Lifelong learning: just a slogan? The reality for working class women.

Following the election of New Labour in 1997 a strong commitment to promoting education for all was made. 'Education, education education' was heralded as New Labours vision to effect a transformation away from the traditional notions of education, towards a vision where education for all could be a lifelong process, accessed at any time during the life course. The National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning was established by the then Secretary of State David Blunkett, shortly after the election. The group published the report 'Learning in the Twenty-first Century' which laid out how the government would approach the concept of lifelong learning, chaired by Professor R. H. Fryer (NAGCELL, 1997). The previous interpretations of learning opportunities in their wider context, were sketchily outlined in this document and then organised around several core values, namely: coherence; equity; people before structures; quality and flexibility; effective partnership; and shared responsibility, for ensuring the success of lifelong learning (NAGCELL, 1997).

The concept of lifelong learning as a means to ensure equality of opportunity for all is both admirable and timely; many in today's society do lack many of the skills and educational qualifications required to be able to compete in the modern technological world of today. Purportedly the opening up of new learning initiatives for such groups will help to cancel out the lost opportunities of the past, when for instance many of today's older people were denied the learning options that were taken for granted by the more affluent and articulate classes. Yet for many socially excluded people in Britain today the possibility of taking up educational opportunities remains influenced by their socio-economic position, the environment in which they live, their family responsibilities, as well as the internal barriers people construct often based upon past failures and subsequent disillusionment with the education system.

This chapter will focus on two groups of people, lone parent mothers and women over fifty and will argue that the barriers women face in accessing opportunities for lifelong learning are not being fully addressed by policy makers. The chapter will determine the difficulties faced by working class women as they negotiate the world of work, education and home. It will show that lifelong learning policies are being overshadowed through a heightened campaign to facilitate re-entry into the workforce to meet labour shortfalls. Failure to adopt a longer term view on wider access to adult education will miss out on valuable mutually beneficial opportunities to the economy, the individual and the communities in which they live.

Political measures which claim to tackle social exclusion such as New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) New Deal 50 plus (ND50+), Pathways to work and/or other inducements to improve the employability of people, only partly address the factors which contribute to the exclusionary status of certain groups in society. Lack of labour market attachment as a result of low educational attainment, redundant skills, family caring roles, which are then compounded by disability, race, gender and more increasingly age, pose serious threats to an individual's future economic stability and increase the risk of poverty and poor health in later life.

The principles that underpinned NDLP have drawn various comments from academics. Levitas (1998) argued that the central characteristic of the generic New Deal programme was based, not upon addressing the structural dynamics of inequality, but instead takes on the personal characteristics of the "excluded". This is exemplified by comments made by Alistair Darling (1999) who stated "Poverty today is complex. It's not just a simple problem about money, to be solved through cash alone", an integral part of the problem remains "a poverty of expectation". The current welfare relationship with lone parents highlights that the past neutrality of the state towards them being either 'stay at home' parents or working, has now clearly been replaced by a strong commitment to facilitate a return to the workplace for as many as possible (DSS 1999) (Meadows 2005).

Lone Parents and NDLP
The government under their flagship policy New Deal, introduced and encouraged systems and methods of intervention, whereby lone parents were required to accept work (paid or voluntary) or training. It challenged the culture of welfare dependency by offering individuals "…a route out of poverty through employment and *opportunity for all*" (authors emphasis added)(Harman 1998). Under NDLP parents were invited to participate in the programme and were offered help and advice on jobs, benefits, training and childcare, through the provision of a designated advisor.

Shortly after its implementation Woodfield and Finch (1999) found that out of 3,963 participating in NDLP, only 33% had found work. However with 22,000, originally invited, it called into question whether New Deal was viewed by the target as a realistic endeavour to enable an escape from poverty and dependency or to provide the 'opportunities for all' to do so, as Harman had envisaged.

Since 1998 and up until March 2005 NDLP has had 813,070 starts and 741,240 leavers which has resulted in 71,830 participants in the programme. Out of those participating 78.5% received advice and guidance, 19.1% received in work support and only 2.4% were in education or training. In a nationally representative sample of lone parents 41% had no qualifications at all, 42% had GCSE, 'O' level or an equivalent qualification such as City and Guilds. Only 6% had 'A' levels and 11% had a degree or an equivalent level (Finlayson and Marsh 1998). The authors concluded that lone parents who were younger, never married, poorly qualified and in reciept of income-tested benefits would be most likely to suffer from low self-esteem" thus making it more difficult for such mothers to find employment. (Source http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/nddp.asp) (Finlayson, L & Marsh A, 1998)

In the short term, gaining a foothold on the employment ladder is made economically viable only with the support packages offered through tax credits and childcare measures, and may provide the motivation for some to participate in New Deal. However the numbers of lone parents whom after participating end up back on benefits points to an issue of retention. The types of employment found show that lone parents tended to enter low skilled poorly paid sectors, dominated by women workers, on minimum wages, in the

catering, cleaning, caring roles or the administrative, retail, or beauty sectors (One Parent Families). Currently the evidence of poor retention rates in employment would certainly support the view that at present the current employment choices open to this group do not offer a way out from the cycle of disadvantage.

Lone Parents and Education
Surveys show that whilst lone parents were enthusiastic about participating in education and training, they faced considerable difficulties in finding childcare. They felt courses lacked more accommodating distance learning options and inflexibility in course deadlines. The study highlighted the importance of outreach and drop in centres, as well as the need to adopt a more varied approach to delivery and tutorial support (Haux T & Kimina M 2005).

A commissioned study for the Department of Education and Employment found that once lone parents had accessed higher education their personal responsibilities and financial circumstances had impacted upon both their own and their family's experiences. Their personal responsibilities meant that they found it difficult to fully participate in their course or in university life. For instance:

- 67% of lone parents studying full-time said that they could not afford to buy books.
- 61% of lone parents with children said that their children had to go without certain items because they could not afford them.

Lone parents were found to be more likely than any other student group to experience financial difficulties and were the most vulnerable financially (Callender C & Kemp M, Research Brief no 213 DfEE 2000). http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/158summ.asp.

Lone Parents and Childcare
Following the implementation of a national childcare strategy, there still remains a shortfall of childcare places with only one registered childcare place for every four children under the age of eight (Daycare Trust, Pacey M, Poverty 113 2002). Not only the lack of childcare but also the inflexibility of it can make the possibility of studying at college or university even more remote. Care arrangements have to fit in with lectures, which may need to stretch into the evening, add on to this the 'travel to study' time can result in expensive childcare bills for student mothers. Whilst some help is available such as childcare grants and access bursaries they are discretionary, meaning they may not always be available. The bursary is in recognition that lone parents' often have to rely upon informal childcare arrangements and the bursary can help to fund this.

Policies to encourage female participation in the workforce raise major issues for those targeted. Individual pressures regarding lack of childcare, caring responsibilities, and gendered assumptions can involve complex negotiation and prioritisation amongst family members when faced with policies designed to either encourage or engage the individual in work, training or education.

Decisions to participate will inevitably be based upon previous work experiences, perceived capability, the ability to combine caring with work/education and economic rationality, coupled with the willingness and motivation to change direction. All of which are important factors which can make or break the success of policies designed to facilitate entry to work or lifelong learning initiatives.

For lone parents their social exclusion has partly been attributed to a range of well researched disadvantaged circumstances. Lone parents have also had to suffer the stigmatising and stereotypical portrayals of lone parents as being, young, never married mothers, when in fact lone parenthood also comprises of many relationship breakdowns (Rowlinson et al 1999). The impact of media characterisations is both offensive and painful and denies the reality of the extremely valuable role of care-giving in the most trying of circumstances.

The link between low income and low educational attainment has been well established (Glennerster 1995). Intergenerational disadvantage is caused by household poverty and is linked to the low educational attainment of parents. The evidence illustrates that boys in poorer households gain less A level passes. In poor households children leave home earlier than those from better off households, they begin their own families at a younger age. In households where the mother has had higher education her daughter is less likely to become a mother herself before the age of 21.

The cycle of deprivation can span the generations as the Chancellor of the exchequer Gordon Brown outlined in his talk on child poverty,*" …… we …know from … research that an infant who then grows up in a poor family is less likely to stay on at school, or even attend school regularly, less likely to get qualifications and go to college, more likely to be trapped in the worst job or no job at all, more likely to be trapped in a cycle of deprivation that is life long...less likely to reach his or her full potential, a young child's chances crippled even before their life's journey has barely begun".* Joseph Rowntree Centenary Conference.
The policies to reduce child poverty requires long-term strategies which include support mechanisms to enter paid work. Unfortunately for those whose aspirations may be to return to education and improve their qualifications there appears to be less emphasis or tangible support available to enable access to education pathways compared to entering work, thus missing a valuable opportunity to deliver a two pronged attack on intergenerational poverty.

The New Deal policies have been geared towards breaking down barriers to facilitate entry or re-entry into the workforce, (NDLP, ND50+) especially after prolonged periods of economic inactivity to both provide for the labour needs of the market as well as reducing the economic burden to the economy. Both lone parents and older people share similar features in terms of qualifications, economic disadvantage in employment, and low aspirations for the future. Thus it may be construed that the concept of 'lifelong learning' offers a valuable opportunity to improve qualifications and training and provide the potential to lift people out of lower status employment and into meaningful career pathways.

An emerging concern is that opportunities for retraining for new careers have clearly been prioritised in favour of the younger elements of society. Policies to promote a 'learning society' have younger people at the heart of their focus. The 50% target for 18 year olds into higher education and the arbitrary age ceilings on skills based learning, such as apprenticeships means that people in their thirties and upwards face considerable difficulties in trying to update their education and skills in order to enter new professions (Frost K TAEN 2005). This sends out a clear message to older people that study for these age groups will find little support from the public purse, meaning those that can afford to pay are those most likely to benefit and those that cannot pay will remain in their current situation. Equity of opportunity, one of the key principles of lifelong learning is called into question when age restrictions and income limitations reduce learning opportunities and prevent engagement with those people most in need of such opportunities.

The number of people who lack qualifications in today's society partly reflects an historical lack of opportunities and also how the constraints of gender roles have impacted upon opportunities, with older age groups having the least qualifications and higher percentages of women, especially in the 35 and over age categories having no qualifications compared to similar aged men (Table 1). For women over fifty the picture is bleak with one-third without any qualifications. (Labour Force Survey 2002).

Table 1

Social exclusion can mean many things, the government defines it as "what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown" (SEU 1997) or 'the dynamic process of being shut out ... from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society' (Walker and Walker 1997:8). Being excluded from opportunities to work, networks of support, groups and institutions will impact upon a person's outlook and perception of themselves, as confident and competent individuals. Attempting to take that first step into the unknown is for most people the most difficult. Community initiatives offer a good starting point, often it can begin outside of the traditional educational establishment within a community centre, parent support group or drop in centre. But the challenge for many working within the community is how to get a person to step over the threshold where they can then begin to take up opportunities, delivered in familiar non-judgmental settings. The value of small scale educational projects and other interventions which improve and nurture self esteem cannot be underestimated. They have the power to elevate the spirit from a state of passivity to a positivistic attitude.

In an effort to gain a greater understanding of the difficulties women face in taking up of lifelong learning or other initiatives two studies have been used to highlight how experiences, perceptions and beliefs of firstly lone parents and secondly people over fifty impact upon their ability, willingness and motivation to participate in interventions such as New Deal, community schemes or education/training.

The first study was primarily focused upon the effects of interventions designed to facilitate job readiness and highlighted two clear positions, those who did take the step into an initiative began to have more optimism and set goals for the future and those who did not participate had an indifferent attitude towards initiatives or training courses.

Perceptions of interventions by lone parents

Those that were or had been involved in initiatives, generally appeare to be enthusiastic about the benefits of participating and those who had never been involved in any kind of intervention displayed both skepticism and suspicion of such schemes (Meadows 2004).

The benefits of interaction enabled some to become part of a different community outside of the home, having very positive effects on them and their families. This young mother explains,   *"Going to college has been really good. It gets me out of the house and not only that, I've got something to look forward to each day"*

Setting targets and goals was a recurring theme for those who had some kind of involvement in community initiatives. Participants said how involvement had provided the opportunity to set personal targets. For others goal setting was not particularly linked to work, but how their aim was to improve themselves and raise their esteem - to develop a sense of agency. Issues concerned with assertiveness and self-confidence were often described as the types of objectives participants were aiming for.

For some, taking on paid work was evaluated against their current economic status. Economic rationality (financial cost-benefit analysis) was a prime factor in the decision to enter into NDLP. Implicit in the following two quotes are two key issues, firstly of low expectations of the type of work they may be offered, and secondly the importance of being at home with their children despite having no money.

"I get the rent paid and so what's the point in going out and slaving away for peanuts? If I'm going to have no money anyway, I may as well be home with them (children) and still have none".

"Bringing up kids is a job in itself. Any mother will tell you that. So I'm supposed to do another job, work twice as hard as I am now and get nothing more for it. Would you do that?"

Lack of confidence was often cited as an explanation for not accessing work/training/education. However it appeared that the lack of confidence in their ability to take on a new challenge was not the issue, but a lack of confidence in being able to combine the joint role of mother/worker/student. This gives a more understandable account of why lone parents in general may not be choosing to access interventions for education or training/employment. To set targets, they have to be seen as achievable, and for this group the complexities of lone parenthood and childcare made such targets appear remote.

Non participants were often somewhat dismissive of interventions. They felt it to be not particularly relevant to them. A recurrent theme form non-participants was that if they were to "leave the home", it had to be financially viable to gain material benefits in the short term. When asked whether she would consider some aspect of training or education, as opposed to a job, one respondent said,

"I don't know, I suppose that if I'm going to do something I may as well get paid for it. I mean what's the point of learning about computers. I'm not going to get a job with that am I?"

The 'poverty of expectation' referred to by Darling is implicit in the above statement in that despite training in computers this young mother felt there was no hope of gaining employment, so why bother? If the incentives to be educated had been similar to paid work remuneration then the decision may have been different. The prospect for gaining higher status employment and improved incomes would be increased

A clear distinction was found between lone parents who had been involved in some sort of intervention and those who had never become involved. Participants had begun to identify objectives in terms of work, education and/or personal development but non-participants, whilst not necessarily not having goals, were often more ambiguous about what their goals were.

"It's hard now, but he'll soon be old enough for me to go to work. It's not really worth it now, I could only work part time, but when he's older?…"

When asked what type of work she would like to do.

"I'm not bothered. I'll do anything. The most important thing is that it's able to fit around the kids. I don't worry about that too much. Something will turn up."

Whilst the aim of many interventions is to eventually facilitate a return to the workplace, some described how involvement helped develop social networks outside of their family, often counterbalancing the feelings many had of isolation. Just "getting out of the house" was an important factor as to why participants viewed such interventions so favourably.

Participants described how being involved had helped to improve their outlook from pre-involvement. Some suggested that it had enabled them to visualise themselves moving into a position of partial self-sufficiency, which was not the case pre-intervention. As one lone parent explained,

"I've been stuck at home for 7 years now. At one stage I used to think that it would be like that for ever. I'm no better off money-wise coming here, but at least I can see some light at the end of the tunnel. I don't think I'll get a job that will give us the money to get everything we want, but at least I know I can have a go. It's took me a long time to get to think like that" (Parent/School Partnership)

All interviews with participants suggested, albeit to different degrees, that they had begun to reclaim some level of control over their lives. Many highlighted how confidence had grown in their own ability to deal with fluctuating circumstances. The pro-activity encouraged by the initiatives had allowed participants to begin to think of themselves in terms other than that of passive recipients.

The themes emerging from the data suggests that *involvement* at any level, helped to create a sense of worth and purpose and as such could be used as small stepping stones into becoming "job ready" or furthering educational opportunities. Similarly the effort needed to encourage involvement for the most difficult to reach groups should be channelled into providing some form of incentives such as good quality childcare, clear pathways into further/higher education/work with tangible financial incentives or rewards.
………………

The predominance of women undertaking caring responsibilities has helped to facilitate a withdrawal from economic activity as well as increasing older women's participation in part time work. For some women moving from full time work creates the opportunity to combine caring with part time work. One in five people between the ages of fifty and fifty-nine regularly providing both informal and unpaid care. In terms of who provides that care we know that women provide more care than men and more intensive care (Mooney et al, 2002). In addition to the provision of care for older people, women also support the needs of their offspring to provide care for grandchildren. Currently there are approximately 6 million carers in the UK, 60% of whom are women between the ages of 45 and 64 (Social Trends 34 :2004). According to the British Social Attitudes survey they found that three-quarters of grandparents have had to "put themselves out" to look after grandchildren and thirty-four per cent of children under fifteen whose mothers are in paid work are looked after by their grandparents (Dench, G et al 1999) (Social Trends 34:2004).

Older women in the workforce
In a similar vein to lone parents, older women now find themselves becoming marginalised in the workforce due to their lack of skills, lower educational qualifications and lack of access. Economic activity rates for older women has decreased quite markedly over the last thirty years. In 1971 data suggests a gradual withdrawal from work for women in their fifties. By 1996 whilst more women had entered the workforce generally, the withdrawal rate began form around age 45 (Collis et al 2000). According to the Third Age Employment Network 30% (2.7 million) people between the ages of fifty to state pension age are economically inactive, with just one in three women over 50 being economically active. The reduction in the paid work of older women may be due to several factors including broken work patterns, lack of skills, qualifications or the requirement to provide care.

More recently researchers have identified not only gender discrimination but also ageism within the workplace creating a double jeopardy for women of gendered ageism. As Redman and Snape, (2002) note, the 'glass ceiling' has been replaced by a stronger and more resilient 'silver ceiling'. Duncan (2004)

argues that the incremental nature of female employment forces women to work beyond pension age or risk living in poverty in later life. Viewed in this way, the phenomenon of early exit has more negative repercussions for women than men, yet female ageing in employment and education remains under-researched. Training and educational opportunities for older people viewed alongside the experiences of being both an employee and an adult learner within employment or education, raises questions on equality of access and perceptions of ageism within both the workplace and the academy.

A study by Taylor and Urwin (2001) found that older workers were less likely to be offered or take up offers of training in comparison with younger workers. Similarly the Labour Force Survey (May 2005) found that when employees were asked whether they had undergone any kind of training in the last four weeks showed that around 40% of women (35 to 49) had, compared to only 16% of 50+ women. It is less clear whether it is due to lack of opportunity directed to older workers or a lack of take up to train.

Working within the education sector Meg Maguire (1995) argues that 'specific discourses and discursive practices of ageism are deeply sedimented into the educational system of the United Kingdom". She asks the question, who defines at what stage a women is 'older'? the "invisible barrier of ageism" means that "women will be displaced and replaced" within the education sector (Maguire 2005). If this is the case for women in education are similar assumptions operating on perceived ageist competencies when considering older women learners? Women in her study felt their age and sex had restricted their employment prospects within the sector and that women were more likely to experience ageist attitudes concerning their appearance or sexuality than men.

Reay (2003) looked at the experiences of learning from the perspective of older working class women undertaking an Access course. She charts the complexities they faced when juggling, caring, work and study, which often resulted in time poverty for the women. She suggests that universities need to change how they accommodate older learners, to provide positive experiences for the non-traditional entrant.

Some of the genuine apprehension women experience when attempting to change directions and combine previous roles with new identities may prevent engagement of the potential older learner with education. The fear of straddling two identities, according to Barnett, whereby the adult who chooses to leave one life world to enter the intellectual world of learning, faces the 'existential anxiety', of 'inhabiting two discourses at once' (Barnett, 1999:38). Furthermore, on a more practical level the admission of being in a state of learning can amount to an unsettling disclosure of lack of knowledge to their employers and colleagues, for those undertaking learning whilst in paid work. In such circumstances, learning opportunities can be perceived by the individual to be threatening. The renegotiation of identities is complex especially when coming from working class roots. Being a woman presents further hurdles such as having to renegotiate some of their previously held roles and responsibilities within the family.

Such evidence calls into question the equality of opportunity for older women and when taken as a whole points to an emerging issue of unequal access in employment, education and training.

The governments target to create fairer access through an Office of Fair Access (House of Commons 2004) and increase the opportunities for education to all is evidenced through the HEFCE widening participation strategic plan,

> " *We aim to ensure that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to do so, whatever their background and whenever they need it. This means providing for the needs of a growing number of students with a broad variety of previous life and educational experiences"*. (authors emphasis added)

Implicit in this statement is the increased acknowledgement of the need to develop support mechanisms for the older learner. However the following study will show that increases in fees and the prospect of debt following completion, may reduce participation of the older student into higher education.

The policy objectives to facilitate re-entry, retention or access into work are clearly given more impetus and support than those concerned with expanding provision and access to learning. Primarily the policy aim is to both provide the capability to remain longer in employment or help people back into employment or voluntary roles.

The following section presents some findings from a study into older people (93 women,137 men) on their history, experiences and perceptions of education in their lifetime. The evidence was taken from work in progress which was the theme a conference paper in 2005, based on a project on gender discrimination and ageist perceptions, currently being investigated at Liverpool John Moores University (Grant, D. et al 2005).

In this survey almost half of all women had undertaken education (post school) either full time, part time or both at some stage, with only just over a third of men doing the same. When asked what the main motivations were for study almost half said there was a clear relationship for qualifications as a means to increase employability or improve job prospects, however almost a third undertook study for non job related reasons. The economically inactive tended to cite non-job related reasons whilst the employed cited career opportunities.

One third of the sample said they would welcome the opportunity to enter higher education, with slightly more in work than out expressing this desire. This clearly indicates the potential interest and possible demand for higher qualifications from both working and economically inactive people over fifty.

Explorations of work histories provided interesting information on experience both pre and post equal opportunities legislation. More men than women had felt they had been discriminated against because they had been too young.

One quarter of the male sample had been discriminated against because of their older age, with over a third of women citing older age as being a factor in their discrimination. One in three women had experienced gender discrimination as opposed to only one in five men. Just under one in four of the sample had experienced other forms of discrimination which included bullying and sexual harassment.

Interestingly just under half of the sample felt that age would not be perceived as a barrier within higher education, this was despite their experiences of such in their previous work. In general the main barriers to entering higher education were cited as

- High cost of higher education (and the impact this would have on their incomes.)
- Feeling too old
- Lacking the necessary qualifications.

Financial concerns were often cited as barriers to participation,

"Yes, I've thought about it, but what's holding me back is the funding side of it….But looking at courses, like at night school…, its so much a course and I just can't afford, you know, so it's the funding.

"I've got a pension with X, but I'm not eligible for that until I'm 60 so it is a bit of a catch 22 situation…you'd like to get higher education, but you've got to pay for it."

"… it's always the money isn't it …the dole is not enough. This big £10 wouldn't even get you out of bed. They need to give you a lot more to retrain, especially when you've got people like me on their own, you've got to pay rent, gas and whatever, it's a big 'no no' for us otherwise I would have gone back."

The cost of entering education is perceived by many as being the prime factor in the decision to engage or not with learning. This was expressed by those in work and those who had reached retirement age. Income or lack of it coupled with the perceived cost of education created a barrier of access for many in the sample.

The responses around caring roles ranged from the lack of acknowledgement of the skills required to be a parent to the difficulties of trying to combine caring and nurturing support for family members whilst undertaking study.

"…you can start a job and do these NVQs, but nobody gives you an NVQ for being a mother …I mean, you know, a housewife a manager, you're budgeting for a things or when a problem comes up, or you've got sickness in the house, you're children are ill, or you're off to hospital or whatever…you've got to think on you're feet a lot of the time.

Juggling home and study for some proved to be difficult, as family members still expected the woman to continue providing the usual measure of attention and support .

"Pressure - It's there, yes. You don't know it. I think what happens is, especially if there's family still at home, and especially if they've got a man, the old fashioned ideas come back in again…I should be there to put the tea on, I should make sure the washing is done"

"You've got to sit down and got this homework, that's were the problems come in for a lot of people, it's the homework. You're all right in college, but once you step back into your own home, that's where the pressure comes back, the family come, the phone will go and you really don't get much peace. If you're not used to doing homework, it creates a big problem".

Experiences of past discrimination were considered a factor on future decisions to return to education with some women citing lack of confidence in their ability to study,

"I think they (College tutors) also understand that our brain doesn't work as fast and we do get self-conscious, and a lot of it, I think is lack of confidence with older people".

Whilst not specifically viewing this experiences as evidence of discrimination the effects nevertheless were damaging and long term.

"The confidence [my mentor] had built up in me, plummeted. I stopped, feeling…I wasn't worth it. Then a course came up in X [F.E. college] so I thought, I'll try there, so I rang up and by then I think I was 49 or 50 and he said, 'How old…can I ask you how old you are?' I said, 'I'm 50' He said, 'Won't you feel stupid in a class of 16-19 year olds?... and I went (shrugs shoulders). But again my confidence… (No 20)

Educational experiences
I didn't like school, I wasn't particularly happy at school and I think I did put a lot of pressure on myself.

Once the women had entered higher education their experiences of stepping outside their normal environment created some difficulties.

"I just got overwhelmed by it, at that time, I just think I wasn't able to do it. It was when I went to have a look round, it just seemed…you were left on your own and I didn't think I'd be able to do it. Yet, I did get some good grades in my A levels so…I just, I was a bit weak… I should have done it but I didn't…"

"It was sort of, everybody was enrolling that day and it was, you know, the first day there. Yes, I mean they were ok. You were treated the same way as everybody else, you know".

One returner to education pondered on how her educational history may have been a factor in her success when compared to the difficulties faced by her fellow students,

"I think a lot of the women that were there, [didn't have confidence]…I mean at least, I had a bit of an academic background, I'd done 'O'levels, I'd done 'A'levels, I'd gone to a grammar school, and a lot of the women there hadn't, you know. They'd left to work at 15, 16 and were now doing exams. They hadn't done anything since leaving either. Whereas I'd done little bits at least…it sounds stupid, but I'd always written letters, you know, I'd always corresponded so I'd always been used to the flow of writing and I think a lot of them hadn't and I think they might of found it a bit off putting".

For some the acquisition of basic qualifications did not necessary hinder their ability to find work but not the desired work, coupled with the realisation that without further qualifications their horizons were limited.

"…I've got 'O'levels, that's it and I mean that's nothing. But I never got the chance to take 'A' levels or to go to sixth form and …from school … there were jobs available, so ..no-one … push[ed] the higher education route. It was sort of come and get a job and so I started work…I often look in the paper and I get really disillusioned, you've got all these job applications, you know, and … think, I'm not qualified for any of that".

When asked whether they felt higher education institutions did enough to attract or encourage older people into learning .

"No, none whatsoever. The impression is, 'young'…you don't see anything where it say's it's for older people…..If they have got anything different, they should advertise it and tell people, let people know about it".

The extracts above highlight how the barriers faced by women are both internal and external ranging from ageist perceptions, financial difficulties through to feelings of inability and lack of confidence; having the stamina to see it through, trying to support the family and home, can create a range of hurdles and obstacles to be overcome. They also provide an insight into the thoughts and perceptions of educational institutions as well as raising questions as to how such barriers can be removed.

Conclusion

The aim of creating 'a learning society' formed an important part of new labours manifesto, designed to 'break down barriers' and widen participation. The governments aim of changing attitudes towards older people are clear and focused, but when viewed in the context of the actual experiences of these two groups of women it becomes much less obvious on how the older learner is included in this vision of a learning society, Withnal comments that "older people are still marginalised in education policy circles….by continued emphasis on economic competitiveness" (Withnall, A. 2000).

The reality paints a dismal picture, with a clear focus on education up to aged 19 coupled with a 50% target to getting 18 year olds into universities, little seems to emanating from policy makers as to how increased participation of

older learners can be achieved. Walker argues that "despite the vogue for lifelong learning initiatives, older learners are still perceived as largely missing from both policy and practice in educational provision (Walker J 2000) (DfES 2002, DfEE 1999).

Apart from the obvious competitive benefits to the economy of an educated, skilled workforce we can safely say that the wider benefits of learning contribute to the physical, mental and emotional health of the older learner and enable them to be active within their communities for longer (Summers 2005 in Tuckett and McAuley 2005).

The arguments in favour of rolling out educational opportunities for all are strong. Some groups may not have aspirations to re-enter education or paid work for a variety of reasons and especially so at crucial stages of their caring responsibilities. But for those who do, the benefits to the economy are secondary to the positive benefits reaped by recipients leading to increased autonomy, raising of self esteem, creating positive role models and decreasing periods of poor health in later life.

The notion that people have equal choices in life is challenged in this chapter. Lifelong learning policies as a means to improve and enhance both the material and cultural well being of society are admirable ideals. However it is argued that access to lifelong learning for working class women is at present little more than a myth and that the, internal and external barriers identified, the constraints of gendered roles coupled with drive for re-entry into the workplace, for the majority of working class women continues to perpetuate their social disadvantage.

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Table 1   PROPORTION WITH NO QUALIFICATIONS BY GENDER AND AGE:

Proportion of age group who have no qualifications (thousands, per cent)

	All aged 16-59/64	**16-24 years**	**25-34 years**	**35-49 years**	**50-59/64 years**
All people of working age	*5944* *16%*	*890* *14%*	*815* *10%*	*1925* *15%*	*2314* *27%*
Women	3159 18%	415 13%	428 10%	1117 18%	1199 33%
Men	2785 15%	475 15%	387 9%	808 13%	1115 22%

Base: All people of working age (men 16-64, women 16-59)
Source: Labour Force Survey (Spring 2001 – United Kingdom)