council, 2002).

The data from both sectors therefore suggest that older students are overall less likely than younger ones to complete longer qualification-bearing programmes of study. However, what does ‘older’ mean? In both cases it could refer to many

students in their early 20s. Students of this age still have much in common with those in their late teens, whereas there can be considerable differences in the lifestyles, learning goals and constraints of people in their early 20s and those in their 30s, 40s and 50s. To obtain a true picture of retention and non-completion among mature students requires far greater age differentiation in the data.

Moreover, the available statistics do not tell the whole story. In the further education sector, for example, providers may not know whether students who have withdrawn from a programme of study have gone on to complete it in another institution since the 'unique' student reference numbers used to track students in colleges currently apply only to a single institution. Second, some adult learners who are taking courses purely out of interest may neither need nor want the qualification so may leave before the end of a course. Although they may have achieved their learning goals, they are still classified as non-completers. And third, the Learning and Skills Council definition of non-completion indicates that even though people who transfer to a different learning mode may continue learning the same course in the same institution, they are still counted as having withdrawn.

These factors, combined with the huge diversity of further education in terms of learners, qualifications and programmes offered, led the National Audit Office (2001) to conclude that the ability of the sector to measure and assess retention is 'significantly hampered by the quality of the available data':

Measuring student retention and achievement within the broad umbrella of further education is extremely complex. The sector includes such a wide range of students undertaking a huge range of qualifications awarded by a large number of awarding bodies. This has led to some difficulties with both the timeliness of data and the definitions used to measure retention and achievement. (Para. 6.20)

### **Adult and Community learning<sup>1</sup>**

Much Adult and Community Learning provision is composed of short, often non-accredited courses lasting for 10 weeks, 6 weeks or even less. In such provision, retention is defined as the number of learners who complete as a percentage of the number of those who have enrolled. However, there is no central data-set relating to Adult and Community Learning and no national figures on retention are available. Although recording completion is a requirement at a local level as part of normal quality-assurance procedures, it has not yet been possible to collate it nationally as there is no single common recording format. From October of 2003, however, all Learning and Skills Council providers will have had to complete an Individual Learner Record, which should capture this information. Adult and Community Learning providers will also now have to undergo a bi-annual Performance Review (further education providers already do this) for which part of the evidence required will also be data on retention.

Given the paucity of detailed national age-aggregated data, one is forced to rely on qualitative studies and individual institutional surveys to gain a picture of adult withdrawal patterns and the reasons for non-completion.

## **The reasons for non-completion**

All researchers in this field emphasize that non-completion is a complex issue. There is usually a combination of interacting reasons that lead people to withdraw prematurely from a programme of study, of which only one or the most recent might be mentioned. Sometimes the real reasons are not expressed and students cite only those that do not threaten their self-esteem or that they perceive as 'acceptable'. Sometimes the reasons given are 'the last straw or the least threatening to reveal' (Cullen, 1994).

Inevitably many of the reasons given by adults for withdrawing from courses are the same as those reported by younger learners. However, there are some that apply particularly to adults over 25 years old.

### *Personal factors*

A distinction can be made between adults on short courses (under 20 weeks) and those on longer courses. The attendance patterns of those on short courses are heavily affected by temporary or last-minute factors such as feeling unwell, family emergencies, weather conditions or problems with public transport. When such factors interrupt attendance for several weeks, some students feel that it is not worth returning as they have missed too much of the short course.

Where longer programmes are concerned, most analyses have found that mature students often leave before completion for 'fact of life' reasons to do with work, home, family, caring responsibilities or health. Sustained study in adulthood can be interrupted by unforeseen events such as a sick child, increased work pressures, redundancy or illness as well as by regular events such as school holidays. Problems related to time pressures are particularly acute for those adults who are studying while trying to hold down a job or fulfil domestic commitments. Sometimes complete withdrawal is not intended but happens because, after a period of interruption, students fear that they may not be able to catch up with the work (McGivney, 1996).

### *Open and distance learners*

Many people are attracted to open and distance learning precisely because their work and/or family circumstances preclude any other kind of learning. However, the pressures inherent in these circumstances can lead to a temporary or permanent cessation of a learning programme. In other words, there is a probably a strong link between the complicated professional and personal lives of those who choose these forms of learning and the likelihood of completion.

The length of time it takes to complete a distance learning programme can also play a part in non-completion. To complete an Open University first degree, for example, is expected to take about six years. In that time, adults' circumstances, interests and priorities may well change. Moreover, they do not have the advantage of set weekly course times and regular face-to-face access to tutors that contribute towards maintaining people's commitment in conventional education settings.

These factors prompt some questions: are the skills and discipline required to persist with a lengthy open or distance learning programme fully understood? Inevitably some people will possess more of these skills than others. Are there any ways of predicting at the pre-entry stage whether prospective students have the necessary dedication and clarity of purpose required to complete a longer open or distance learning programme?

### *Gender differences*

Some typical gender differences in completion patterns have been identified. It is generally found that men are more likely to cite course-related, finance-related or work-related reasons for leaving courses before completion, whereas women are more likely to withdraw for reasons to do with family commitments and the lack, inadequacy or costs of childcare. This has been found in all types of provision, including distance learning (McGivney, 1996).

Studies undertaken in the past decade have also found that women students often experience acute conflict between their domestic and student roles and many feel they have to hide evidence of their study when they are at home to avoid accusations of 'abandoning' the family (Green & Percy, 1991; Munn *et al.*, 1992; Edwards, 1993; Metcalf, 1993; Cullen, 1994; Maynard & Pearsall, 1994; Hayes, 1999).

Cultural expectations of women impact particularly on some groups. A study conducted at Manchester College of Arts and Technology, for example, showed that Asian women learners were unable to continue studying at a college four miles away as 'they were expected to be within walking distance of their homes so that they could be called upon when needed' (Hramiak, 2002, p. 35).

### *Lack of family or partner support*

Adults who lack the support of their family or immediate network can find sustaining study over a long period particularly difficult (Comfort *et al.*, 2002). Some studies have commented on the opposition some women experience from their male partners when they embark upon a sustained programme of study (Edwards, 1993; Cullen, 1994). In her study of non-completing Access students, Cullen found that 50% of women students had experienced physical and/or verbal abuse from male partners while they were on the course. Another study (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994) found that married male students tended to receive far more support and encouragement from their partners than married female students. Although virtually all the women in their study had deferred their entry to higher education until they were satisfied that their children no longer required their continuous presence in the home:

Their decision was contingent on the responses of partner and family to a much greater extent than was the case with the student fathers. If approval was not forthcoming from the partners of student mothers their relationship could be put under strain and even at risk. None of the married male students experienced such negative reactions. Male students frequently benefited from a striking level of solidarity from their partners,

despite difficult financial circumstances arising from the loss of the main income to the household. (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994, p. 233)

Interviews held with male Open University graduates have revealed a similar picture (Lunneborg, 1997). Although some of the interviewees referred to indifference and hostility from employers and workmates, virtually all (except one who rapidly changed partners) referred to the invaluable support of their wives in helping them to conduct their studies and maintain their motivation. One had the grace to recognize that women students often have a very different experience:

A lot of the women students I met had partners who were very threatened. They had to deal with violence, marriage break-ups, being a single parent. One woman in her 50s who was going to graduate the following year hadn't told her family (that she was studying) in all those years because of ridicule. (Lunneborg, 1997, p. 32)

### *Financial problems*

Research into retention and achievement at colleges in areas of deprivation has identified clear links between low retention levels and high levels of disadvantage. (National Audit Office, 2001). Mature students tend to experience more acute financial difficulties than younger ones. In her investigation into the income and expenditure of further education students, Callender (1999) found that those who suffered the most financial hardship included full-time students over the age of 19, lone parents and couples with children. She also found that these groups had little knowledge and awareness of potential sources of financial aid. Over half had received no information about the costs before starting their courses, two in five had perceived the costs incorrectly and one-third had underestimated them.

Unemployed adults who are dependent on state benefits are additionally constrained by the 'availability for work' rule and limitations on the number of hours they can spend on study.

### *Course-related and institution-related factors*

Analysts warn against the conclusion that, since the main expressed reasons for mature student withdrawal are external to an institution, there is nothing the institution can do to prevent or ameliorate them. Dissatisfaction with a course or institution is also a common reason for non-completion, and if this is on top of a range of external constraints and pressures, there is a strong likelihood that students will abandon a programme before completion.

### *Inadequate pre-course information and guidance*

A study of the factors influencing learner progression in further and higher education institutions has concluded that choosing the right course is fundamental to learners at every level (Comfort *et al.*, 2002). This research found that the wrong choice of

course was a highly significant factor in early withdrawal from further and higher education programmes. Specific difficulties identified were:

- Course differing from that which was advertised: units changed or modules discontinued.
- Course content differing substantially from that which was expected.
- Other qualification routes preferred with hindsight, but not known about at the time (Comfort *et al.*, 2002).

Research indicates that many adults have difficulty obtaining full details and guidance on content, timetabling and workload programme prior to entry (Dinsdale, 2001; Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2002). Many also rely on the information and advice received from friends, family and colleagues rather than from education or careers guidance workers (Sims, 1995; McGivney, 2003a). As a result, some are ill prepared for the level of study involved in a qualification programme. Access students in particular may be under-prepared. They are sometimes forced into making inappropriate or rushed course choices as they have to apply to a higher education institution at an early stage in their Access programme (Dinsdale, 2001; Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2002).

A study of the factors affecting student progression has indicated that education institutions are not always helpful in guiding learners to the right courses (Comfort *et al.* (2002)). Examples of poor practice cited include:

- Perfunctory interviews.
- Courses being cancelled and applicants put on the ‘next best thing’ at the beginning of term without discussion.
- Appropriate level of course not available and applicants put on the same level of study as their previous qualification rather than directed to another provider.
- Applicants’ aptitudes and abilities (often broader than their qualifications) not taken into account.
- Insufficient help and advice for learners who find themselves on the wrong course.

### *Managing study time*

Unlike students in conventional learning settings who know that they have to give up a set number of hours a week for classroom time, open and distance learners who are learning in their own time and at their own pace possibly receive less guidance on the day-to-day or weekly input of work required and how to carve out a space for it. Without the discipline of classes, lectures or seminars at set times, they can easily yield to competing pressures and lose the habit of maintaining regular study time.

### *Difficulties in settling in and integrating into the life of an institution*

A frequently identified reason for early withdrawal from a programme is lack of integration into the life of an institution. Staffordshire University has found

that loneliness and not making relationships with other students or tutors are among the most likely causes of non-completion among those studying in a conventional education setting (Utley, 2002). Although such problems can be experienced by students of any age, mature students may be particularly vulnerable if there are few other older learners on their course or in the institution. Studies of mature and other 'non-traditional' students have found that those who fail to complete courses often lack a sense of belonging to the institution where they are studying (Metcalf, 1993; Cullen, 1994). A large proportion of mature students study at institutions within relatively easy distance of their homes. On the one hand, this means that they remain within their existing social and family networks; on the other hand, it means that they form weaker ties with the life of the education institution and have less interaction with the student community. Some can consequently feel isolated.

Isolation can be a particular problem for open and distance learners. Learners in conventional education settings can benefit from the insights and contribution to learning provided by other learners, as well as from their support and camaraderie. People are more likely to continue with any endeavour if they are members of a friendly and supportive group and if there are regular and pre-determined times set aside for that activity. The comparative isolation of open and distance learners who are not part of a learning group and who have to make time to study at home in the face of myriad competing demands is likely to have an impact on long-term persistence. Moreover, if there are no links between the content of a course and the nature of one's job and other regular activities, there may be no-one to share ideas and learning experiences with on a daily basis. This can reinforce a learner's isolation.

#### *Institutions that are not 'adult-friendly'*

Some mature students feel alienated when their existing skills and experience are not taken into account or when their outside commitments are ignored. In conventional higher education institutions the timetabling of compulsory lectures, seminars and tutorials can make life very difficult for parents of school-aged children or those with part-time employment. I recently met a mature under-graduate with three children who had to travel a considerable distance to her nearest university. She complained that in her first term induction meetings, lectures and seminars were frequently cancelled or re-scheduled without any prior notice: 'do they think that my time is less valuable than theirs?'. Such practices can cause resentment and disillusionment and precipitate early withdrawal.

#### *Lack of support*

A number of studies have found that Access students and other adults moving from further to higher education do not receive the same amount of support as they did in their previous learning environment, and this can come as a shock to some. A survey of Access students conducted by the Open College Network of Central England (2002) found that most respondents considered higher education 'less flexible, less accommodating and less supportive' than further education. In another

study, further education students moving to higher education institutions felt that they were ‘thrown in at the deep end’ and had to adapt to a less supportive learning environment (Gentleman, 2002). Similarly, Comfort *et al.* (2002) reported that students moving from further education had difficulty in adjusting to the higher education learning environment (big lecture halls accommodating large numbers of students) and the large amount of independent study required.

The literature on adult learning shows that adults are easily discouraged when teaching staff do not get to know them, show little interest in their work or make disparaging comments on assignments.

## **Factors that contribute to persistence**

### *Motivation*

While outside constraints relating to work and family prove too great for some mature students, others manage to overcome similar pressures. Often this is due to personal drive and motivation. Motivation is a word that is often applied to adult learners. Many lecturers and tutors find that mature students tend to be more motivated than younger students for a number of reasons: because the course or programme is something that they have long wanted to do; because they have made sacrifices in order to participate; because they want to prove to themselves (and others) that they are capable of learning and gaining a qualification; or because they need or are required to study for career or employment reasons.

It is probable that people working on their own through open and distance learning programmes require a greater degree of motivation than those in conventional settings where there may be other ‘pull’ factors (social elements, set course times, face-to-face contact with tutors, etc.). If completion of an open and distance learning project is necessary for promotion or if it is paid for by an employer, there will be a strong incentive to complete. If the learning is undertaken more out of personal interest without a clearly felt, or externally imposed, requirement to complete, a learner’s commitment is likely to be correspondingly less.

### *A supportive family or partner*

All the literature on adult learning indicates that having a supportive family or partner significantly assists the motivation and persistence of adults engaged in programmes of study that demand a considerable amount of time, financial and psychological commitment.

Those with work and family commitments who are trying to sustain an independent programme of study over a prolonged period of time may find it particularly difficult to persist if they do not receive sufficient encouragement and support from their immediate entourage as well as from tutors and other professionals.

### *Financial support*

Analysis of further education student records for 1999–2000 by the Institute for Employment Studies has found that, in conventional learning settings, learners in receipt of financial support are less likely to drop out of programmes and, on completing their studies, have achievement rates equal to those of other students. Significantly, the study found that financial support had a much greater impact on the retention of adults than on that of younger learners. Adults receiving such support were 38% less likely to drop out than adults receiving no support funds: for young people the difference was only 10%. (Fletcher, 2002; Kirk, 2002). There are indications that the same does not apply to students engaged in distance programmes and that their completion rates are worse than those of students who do not receive any financial support. A possible reason for this might be that students with financial pressures are often experiencing other practical difficulties in their lives and have support needs such as help with childcare that a distance learning institution cannot provide.

In a conventional learning context, additional practical supports can make all the difference to adult persistence—timetabling that takes account of their outside commitments, good childcare facilities, advice on a range of personal and learning matters, and social and study spaces specifically for adults.

### *Good pre-entry information and advice*

Student persistence rates might be improved if, before enrolment, every prospective student received full and accurate information and advice on course content and the required workload, as well as on sources of financial and other supports. However, research indicates that adequate information and advice is not always provided. Its provision is particularly important for learners embarking on higher education study with no prior knowledge or experience of the real extent of commitment and workload required.

### *High-quality course content and presentation*

The quality of course content and the overall presentation of course materials are extremely important for learners who are studying on their own. If the content of a programme is considered boring and uninspiring, the incentive to persevere will be low, especially if there are no other benefits such as the camaraderie of a friendly student group.

### *Effective tutors*

Friendly, interested and helpful tutors who provide one-to-one support and prompt, regular and constructive feedback on performance are crucial to learner persistence (Turner & Watters, 2001). The personality and attitudes of tutors can be more

important to mature students than to younger ones. Younger students often view participation in further and higher education as a social as well as an educational experience, and if they enjoy the social element this often offsets any dissatisfaction they may feel with tutors or the course. For mature students on longer programmes, the educational experience is paramount and inaccessible, indifferent or insensitive teachers can negatively affect their motivation to persevere with their studies: 'If someone cares about my work, I'll do that bit extra' (cited in National Audit Office, 2001).

It goes without saying that good tutors are absolutely essential to the success of students engaged in distance learning programmes. As they are the main or only persons with whom students will be in contact about their work, the quality of tutors' and tutor-counsellors' feedback and advice can have a decisive impact on progress and persistence, as the following testimony from a non-continuing Open University student suggests:

With ODL, there's no place to hide! If I were turning up to a particular building each week along with others, the tutor would be one among many factors pulling me into continuation or pushing me away. As it was, as an isolated learner unenthused by the printed materials, and with other pressures on my time, I needed someone to remind me of why the course was worth doing—and what the benefits would be. My tutor did not succeed in doing this over the phone (and frankly, did not even try). (Correspondence with the author)

#### *A supportive learner group*

Group solidarity is particularly important for those who are in a minority in a learning environment and who, because of work or family commitments, are unable to join in the social activities enjoyed by younger students. This has particular implications for students in open and distance learning who are studying on their own. The formation of local study groups or circles can help to maintain the motivation of such students, especially when combined with regular contact with helpful tutors. According to a former Open University tutor:

I found that the people who stuck at it were those who had regular tutorial support, were given appointments to meet tutors which were mutually negotiated, kept their appointments and had the clarity of purpose which helps all learners—i.e. knew why they were doing what they were doing. It seems to me that having a tutorial on a one-to-one basis is a huge advantage as, whilst you might be working your way through learning materials and packages as a fairly independent learner, to have the tutorial meant that individualised issues were considered and addressed.

We did find that some learners always tried to make appointments on, for example a Wednesday morning, and in that context often met up with similar people and so a very informal network of learners was developed. Or they would start coming into the open learning centre at a time which they arranged with a friend so the social isolation was reduced. Tutors would sometimes try and engineer such peer support. (Correspondence with the author)

#### *Prompt follow-up of those at risk of non-completion*

Although education institutions can do little about the external pressures experienced by students, effective action and support at crucial times can help to prevent

complete withdrawal. The National Audit Office (2001) found that whereas younger further education students disliked being 'chased' about attendance, older adults welcomed it and perceived it as evidence of staff showing an interest in them. The study found that follow-up was most effective when conducted very promptly, by telephone rather than by letter. Sending class notes and handouts to students who have been unable to attend classes for a while has been found to prevent complete withdrawal by those with anxieties about keeping up with the work.

Some institutions now have established procedures for identifying and following up absentee or under-performing students and in many cases these have significantly increased retention rates.

### **Final observations**

It is not just in an institution's interests to ensure that students successfully complete the right programme of study; it is in students' own interests. The costs to them of non-completion may be considerable; they may incur financial penalties for leaving courses prematurely and some may suffer from a sense of personal failure and inadequacy. The consequences, however, can be far worse for adults than for younger students: those aged over 30 have less time to start a programme again and their circumstances may in any case preclude that option. An even worse consequence is that those who feel that they failed in the education system the first time round can suffer a repeated sense of failure from which they may never recover. It is imperative, therefore, that staff in all educational settings take swift action to determine the cause of non-attendance or non-completion of assignments and provide help and support for students who are experiencing difficulties.

However, there will always be some students who do not complete their programme of study and this should not necessarily be perceived as failure either on the part of the individual or on the part of the institution. It is a fact of life that people's choices, aspirations and circumstances change. For many, leaving a course before completion may be the right decision and we should be able to accept and support their choice.

### **Note on contributor**

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### **Notes**

1. For a definition of Adult and Community Learning, see McGivney (2003b).

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