

Older Workers Learning – Workshop 5

Abstract

A major issue facing Europe, particularly Scotland, is the challenge of an ageing population, particularly the workforce. Improvements in health and lifespan, coupled with reduced birth rates and pension uncertainty, mean that most people may wish to work beyond age 65. Opening access to education and employment for older workers is beneficial in terms of improved health, financial security and overall quality of life. The Older Workers Learning (OWL) Project developed a range of innovative methods to assist older workers participate in lifelong learning. The project supported both employed and unemployed adults aged 50+ to re-connect with learning, develop new skills and enhance future employability.

Groups were formed in both work and community settings resulting in participation of staff, and individuals who were unemployed, from non-traditional learning backgrounds. It was found that groups worked best with an optimum size and consisted of around 75% female participation and 25% male. A key barrier to involvement was rurality, with less participation in more remote areas as opposed to urban areas. In addition, peer support encouraged and enhanced learning among groups with social interaction playing a key role. Finally, the use of reflective learning and building on past experience resulted in increased confidence of participants.

Many older workers experience significant barriers which affect participation in learning. Time, cost, perception of relevance and ability are just a few. Evidence suggests there is also a lack of confidence and self-belief, which can be overcome through use of reflective learning and recognising past achievements as a basis for progression. Information on learning opportunities has to be more readily available and accessible to older workers. Finally, post-learning support is crucial for sustaining interest and stimulation with considerable work required in educating employers on the benefits associated with developing older workers as lifelong learners.

Bio – Graham Smith

Mr Smith is Project Manager of employability projects within the University of Strathclyde's Senior Studies Institute, with a particular interest in age management, employability of older adults and demographic risk within companies.

He has just finished two Equal-funded programmes in Scotland, working with a range of older adults as well as public and private sector organisations and a locally funded project reviewing the workability of older unemployed adults who have been out of the labour market for an extended period of time.

He is about to start a three year ESF project focusing on older workers.