

## Research Briefing N° 86

# Learning and the lifecourse: gaining new qualifications in adulthood

This research used longitudinal data to explore the extent to which people were gaining qualifications in adulthood from ages 23 to 50 and also the amount of “upgrading” (moving to higher levels of qualification than previously held).



**Key words:** lifelong learning; adult education; qualifications; upgrading; longitudinal data

## Key findings

The findings will be of interest to policymakers and others concerned with the extent to which adults gain qualifications and renew and upgrade their skills.

- Over two-thirds (71 per cent) of people in the survey achieved at least one qualification between the ages of 23 and 50, and more than half, 53 per cent, did so between the ages of 33 and 50.
- The majority of qualifications obtained by adults were vocational, suggesting that career development was the main reason for further study. For instance, almost 30 per cent of adults gained a vocational qualification between the ages of 42 and 50, compared to just 5 per cent who gained an academic qualification at this age.
- Many people upgraded to higher levels of qualifications in adulthood than they previously held. At age 23, for example, just 21 per cent of those included in the study had a higher qualification (such as an undergraduate degree or Higher Education Diploma), but 37 per cent had a qualification at this level by age 50.
- Less than 6 per cent of people in the study had no qualifications at all at 50.
- The study revealed that women were more likely than men to gain qualifications in mid-life (between ages 33 and 50). 57 per cent of women obtained a qualification between the ages of 33 and 50, compared to less than half (48 per cent) of men. Those who had children at an early age were most likely to return to education in later life. Women with family care responsibilities were particularly unlikely to obtain qualifications in their 20s but took the opportunity to catch up in their 30s and 40s.

- Women were also substantially more likely to upgrade to higher levels of qualification than previously held. Between the ages of 33 and 50, women were almost twice as likely as men to gain a qualification two or more levels higher than they previously held, or to obtain a degree-level qualification.

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## What we did

Over the last 30 years there has been a relentless shift in the labour market with a growing number of jobs needing qualifications of some kind, often degree-level qualifications, while the number of unskilled jobs has shrunk. Therefore, if they are to be successful in work, it is likely to be important for individuals to gain new qualifications in adulthood.

Previous educational research had tended to suggest that few courses undertaken by adults led to qualifications and that there was very little evidence of progression up the hierarchy of qualifications. However, the data requirements for answering questions about the extent to which adults are acquiring qualifications and improving their highest level of qualification are high: requiring longitudinal data on individuals tracked over substantial periods of time in order to observe a sequence of learning episodes, and whether they involve obtaining qualifications and movement up the ladder of qualifications.

## How we did it

This research used data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS), a cohort study of people born in a week in 1958. They were

subsequently surveyed at various points in their lives. Follow-up data collection took place at various points in childhood up to age 16, and then several times in adulthood including at ages 23, 33, 42, and 50. Data from each of these surveys was used to determine whether people had obtained new qualifications in adulthood, the time at which they did so and to calculate the extent of upgrading in the sample. The analysis looked at nearly 9,000 individuals through to the time that they were 50 years old in 2008.

The research was funded by the award of a British Academy mid-career research fellowship to Dr Andrew Jenkins. The purpose of the research as a whole was to investigate education and wellbeing through a lifecourse perspective using large-scale, longitudinal data sources.

The NCDS is managed by the **IOE's Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS)**, which is based in the Department for Quantitative Social Science. CLS is responsible for running two of Britain's other major birth cohort studies: the 1970 British Cohort Study and the Millennium Cohort Study. CLS also manages the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), a national study of young people's transitions from school to adult life.

## Further information

[Jenkins, A. \(2013\). Learning and the Lifecourse: The Acquisition of Qualifications in Adulthood. CLS Working Paper 13/04, Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, London.](#)

Further information on the birth cohort studies is available at [www.cls.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk)

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