

# »The Positive Effects of Lifelong Learning are Evident«

## Interview with Tom Schuller about the »Benefits of Lifelong Learning«

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Interview with Tom Schuller about the »benefits of lifelong learning«

## »THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF LIFELONG LEARNING ARE EVIDENT«

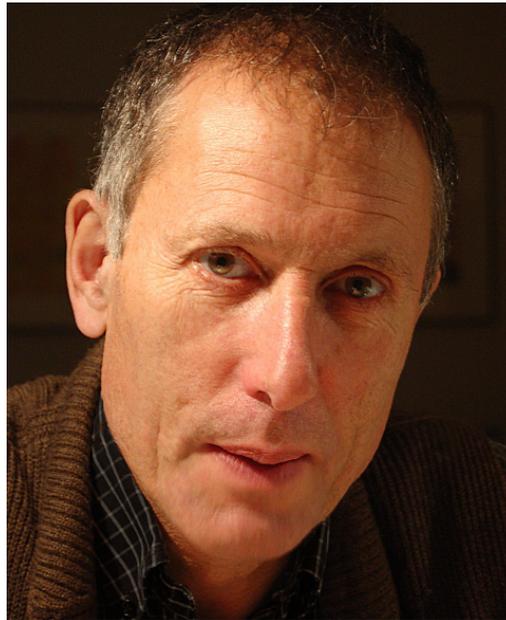
**DIE:** Surely there are only very few people who would seriously deny the positive effects of learning. Why is it important to measure or quantify the »benefits of lifelong learning«?

**Schuller:** Two main reasons: First, measurement (not necessarily quantitative) is vital for us to know which areas of learning are most effective in improving the quality of life, and why. Secondly, a more pragmatic reason: measured results – especially quantitative ones – have a political impact.

**DIE:** Which benefits can be identified, and which effects of learning have been shown to be the strongest?

**Schuller:** In my view health is a major area: mental as well as physical health, and collective as well as individual. One of the most significant shifts in thinking has been the recognition of mental wellbeing as a goal for which practical policies can be developed, even in societies used to measuring everything in economic or material terms. Adult learning has a huge part to play in this, both as a direct route to greater wellbeing, and as a means by which people can understand how to improve their health in other ways. Personally I'm also convinced that learning can play a big part in addressing issues of crime and anti-social behavior, but only if it is accompanied by other policies.

**DIE:** The term »benefits« seems to be all-inclusive. Nearly everything can be a »learning benefit' – research findings range from health, social cohesion, active citizenship and racial tolerance



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Questions about the research on benefits by **Dr. Thomas Vollmer (DIE)**  
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to well-being, parenting, and even happiness. How strong is the empirical evidence? Is there any evidence at all?

**Schuller:** Indeed there is! We began to build up the evidence base with the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, established in 2000, and we mixed extensive large-scale data analysis (especially longitudinal

analysis) with in-depth qualitative work (see especially [www.learningbenefits.net](http://www.learningbenefits.net), with several good syntheses, and our book on The Benefits of Learning: Schuller 2004 ). It is significant that the OECD now includes social outcomes as one of its core educational indicators. I'm very pleased that the Bertelsmann Foundation has followed up this theme also.

There are plenty of individual researchers doing good work on particular aspects of learning and particular groups of learners. But you are right to suggest that there is a tendency to »overclaim« benefits for learning, as if it can solve all our problems. Further research will discriminate between different types of learning and their relative effectiveness. This may mean some painful results, if we find that some forms of learning are not effective at all in terms of producing benefits, or do so only for small and already advantaged groups (thus increasing inequalities – a big issue...)

**DIE:** What can be understood by a »monetary« versus a »non-monetary outcome« of lifelong learning? Can every benefit of learning be monetarised? Should every benefit be monetarised?

**Schuller:** Obviously not! But it is often worth trying to fit a monetary measure to learning outcomes. Health is again a good example, where there are very positive monetary gains for individuals and for society more widely from people learning to manage their own health better, and from the indirect effects of participation in adult learning. If learning can help an older adult

merely to postpone their entry into hospital or residential care by just one month (because it gives them greater capacity to look after themselves), that is a big gain for everyone. In our 2009 report *Learning Through Life* (Schuller/Watson 2009) we calculated that this would yield a public benefit of some £40 million annually.

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»Monetary figures attract attention!«

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Similarly in respect of crime and prisons: we calculated that even if learning has only a very modest effect on whether or not offenders will reoffend, it could still save huge amounts: £325 million in prison costs alone if it reduces reoffending by just 2.5 percent. And this leaves out the huge costs to the families of offenders – to say nothing of the victims of their crime. So I think we should aim at many more cost-benefit analyses (we called them »public value analyses«) which are realistic – i.e. they do not overclaim for learning, and are based on transparent and reasonable assumptions about the effects of learning. If nothing else, these are powerful ways of getting a public debate going – monetary figures attract attention!

These public value analyses need to be done rigorously, but we do not necessarily need to accept conventional econometric techniques for them. This is an important area where a range of different approaches are needed, including how to bring in the experience of practitioners, and of course the learners themselves.

**DIE:** *The OECD – its main task is to promote economic prosperity – carried out a project called *Measuring the Social Outcomes of Learning (SOL)*. Does this mean that »social outcomes« are now as important as other economic indicators such as labour market income or economic growth?*

**Schuller:** As I've said earlier, I think this is a very important step forward. It

would be unrealistic to think that social outcomes are now given equal weight, so the strict answer to the question is »no«. But in a broad political context there is now a real shift away from narrow conventional frameworks for measuring progress. The key text on this is the Sen/Stiglitz/Fitoussi report for President Sarkozy, on *The Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*. I would urge anyone interested in the issue to read this at <http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/en/index.htm> - there is a short version! It brings in environmental issues, but also gives a strong role to education as a key dimension of social progress. It is written by a very authoritative group of social scientists, including several economics Nobel Prize winners, and I think will come to be seen as a seminal text of the 21st century.

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»Education as a key dimension of social progress!«

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**DIE:** *In Germany there is increasing pressure on those sectors of adult education not directly linked to »employability« or »business« Is the empirical validation of »benefits of lifelong learning« a strategy designed to legitimize non-vocational training?*

**Schuller:** In part, yes. I think it's quite legitimate to make the case for the benefits of non-vocational training with the goal of defending that part of the service. But in a sense we should be getting beyond the vocational/non-vocational distinction, and looking at other ways in which learning of different kinds can be evaluated.

Of course there will always be some kinds of learning which are more obviously likely to be relevant to the labour market. But the key issue is about balance and breadth, both for an individual and for society as a whole. In the UK, for instance, we depend quite heavily on the so-called »creative industries« as an important part of our economies, and the most important

influences in this sector have often not been trained in strictly »vocational« programmes.

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»International comparisons can be particularly illuminating«

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This is an area, by the way, where international comparisons can be particularly illuminating. We can look at what works in different countries as far as preparing people for their professional lives, and at how they can acquire »flexibility«. German vocational training is renowned for its excellence; but how far is that dependent also on the German employment system – i.e. it's not only a matter of the training itself, but of the way careers are organized and material and symbolic rewards distributed. There is a danger that more attention to outcomes of learning will lead to a narrow focus on income effects, simply because data on these is more easily available.

**DIE:** *What, then, is the nature of the relationship between »human capital«, »competencies« and benefits? What is to be understood by those terms?*

**Schuller:** In »The Benefits of Learning« (Schuller et al. 2004), we had a go at proposing a »three capitals« framework: human capital, social capital and identity capital. We stressed that outcomes are a function of the interaction of these, and not a direct linear result of human capital alone. I have nothing against human capital as a concept, but it has been used too narrowly and subjected to gross distortions by some analysts who are prisoners of their own techniques, and fail completely to address the complexities of the processes by which learning produces effects. I would urge all of those involved in producing or reading research to continually ask, how well does the methodology match the reality?

»Competence« is a difficult word – so obvious in one sense, so hard to pin down. I'm particularly interested in why women's competences are not

properly recognized in the labour market. Women now outperform men in almost every OECD country in almost every subject and at almost every level, in terms of educational qualifications. They take part more in training and in adult education generally. But this is not reflected in their careers and earnings. This is what I call the »Paula Principle« – that women stay below their level of competence. But it raises questions about why some competences are recognized by employers – and by society – more fully than others. It is a social, even a political process, and we need to remember that. It's not just a technical matter.

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»Lifelong learning can – indeed probably does – increase rather than reduce inequalities«

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**DIE:** Sometimes »crime prevention« is seen as a benefit of lifelong learning. But isn't it also possible that »learning« eventually creates »smarter« criminals? In other words, are there any negative outcomes of lifelong learning we have to be aware of?

**Schuller:** Yes indeed! Crime is one example. A particularly important and difficult issue is that of equality and inequality. Lifelong learning can – indeed probably does - increase rather than reduce inequalities, since it is those with more education who tend to take part more in lifelong learning. So it is arguable that lifelong learning continues to promote widening inequalities. I do not think lifelong learning should be judged only on its distributional impact, but this is a serious issue, and a challenge to those of us who believe it should be promoting equality. It challenges us to think of different financing mechanisms, and for ways of changing the balance of opportunity.

**DIE:** Are the individual benefits of lifelong learning distributed equally in society?

**Schuller:** The answer to this question is definitely no. I've said something

about this earlier on. Whilst there is a strong thread of egalitarian ideology in the adult education movement, the reality is often different. In the OECD work on social outcomes, we drew an important distinction between absolute and relative effects of learning. Absolute effects are those such as when improved health follows directly for the individual from some form of learning; this is the kind of simple benefit that we like to contemplate. But relative (or positional) effects occur when one person gains from their learning but only at the expense of someone else: what the learning does is arrange the order of people in the queue for benefits. Here we have a zero-sum game, where one person's benefit is another's loss. This happens, I suspect, more often than we think.

**DIE:** Nevertheless adult education can diminish inequalities in society and hence contribute both to individual and social benefits?

**Schuller:** Yes! It is increasingly important as most Western societies are becoming more and more unequal, led by the US and the UK. We have reached incredible levels of disparity of earnings and wealth, unsustainably so. The lesson for adult education is not that we should work to provide equal opportunities for everyone to become one of the select few at the top. Rather it is that we should have a much better understanding and agreement on what is a reasonable level of total inequality. We should seek some kind of clearer social moral consensus on the limits of inequality. Lifelong learning has a role in this – not so much in people directly learning about inequality as such, but in building stronger links across different segments of society, countering the tendencies towards fragmentation, where people meet only others who are like them and share their attitudes and values.

**DIE:** Do we see any intergenerational effects? For example, are parents who experienced the benefits of lifelong

learning likely to have better educated children?

**Schuller:** I believe this is a crucial issue. If we go back to the issue of crime and offenders, there is a particularly shocking statistic which emerged in the course of our Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning, where »Crime and Lifelong Learning« was one of our major themes: two out of three of boys with a father in prison will go to prison themselves. This is the most appalling figure, which shows how weighted the system is against some parts of our population. There are several inspirational projects in the UK and elsewhere which seek to help prisoners learn how to communicate with their families, so they can stay in touch with them and maintain positive relationships – and so that boys will not either lose touch with their fathers or grow up with the wrong role model as a father.

**DIE:** Are there different benefits within different age cohorts?

**Schuller:** This question aims the whole pattern of the life course. The life course is changing shape, mainly because of the ageing of our populations. There is no specific type of learning which is always appropriate to a specific stage of the life course. But first of all we are gradually becoming aware that the way our education system is designed is simply not appropriate for the way young people and adults develop and grow. We need to gather information much more systematically about how learning potential varies across the life course. At the same time, we know the truth of that old cliché, it's never too late to learn. It continually amazes and warms me to hear stories of adults who have come into learning after decades away, and the difference it makes to their lives.

**DIE:** Which benefits can be observed when we think about learning at an older age?

**Schuller:** I've referred above to health as a very major area where learning

produces mental and physical benefits. Social integration is crucial. Then we are mostly going to have to work longer, and so access to vocational training opportunities in later life is very important – too much of the debate is only around what age pensions should start. But if by »older« you mean the fourth age – the stage that in Learning Through Life we defined as starting roughly around the age of 75, when many people's level of independence drops - then there is a different set of issues.

You have given me the opportunity to express myself on a topic which I believe should be given a far higher profile, but which is repressed by one of our most profound taboos: how to manage our own deaths. I mean the whole process leading up to death: the organizational aspects, the issues to do with personal and family relationships, but above all the actual process of dying. I am 64, with a mother aged 96, and my generation is the first to have seen a very widespread phenomenon of the previous generation living into major dependence. We have no excuse for not confronting this as an issue which will occur for us; and those of us involved in adult learning must surely think hard about what we think learning has to offer, for us as individuals and for society. How do we learn to manage death, and what part can learning play in this? This is my challenge to us!

**DIE:** *How can politicians contribute to enhancing the benefits of lifelong learning? What has to be done at the political level in the future?*

Schuller: In my experience, in the UK and in OECD, the main way in which politicians can contribute is in providing and maintaining a more strategic overall vision for lifelong learning. That means putting in front of people the idea of learning throughout their lives, challenging assumptions about when learning is or is not appropriate, encouraging experimentation and evaluation – and leading by example. I would love

to see politicians tell us more about how they see themselves as lifelong learners.

**DIE:** *Thank you very much!*

#### Literatur

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