

**Measures to combat educational disadvantage:  
A European consultation symposium December 2011**

Rapporteur Report

**Workshop 3: Hidden barriers in the education of adult learners**

Rapporteur: Professor Catherine Casey

**Introduction**

Workshop 3 addressed questions in regard to barriers that inhibit adult participation in learning, especially VET and various forms of informal learning processes. The twenty participants came from various member state backgrounds and interests in adult learning and VET. That diversity included representation from the concerns of adults with specific disadvantages, including people with physical or other impairments to learning, migrating or travelling groups, prisoners, and marginalised urban dwellers. It included academic and social researchers in education and related social fields in labour markets and employment studies. The speaker, Professor James Wickham, provided a comprehensive overview of social and economic conditions and labour market developments in which adult and lifelong learning and VET occurs.

Participants in the workshop recognised that the policy context in which our discussion took place is that of Europe 2020. Taking up the aspirations of Europe 2020, we considered that 'smart growth' has very rich potential for comprehensive development.

- The term 'smart' invites wider and deeper conceptions of education, learning, knowledge and capability. While it often implies a worldliness and a savvy and efficient course of action, which may be regarded as overly economic and instrumental, smart can also readily imply a creative and innovative orientation that can be directed toward diverse social and economic aspirations. Similarly,
- 'growth' invites imaginative thinking on enduring aspects of human, social, cultural and economic development that is by no means confined to accumulation of goods or expansion of a crude measure of size. Growth in capacities for rich human development is profoundly related to education and learning.

**Lifelong learning**

The education of adult learners can be variously understood by different stakeholders. For many academics and practitioners in the field, the term lifelong learning is preferred. Lifelong learning is a concept that embraces learning throughout the life course. It includes formal education and training (E&T) and other forms of formal and informal learning. Many of the barriers to the continuing learning of adults can be found in earlier poor experiences of formal education and schooling and family disadvantage for some individuals and population groups.

- Regarding adult education and learning as part of lifelong learning encourages a

fuller understanding of the possibilities as well as the obstructions in formal and informal programmes of learning for adult populations, especially disadvantaged groups.

Practices across Member States in regard to lifelong or adult education may express different emphases and retain the term adult education for practical organizational and funding purposes. Adult education can be seen as a particular aspect of education and lifelong learning which focuses on formal learning and qualification systems, including post-compulsory education and training in VET systems.

- Lifelong learning is a social and cultural right of citizens in Europe.
- Education and learning are about personal, cultural and social development just as they are about economic objectives and job skills.
- Education and learning policies face the imperatives, and challenges, of pursuing both sets of learning objectives together.

### Hidden barriers

A social analysis of the contemporary context of adult and lifelong learning raises many and considerable barriers to lifelong learning and VET participation for sectors of the population. It is evidently the case that more people participate in post-compulsory education and training across the EU than ever, but there are also groups who have become more disadvantaged and apparently excluded from participation in expanded E&T systems in the present decades. In sum, there are serious unintended, unfavourable consequences of a much emphasised policy pursuit of highly competitive knowledge-based economies in the EU in recent decades. The unfavourable effects of that high emphasis affect accumulations of advantage and disadvantage. It is cross-generational.

Main hidden barriers include:

- Effects of an over-emphasis on utilitarian and instrumentalist policy approaches to education and learning.
  - Too much emphasis on economic and labour market outcomes of E&T and individual competitiveness results in many disadvantaged groups failing to achieve. When education and learning opportunities focus solely on job oriented skills training, disadvantaged groups have fewer opportunities to gain wider learning (such as cultural, sporting, civic) which can positively influence their life chances in other domains. Many people from disadvantaged conditions experience repeated failure to win in competition for social and educational goods which are typically won by the already advantaged. They are vulnerable to accumulation of disadvantages.
- Effects of historical accumulation of disadvantages.
  - These frequently include the compounding of individuals', families', groups', negative experiences in formal E&T and labour market vulnerabilities. Researchers and practitioners observe patterns of 'learned

helplessness' among people repeatedly exposed to failure. It can result in psychological reluctance to learn, fear of renewed effort, resistance to new opportunities to learning provided by formal institutional providers. It can result in social exclusion and hostilities and cultures of cynicism.

- Effects of persistent prejudices, cultural fears, blocked communication
  - Disadvantaged adults continue to experience social and cultural prejudice and status inferiorisation because of their visible, or assumed, characteristics of disadvantage. This includes physically disabled adults, ethnic or social class, migrant, linguistic or religious characteristics.
  
- Reluctance or resistance on the part of established educational institutions to change
  - toward more flexible, learner-centered learning and fuller recognition of learner diversity and multiple needs. Formal educational institutions frequently resist providing multiple points of entry and re-entry and 'second-chance' opportunities. Many education institutions focus on profitability more than provision of learning and human development. 'Drop-outs' are created by educational institutions.
  
- Effects of disjuncture and contradictions in policies in regard to E&T and labour market dynamics.
  - Research shows that employers and organizations behave in ways that often do not utilise the skills provided by education systems and held by workers and school leavers. Despite high policy encouragement of learning and skill development at work, employer and organizational behaviour can undermine, obstruct or delimit that learning to certain sectors of workers and exclude others. This situation makes some workers and skill sets highly vulnerable to precariousness. It exposes a high need for policy and practical attention to firm and organizational learning.
  
- Effects of low synergies between sectors of high learning need.
  - Low synergies and gaps between business firm and organizational levels of learning, professional formation, worker education, and providers of E&T for disadvantaged groups results in skills mismatching, lack of job quality (which increases turnover and worker vulnerability) and disjuncture between expectations and opportunities.
  
- Lack of recognition of employers' roles in creating poor quality jobs.
  - Employers create poor quality jobs, not workers. Sectors of low or medium skilled jobs remain economically viable. They are not inherently poor quality or temporary. Responsibility for their quality and decent esteem of the workers performing these jobs lies with employers and consumers.

## Responses and Recommendations



- Knowledge can be viscous; it 'sticks' among those who possess it. But learning is contagious. Stimulating learning processes and knowledge transfers of creative and developmental learning is vital.
- Gaining and developing social and cultural capital, or capabilities, are vital for persons, families, communities, societies.
- Capabilities are diverse and that diversity is potent.

Adults continue to learn throughout the life course. Learning occurs through multiple sites, events, and processes. It occurs in formal and informal, deliberate and opportunistic ways. A focus of policymakers and E&T and lifelong learning providers on the stimulants and diverse opportunities for learning among adults of any social situation can encourage greater mobilisation of learning capacities and socially innovative outcomes.

- Addressing motivational issues

Awareness of the barriers outlined above broadens the sense of responsibility for motivational issues among disadvantaged learners. It is imperative to promote shared responsibility among business communities, worker actors, such as trade unions, education actors including institutions and professional educators, community groups and individuals and families.

- Motivations to learn can be diverse and spontaneous, as well as discipline and reward induced. But they are typically relational. Recognising the relational encouragement or discouragement of motivations to learn and participate is vital.
- Encouraging and stimulating lifelong learning emphasises the connections between early childhood learning and adult learning and life chances.
- As barriers to motivation to learn among disadvantaged groups include the results of employer and management behaviour, attention to management learning in recognition of barriers and prejudices is imperative.
- Mobilising linkages, forging synergies, encouraging spill-over of learning. Research and practitioner evidence shows that:
  - Learning for relationships and cohesion spills-over into employability
  - Learning for leisure cultural values spills-over into learning for other useful objectives, including labour market work
  - Learning for sport or physical activities spills-over into other learning, and social cohesion
  - Learning for health spills-over into other learning
- Showcasing examples of best practice:

- Identify successful practices, model them into communicable 'best practices' which encourages copying and adaptation of these successful approaches to different national or regional settings.

Examples of successful practices include:

- Partnership or collaborative programmes between existing, better established organizations such as universities, colleges, trade unions, sports bodies, civil society bodies, churches, charities which work with less organized, sporadic, or low commitment groups and individuals.
- Inter-generational learning. Inter-generational learning recognises that collective, relational dimensions of learning can motivate disadvantaged young people to learn and gain a wider range of skills and competencies. As a deliberate intervention strategy, it utilises diverse knowledge across the age groups, from infants to elders, for learning for plural objectives. For example, disadvantaged youth learning from elders their shared community history stimulated new learning, confidence and activities. Further intervention led to groups' recognition and respect for other groups' histories and potential higher toleration of diversity in society.
- Small scale and local programmes, with high involvement of local community stakeholders. Small scale can work more successfully than large scale; it mobilises local resources and fosters relationships which provide the social capital for further development. For example, linking learning parenting skills with character development and other cultural goods stimulates learning for economic objectives.
- Mentoring works
  - Utilising the practical skills and social and cultural capital of active retired persons in direct one-to-one mentoring with disadvantaged young people for plural learning objectives is shown to be successful. Examples in car mechanics, carpentry and catering.
  - Mentoring of similar-aged learners also works in social and job skills development.
  - Women in small scale businesses frequently form associations to support each other and mentor new entrant young small business women. High use of voluntary skills sharing. Demonstrated successes.
- At labour market policy level, 'flexicurity' practices work. Note Danish best practice case. Flexicurity refers to flexible firm and employment practices

while maintaining workers' economic security and transitions between employment and skills training. (see, e.g., <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/studies>). It is supported by employers and trade unions. It requires coordination and commitment.

### Summary Recommendations:

- Strengthen policy endorsement and emphasis on lifelong learning and capabilities development.
- Focus concrete policy attention on mobilising, dispersing and integrating available expertise among existing community groups, and citizens. Facilitate voluntary knowledge and skills transfer between active retirees and unemployed young people.
- Facilitate synergies between different types of institutions and groups already experienced in working with disadvantaged groups. For instance, foster collaborations between sports associations and environmental or religious groups for deliberate, diverse learning and learning spill-overs.
- Foster established bodies' toleration of different orientations and dynamics of the sporadic, loosely coordinated and lower commitment configurations in order to maximise opportunistic learning, stimulate learning connections, overcome inter-group prejudices and diminish barriers to further learning opportunities.
- Foster education of the educators, trainers and mentors.
- Encourage employers, educators, and policymakers to recognise and esteem diverse occupational skills, not just high-tech skills and knowledge-based, innovative production. Foster esteem of medium level skills, such as transportation, construction, retail, home-help jobs (and many others) which lower VET young people can attain. These jobs remain economically and socially viable.
- Encourage employers and businesses to recognise and address learning obstructions in workplaces and under-utilised skills and capabilities.
- Encourage greater social responsibility among corporate firms for wider community involvement and commitments.
- Encourage employers in industry sectors utilising low-skills productivity to ensure good quality of low-skilled jobs to avoid stigmatisation, low commitment and precariousness.

- Link flexicurity policies with education and lifelong learning policies.
- Encourage educational providers to utilise multimedia approaches, flexible design and provision, multiple entry points and recurrent participation in formal and informal lifelong learning.
- Strengthen emphasis on social and cultural capital and diverse capabilities formation; and lifelong learning's connections between early childhood learning and adult capabilities.
- Foster active interventions in inter-generational and community learning to break cycles of low participation, persistent prejudices, and recurrent disadvantage.

### Conclusion

Formal social science research evidence, as well as local anecdotal illustrations, attests to all the points made above. Moreover, many Commission and Council policy recommendations similarly confirm points made above. We stress that greater emphasis on corporate social responsibilities and business firm behaviour is needed. To that end, more 'organizational learning' is required.

More practical research on grassroots endeavours and experimental interventions among disadvantaged adults is needed.

The supportive conditions for enhancing participation in learning and improved life chances for disadvantaged adults are cross-sectional. Recognising and developing supportive conditions can be fostered through greater linkages between a richer, wiser, concept of economic policy, than one reduced to competitive instrumentalism, and education and social policies. They require strengthening of education institutions toward fostering multi-dimensional human development for all. They require stronger recognition of *lifelong* and *life-wide* learning. Emphasis on social responsibilities at all levels of society for personal, social and economic well-being is imperative.

---

Catherine Casey  
16 December 2011