

Enterprise and Lifelong Learning

Looking to Learn: Investigating the Motivations to Learn and the Barriers Faced by Adults Wishing to Undertake Part-Time Study

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This project was designed to enhance the evidence base regarding adult participation in learning. Literature on participation from 1990-2005 was reviewed, and a model for understanding participation decisions was developed.

Main Findings

- There is a need for a clear framework concerning the meaning of the Learning Society, particularly in terms of the kinds of participation in order to determine what is an acceptable level and form of participation.
- Barriers and motivations are not directly linked, and need to be treated differently. It may be important to conceptualise the two areas separately when developing policy to promote learning.
- Basic needs for income, housing, and so on need to be satisfied before people will be motivated to learn.
- Vocational reasons for learning, such as improving or gaining employment, are consistently identified by learners as the dominant motivation for getting involved in learning.
- In order to engage in learning, research suggests that individuals need some protection from financial risk, flexible programming of learning provision, peer and academic support, and a clear understanding of the benefits of learning.
- Factors such as social class and age have an impact on participation decisions that will prove hard to modify in the short to medium term through policy development. These factors are often to do with cultural attitudes towards learning rather than concrete aspects of access to learning.
- Policy frameworks around learning often reflect traditional forms of education, with discrete types of provision for different groups of people and strong boundaries between them. It may well be beneficial for policymakers to address these frameworks.
- There is a need for further research on how different factors interact with different groups of learners, and the mechanisms of that interaction.

Background to the research

The growing interest in lifelong learning over the past twenty years has placed more emphasis than ever before on questions of why adults choose to participate, or not participate, in education. Part-time learning is a particularly important area to consider as it may act as a critical pathway to learning for people who have historically been excluded from education. For the purposes of this discussion, participation in learning means being involved in an activity leading to new information or understanding, either alone or in an organised setting.

This study was conducted by Dr. Ralf St.Clair of the Centre for Research and Development in Adult and Lifelong Learning, Department of Adult and Continuing Education, University of Glasgow on behalf of the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department of the Scottish Executive. There were three research questions:

1. What motivates adult learners to take up learning opportunities?
2. Can we distinguish between the relative importance of interest in the subject/enjoyment of learning as opposed to more instrumental reasons (related to jobs for example)?
3. How do these vary for different sectors of the population?

The study develops a model of participation in adult learning based on the theories of Maslow and Hertzberg. The model suggests that participation in learning is not a universal activity that is inevitable once certain barriers are removed. Instead, it is the result of basic needs being fulfilled, certain factors being satisfied, and the presence of a specific motivation for learning. In the context of this study it is important to recognise that only some of these factors may be affected by policy frameworks.

The study discusses factors that are relevant to participation by certain under-represented groups of adults in non-formal and formal education. The lack of available data makes the analysis more complex than would otherwise be the case, but throughout the document the aim is to assist policymakers to think through issues central to policy designed to support participation.

Most of studies identify factors associated with educational participation without analysing why those factors matter. For example, social class background predicts educational engagement very well, but there is little further research on why it has the effect it does. In this study, the author has created a theoretical model allowing the specific effects of different factors for different groups to be discussed.

There are a number of questions that could helpfully be addressed at policy level to assist with understanding lifelong learning. These include what levels of participation are reasonable to expect in a learning society, what standard measures should be used to define and capture participation, and whether there are priority areas within lifelong learning. There is a need to avoid the assumption that everybody should be learning all the time, and that some participation must lead to more participation.

Findings and recommendations

The level of participation in learning, as identified by adult survey respondents, has remained steady at around 40% for many decades. Since different ways of measuring participation have had little effect upon this figure, a number of questions arise. If the broad measures used in national surveys are only showing this level of learning, it challenges the idea that learning is a central human activity. More likely, however, it shows that there are problems with how people identify and think about learning.

Many of the central factors in decision making about participation are difficult to affect directly through policy because they are highly subjective, rooted in long-term experience, and based in values or culture. For example an individual's belief that they are too old to learn can be seen as a personal judgement reflecting what they have heard throughout their life and their cultural values surrounding learning. This individual is unlikely to participate in learning however easy access is made by policy initiatives.

Research shows consistently that the dominant reasons for educational participation tend to be vocational, but learning for other reasons is also valuable, and helps to create a culture where learning is the norm. While it is difficult for policy to increase motivation to learn, vocational learning is one area where it could potentially make a difference. Examples could include tax incentives for employers and employees to encourage workers to take part in learning activities based within and outside the workplace.

Learners may not distinguish between interest and instrumental reasons for participating in education. Computer classes, for example, may be taken for curiosity but may also enhance the individual's employability. Once the learner's basic needs are met, they are likely to be most motivated by learning which is both interesting and beneficial economically. It may be helpful to avoid thinking about education for interest separately from education for employment; in many cases, the same learning will address both outcomes.

If the learner's basic needs (such as employment income or an equivalent) are not met, then it is more likely that

educational participation for purely instrumental purposes will be considered. Unemployed people, for example, may be more willing to participate in learning entirely focused on employment outcomes than people who are already employed but considering a career change. It is necessary to be careful to ensure that groups such as unemployed people do not end up with less desirable learning opportunities because they are motivated to participate by the concrete outcomes.

The factors affecting the decision to participate in education was analysed for a number of key under-represented groups. Due to lack of specific data this analysis relies on theoretical generalisation, meaning that a model for participation was developed and used to demonstrate which factors might be most important for the particular group being discussed. This approach is not as reliable as evidence-based information on each group, but suggests that generally people will participate in learning when there is:

- Some protection from financial risk
- Flexible provision
- Peer and academic support for learners
- Clear information about how learning can benefit the learner

One of the challenges to understanding lifelong learning is that the structures, policies, and measures used to frame

and analyse learning are left over from the previous era of highly divided and exclusive education. They tend to create rigid boundaries between formal and informal education, for example, or between full-time and part-time participation. It would be helpful for adult participation in learning if the procedures for entry into learning, the availability of funding, and other practical factors were as seamless and consistent as possible. If the central principle of the system and the policies supporting it is to make individual learning as accessible as possible then the financial structures and general design of provision must reflect this principle. This does not mean that rigour or concerns with excellence must be downplayed, but it does mean that learners should be able to move more easily through and between learning opportunities.

There is a need for more empirical research to identify the particular factors influencing the participation decisions of specific groups of people, an area about which data is lacking. In particular, it would be useful to know more about the mechanisms by which factors such as social class and age affect attitudes to learning and learners' aspirations.

This research suggests that participation is a complex subject with social and psychological aspects. Developing a framework for Scotland as a learning society requires careful consideration of what it is desired to achieve and the most appropriate policy interventions to support these developments.

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The report “Looking to Learn: Investigating the Motivations to Learn and the Barriers Faced by Adults Wishing to Undertake Part-Time Study”, which is summarised in this research findings is a web only document and is available on the Social Research website at www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch

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