

Count Us In

Older learners' involvement in
Department of Education & Skills-funded community education

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Contents

Foreword	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
1. Executive Summary	1
1.1 Conclusions	1
1.2 Recommendations	3
2. Introduction	5
2.1 Overview	5
2.2 Methodology	6
3. Context Review	8
3.1 Older People & Lifelong Learning	8
3.2 Community Education	10
4. Findings & Analysis	13
4.1 Demographic Profile	14
4.2 Experience of Community Education	22
4.3 Community Education Outcomes	34
5. Conclusions & Recommendations	51
5.1 Demographic Profile	51
5.2 Access, Persistence & Retention	52
5.3 Approach to Community Education	54
5.4 Outcomes Experienced	54
5.5 Comparison between Older & Younger Groups	55
5.6 Recommendations	56

Foreword

Strategies to address the ageing of the world's population increasingly aim to engage the skills and experience of older people through both lifelong learning and volunteering. This approach is based on:

- The positive effects on health and wellbeing that flow from continued engagement in social and productive activities, including volunteering and learning; and
- A desire to harness the time, skills and expertise of the older members of communities to enhance social capital and community cohesion.

Age & Opportunity works towards a society where people of all ages can feel included in all aspects of life, particularly in the areas of arts and culture, physical activity and sport and in education and active citizenship.

Research carried out by AONTAS in 2008 and funded by Age & Opportunity's Get Vocal programme found that, apart from a notable increase in ICT courses, adult learning opportunities for older people had not changed greatly in 20 years and largely involved hobby-learning. We are now pleased to be able to publish this research, carried out in partnership with AONTAS. Its focus is on community education provided by the VECs, and in what ways people over 55 are participating in it, looking in particular at whether these participants engaged in types of community education that fosters critical reflection or civic engagement.

Notable findings include that education for older learners was, for the most part, described as a type of learning that helps to maintain well-

being. It does this by fostering social engagement, personal development and it has some physical health outcomes. It is notable that a motivation of older learners for participating in community education frequently cited was wishing to get more involved in the community. One of the conclusions of the research is that there is fertile ground on which to build more involvement in education that fosters civic engagement amongst older learners.

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1. Executive Summary

This report presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations from a piece of research to explore the extent to which learners aged 55+ in Department of Education and Skills (DES)-funded community education experience community education which fosters critical reflection and civic engagement. To do so, an existing survey data set was re-analysed isolating the responses of those aged 55+ in the sample.¹

1.1 Conclusions

The conclusions from the research are:

- Generally, older learners were experiencing a liberal model of community education, which focuses on the provision of leisure learning for fun and to combat social isolation. This model does not work to foster critical reflection and civic engagement.
- Some learners did experience facilitators/ tutors who encouraged them to talk about their local area, reflect on inequality and the impact of society on their personal experiences, which are facets of pedagogy that foster critical reflection. However, they did not describe either being encouraged to take action, which would have encouraged them towards civic engagement outcomes like protest or becoming involved in community development activities.
- Many older learners were already engaged in quite a few of the civic engagement outcomes tracked like voting, volunteering and talking to

¹ Dataset was from research carried out by AONTAS using the *Survey of Learners in Community Education*, a tool developed by AONTAS. See www.aontas.com.

friends or family about politics. This finding shows that older people maintain political interest, which indicates fertile ground for the provision of community education to older learners that examines these topics.

- There was significant scope to develop civic outcomes like protest, writing letters voicing opinion to politicians or newspapers and giving back to the community, as older learners did not achieve these outcomes through community education very frequently, although wishing to get more involved in their community was one of the most strongly cited reasons for participating in community education.
- A large minority of learners appear to be living in poverty. As only half the sample responded to the question on income, we cannot make definitive claims from this research. However, given a State emphasis on community education for disadvantaged target groups, this tentative finding means that there may be more scope for reaching more deprived older people.
- The data did show that community education provides respite for a significant number of carers (22% of sample) and some older people who are living in poverty (28.5% of n=174) as well as some who live with a disability (16%).
- About 60% of the learners sampled indicated they had left school at lower secondary level or below. This figure compares similarly to their counterparts nationally and supports the need generally for the provision of educational opportunities to older people.
- Community education successfully offers older learners a number of supports that encourage access, persistence and retention and these supports should be maintained. However, if more marginalised

learners are to be reached other types of supports will need to be offered through community education such as intensive outreach, transport and referrals to community services.

- Community education for older learners was, for the most part, described as a type of learning that helps to maintain well-being. The results show it does this by fostering social engagement, personal development and some physical health outcomes for older learners with high frequency.
- When compared to the under 55s in the survey sample, the research showed that they were generally more likely than over 55s to experience the outcomes tracked (i.e. civic outcomes) and to experience other types of community education. Within the 55+ age brackets, 55-64 year olds were more likely to be focused on goal directed learning that resulted in accreditation.
- Over 75s were not well represented in the sample, indicating more could be done to recruit people of this age group to community education.

1.2 Recommendations

- Ensure that facilitators are trained in the approach to community education that works to achieve civic engagement outcomes and critical reflection.
- Make sure that providers and facilitators can offer opportunities to older learners for civic engagement so that, if they so choose, older people can become involved in community development or taking collective action.

- Offer older learners programmes that involve political or civic matters as the high rate of learners voting, volunteering and talking about politics shows that their interest in these matters is high.
- Focus on the recruitment of harder-to-reach older people and on increasing the representation of older men in community education.
- Attempt to recruit more people 75 years and older into community education.
- Use outreach methods to reach more marginalised older people and recruit them into community education.
- Continue to offer the supports highlighted through the research to older learners to facilitate their access, persistence and retention. Ensure that supports for more marginalised learners are also offered such as disability support or service referrals.

2. Introduction

2.1 Overview

In May 2011, Age & Opportunity commissioned a piece of research that aimed to examine the extent to which *older people are involved in community education that is aiming to build capacity for critical thinking and engagement*.

The objectives for the research were to:

- Present a demographic profile of the age 55+ cohort in the existing data set.
- Explore this cohort's experience of community education, including their motivations for participation and the factors assisting their access, retention and persistence.
- Understand what approaches to community education the cohort experienced.
- Investigate the key civic, social engagement, health, personal development and progression outcomes experienced amongst the cohort.
- Where relevant, explore the differences between the younger and older age brackets for specific variables.

- Make recommendations about how to facilitate the access, retention and persistence of older learners to community education as well as the ways in which providers can help to achieve civic engagement outcomes with older learners.

This report presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations from this research in the following sections:

- Context review
- Findings and analysis
- Conclusions and recommendations

2.2 Methodology

In order to carry out the research an existing data set was used. In 2009, AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, carried out a piece of research examining the outcomes and impact of Department of Education and Skills (DES)-funded community education. The research included a survey of community education learners participating in Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES) resourced community education.² This source of funding is delivered to local groups or centres through the Community Education Services of the Vocational Education Committees (VECs).

The survey sample was a stratified representative sample. Therefore, findings were generalisable to the national cohort of learners involved in ALCES-funded community education. AONTAS gave permission to Age & Opportunity to re-analyse the survey data set. The piece of research

² See AONTAS (2009). *Survey of Learners in Community Education* at www.AONTAS.com.

presented here includes the survey findings in relation to the age 55+ cohort of the overall sample (N=318).

The main limitation of this research is that findings only refer to ALCES funded community education and not DES funded community education provided through the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) Community Strand, the other main programme for this type of learning from DES. However, older people are not a target group for BTEI.³ Older people may also be participating in community education that is not funded by DES and these findings cannot speak to outcomes for those learners.

One other limitation is that very few learners in the 85-94 year old age bracket participated in the survey (n=11). Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn about this cohort as the sample size is not significant.

³For BTEI target groups, see *Department of Education and Skills, Back to Education Initiative Community Strand – Guidelines for Providers* at www.education.ie.

3. Context Review

This section briefly explores older people as a policy target group for community education and lifelong learning in Ireland, as well as the community education approach that fosters critical reflection and civic engagement.

3.1 Older People & Lifelong Learning

Currently, there is no single document that expresses Ireland's policy commitments to older people as the long awaited National Positive Ageing Strategy has yet to be published. Therefore, the State's commitment to fostering community education and lifelong learning for older people must be found amongst a range of documents.

The White Paper on Adult Education identified the older people's sector as one that the then new Community Education Facilitators would support in the provision of community education.⁴ This commitment has resulted in older people being a significant cohort of ALCES community education learners. In 2009, 42% of learners nationally were aged 55+. In 2008, 22% of groups funded were active retirement/older learners groups.⁵

More recent policy documents have expressed imprecise commitments to targeting older people for community education and lifelong learning. Both *Towards 2016* and the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion* commit to the provision of targeted adult and community education opportunities for older people, and the encouragement and involvement

⁴ Community Education Facilitators are the personnel in each of the VECs who support the provision of community education in the VEC area.

⁵ See Bailey, N. (2010). *Not just a Course: the Outcomes and Impact of Department of Education and Skills funded Community Education*. AONTAS: Dublin.

of them in family literacy projects through the Delivery Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme.

Towards 2016 expresses an overall commitment to encouraging and supporting older people to participate in social and civic life. It also dedicates a role to the eInclusion Strategy Group to explore how ICT can be used to assist older people.

As with other Western countries there has been an increasing emphasis in Ireland on a human capital approach to lifelong learning, which focuses on educational outcomes related to employment.⁶ There is a state commitment to fostering civic contribution, enhancement of learning and empowerment through community education as opposed to solely vocational learning.

However, it is likely that community education provision may also be used to help realise the objective of the *National Skills Strategy* to move 260,000 people up to FETAC Levels 4 or 5 in order to upskill the nation's workforce.⁷ This synergy occurs because much of the learning that happens in community education is from FETAC levels 1 through 5 and often involves the development of basic skills, personal effectiveness and pre-engagement preparation for further education, training and employment as well as other aims.

This emphasis on education for employability is only likely to increase given the current economic context. Since older learners generally are not participating in adult education for employability and are perceived as no longer economically productive, it is likely that their participation is to be challenged by a focus on other groups for whom employment is a priority. Critics believe that older people are generally already discounted from lifelong learning as a result of the prevalence of the human capital or neo-liberal approach to adult education.⁸

⁶Finnegan, F. (2008). "Neo-Liberalism, Irish Society and Adult Education." In *The Adult Learner*. 2008.

⁷See Bailey, N. (2010). *Not just a Course: the Outcomes and Impact of Department of Education and Skills funded Community Education*. AONTAS: Dublin.

⁸Crossan et al. (2001). "Learning, Identity and Citizenship: Researching Older People's Use of ICT in Scotland." www.ulosofona.pt.

3.2 Community Education

This research attempts to see if older learners are involved in community education that fosters critical reflection and civic engagement such as critical media interpretation, voting, volunteering, protest and involvement in community development activities. In an earlier publication, Bailey proposed that a particular approach to community education works to achieve these kinds of outcomes.⁹ This approach differs to other models of community education, which primarily see the provision of education as a service to a community that is learner-centred and focused on individual development.

Instead, a community/social action model of community education involves collective development and social change to address discrimination as well as individual development. The key ingredients in this approach are as follows¹⁰:

- **A focus on the most disadvantaged** This focus is a stated policy commitment for community education in Ireland. Disadvantage can stem from educational disadvantage (finishing school at lower secondary or before), income disadvantage, deprivation, or membership of a community of interest that experiences discrimination (ethnic minorities, people living with disabilities and so on).
- **The aim of conscientisation** is an explicit project in community education to develop critical reflection and to help disadvantaged communities develop a social and structural analysis about their discrimination.
- **The primacy of experience** means that people's daily experiences

⁹ See Bailey, N. (2010). *Not just a Course: the Outcomes and Impact of Department of Education and Skills funded Community Education*. AONTAS: Dublin.

¹⁰ Summarised from the literature. For more detailed reviews see Connolly, Brid. (2003). "Community Education: listening to the Voices." *The Adult Learner*. 2003. Or consider WERRC. (2001). *Women at the Forefront: the Role of Women's Community Education Groups in Combating Poverty and Disadvantage*. AONTAS: Dublin.

form the basis of learning. The facilitator draws on the experience of the group to answer questions believing that the answers are within the group. Where necessary, theory is applied to experience through discussion and participation. Through this emphasis learners find that they share common ground and a basis for action. This aspect is about the openness of the learning environment or the overall atmosphere of the group.

- **Co-building of curriculum** learners choose content that meets their needs. The tutor or facilitator presents the possibilities for learning. They do not impose a curriculum but they do seek to widen what groups see as possible since the experience of disadvantage means they may not know what is available to them.
- **Skills for community development and social action** learners use newfound skills and knowledge to create change to address their disadvantage either at the community or societal level. These actions are the types of civic engagement outcomes outlined above. Providers ensure that they know about or facilitate opportunities for learners to engage in civic life.
- **Centrality of social recognition** providers of community education know that their learners lack social recognition linked to the experience of discrimination and disadvantage and due to that often have poor self-esteem. They know that other learning aims cannot be accomplished until confidence and self-esteem are developed. This aim is the groundwork of community education. Providers also work to remove barriers to learning for participants, both situational and dispositional.

The neo-liberal discourse outlined above challenges the provision of community education opportunities that embrace this approach as a

human capital focus denies the importance of education that seeks to address inequality and develop social capital. Older learners may also be further blocked from this type of community education because learning for them is often narrowly defined as a liberal project, focused on leisure pursuits and opportunities to decrease social isolation.¹¹

The research presented here attempts to show if older community education learners have experienced any of the ingredients for community education outlined above or if they are experiencing a more liberal model of learning.

3.2.1 Access, Persistence & Retention

There are a few key issues in community education about access, persistence and retention that are pertinent to this research:

- Concerns about the Matthew Effect in provision, which asserts that those people with more resources and more education would be most likely to engage in and persist with learning. This effect means that the most marginalised are not reached.¹²
- Intensive outreach work and addressing learner barriers is required to avoid the Matthew Effect. This work includes door to door visits, community consultation, peer support, one-to-one mentoring and community service referral.¹³
- A notable point about older people, income poverty and deprivation is that traditional measures of deprivation are not adequate to assess their ability to meet basic needs.¹⁴ Therefore, the extent to which older people are disadvantaged may be difficult to gauge when conventional tools are used to target those who are deprived.

¹¹ See for instance Dale, L. (2001). "Learning in the Third Age." In Aspin, D. et al (eds.). *International Handbook of Lifelong Learning – Part 2*. Kluwer:USA.

¹² Educational Disadvantage Committee. (2005). *Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage: report of the Educational Disadvantage Committee: 2002-2005*. Government Stationary Office: Dublin.

¹³ Keogh, H. (2007). *Education Equality Initiative: Lessons and Impact*. Department of Education and Skills: Ireland.

¹⁴ Daly, M. (2010). *Poverty and Deprivation among Older People in a Changing Ireland*. Older and Bolder: Dublin.

4. Findings & Analysis

This section presents the findings and analysis from the respondents aged 55+ to the *Survey of Learners in Community Education* under the following headings:

- Demographic profile
- Experience of community education
- Community education outcomes

Results are, for the most part, presented as a percentage of the total sample that answered each question excluding missing responses. However, the total number of learners that responded to each question will generally be presented, particularly where that number is much lower than the total sample. Where relevant, the responses of over 55s is compared to those under 55 to see if there are significant differences and responses amongst the older age brackets.

When percentages are cited in relation to a particular age bracket within the age 55+ cohort they refer to the proportion of learners within the age bracket that gave a response. In other words, percentages may not always reflect the proportion of all learners in each age bracket.

4.1 Demographic Profile

The total number of learners aged 55+ who took part in the survey was 318, 91% women and 9% men. These figures differ to the most recent national profile of learners for community education in 2009 where 22% of learners were men and 78% women. The age and gender of respondents is considered in the table below:

Table 1 Age & gender of 55+ learners¹⁵

Age bracket	55-64	65-74	75-84	85-94	Total by gender
Total by age	138	118	47	10	
Male %	11.6	9.3	4.3	0	29
Female %	88.4	90.7	95.7	100	284

From the table above we can see that learners were most likely to be from 55 to 74 years of age. Men are slightly better represented in the 55-64 age bracket.

The vast majority of learners were either in their first marriage (58.4%) or widowed (25.4%). The proportion of those whose marital status was widowed rose as age increased with over half of those in the 75-84 age bracket indicating this status. Twenty per cent of 55-64 year olds had dependent children with statistically insignificant numbers of learners in the other age brackets still looking after dependents.

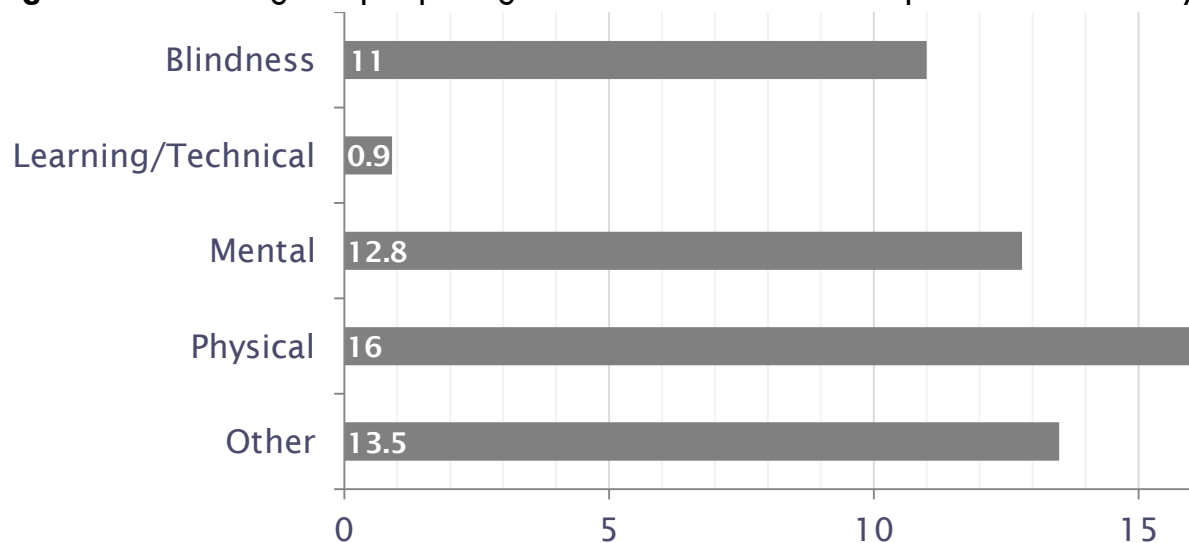
Over 95% of the sample were white Irish. Eleven learners indicated they were from any other white background and one person described themselves as African.

¹⁵ The number of learners in this table does not correspond to the overall sample number as the gender question was only answered by 313 learners.

There were no statistically significant differences across the age categories in terms of the type of area people said they lived in. The sample was mostly from rural areas. Sixty-nine percent said they lived in a small town, village or rural area and 24.5% indicated they lived in a city while the rest (6.5%) said they lived in a large town. Over 95% of learners described living in a house or bungalow with over 90% indicating that they were homeowners. Most learners travel to their course by driving a car (57%) with about 21% saying they were able to walk and about 15% indicating they got a lift by car.

Learners were asked to indicate if they experienced a disability or long-term medical condition. At least 16% of the entire sample indicated that they were living with a disability (as per the figure below), with 55-74 year olds stating more frequently than the other age brackets that they were living with one. This rate is below the national comparison where 23% of adults aged 55+ in the State indicated in Census 2006 that they were living with a disability.¹⁶ Figure 1 shows the proportion of people in the overall sample (n=318) who indicated that they experienced a disability, sorted by their disability.

Figure 1 Percentage of people aged 55+ in the overall sample with a disability



¹⁶ See www.cso.ie.

4.1.1 Education & Income

Learners were asked to indicate their level of education when they left school. This response was taken to be their current level of education. Education levels in the aged 55+ group were compared to learners who were under the age of 55. The table below shows the results.

Table 2 Education levels of older & younger learners

	% over 55s	% under 55s	Population % ¹⁷
No formal education	1.8	0.7	14
Primary level or similar	32.4	10.2	20
Lower secondary	29	26.2	
Upper secondary	25.2	38.8	28
Apprenticeship, vocational, trade or craft	5.2	10.2	
Third level	6	13.9	29

We can see from the above table that older learners were more likely than younger learners to indicate low educational levels with 32.4% of the sample of those aged 55+ indicating that they had left school at primary level. About 63% of older learners left school at lower secondary or below compared to about 37% of learners under 55.

The level of older learners in the sample who left school at lower secondary or below is far higher than the national figure of 34%. However, the learners aged 55+ in the sample compare similarly to their counterparts nationally. Census 2006 shows that around 60% of people aged 55+ in Ireland left school at lower secondary or below.¹⁸

¹⁷See www.cso.ie. Census 2006.

¹⁸See www.cso.ie. According to Census 2006, 858,003 people over 55 had ceased full-time education and 516,263 indicated they had finished school at lower secondary or below.

Learners were asked to describe their employment status. The majority of the people in the sample were retired (47.9%) or looking after home or family (27.4%) Only 12.5% said that they were working for pay or profit and they were most likely to be between the ages of 55-64. About four percent of the sample said they were unemployed.

The survey sought to assess levels of deprivation amongst the sample. To do so learners were asked to indicate if they experienced one of the eight indicators of consistent poverty used nationally in the 2006 Survey on Income and Living Conditions, including not being able to afford new clothes, ordinary living expenses or food.¹⁹

About 25% of the learners aged 55+ in the sample described experiencing at least one of the poverty indicators compared to 49.7% of people under 55 who completed the survey. Thus, younger people indicated more frequently than older people to be experiencing some form of material deprivation. However, given that 11.5% of the population nationally experiences at least one of the forms of deprivation measured, the rate of older learners describing some form of deprivation is high. It is also high compared to their counterparts nationally. In 2009, 10.2% of people 65+ experienced one of the deprivation indicators.²⁰ The indicator that older people chose most often was having had problems with money due to ordinary living expenses (14.7% of entire sample of learners aged 55+).

Learners were asked if they were in receipt of a range of social welfare entitlements and 234 learners (73.5%) indicated they were on any of the payments asked about. The most frequently named were the medical card (n=134), the non-contributory State Pension (n=42) and the contributory State Pension (n=23).

Learners were also asked to indicate their levels of weekly household disposable income before starting the course and currently. Only about

¹⁹ See www.cso.ie/eusilc.

²⁰ See www.cso.ie (2010). *Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2009 (SILC)*. Government Stationary Office: Dublin. This report does not give a figure for the 55+ population. Also the list of indicators used for the 2009 survey were expanded from the list used for this research with two extra indicators.

167 (52%) of the older learners surveyed completed this question. Their responses are compared to those learners under 55 who completed the question in Table 3.²¹

Table 3 Weekly income levels of older & younger learners

	Younger people	Older people	Younger people	Older people
Total no. of responses	252	167	252	174
	Before started course (%)		Currently (%)	
Less than €100 a week	12.3	3.6	7.9	3.4
€101-€200 a week	17.5	24.6	16.7	22.4
€201-€300 a week	29.0	32.3	29.2	34.5
€301-€400 a week	11.9	17.4	15	17.2
€401-€500 a week	12.3	10.2	12.5	10.3
€501-€600 a week	5.6	4.8	5.8	4
€601-€700 a week	4.4	3	6.3	4
€701-€800 a week	2.8	1.2	2.5	1.7
€801-€900 a week	1.6	0.6	1.7	1.1
€900-€1,000 a week	2.0	0.6	1.7	1.1
Over €1,000 a week	0.8	1.8	0.8	1.1
Total	100	100	100	100

The average equivalised disposable income in Ireland in 2009 was €23,326 per person and the at-risk-of-poverty threshold was €12,064.²² From Table 3 we see that on average the learners who answered this question had less household disposable income than the national average

²¹ As already indicated, learners were told that if they were not comfortable with a question they did not have to answer it. A high proportion of 55+ learners did not answer the question on income.

²² See www.cso.ie (2010). *Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2009 (SILC)*. Government Stationary Office: Dublin.

for individual disposable income. Older people who described their income were slightly more likely than younger people to be living on €101-€200 per week. Those living on an income at the top of this band would be living below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. So would those in the €201-€300 band living on up to €232 per week ($232 \times 52 = 12,064$).

The proportion of the population at risk of poverty nationally in 2009 was 14.1%. For those people who answered the question about income 25.8% indicated they were living on €200 a week or less. If we take this to be an indication of how the whole sample of older people might have answered the question we can see that a minimum of a quarter of older learners surveyed could be living in poverty. This figure is a much higher percentage than the national at risk of poverty figure of 14.1%. This percentage (25.8%) does not include learners in the 201-300 euro per week band whose income leaves them at or below the at risk of poverty threshold (232 euro per week). However, since only about half of the learners surveyed indicated their income, we can only make tentative conclusions about their risk of poverty.

4.1.2 Caring & Unpaid Work

Learners were also asked if they gave any regular unpaid help to a friend or family member with a long-term illness, health problem or disability (including problems due to older age). Twenty-five percent of the 277 older people who answered this question said that they did, most of whom (79.7%) did so for 1-14 hours per week.

The rate of caring in the sample is far higher than the national rate for those over 55 caring for someone (5.1%) at the time of Census 2006.²³

Of note is that a significant proportion of the older learners surveyed indicated that they had done volunteer work in the last four weeks, while

²³ See www.cso.ie. Calculated by taking the number of carers 55+ (n=45,235) as a percentage of the total number of people in the State over 55 in 2006 (n=874,981).

43% said that they had not. This figure is lower than the 66% of people nationally who were not volunteering at the time of Census 2006.

Table 4 below shows the type of voluntary activity that older learners were involved in at the time of the survey. Learners could select if they were involved with more than one type of activity.

Table 4 Types of volunteer activity

	55-64	65-74	75-84	85-94	
Total by age (including overlap)	168	137	49	11	
	%	%	%	%	Total by activity
Volunteered for social/charity org in last 4 weeks	28.6	31.1	16.3	10.0	86
Volunteered for religious group/church in last 4 weeks	22.1	17.6	24.5	10.0	65
Volunteered for sports org in last 4 weeks	8.6	4.2	0.0	0.0	17
Volunteered for political/cultural org in last 4 weeks	6.4	2.5	2.0	0.0	13
Did other voluntary work in last 4 weeks	17.1	15.1	8.2	0.0	46
Did no voluntary work in last 4 weeks	37.1	55.5	49.0	9.0	138

About 13% of the entire population and 17% of people over 55 said that they were involved in one or more voluntary activity at the time of Census 2006.²⁴ From Table 4 we can see that 86 (27%) of the 318 older learners surveyed had undertaken at least one form of voluntary activity in the previous four weeks. This figure shows that rates of volunteering in this sample are higher than the national rates presented.

Notably, volunteering declines with age in the sample and most people who said they volunteered indicated they did so for a social/ charity organisation or religious group or church. Very few volunteered for a political or cultural organisation.

4.1.3 Analysis

The following points are notable in terms of the demographic profile of the aged 55+ sample:

- The representation of men 55+ is very low even in comparison to the national profile where men are also in the minority of learners.
- Most learners were from rural areas or small towns and villages.
- The majority of learners are between 55-74 years of age.
- Education levels amongst the aged 55+ sample are low compared to their younger counterparts. However, these rates are similar to those aged 55+ nationally.
- The level of deprivation is high compared to the national profile where 25% of 55+ learners said they were experiencing one or more of the measures tracked (compared to 11% nationally and 10.2% for those 65+). However, under 55s more frequently indicated deprivation than 55+ learners.

²⁴ www.cso.ie. Calculated by taking number of people nationally (n=553,255) as a percentage of the State (4,239 848) and number of people over 55 (n=155,901) as a percentage of those in that age bracket (874,981).

- It is not possible to draw clear conclusions about income disadvantage from the sample, since only about half the sample indicated their income. For those who did about a quarter are definitely living below the at risk of poverty threshold and potentially a further unascertained number may also be living below the at risk of poverty threshold.
- There are low rates of disability in the sample when compared to the national figures.
- There are high rates of carers in the sample where 25% indicated they were caring for someone mostly for 1-14 hours per week.
- The older people in this sample indicated more frequently than their counterparts nationally that they were volunteers. They were generally not volunteering for a political or cultural organisation.

4.2 Experience of Community Education

This set of survey questions pertained to the type of courses learners were involved in, reasons for participation and accessing their current provider and the community education approach they experienced.

The learners aged 55+ in the sample were involved, for the most part, in either Information and Communication Technology (ICT), dance/exercise/drama or hobby learning. Figure 2 (next page) shows the proportion of learners in each type of course provided.

Of note is that those aged 55-64 were more likely to be involved in social/personal or professional development courses than the other age brackets (13.9% of this age bracket). Those aged 65-74 were more likely than those in other age brackets to be engaged in hobby learning (51.7%)

and dance/ exercise/ drama courses (16.1%), and less likely than the other age brackets to be involved in IT learning (14.4%).

Learners were asked how many community education courses they had already completed. Figure 3 below shows the result of this question.

Figure 2 Types of courses taken by learners aged 55+ (percentages)

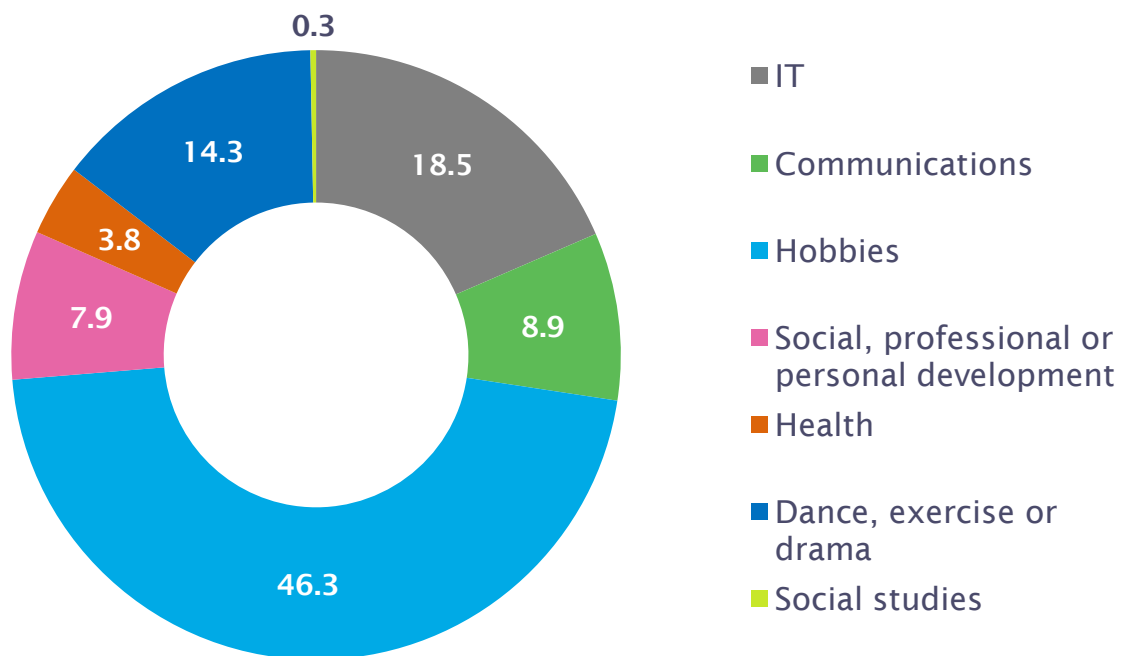
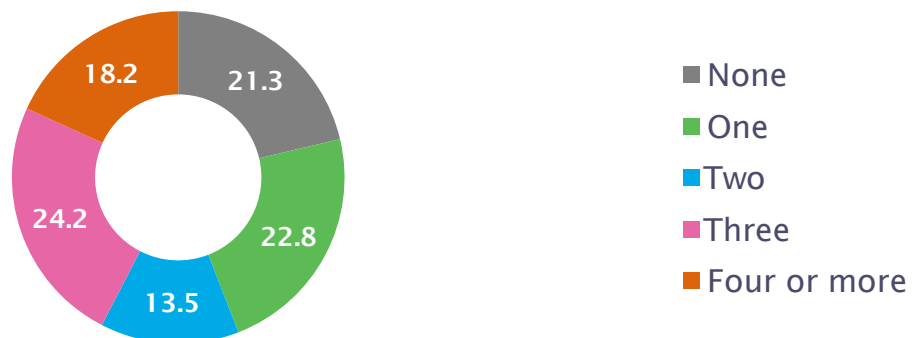


Figure 3 Number of courses completed by learners aged 55+ (percentages)



As the figure shows, just under half of people aged 55+ had completed none or one course (44.1%) with the rest having completed two or more (55.9%). These rates differ slightly to the overall survey sample where 47% of learners would have completed two or more courses. Those in the 55-64 year age bracket were less likely to have completed a course than those in the other brackets (34.6%) and the number of courses completed generally increased with age. It would appear that older people tend to stay with community education over successive courses.

4.2.1 Participation & Access

Table 5 on the opposite page shows the reasons that learners identified for why they wanted to participate in community education. The actual number of respondents who answered each question is indicated next to each reason.

As the table shows, the top reasons for participating in community education for the 55+ learners were to make friends and have social contact (94.3%), to get more involved in the community (81.5%), and to improve self-confidence (79.7%). When the responses of the older group are compared to those under 55 in the survey sample we can see that the older group was less likely than the younger group to say that they wanted to improve their employment prospects, to get a qualification, to move onto further study and to examine their experience as a member of a disadvantaged group. However, the older people were more likely to say that they wanted to improve their health or fitness levels by participating in community education.

Learners were also asked to indicate which factors helped them make the decision to attend their current provider. Figure 4 (on page 26) shows their answers. Results in the figure are shown as a percentage of the total number of learners over 55 who completed the survey (n=318).

The figure shows that the top three factors facilitating access were that the people were really nice (69.8%), the surroundings were warm and welcoming (66%) and the providers had the courses the learners definitely

Table 5 Reasons for learners aged 55+ participating in community education (%)

	Yes & have achieved goal	Yes, but have not achieved goal	Total yes	No, not a reason
To make friends and have social contact (n=280)	90	4.3	94.3	5.7
To get more involved in the community (n=249)	74.7	6.8	81.5	18.5
To improve my self-confidence (n=256)	71.9	7.8	79.7	20.3
To study a particular topic (n=220)	59.8	11	70	29.2
To improve my health/fitness levels (n=216)	51.4	4.2	55.6	44.4
To help me move on to further study (n=203)	26.1	16.3	42.4	57.6
To improve my reading/writing skills (n=192)	26.6	7.3	33.9	66.1
To get a qualification (n=198)	21.2	7.1	28.3	71.7
To improve my employment prospects (n=199)	14.6	9	23.6	76.4
To understand my experience as a member of a disadvantaged group (n=189)	11.1	3.7	14.8	85.2
Because I was told I had to do it (n=181)	2.8	0.6	3.4	96.7

Figure 4 Factors facilitating access to current providers (percentage values)

wanted to do (56.6%). Over half the sample also indicated that factors for access included that they had heard good things about the course provider (52.8%) and the course information was interesting (52.8%).

When we compare responses to this question across age brackets some differences do occur. For instance, 65-74 year olds indicated more frequently that the inclusion of hospitality helped them make their decision to attend (58% of those who responded) and less frequently that friends and family had supported them to take part (28.6%). Fifty-five to 74 year olds said more frequently than the older brackets that hearing good things about the course provider facilitated access (over 50% of responses for this question in the age bracket) and that the provider had the course they wanted to do (over 50% of responses for this question in each age bracket). Seventy-five to 84 year olds said less frequently that the course timing fitting with their work/caring duties (20.4%) was a factor.

Fifty-five to 64 year olds were less likely than the other age brackets to indicate the course giving access to computers and the internet was a factor in their decision to attend (32.9%).

Another key factor in access is the promotion of community education opportunities. Learners described how they had heard about their current provider. The table below shows the results for this question.

Table 6 How learners heard about current providers (percentage values)

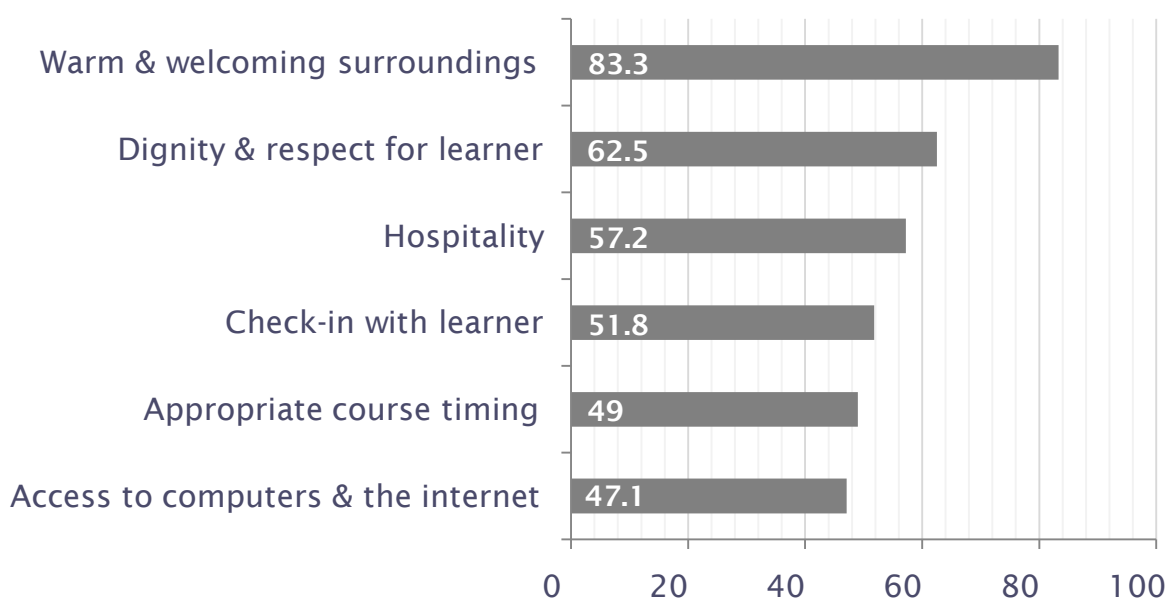
	55-64	65-74	75-84	85-94	
	%	%	%	%	Totals
Read about it in a poster/leaflet/advert	27.9	29.4	22.4	0	85
A friend told me about it	45.7	55.5	49	90	163
Someone called to my house/came up to me on the street	2.1	3.4	6.1	0	10
A community service worker referred me to the course	17.9	8.4	8.2	0	39
Other	21.4	18.5	18.4	10	62

Table 6 on the previous page shows that the main ways that older learners heard about their provider was through word of mouth (51.2% of entire sample) and reading about it in a poster/ leaflet or advert (26.7%). A qualitative analysis of the other category shows that many of the learners who ticked this option wrote in that they were already part of a group that approached their community education service to run the course or had been referred through another group.

4.2.2 Retention

Learners were asked about supports that were important to them in community education and whether or not they had experienced barriers to attendance.

Figure 5 Important supports for 55+ learners



The top six supports that the 55+ learners indicated were important are set out in Figure 5 above. The percentages are presented as a proportion of all the learners in the 55+ sample (n=318).

As we can see from the figure, the key important support to learners is warm, welcoming surroundings (83.3%). When answers in relation to these supports are compared across age brackets we can see that the importance of hospitality increases with age. The need for appropriate timing of the course decreases with age. Of note is that 56-74 year olds chose more frequently than other age brackets that provision of dignity and respect was an important support (70%).

A range of other supports were asked about. Of note is that 23% of 55+ learners said that transport was an important support, 42% said free fees were important and 26.4% said that it would be important for the community education provider to be able to make referrals to other types of community support. Twenty percent indicated that it would be important to have outreach work as part of the means to encourage access to community education opportunities.

Relatively low numbers of older learners indicated they had experienced barriers to participating in community education. The top three identified were lack of confidence in myself (14.4% of entire sample), feeling too old to learn (11.9%) and lack of transport (8.8%). Fifty-five to 64 year olds who responded to this question indicated with higher frequency than other age brackets that lack of confidence was a barrier for them (20.7%). Lack of transport as a barrier increased with age and feeling too old to learn decreased with age. However, the numbers of people indicating barriers are quite low so these trends may not be significant.

4.2.3 Approach to community education experienced

Learners were asked to complete a 45-item question where they selected adjectives that described their experience of community education. These adjectives were clustered into categories representing four models of community education. Each model was given a maximum possible score and then learners' responses were evaluated to see the extent to which

Table 7 Models of community education experienced by learners

Model	+55s points (mean)	Under-55s points (mean)	Maximum points
Community Organisation – Liberal (e.g. social, friendly, supportive, vocational)	3.00	3.07	6.00
Community Development - Liberal Reform (e.g personally changing, good for community, structured)	1.43	1.55	5.00
Community Action – Freirean for Local Change (e.g. community action, group led, social analysis)	1.78	2.03	9.00
Social Action – Working Class Education (e.g. class analysis, social change, women’s studies)	1.29	1.57	9.00

they had experienced each one. Table 7 above shows the results of this question and compares the over 55s to the under 55s.

This research is concerned with the extent to which older learners are involved in community education that fosters critical reflection and civic engagement. We can see from the above table that when asked to self-report on the model they have participated in older learners are less likely than younger to be involved in either the community action or social action models. Overall these are the two models that learners describe having experienced the least.

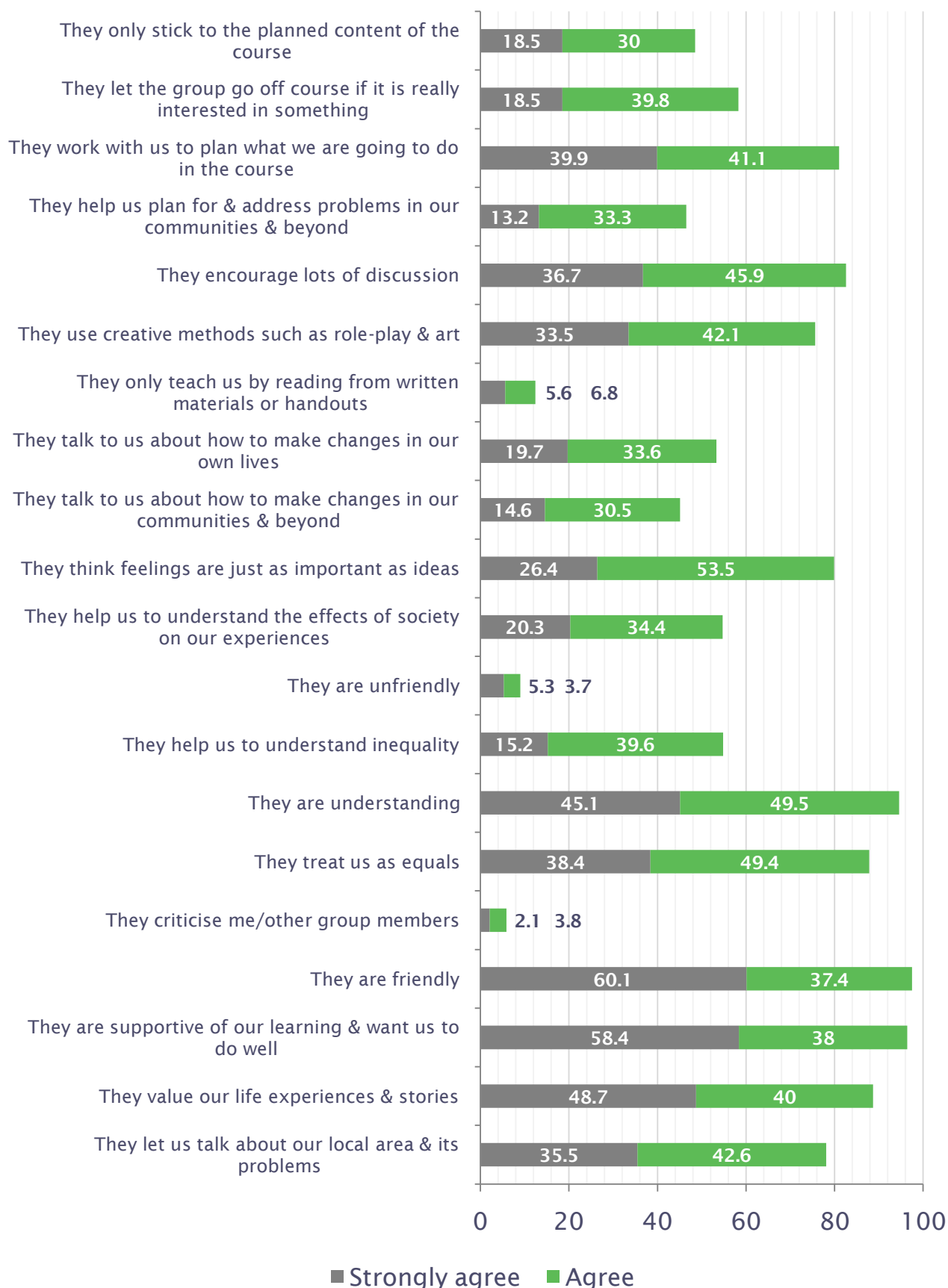
In the main, the model that older learners describe being involved in is the community organisation or liberal model.

In order to further investigate the approach to community education learners had experienced, they were asked the extent to which they agreed to a series of statements about their community education tutors. The results of those who agreed or strongly agreed to these statements are in Figure 6 overleaf.

We can see from Figure 6 that high percentages of the sample indicated experiencing essential aspects to the process of community education such as encouraging lots of discussion (82.6% said they agreed or strongly agreed), negotiating curriculum (81% said they agreed or strongly agreed), using creative methods (75.6% said they agreed or strongly agreed) and valuing life experiences and stories (88.7% said they agreed or strongly agreed). Very few indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed to statements regarding being criticised (5.9%) or that the tutor was unfriendly (9%).

However, in the statements that refer to aspects of pedagogy that encourage civic empowerment and critical thinking, results are mixed. Over half of learners agreed or strongly agreed to the statement about tutors letting them talk about their local area and its problems (78.1%), which is important to a community/social action model of community education. Just over half agreed or strongly agreed to statements about being helped to understand about inequality (54.8%) and the effects of society on personal experiences (54.7%). The latter two aspects are critical to the development of critical thinking and conscientization.

Less than half of learners indicated that their tutors talked to them about how to make changes in their community and beyond (45.1%) or helped them to plan for and address problems in their community and beyond (46.5%). Since the facets named in this paragraph and the one above are essential to creating civic outcomes we can see that, for the most part, half of the learners were not encouraged to take action on community or

Figure 6 Tutor approaches experienced by 55+ learners (percentages)

social problems or understand inequality and the effect of society on personal experiences. However, the majority of learners were facilitated to talk about their local area and problems in them.

4.2.4 Analysis

The following points summarise what we have learned from the data regarding the experience of learners aged 55+ of community education:

- Older learners are predominantly involved in hobby learning (46.3%) followed by IT and fitness-related courses.
- Learners aged 55+ tend to stay with community education for more than one course, the older they are, the more courses they have done.
- The main reasons that the older learners gave for becoming involved in community education were to get more involved in the community, accessing social contact, developing self-confidence, learning about a specific topic and fostering health and fitness.
- The provision of hospitality, welcoming surroundings, the reputation of the provider and their positive disposition to learners as well as access to PCs and the internet appear to be important to encourage the access and persistence of older learners in this sample.
- Older learners predominantly learn about community education by word of mouth.
- Small numbers of learners indicated barriers to participation. For those that did the main reasons were lack of confidence, transport and feeling too old to learn.

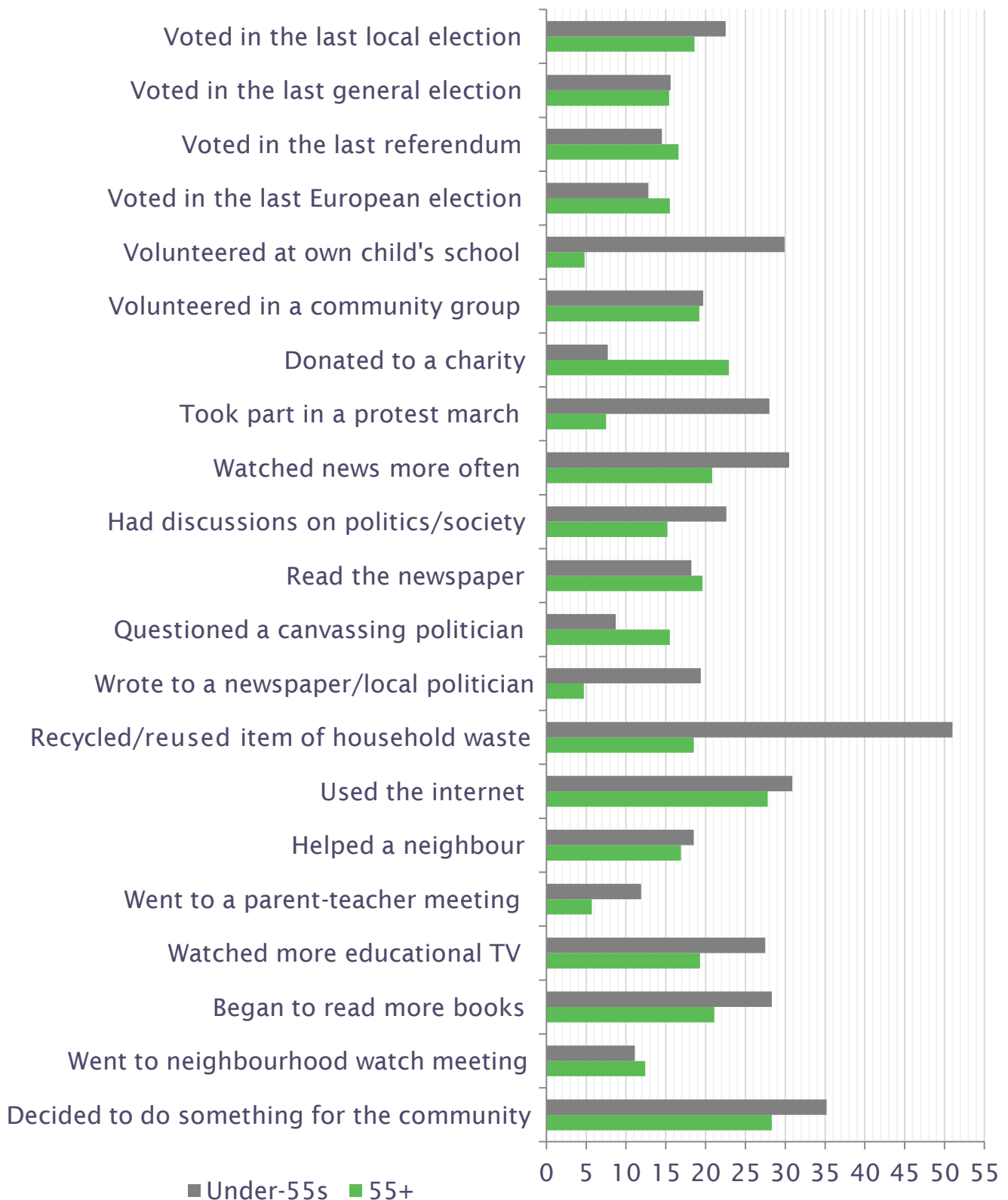
- About a quarter of learners indicated that transport, service referrals and outreach were important supports for community education.
- The learners aged 55+ surveyed experienced, for the most part a liberal approach to community education emphasising fun and social interaction. However, this finding is tempered by the numbers of people indicating that their facilitator/ tutor had encouraged some critical reflection activities such as learning about inequality and the effects of society on personal experience as well as talking about local area problems. However, the majority indicated that these discussions had not involved encouragement towards taking collective action for local or societal change.
- Learners did indicate that they had experienced in high amounts, aspects related to the openness of the learning environment such as learner/ facilitator equality, having lots of discussion and being able to negotiate curriculum.

4.3 Community Education Outcomes

Learners were asked to indicate whether or not they had experienced a range of outcomes because of their community education experience. The focus in this section is on the extent to which learners indicated experiencing civic engagement outcomes. However, results of note about other types of outcomes explored such as health, social engagement and progression are also presented.

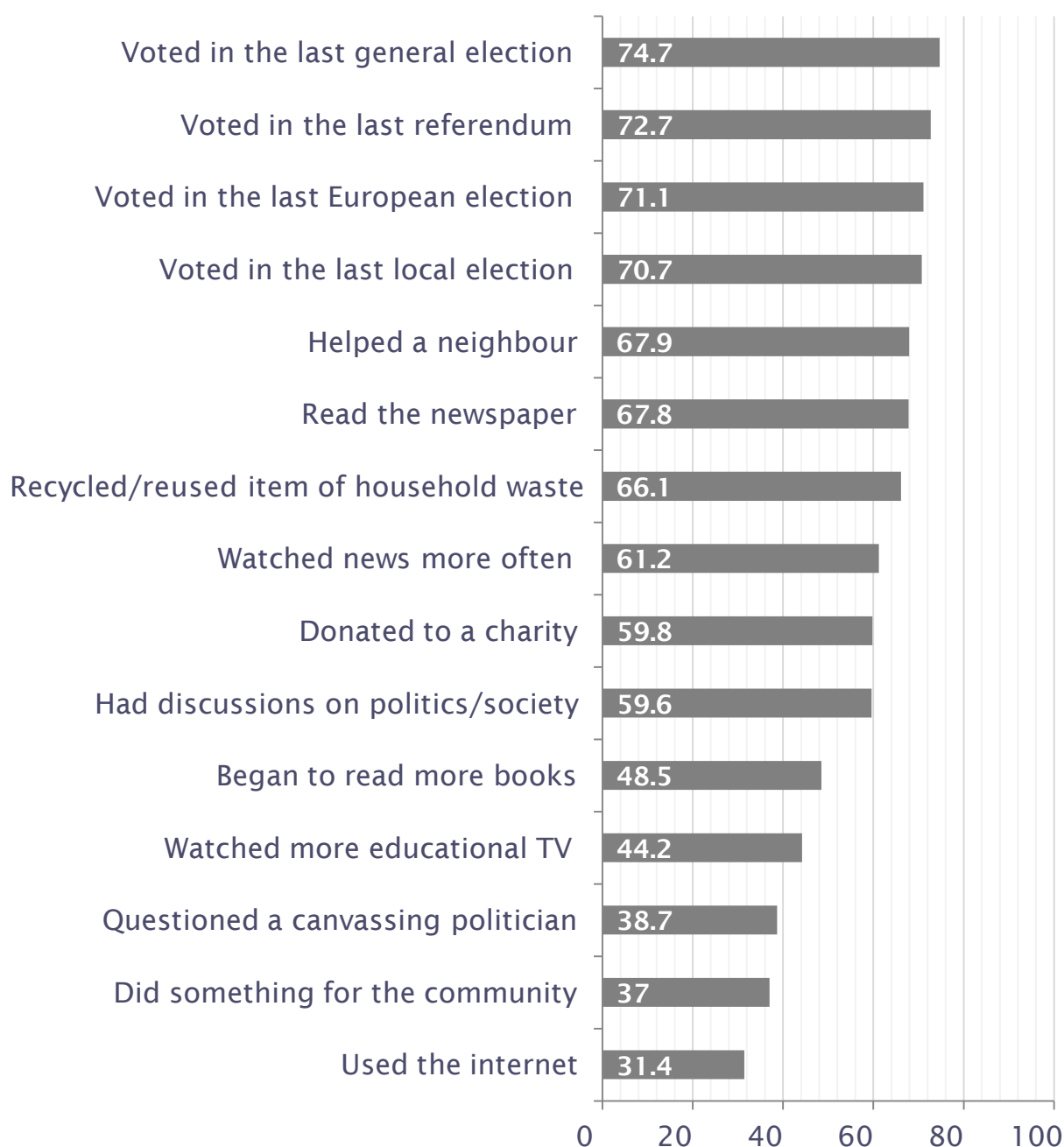
4.3.1 Civic Outcomes

Learners were asked to specify whether or not community education had helped them to achieve 21 different civic engagement outcomes. Figure 7 opposite compares the percentage of people indicating that community

Figure 7 Civic engagement outcomes experienced by learners (percentages)

education had helped them achieve each outcome for the under 55s in the sample and the learners aged 55+.

Figure 8 Civic engagement outcomes already experienced by 55+ learners (%)



For the most part, older learners indicate having experienced any of the outcomes named less frequently than the under 55s, save for voting, reading the newspaper, donating to charity and attending community policing or neighbourhood watch meetings. However, these results must be tempered with the rates of older people who said they had always carried out these actions. Outcomes for which these rates are notable are presented in Figure 8 on the previous page.

This figure shows high rates of voting, donating to charities, watching news, reading books and the newspaper, recycling, helping neighbours and talking about politics. The results suggest that there is scope for older learners to attain civic engagement outcomes related to giving something back to the community, reading more books, using the internet, watching more educational t.v., questioning and writing to politicians, taking part in protest, volunteering and going to a community policing/ neighbourhood watch meeting.

Table 8 (overleaf) shows the percentages and cardinal numbers of older people indicating that they experienced the top five civic engagement outcomes. The last four outcomes in the table are ones that Age & Opportunity was particularly interested in knowing the results of.

The table shows that 55-74 year olds indicated more frequently that they had begun to use the internet as a result of community education. Fifty-five to 64 year olds indicated less frequently that they donated to a charity as a result of community education than the other age groups and 75-84 year old indicated more frequently than the other age groups that they watched the news more often as a result of community education.

In terms of the four outcomes that Age & Opportunity was interested in the numbers of older people experiencing them due to community education in each age group were too small to be statistically significant. In relation to questioning a politician 38% of learners were already doing this action.

Table 8 Main civic engagement outcomes experienced by learners aged 55+ (%)

Outcome	55-64	65-74	75-84	85-94	Total Responses ²⁵
	%	%	%	%	
Decided to give something back to the community	23.6 (33)	21 (25)	24.5 (12)	20 (2)	254
Used the internet	25.7 (36)	23.5 (28)	16.3 (8)	10 (1)	259
Donated to a charity	12.1 (17)	22.7 (27)	36.7 (18)	20 (2)	279
Watched the news more often	15 (21)	16.8 (20)	32.7 (16)	10 (1)	279
Began to read more books	17.9 (25)	16.8 (20)	18.4 (9)	30 (3)	270
Took part in a protest march	13 (7)	12.5 (7)	12.5 (2)	25 (1)	227
Questioned a politician canvassing for election	26.3 (15)	23.1 (15)	39.1 (9)	25 (1)	258
Wrote a letter to a newspaper or to a local politician	2.9 (4)	3.4 (4)	6.1 (3)	0 (0)	234
Went to a community policing/neighbourhood watch meeting	7.9 (11)	8.4 (10)	10.2 (5)	10 (1)	244

Comparing the results in Figure 8 to the table above, we can see that there is definitely significant scope for community education to engage older learners in protest, giving something back to the community,

²⁵ It should be noted that participants could also choose the other following responses for each outcome: 'yes I did this, but I don't think it is as a result of my community education experience'; 'yes, I did this, but I have always done this anyway', or 'no, I did not do this.' The total number in this column refers to the cardinal number for frequencies across all responses, so what we can see is that a significant number of older people did not answer the question relating to civic engagement outcomes.

writing letters to politicians/ newspapers and going to community policing meetings and reading more books.

The extent to which learners were likely to engage in behaviours related to community cohesion was also measured in the survey. The table below shows the extent to which learners were more or much more likely to experience these outcomes, which are the responses in the Likert scale employed for the question that would indicate they had been achieved.²⁶ The table shows that over half of learners indicated they would be more likely or much more likely to do something about the top three outcomes.

Table 9 Learners aged 55+ likely to do something in community situations (%)

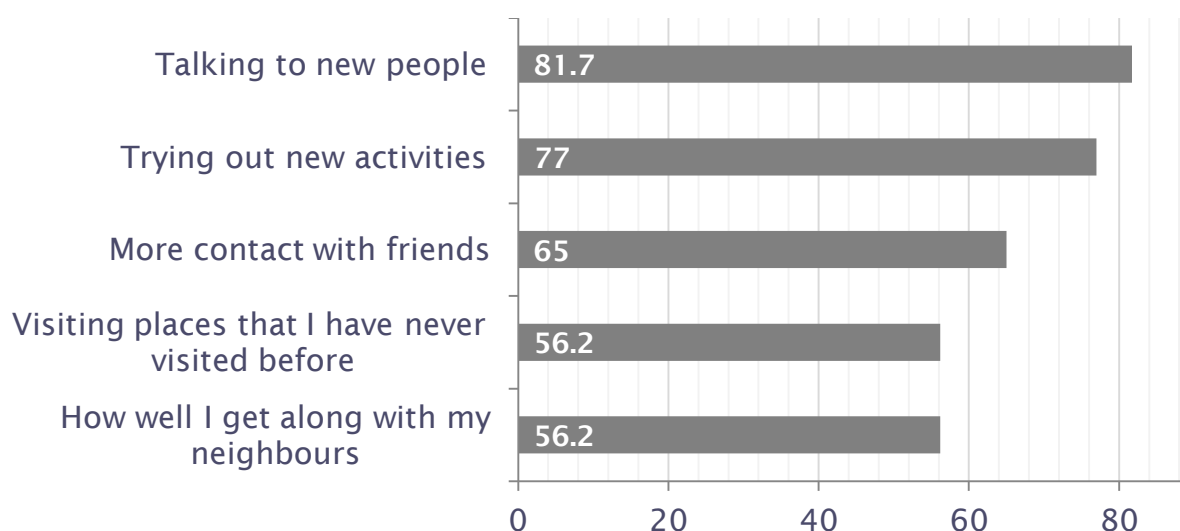
Outcome	More/much more likely to do something
If the fire station closest to my home was in danger of having its budget cut (n=274)	67.1
If children were showing disrespect to an adult (n=277)	56.6
If I saw children putting graffiti on a local building (n=277)	53.4
If I saw children skipping school and hanging out on a street corner (n=278)	39.9
If a fight broke out where I live (n=277)	39.4

However, when the responses of over 55s are compared to those of under 55s through significance testing we can see that the younger groups were more likely to respond that they would do something about these situations with the exception of a fight breaking out in front of where they live, for which there was no significant difference.

²⁶ The other responses in the scale were: 'no change', 'less likely' or 'much less likely'.

The survey also asked learners the levels of change they had experienced in regard to known social engagement outcomes for community education. The top five outcomes for learners aged 55+ are shown in Figure 9 below, as a percentage of the entire sample (n=318). These are related to learners who indicated that they had experienced some or large positive change in relation to the outcomes.

Figure 9 Top social engagement outcomes experienced by learners aged 55+ (%)



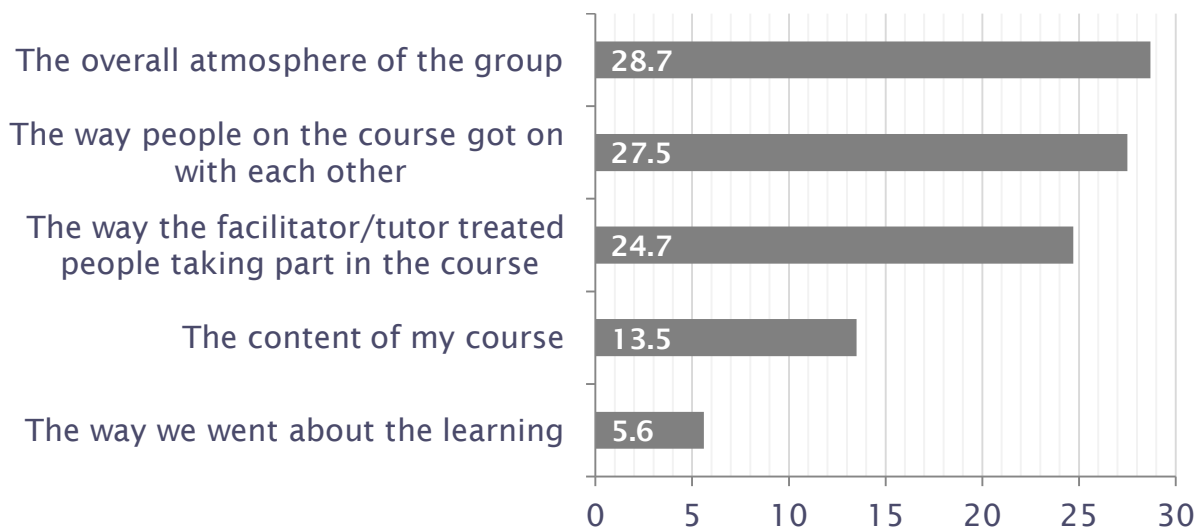
When compared to the under 55s, older learners were less likely to indicate that they had experienced some or large positive change in relation to the social engagement outcomes presented. Some differences emerged between the older age brackets. Fifty-five to 64 year olds mentioned they had experienced positive change less frequently than the other age brackets in regard to having more contact with friends (63.2%).

Sixty-five to 74 year olds indicated more frequently than the other age groups that they had experienced positive change in relation to trying out new activities (91.4%), how well they get along with neighbours (100%),

Sixty-five to 74 year olds indicated more frequently than the other age groups that they had experienced positive change in relation to trying out new activities (91.4%), how well they get along with neighbours (100%), and visiting places they had never visited before (71.1%).

Learners were asked a question investigating the aspect of community education that facilitated them to make positive changes in relation to civic and social engagement outcomes. The results of this question are set out below.

Figure 10 Aspects most useful in achieving civic & social outcomes (percentages)



A comparison across the older age groups reveals that 55-64 year olds chose the way the facilitator treated people as the key aspect that facilitated positive change (28.9%). The other age groups chose the overall atmosphere of the group most frequently as the aspect that created positive change.

4.3.2 Health & progression outcomes

The survey explored the extent to which learners had experienced a range of mental and physical health outcomes, as well as further education, training and employment goals. While not the priority focus of this piece of research, notable results are presented here.

Table 10 below shows the top five personal development outcomes experienced by older learners compared to the under 55s in the survey. Personal development outcomes are part of the mental health changes tracked through the survey. Responses shown below indicate the learners who experienced some or large positive change in relation to each outcome as opposed to neutral or negative change since the research was interested in the extent to which outcomes had been achieved.

Table 10 Top personal development changes for learners (percentages)

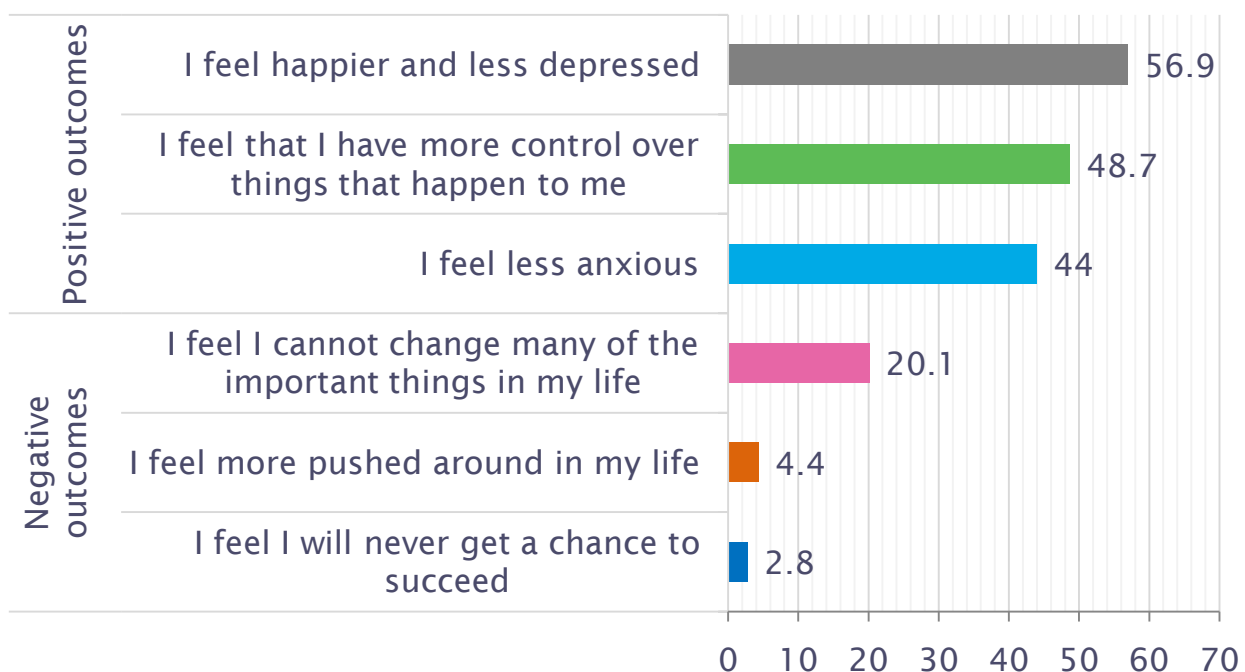
	Large positive change			Some positive change		
	16-54	55+	Total responses	16-54	55+	Total responses
	%	%		%	%	
Your self-confidence	40.8	37.6	246	47.3	43.2	284
Your happiness	42.6	36.8	248	40.8	32.6	230
Your quality of life	36.5	30.6	207	40.5	36.8	238
Your trust in others	25.8	26.1	160	35.6	28.9	200
Making decisions	28.9	21.6	158	41.9	38	248

When compared it appears that the under 55s were more likely to state positive changes in relation to happiness, quality of life and trust in others. There was no significant difference between the younger and

older groups in relation to self-confidence or in making decisions.

Learners were also asked how taking part in community education has changed the way they feel in relation to a variety of aspects related to mental well-being. Figure 11 below presents the proportion of people out of the entire sample (n=318) who answered positively to each aspect.

Figure 11 Mental health of learners aged 55+ (percentages)



The figure shows that community education did not have a negative impact on the older learners' mental health and shows that for almost half it helped them to feel less anxious (44%) and to have more control over things that happen to them (48.7%). Over half indicated that they felt happier and less depressed as a result of community education (56.9%). When responses are compared across age brackets it appears that 75-84 year olds responded more frequently that they felt happier and less depressed as a result of community education (67.3%). Learners

indicating that they felt they would never get a chance to succeed increased with age (although the numbers of learners choosing this option was very small). The 55-64 year olds described less frequently than the other age groups that they felt they could not change many of the important things in their lives (13.6%).

When learners aged 55+ were asked what aspect of community education helped to make positive changes in relation to health, the option chosen most frequently by older learners was the overall atmosphere in the group (31.9%). Choosing this option increased with age with the 55-64 year olds only choosing this facet 23% of the time.

When asked about a number of physical health changes, and whether or not community education had resulted in any of the learners making them, only two significant changes were of note for the over 55s. Thirty-four percent of learners started to eat more fruit and vegetables and 43% started to exercise a bit more.

The second most important aspect for making health changes for the learners aged 55+ was the way the tutor/ facilitator treated people taking part in the course (28%) although choosing this option decreased with age with 55-64 year olds describing it as the most important feature in helping them to make positive change (38.9%).

Learners were also asked to choose from a series of statements which one best described community education for them. These were related to theoretical concepts of progression from the literature. Results of this for 55+ learners are considered in Table 11 opposite. Percentages are shown as the proportion of responses to this question (n=253).

The table shows that overwhelmingly, community education for the older learners is about maintenance of well-being as opposed to more goal-

oriented learning. When responses are compared across age brackets we see that the tendency to choose the first option in the table above decreases with age. Twenty-six percent of 55-64 year olds chose this option compared to 12.5% of those 75-84. However, the total number of learners selecting this option at all was quite low compared to the other options.

Table 11 Concepts of progression chosen by 55+ learners (percentages)

Concept of community education	Percentage
Like a ladder where at each rung I feel supported & safe enough to move to the next rung & closer to my goals (progression as linear along one dimension)	20
Like a journey where sometimes you take breaks or change direction, but where each part of the trip teaches you something new, regardless of the final destination (progression as development & non-linear)	28.8
A space for me to go, where I can connect with others & look after myself (progression as maintenance of well-being & equilibrium)	50.9

Likewise, 55-64 year olds were more likely than the other age brackets to choose the second option which is related to goal oriented learning but can involve dipping in and out of education and moving down, diagonal or across lines of progression (38.7%).

The survey also explored learners' awareness of the accreditation frameworks available in Ireland. Table 12 overleaf shows the results for the 55+ learners.

Table 12 Older learners' knowledge of FETAC/NFQ & expectation of certification

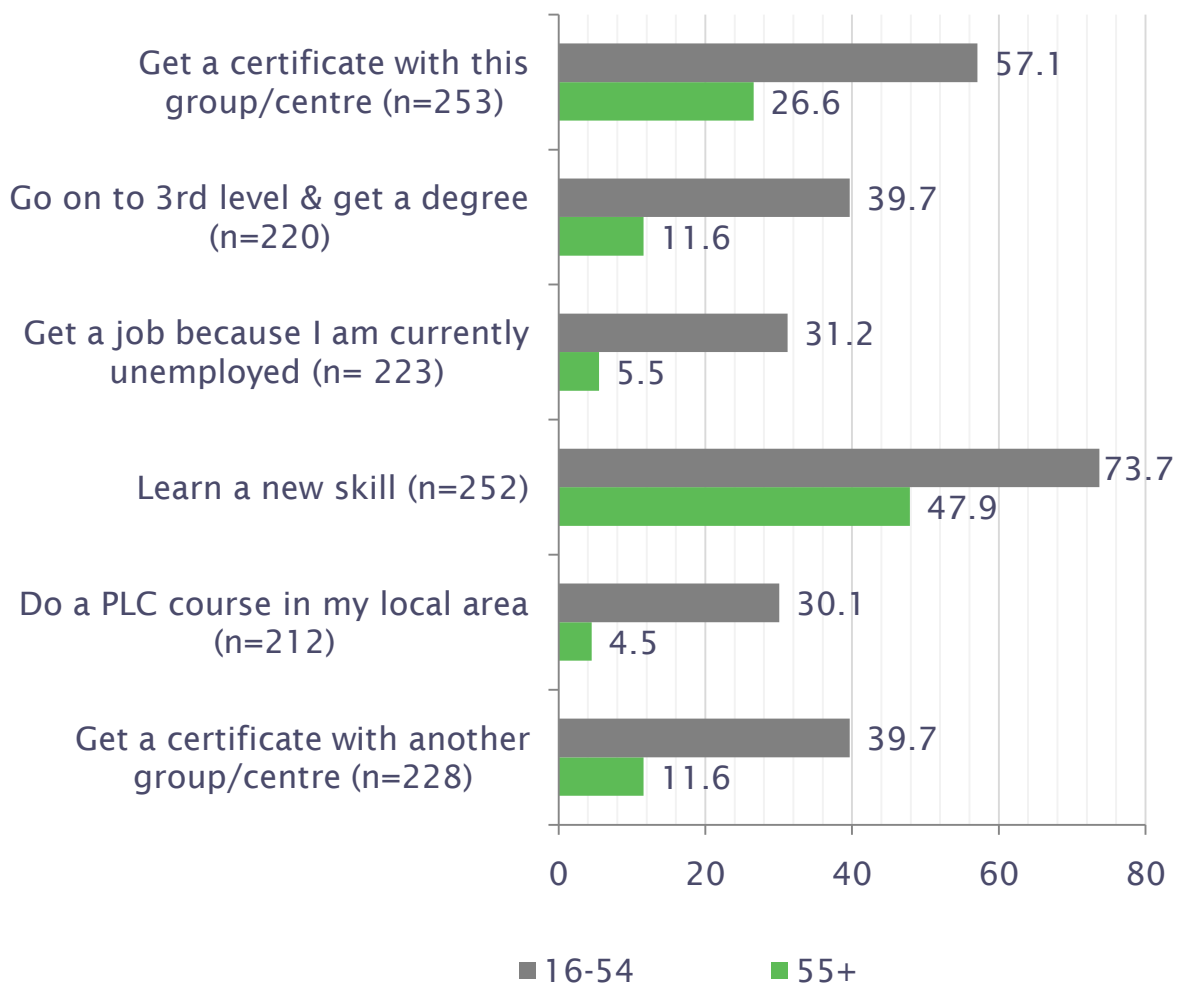
	55-64	65-74	75-84	85-94	Total yes
	%	%	%	%	
Has heard of FETAC	79.7	61.6	51.2	10	198
Knows what FETAC is	77.1	63.8	64.3	0	160
Has heard of NFQ	34.6	25.7	16.7	0	79
Knows what NFQ is	45.6	42	43.8	0	64
Do you think that every time you do a community education course it should result in a certificate?	46	30.8	22.5	10	101

Table 12 shows that high numbers of the sample know about FETAC as an accreditation system. However, if we compare responses across age brackets this awareness decreases with age with only 51.2% of 75-84 year olds having heard of FETAC and 64.3% of those knowing what it is. The same trend occurs with knowledge of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ into which FETAC is integrated as part of the overall system of accreditation in Ireland). Only 16.7 percent of 75-84 year olds had heard of the NFQ and of those only 43.8% knew what it was.

Learners were also asked whether or not a learner should receive accreditation from an awarding body (such as FETAC) every time they did a course. Thirty-six percent of 55+ learners said 'yes' to this question. However, the frequency of this response declines with age with 22.5 percent of 75-84 year olds saying that certification should always be offered compared to 46% of 55-64 year olds.

Lastly learners were asked whether or not a range of goals had become important to them as a result of community education. Figure 12 shows the results of this question for the top six outcomes for the 55+ learners where they indicated they wanted to achieve the goal and their provider could help them do it. The number of those aged 55+ who responded in relation to each outcome is noted next to the relevant goal.

Figure 12 Progression goals for learners



From Figure 12 (previous page) we can see that younger groups more frequently chose progression goals that they had decided upon as a result of community education. The key goal for older learners was to learn a new skill (47.9%) with about a third indicating that they wanted to get a certificate with their current group/ centre (26.6%). When compared, younger learners were more likely than older learners to indicate wanting to achieve all the goals in the table above except learning a new skill. There was no significant difference between the age groups for wanting to achieve this goal.

When responses are compared across age brackets we can see that the interest in achieving any of the goals above declines significantly with age except for learning a new skill although the desire to accomplish this goal also decreases with age, albeit to a lesser extent. The 55-64 year olds predominantly indicated wanting to achieve each of the goals above.

When asked what aspect of community education helped to facilitate progression goals the top two facets were the overall atmosphere of the group (31.5%) and the way the facilitator treated people taking part in the course (26.4%). Fifty-five to 64 year olds chose the latter option more frequently than the other age brackets (33.6%).

4.3.3 Analysis

The following points are notable in relation to the outcomes experienced by older learners who took part in the survey:

- Civic engagement outcomes for older learners are low, especially compared to the under 55s in the sample. However, this finding must be tempered by the rates of older people already engaging in quite a few of the outcomes tracked. For instance, older people already vote, help neighbours, read the newspaper and talk to others about politics. This finding shows that older people maintain political interest.

- There is scope to foster civic engagement outcomes for older learners related to giving something back to the community, reading more books, protesting, writing letters to newspapers and politicians and attending community fora like community policing meetings.
- Community education does foster community cohesion outcomes for older learners, particularly in that most (67.1%) said that they would be more likely to do something about a community service like a fire station being closed. However, the civic engagement opportunities older people note experiencing do not show that they have been offered routes to engage in the community in this way. There is also still scope to foster the other community cohesion outcomes measured for half the learners.
- Community education fosters social engagement for older learners which does mean that it combats social isolation and supports the idea that they are engaged in a liberal model of education that focuses on the provision of social opportunities.
- The results about personal development outcomes show that community education does foster social recognition for learners through the development of self-confidence, happiness and quality of life although older learners were less likely than younger learners to indicate experiencing change in these outcomes.
- For around half of the learners surveyed community education promotes some mental health and physical health behaviours.
- A significant proportion did want to continue to learn new skills (47.9%) and were motivated to participate in community education to help them move on to further study (42.4%). However, it would appear that goals related to linear progression, accreditation and employment

are not a priority for this group since the majority saw community education as a place to maintain well-being. These kinds of goals are not a priority for the 55+ group generally and where they are it is for the 55-64 year olds.

- It does appear that older learners would like to stay with their current providers and learn new skills.

5. Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusions about the findings are presented under headings mirroring the objectives for this piece of research.

5.1 Demographic Profile

Where income is concerned, the findings tentatively indicate that a significant minority (25.8%) of this sample may be living below the at risk of poverty line and this figure may be higher.

Other learners seem not to be experiencing income disadvantage, and relatively speaking, reported levels of deprivation were not high.

It appears that, for the most part, those over 55s who are fit and without disability are accessing community education. These findings may confirm the Matthew Effect in the provision of community education to older learners through DES funded community education as the most disadvantaged of older people do not appear to be participating to the greatest extent.

However, two points can temper this conclusion, First, as suggested by Daly in the context review, the measures of deprivation used may not have been appropriate for the older people surveyed and the question about income culturally inappropriate. Thus, only half chose to answer the question about income and few said they experienced the deprivation indicators measured. Therefore, it is difficult to come to a clear conclusion about disadvantage in the sample. Future research of this type would need to take this point into account and attempt to find different ways to isolate deprivation amongst older learners.

Secondly, there was disadvantage in the sample. For instance, there were high levels of carers in the sample and a proportion of learners who indicated they were living in poverty and experiencing the deprivation measures tracked. These trends show that community education is providing respite from those with caring responsibilities and reaching disadvantaged older people. However, since a stated commitment for community education is to target those who are disadvantaged we must ask if it would be desirable to see higher levels of disadvantage in the sample. If so, then there are ramifications for how community education is promoted and older learners recruited.

Furthermore, about 60% of the learners sampled indicated they had left school at lower secondary or below. This figure compares similarly to their counterparts nationally and supports the need generally for the provision of educational opportunities to older people.

5.2 Access, Persistence & Retention

The results showed that community education is successful at providing a variety of factors that support access, persistence and retention for older learners such as warm and welcoming environments, positive dispositions from providers, hospitality, provider reputation and access to PCs and the internet. It is important that these types of support continue to be offered.

The main way that older learners find out about community education is through word of mouth. While this method works for those learners who are involved, it may mean that relying on this mode of promotion limits the extent to which more marginalised older people are recruited to community education. Reaching the most marginalised involves considerable outreach work involving such activities as those mentioned

in the context review. It follows that the recruitment of more disadvantaged older people will require the provision of supports such as transport and referrals to community services to remove barriers.

Barriers were experienced by low amounts of learners. Either community education is adept at removing these barriers or the type of learners involved do not experience them to a significant degree. Given the results about the factors affecting access, high rates of social engagement outcomes and the extent to which facilitators/ tutors were friendly and fostered relationships of equality it is likely that barriers were removed for those learners surveyed.

The data shows that older learners seem to stay with community education. This finding shows fertile ground for the provision of community education that fosters civic empowerment, as it means that there is time for the confidence and social recognition of learners to be fostered before moving onto a focus on critical reflection and taking action. The finding that most indicated that they felt their current provider could assist them with the progression outcome of learning a new skill backs up this idea.

Most learners indicated that they wanted to participate in community education in order to become more involved with their community. It is difficult to know how learners interpreted this reason. To the extent that getting involved in the community is about meeting other people from the local area and combating social isolation, community education attends to this motivation for people. However, if it is about becoming involved in community development and taking action, community education for older people is falling short.

5.3 Approach to Community Education

It was clear that older learners are participating in a more liberal approach to community education that emphasises fun and social interaction, with some indicating that they had been encouraged to engage in activities, which develop critical reflection, such as learning about inequality and thinking about the effects of society on personal experience. However, the results show that, for most older learners, the type of community education which fosters civic engagement and critical reflection was not one they had experienced.

As indicated in the next section implementation of a liberal approach means that the potential to attain civic engagement outcomes is limited.

5.4 Outcomes Experienced

Older learners did not experience civic engagement outcomes frequently. For many of the outcomes this situation was because they were already engaged in them such as voting and talking about politics with friends and family. The latter finding is notable as it shows that older people are maintaining political interest, which demonstrates fertile ground for community education that might focus on political or civic issues.

However, for those kinds of civic outcomes which are related to a critical citizenship such as protesting, writing letters voicing opinion to politicians or newspapers and giving back to the community the results show significant scope to foster these outcomes for community education for older people since they did not occur for significant proportions of the sample, nor were they doing them already.

It is clear that community education results in a number of other types of outcomes for older learners. Personal development outcomes were quite high for older learners showing that community education is creating social recognition for them and improving their quality of life. To the extent that community education is seen to be a place for maintaining well-being for the older learners surveyed then it is helping to do that for them through the personal development, mental health and physical health outcomes noted.

5.5 Comparisons between Older & Younger Groups

This comparison was done in two ways. In the first, the under 55s were compared to those aged 55+. We can see from this comparison that younger groups were usually more likely to indicate experiencing most of the outcomes measured. This finding demonstrates the extent to which older learners are involved in liberal learning that emphasises fun and social interaction as opposed to other goals.

The latter comparison was between the age brackets in the 55+ group. Of note is that 55-64 year olds were more likely to indicate that they wanted to achieve the progression goal of getting a certificate with their group/centre and embracing concepts of progression that were more about goal directed learning. For 55-74 year olds the experience of dignity and respect in the learning environment was important. Also the proportion of learners 75 and older was low.

5.6 Recommendations

The key recommendations arising from this research are:

- Focus on the recruitment of harder-to-reach older people and on increasing the representation of older men in community education.
- Attempt to recruit more people 75 years and older into community education.
- Use outreach methods to reach more marginalised older people and recruit them into community education.
- Continue to offer the supports highlighted through the research to older learners to facilitate their access, persistence and retention. Ensure that supports for more marginalised learners are also offered such as disability support or service referrals.
- Ensure that facilitators are trained in the approach to community education that works to achieve civic engagement outcomes and critical reflection.
- Make sure that providers and facilitators can offer opportunities to older learners for civic engagement so that, if they so choose, older people can become involved in community development or taking collective action.
- Offer older learners programmes that involve political or civic matters as the high rate of learners voting, volunteering and talking about politics shows that their interest in these matters is high.



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