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TOWARDS A LIFELONG LEARNING SOCIETY IN EUROPE: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Sub-project 3: Survey of adult returners to further and higher education in Scotland

This briefing reports on a survey that was undertaken during March and December 2007 and forms part of a Sixth Framework European project entitled: *Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Education System*. The main aim of the survey was to investigate attitudes, motivation and satisfaction among learners and to gain contextual data about the institutions these learners attended. It consisted of two questionnaires: one for adult learners and one for the institutions that these learners were attending. The full report (<http://www.creid.ed.ac.uk/projects.html#I2010>) includes a literature review, background information on policy, participation rates and labour market in relation to participation in education in addition to the findings of the survey.

ISCED levels

As the survey was part of a European comparative study, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels were used for some of the analysis. A comparison between ISCED levels and the main Scottish qualifications are shown below.

Table 1: ISCED level of Scottish qualifications based on National Education Attainment Classification comparison with EU LFS coding (DfES)

ISCED 1-2	ISCED 3	ISCED 4	ISCED 5	ISCED 6
Basic skills	Standard Grade, Highers or equivalent, SVQ 1-3	Access to HE	HNC/D, Undergraduate, Postgraduate or equivalent, SVQ 4 and 5	PhD

Main findings – learners:

- The majority of learners from all levels had positive attitudes to adult learning and education. The main statistically significant differences were in relation to dislike of studying and being bored with teachers and classes. Here, learners on ISCED level 2 courses were more likely to say they were 'fed up' with teachers and that they disliked studying.
- Learners who lacked social contact elsewhere valued the social aspect of learning to a greater extent than those with social networks, and women were generally more positive about learning than men.
- Getting a job was a more important reason for learning for those on ISCED level 3 and 5 courses than for those on level 2 and 4. The latter two groups were more likely to cite personal reasons for learning.
- Social motives were more important for women than for men and learners on basic level courses were more likely to use learning as a way of alleviating boredom and getting a break from routine.
- Generally those studying level 5 courses were more interested in enhancing their qualifications in order to boost their future earning power and promotion prospects, compared with lower level learners. This group was also most likely to be in work and be required to do the course as part of their employment.
- Type of study programme impacted on motivation but participation in particular programmes was strongly influenced by gender. Women were more likely to stress social motives for learning and they were also more likely to enrol on courses in health and welfare and education; men were more likely to enrol on engineering programmes.
- Employer support for learning was low but those at higher levels were most likely to be supported.

- The majority of learners were confident that they would be able to complete the course and they felt that they had few problems when engaging with learning. Finance and insufficient time to study were the most common problems, identified by around one third of the learners, and most students were satisfied with their course, its organisation and progress.

There were a number of significant differences between learners at different levels in relation to the teaching and learning process. The main ones were:

- Learners at ISCED level 2 were significantly more likely to state that their course afforded opportunities to make new friends, followed by those at ISCED level 4. They also felt that students enjoyed the course and enjoyed working together. This group of learners were also most likely to state they had choice in assignments and that they were able to question course requirements. In contrast to this degree of choice, level 2 learners indicated that they had to do things according to guidance from the teacher.
- Students at level 5 were least likely to ask questions of their teacher and to feel that their teacher was making every effort to help them, but were most likely to say there was a strong focus on course tasks and that the course offered them opportunities to draw on their experiences and relate it to their learning.
- Students at level 2 and 3 were most likely to say that students would achieve their learning goals and those at level 2 and 4 were most likely to feel that the course was well organised. Students at level 4 were most likely to say that the course had a clear sense of direction.

Main findings – institutions:

Three different types of institutions participated: further education colleges, higher education institutions and voluntary/local authority organisations.

- All institutions provided staff development, had at least annual staff performance reviews and were subject to some form of external scrutiny.
- The institutions also stated that they had a range of measures for attracting disadvantaged or non-traditional learners. In addition, all had support mechanisms in place for students. This included financial support, grants and allowances and also study support.
- Whilst some of the courses in the further and higher education institutions had entry requirements, all the institutions offered APL and APEL to adult (mature) learners. However, the extent to which students could make use of APL and APEL seemed to vary between institutions. The two voluntary organisations and the local authority community learning did not require any entry qualifications for their courses.
- The local authority and one of the voluntary organisations offered only part-time learning, the others offered both full-time and part-time. In addition, ten of the institutions offered distance learning. Some of this included online learning through a virtual learning environment.
- Learners in voluntary sector and local authority organisations were most likely to feel respected by their tutor and most likely to feel that the course was well organised. There was no difference between the institutions in terms of task focus – the majority in all institutions felt that this was the case on their course.
- There were no differences between students in different types of institutions and their confidence in being able to complete the course or between students in different types of institutions and the problems that they experienced. There was a suggestion, though small numbers did not allow for statistical analysis, that students on higher education course were less satisfied with their course than students in the other types of institutions.
- Students whose course had a high level of online activity were significantly less likely to be satisfied with the learning climate in the institution. However, it is clear from the additional comments provided by these students that if they could not study online, they would not be able to study at all. Clearly then, online provision offers an important alternative provision for students who cannot attend college or university.

Background

The survey reported on here forms part of a Sixth Framework funded European project entitled: *Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Education System* (www.lll2010.tlu.ee). The project consists of five subprojects and the survey constitutes subproject 3. The survey included learners at all levels from ISCED level 1 to 5 and the key criterion for inclusion in the survey was that a learner should have had a break from his/her initial formal education for at least two years. A key aim of the overall project was to examine the contribution of the education system to lifelong learning in Europe.

Educational institutions are nowadays expected to play a role in reducing inequality in participation in order to foster social inclusion. Data were therefore gathered from the institutions to examine the extent to which their policies and practices included stimulating participation in lifelong learning by adult learners. In order to contextualise the data within country practices macro level data is included in the report.

Scottish lifelong learning policy reflects the key objectives of the EU Lisbon strategy. There have been a range of policies and strategies in relation to community learning and development, adult literacy and numeracy and work-based learning. The first lifelong learning strategy was published in 2003 and the lifelong learning skill strategy in 2007. The new SNP administration which took over in 2007 has changed the focus of lifelong learning from being mainly post-compulsory to encompassing all aspects of education from early years to post-compulsory. Whilst there have been surveys of students in both higher and further education they do not always combine attitudes, motives and experiences in such a way that it can be linked to demographics and socio-economic status. This survey therefore builds on other surveys and provides data for a comparative study across Europe by using the same survey instruments as those of partners in 11 other European countries.

The Aims of the Survey

- To gain greater understanding of the adult learners' perspective on formal provision of lifelong learning
- To explore causes of unequal participation with a particular focus on low-skilled and low literate adult learners

Research Methods

Two separate surveys were used: one for learners and one for the institutions that the learners attended. The institutional questionnaire was adapted for each individual institution and factual information, e.g. student numbers, was gathered through desk based research using web based resources.

The learner survey was administered through a group survey in class, except in a small number of cases where it was done face to face on a one-to-one basis. A small number of surveys were administered online for students engaged in online learning only. Information for the institutional survey at the level of the tutor was gathered when administering the survey to the class. The remainder of the institutional survey was administered via email.

Findings

Policy and literature review

Since 1999 there has been an increase in students in both further and higher education, though there has been some fluctuation during this period. For adult learners, women outnumber men in both higher and further education; non-white ethnic minorities account for around 4% of students

in further education and 7% in higher education. The higher figure in HE is likely to be due to post-graduate overseas students rather than domiciled non-white ethnic minority students. In relation to non-formal learning and training, younger workers and women (except those under 24) are most likely to receive training. Public sector workers, employees in larger workplaces and those with higher qualifications are also most likely to engage in further learning and training.

Labour market policy is UK wide and it has adopted an active labour market approach with benefits being tied to the need to actively seek work or engage in training for work. Trade union density has decreased and public sector workers are more likely to be union members than those in the private sector.

There is considerable debate in the academic literature about the value of the concept of lifelong learning; Field argues for its use as he feels it reflects changes in society in relation to acquisition of skills and training. However, he also cautions that it may become a tool for social control (Field, 2006). Coffield (1999) warns against its use as a means of solving social problems and Swedish writers Ahl (2006) and Fejes (2006) raise concerns about non-learners becoming labelled as deficient because they do not take part in learning. Research on motivation draws on both psychological concepts which examine individual attributes which contribute to participation (e.g. Boshier, 1991) and sociological perspectives which examine participation in learning drawing on structure and agency (e.g. Evans, 2002). Research using large scale surveys to examine inequality focusing on income inequality suggests that the middle classes have been the main beneficiaries of the expansion of higher education (e.g. Blanden, et al, 2005).

The learners

A total of 1021 adult learners who had been out of their initial formal education for at least two years participated in the survey. They came from seventeen different institutions, with the majority based in one of the eleven participating FE colleges.

The majority of learners participating were women and most were aged between 18 and 47. Older learners were more likely to be doing the basic level courses and most of the learners were Scottish or British with English as their first language. The most common courses were those in social science, business and law and health and welfare. These accounted for over half the learners. Around 8% of learners had no previous formal qualification and 62% had at least ISCED level 3. Around 30% had ISCED level 5 qualifications; however, most of these were at sub-degree level (HNC or HND). Most (57%) classed themselves as students with some of these having a part-time job.

The majority of students viewed adult learning positively, although a small number of learners at ISCED level 2 were slightly less positive. This may reflect earlier negative experiences rather than their current experience as they reported higher levels of satisfaction in relation to their current course than some of the learners on higher level courses.

The motives for engaging with learning varied according to level of the course. Those on level 2 and 4 were more likely to be motivated by personal reasons, those on level 3 and 5 for job related reasons. Women were more likely to cite social capital motives than men; however, there was also a split with those on higher level courses, irrespective of gender more likely to focus on human capital aspects of further education and learning. Those on lower level courses were more likely to cite external pressures for engaging with learning, in spite of this, they were also more likely to be satisfied with their current learning experience. Employer support, although generally low, was more likely to be provided to those on high level courses.

Most of the students were confident that they would complete the course. Those that indicated they had problems stated that these were most likely to be in relation to finance, lack of study time and, in a smaller number of cases, due to family problems.

In relation to the teaching and learning process of the current course, learners at levels 2 and 4 were most likely to say that they enjoyed the course and that it afforded opportunities to make new friends. Those at level 5 were more likely to say that they had limited opportunities to ask questions but felt more so than those at other levels that there was a strong focus on course tasks and that they could draw on their own experiences and relate it to their learning. These responses are likely to have been influenced by the general organisation of the course as those on basic level courses were more likely to be in smaller groups and thus have greater access to their lecturer. Observations during the administration of the survey showed that those in voluntary/local authority organisations were in the most informal setting.

The institutions

The institutions varied in terms of the level of the course provision with HE institutions offering ISCED level 5 and 6 courses, FE colleges provided a wide range from basic skills up to and including ISCED level 5 and the voluntary/local authority provision focusing on ISCED level 2 and 3. All of the institutions had a range of measures in place to widen participation but voluntary/local authority organisations had the greatest focus on policies aimed at widening participation, followed by further education colleges with HE institution being least geared towards inclusion. This was reflected in the previous level of qualifications of their students; those with no previous qualification were either in voluntary/local authority organisations or in further education. Whilst the HE and FE institutions were the most flexible in terms of different modes of study, the most flexible mode – online learning – was not necessarily the most appreciated. Students recognised that they might not be able to study without this flexibility, but also that it was more difficult and afforded fewer opportunities to engage with other students. Generally, FE and HE have more support mechanisms in place than voluntary/local authority organisations; however, some of the support offered, such as preparatory programme and Access courses, are not relevant in voluntary/local authority organisations as their mission is to provide such opportunities for all of their learners. They also do not have the funding to provide accommodation or sports facilities.

Emerging issues

We identified four main issues from these findings:

- Tensions between individual choice and external pressure to engage with learning
- Lack of clarity in relation to portability and progression for learners, especially those on lower level courses
- The differences between learners on lower and higher level courses in terms of social and human capital orientation and the potential impact that this may have on their ability to enhance their opportunities in other areas of life such as employment
- The differences in funding mechanisms between further and higher education institutions and voluntary/local authority organisations who cater for the most vulnerable learners

In relation to the first issue, the findings show a relationship between the level of a learner's previous qualification and individual choice as to whether to engage with learning or not. Our findings suggest that learners with low/no previous qualifications were most likely to have experienced some form of external pressure to engage with learning. This, in one sense, is in contrast with the need to allow learners autonomy and individual choice. However, those with no previous qualifications were generally highly satisfied with their current teaching and learning experience which suggests that external encouragement is not always negative. It is also worth noting that this group may have less access to information about learning opportunities. According to the National Adult Learning

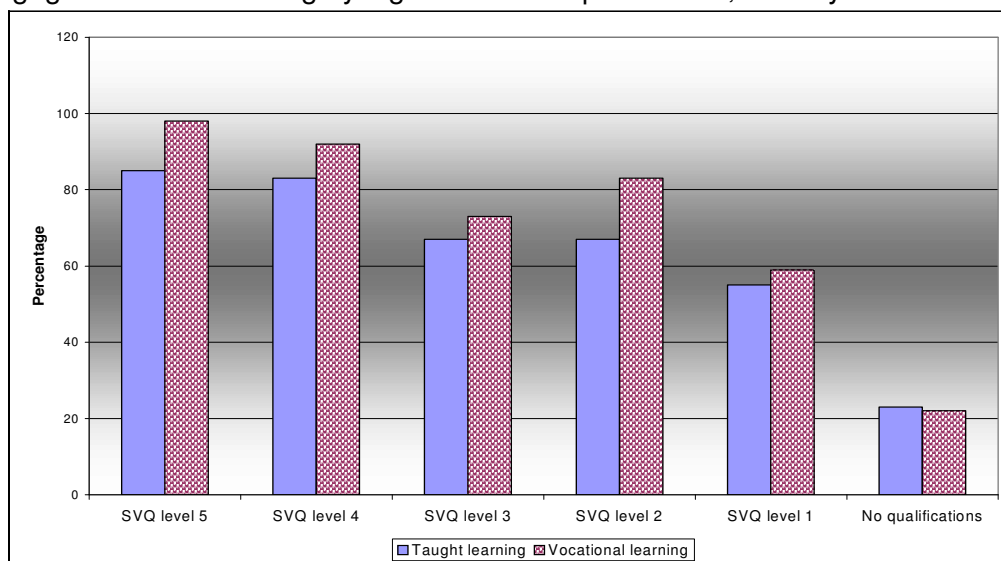
Survey (Scotland) (Ormston, et al, 2007) learners are more likely to have received information about learning than non-learners and those with higher qualifications are more likely to have received information than those with low/no qualifications. Ormston et al also noted that employers were the most commonly cited source of information. As the learners with low/no previous qualifications in the survey were least likely to be in employment it may be that additional routes for provision of information about learning should be considered.

The second issue relates to the ability of learners to achieve in such a way that they can use their qualification as a means to improving their standing in the labour market. It is clear that not all learners are engaging in learning in order to gain employment; however, it is important that those that are, can gain qualifications that allow them to progress. Learners in voluntary/local authority organisations were most satisfied with the process of learning but it is not clear what progression routes were available to them and how they would cope in a different setting, for example, a further education college. Other research (Gallacher et al, 2007) has indicated that some learners have difficulties in moving out of the 'comfort zone' of a particular setting. The way that progression is managed is clearly an issue for policymakers who wish to make use of education as a means of social mobility.

Our third point relates to the second one but focuses on the learners at level 5. It is clear from the data that learners on higher level courses, mainly level 5, were considerably more focused on economic gains and returns from learning in relation to the labour market. They were most likely to be in employment and thus to get support from their employers. In terms of the teaching and learning process, they were not as satisfied with the social aspects of the course, or the extent to which it was orientated to their needs, suggesting that they were more demanding educational consumers. However, students at level 5 were most likely to say there was a strong focus on course tasks and that the course offered them opportunities to draw on their own experience and relate it to their learning.

It is evident that students who are already qualified to a high level are more likely to engage in further learning than those with lower levels of initial qualifications (see figure 1, which draws on the National Adult Education Survey (Scotland) 2005 (Ormston, et al, 2005). Overall, learners at this level appeared to be focused on the human capital gains of undertaking an additional course, but were also confident enough to be critical of particular aspects of course delivery, rather than accepting passively what was on offer.

Figure 1: Engagement with learning by highest level of qualification, 16-69 year olds



Source: Ormston et al 2005

Finally, the success of voluntary/local authority organisations in making satisfying provision for those with previous low qualifications is clearly of importance. Funding for these organisations differ from that of further and higher education. Their funding is often more short-term and sometimes limited to specific projects. This can make it more difficult to make more long-term planning and securing provision for those that are most vulnerable and in need of high quality learning opportunities. Ensuring stability in funding for these organisations so that they can continue to provide highly valued learning experiences and also to develop opportunities for transition into higher level learning opportunities is of importance.

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