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What Can Adult Education Accomplish?

The *Benefits* of Adult Learning – The Approach, Measurement and Prospects



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What can adult education accomplish? The benefits of adult learning – the approach, measurement and prospects

The aim of wider-benefits research is to record the complexity of benefits and other effects on both the personal and the societal levels deriving from the individual's educational efforts. The central issue is: "What changes are affected by learning interventions?" (Schuller/Desjardins 2010, p. 229). The exploration of the wider benefits of learning is still in its infancy. Pioneers in this field of research are, in particular, to be found in the UK – the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL) and the Institute of Education (IOE) at the University of London being two institutions of major impact. Furthermore, this article takes the work of the OECD and its affiliated Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) into regard. Last but not least, the work of Jyri Manninen (University of Eastern Finland) is also integrated. The aim of this article is to offer a comprehensive approach to the field of wider benefits of learning and make it available for comparative European studies. Another objective, finally, is the dissemination and circulation of this approach in the EU.

1. The 'wider benefits of learning' approach for adult education

The idea and concept of lifelong learning essentially come from supranational and international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and the EU (European Union). It is evident that adult learners and adult education/continuing education are assigned particular importance in the continuum of lifelong learning but this importance is fragile due to the fact that the financial support it receives and the extent to which it is developed (including promotional structures, professionalisation of staff) do not correspond to the level of importance (Kuhlenkamp, 2010). Studies on educational economics feed further arguments that investment in late educational stages is on the decline compared to investment in preschool activities; it is even regarded as being counterproductive or "simply" omitted (Vereinigung der Bayerischen Wirtschaft e.V. [Bavarian industry association] 2007, pp. 121 et seg.; Initiative New Social Market Economy (INSM) 2009). In light of these observations, the discipline of adult education per se is to a certain extent under pressure to provide authentication and evidence, to strengthen its role in the entire lifelong learning concept and to demonstrate its potential in the long term with regard to educational policies.

The models used in studies on educational economics that legitimise investment include so-called cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Heckman, 2000). Cognitive skills are particularly those that are developed in the early years and are difficult to change. As early childhood multiplies skills, the return to be expected from investment over a lifetime exceeds the costs many times over (Pfeiffer & Reuss, 2008). If these findings are followed, then adult education/continuing education in the field of lifelong learning can

demonstrate its legitimacy especially effectively from an educational economics perspective in activities for parental education, in the further training of educational staff, in early childhood and for adults who need to make up for the "care" and "basic education" that they are missing. These services must therefore be provided on a greater scale and given the required funding.

With a simplified' understanding, the adult education schemes on offer would be preemptively exposed to educational policy and control of a kind grounded entirely upon education budget considerations. Opportunities would be missed for greater educational equality, participation, catch-up learning and personal development gained through participation in general political and cultural adult education. Adult education constitutes a value per se. It provides an insight into world knowledge and enables own experiences to be confronted with acquisition processes. This may take place on a voluntary basis, in groups, or on all kinds of learning projects or courses, to meet all kinds of needs for knowledge and continuing education, the whole point being that it is not only made available to certain groups and age cohorts, as otherwise they would not pay off at first glance.

But when a second look is taken and the benefits are seen for individuals and society when people of any age and regardless of their previous qualifications are allowed to participate in adult education, the 'wider benefits of learning' approach provides the possibility of legitimising general, political, cultural and even recreational adult educational schemes, as in this case the primary focus is on the so-called non-economic benefits and the return from learning (which is not necessarily reflected directly in a higher income or growing productivity) in terms of social and/or personal benefits. For that reason, the analysis goes further than the individual level and investigates the impact of educational processes on the levels of family, community and society as a whole (Schuller, Bynner, Green, Blackwell, Hammond, Preston & Gough, 2001)¹.

The aim of wider-benefits research is to record the complexity between the various educational efforts and the specific benefits for the well-being of the individual and society. This must occur in an open and unbiased way, i.e. a positive result cannot be expected to fit the model and follow a formalised learning process. Negative effects of learning can also be identified whereby learning processes

- are too difficult/demanding;
- form expectations that cannot be met;
- enable individuals to develop themselves, but this happens to the disadvantage of others, in particular families;
- bring stress into family life;
- lead to conflicts with people's social network or work requirements (WBL 2008, p. 20).

¹ The "Deutscher Lernatlas" [German atlas of learning] from the Bertelsmann Foundation attempts to present the first illustration and ranking of the overall benefits for a society on a local level in Germany (Schoof et al., 2011; for a criticism of the calculation and cumulation of the indicators, cf. Reichart, in this report).

The benefits thus change over time and educational efforts that are initially assessed as negative could be viewed as being positive after some time, because an increase in decisive behaviour, accompanied by a new professional development, for example, can be attributed to the past investment in education².

As yet, the term 'wider benefits of learning' is not based on any standard theories or research approaches. The research field is characterised by various theoretical strands and a range of methodological approaches (Schuller, Bynner, Green, Blackwell, Hammond, Preston & Gough, 2001, p. 1). In Europe, the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL), the Institute of Education at the University of London (IOE) and the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI; affiliated to the OECD) have rendered outstanding services to the research on the wider benefits. Furthermore, Jyri Manninen from the University of Eastern Finland, who carried out a representative survey on the wider benefits of adult learning in Finland, belongs to this circle of experts (Manninen et al., 2010). Wider-benefit research attempts to illustrate the benefits of learning at all stages of life (see Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL), 2008; Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), 2007; Schuller et al., 2004). Despite the various theoretical and methodological approaches, research work in this field intersects at two points: firstly, they share the same central question and secondly, they believe that the analysis of the wider benefits of learning is only possible via a multi-dimensional research approach. The term 'well-being' is used in this context in an attempt to create an umbrella term that incorporates health, social relations and the possibility of being able to observe networks and types of participation in people's immediate living environment (Field, 2009; see also CERI, 2007, p. 42). A secondary aspect of the approach is that it needs to be easily understood by political decision makers, among others, and should provide them with descriptive information and supporting arguments on education.

In order to systematise the return gained from learning, the concept of 'capital' is used (Schuller et al., 2004). It is assumed that through learning and (continuing) education, people acquire – consciously or unconsciously – forms of capital from which both the individual and the society as a whole can profit.

- 'Human capital' is based on know-how and qualifications that enable an individual to participate in the economy and in society.
- 'Social capital' results from networks in which people actively participate, so that when they face a challenge they can fall back upon their social relations.
- 'Identity capital' comprises individual features such as self-confidence and internal control to support personal development, whereby it is also assumed,

Weber, 2009, p. 25).

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² This phenomenon is proven in a meta-analysis of continuing education and qualification programmes within the framework of promoting state employment market policies. One year after the measures were concluded, the recorded effects were not yet significant or were even negative, while two to three years later, the results were positive and significant (Card, Kluve &

however, that there is a social influence on this form of capital (Schuller et al., 2004, p. 20).

The fact that reference is made to the human capital theory, which sees education and learning primarily as an investment to increase the productivity of goods and services, has a disconcerting effect in connection with the issues of learning and education (Vater, Kellner & Jütte, 2011). After all, the whole point of this approach is to avoid the economic interlinking of learning and educational schemes. Schuller et al. (2004) attempt to make this concept of capital compatible for educational concepts by creating a connection to the term 'capabilities', used by Amartaya Sen (1992). "Much of this capital accumulation is identified with the acquisition of capability – in Amartaya Sen's terms, the potential to achieve desired functioning in the different domains of life. Sen argues that variation in these capabilities is the underlying cause of inequality" (ibid. p. 3). The less people are able to successfully shape their life, an ability which (can) be built and rebuilt throughout the course of their life, the greater they are at risk of exclusion (Schuller et al., 2004, p. 12). This is why learning and education are given a key value. The wider benefits – in addition to the acquired skills and qualifications – are achieved through two mechanisms:

- Personal characteristics and abilities: education and learning can strengthen the
 development of key skills, abilities and personal resources as well as reinforcing
 belief in the individual's ability to deal with disadvantageous situations. Education also
 helps individuals to make well-reflected decisions on their behaviour, which are
 related to their health and happiness.
- Social interaction: education enables access to individuals and groups with a similar and heterogeneous socio-economic background, encourages social cohesion and provides the possibility of social involvement.

2. Systematisation of recorded benefits following participation in adult education/continuing education

Below, there is a summary of previously recorded findings for adult education and constructs (grouped according to theory) following participation in adult education, which are expected to prove to be benefits, especially in the field of assessing adult education (Fig. 1). However, detailed information, such as the level of significance, descriptions of the sample tests and an explanation of the variances, is largely missing from the available files. A meta-analysis taking primary data into account thus still needs to be carried out and would initially require extensive research from the individual authors of the benefit investigations. In addition, the findings mostly come from English and Finnish studies and for that reason possible cultural variations and differences or designations of the recorded benefits are still unclear, being in no way conceptually defined or separately validated. A summary will be made below from the available range of benefits

given which can initially be deemed as proven thanks to study references and which should be used and further researched for the legitimisation of adult education³.

Figure 1: Benefits following participation in adult education

Localisation of the benefits and their references in research	Perceived benefits following participation in continuing education
Subjectively experienced change in an individual's personal aspects which are key to learning (learning research)	- Locus of control - Self-efficacy/Self-confidence
Subjectively experienced change in a personal environment with a complex and ever-changing society (adult education research)	- Tolerance - Sense of purpose in life - Civic competences - Shifts/changes in educational experience - Mental well-being
Subjectively experienced change in social domains that can be observed in behaviour (inclusion research)	- Civic and social engagement - Work-related benefits/employability - Family - Physical health/health behaviour - Social networks - Trust in others and in decision makers

Adult education maintains and develops the prerequisites for learning

The central prerequisite for participation in adult education (especially in voluntary and open-to-all schemes) can be said to be a general ability and willingness/motivation to learn. The findings according to Schuller (2002) and Feinstein & Hammond (2004) show that self-efficacy and self-confidence as an adult (Cervone, Artistico & Berry, 2006) can develop positively, become clearer and grow through the process of learning itself. This could also be seen in older participants. There is therefore proof that it is not just at a young age that important requirements which are motivational for learning are acquired, but that older adults can also strengthen these significant learning prerequisites through continuing education. Thus, Dench and Regan (2000) show that adults between the age of 50 and 71 perceived that they had a higher level of self-confidence following participation. Being able to take on changes requires you to see yourself as playing an

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³ This summary comes from a collection by Ricarda Motschilnig, which she undertook as part of her internship with DVV international and published in an English version in dialogue with the other two authors (Motschilnig, 2011). For the field of lifelong learning (pre-school education, school, university/college, early education and adult education), five English-language brochures on the findings from the Anglo-American field are available in a summarising collection, which were compiled in parallel as part of the Bertelsmann Foundation's so-called ELLI project (Akerman, Vorhaus & Brown, 2011). Furthermore, the DIE magazine of 1/2013 deals with the topic of "Benefits". This has also been taken into account.

essential role in your own living situation. Participating in continuing education, in turn, provides you with opportunities to reflect on ways of enriching your own life. These findings mainly come from qualitative research (semi-structured interviews) and are also confirmed in the content analysis carried out by Manninnen (2010). To be able to record these benefits quantitatively from a participant's perspective, pedagogical psychology has developed tried-and-tested constructs which can be investigated with the help of questionnaires looking at the changes. For example, there is the Rotter scale (Rotter, 1966) to record loci of control and a self-efficacy scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995).

Adult education allows people to participate and become involved in a democratic society society

It is surely almost impossible to find one single uniform definition of adult education in and aimed at Europe, considering the different organisational forms and systemic prerequisites the field involves across the different EU nations. However, some key points can be named according to which modern pedagogy/adult education defines itself, such as independence, self-determination, agency, subjectivity and critical thinking (cf. Pongratz, 2010). One possible benefit lies in the genuine aims of adult education: in dealing with change, in using communicative means to grapple with novelty and difference, and in individuals extending their repertoire of strategies for coping and development by means of reflection. For example, there is evidence that participants in continuing education are less at risk of adopting extremist attitudes and develop a more tolerant behaviour (Preston & Feinstein, 2004). Older people improve their learning experiences by adopting fewer age stereotypes and by being able to participate in decision-making processes and incorporate their ideas (Simone & Scuilli, 2006). Preston (2003) and Feinstein and Hammond (2004) show that people involved in adult education activities become politically active, vote and are on the whole politically motivated. A study in Sweden (Tuijnman, 1990) has also shown that participation in adult education can also lead to a generally positive attitude to life. In Scandinavian countries and in England, the term "mental well-being" seems to have established itself already and deals with a psychosocial quality that comprises an individual's own optimistic attitude and opportunities to influence one's own journey through life (Field, 2009, p. 9).

Adult education supports social inclusion

The number of unlimited contracts for full-time employment is falling and a crisis is manifesting itself in the field of social coexistence as regards local social relationships. The ways in which people live together and the lives they lead are less often dictated by convention and can now take on a more individualised form. This means that the risk of exclusion is growing in all sectors and layers of the population. Social exclusion relates to three dimensions: gainful employment, local social relationships, and civil rights, including education and social security (cf. Kil & Kronauer, 2011). It is indeed the wide range of activities falling under adult education which mean it can play a major role by addressing and deliberately linking all these dimensions of inclusion. As part of the research on benefits, strong evidence has already been found to prove adult education's supporting role in inclusion. This can be gathered from a number of studies that prove

that improvements can be seen in the areas of physical health (or healthy behaviour), family life and work. There is concrete proof extending to such fine details as a lower consumption of cigarettes and alcohol (through general work-related, sports and crafts courses)⁴ (Feinstein et al. 2003). Experiencing and developing social networks creates trust in others and in decision makers. A study carried out by Field (2005) shows that participation in adult education is closely linked to further involvement in social and community activities. In a qualitative study, Brasset-Grundy (2004) shows that parents not only pay more attention to how their own children are raised but that they can also provide more support and communication when interacting with their children.

3. A model for recording benefits in a European comparison

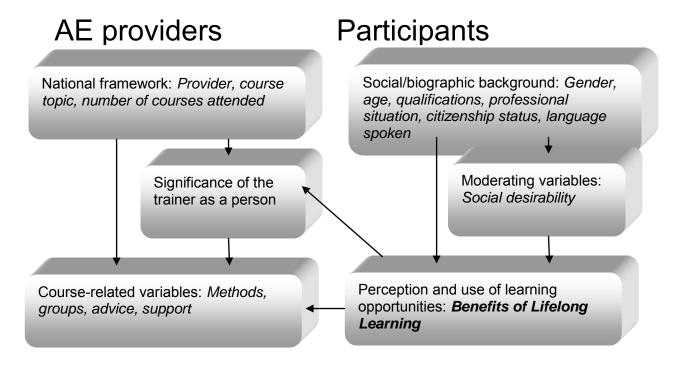
The accomplishment of learning results is complex. In adult education, a significant role is played by additional selection decisions other than those taken in school, based on the expectations and experiences of the "experienced" adult learner. Personal factors such as motives and interests (Illeris, 2010, so-called life projects) thus provide reasons for adults choosing to make use of certain learning schemes, looking for specific tasks, actively dealing with content and striving for new skills. It also depends on sector-specific prior knowledge as to how they then accept the learning environments they encounter and process the respective learning content (Kil & Wagner, 2006). From the perspective of continuing education institutions, there are several areas of influence that work to support positive learning experiences and results; in particular it appears to be the teachers who can provide support and set a good example during the learning process itself, while the organisational parameters such as classrooms and the registration process tend to stay on the sidelines of the actual learning process. However, the learner is always crucial to how learning processes are received and processed. This can also be applied to the accomplishment of benefits. Benefits only become apparent retrospectively, with a subjective "bias". Benefits can also be judged from the perspective of current and former participants in continuing education; they may see these benefits in changes in their behaviour which are visible to a greater (e.g. I now smoke less) or lesser (e.g. I now have more confidence) extent. Such an answer can become subject to the effects of positive thinking, as one possible benefit of continuing education comes directly from the effort an individual makes on a course, and this individual might answer others' questions in this normatively highly charged field of lifelong learning in a "socially desired" manner (Paulhus, 1998). The recording of subjectively experienced "benefits" should take this effect into consideration. Figure 2 models the occurrence and monitoring of the essential factors influencing benefits. A review of the model is currently being realised in an EU project "Benefits of Lifelong" Learning" (BeLL), requested by the German Institute for Adult Education Leibniz Centre for Lifelong Learning (Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung Leibniz-Zentrum für Lebenslanges Lernen; DIE), based on approximately 10,000 questionnaires⁵. In addition, there is to be respondent validation of the findings and they will be combined with a

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⁴ While alcohol consumption increased in participants in specific work-related courses
⁵ The structure of the questionnaire and systematisation and classification of the constructs were compared with findings from pedagogical psychology, classroom research and general psychology (cooperation: TU Dortmund, Prof. Dr. Hellmuth Metz-Göckel, general psychology). Others involved in the project are the protagonists linked to the Institute of Education at the University of London (IOE) and the University of Eastern Finland.

qualitative method in a European comparison with ten partners (Kil, Operti & Manninen, 2012).

Figure 2: Model for the comparative recording of benefits



4. Political and research-related prospects

All in all, there is not such a wide gap between the economy and adult education, since investment in education has to extend across people's entire lifespan and can also "pay off" for society and the individual in later years. Consequently, it is important to initiate system developments and make demands that are also favourable for investment in education at an adult age. Thus, continuing education can also be considered as a civil right (Kronauer, 2010). There must be an "upgrade bonus for education" instead of "scrappage allowances", according to the former director of the Social Science Research Center Berlin, Günther Schmid (2011, p. 103). He proposes that continuing education funds should be set up, into which is paid, for example, one percentage point of what has until now been employment insurance tax. These tax-financed funds mean that, irrespective of their productivity, everyone has the same access rights to the funding! In this way, Schmid accommodates the individualism and adult typology of learning. This requires rights and duties regarding advice on continuing education, collective or company agreements for continuing education and an infrastructure of approved advisory institutions. The schism of work-related, education-related, recreational and self-organised continuing education would simultaneously be overcome through rights of choice, since the benefit of recreational education can be reflected in improved employability, in the same way as what is intended as vocational training actually means "further personal development" for most participants (BIBB, 2005). Parallel to this, further research efforts are required for a more intensive understanding, identification and replication of the benefits of adult education/continuing education for the individual

and society regarding their contexts of origin and their characteristics. However, due to the complex and also diverse learning output following participation in courses, causal relationships will be difficult to prove directly.

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