Lifelong learning: learning because I want to or because I have to?

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The Scottish Lifelong Learning Strategy (Scottish Executive, 2003) and the EU Lisbon strategy emphasise the importance of lifelong learning for economic development as well as for social cohesion and personal development. However, the indicators measuring the success of the strategy suggest a focus on education that is relevant to employment and work training. This is also reflected in the funding mechanism for lifelong learning (see e.g. Scottish Executive, 2005).

Although lifelong learning as a concept has been described as a ‘broad, imprecise and “elastic” term’ (Johnston, 2000, cited in Rogers, 2006, pp.125), it is nonetheless in widespread use. It has also been accused of being ‘human resource development in drag’ (Boshier, 1998). However, Field (2006) argues that term is useful for a number of reasons; one of these is that it reflects changes in society that are evident in the ways that people nowadays acquire new skills and capacities but that it can become a mechanism for exclusion and social control. Field also notes that the discourse emphasises individual agency and that learners are expected to take control of their own learning. There is thus a tension between human capital, social capital and personal development. This paper draws on survey data to examine the role that human capital, social capital and personal development plays in motivating learners. It also considers the extent to which learners are compelled or chose to engage in learning.

The data comes from a recently conducted survey which forms part of an EU funded 6th framework project on lifelong learning. It was undertaken in 13 European countries.

Methodology

The Scottish survey included 1021 adult learners at different ISCED\(^1\) levels of study. Within the Scottish education system qualifications at ISCED level 2 are those that provide basic skills, ISCED level 3 encompass Standard and Higher grade qualifications, ISCED level 4 refers to Access courses and ISCED level 5 includes HNC/D, undergraduate and masters degrees.

Table 1 shows the location and number of learners at each level. As can be seen the majority came from further education colleges. An online version of the survey was used with students studying online.
Table 1: Location and level of study of the learners

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ISCED level</th>
<th>University/HEI</th>
<th>Further Education</th>
<th>Voluntary organisation</th>
<th>Local Authority CLD</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>355</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

There were 1021 respondents in the survey, the majority (73%) were women and most were born between 1960 and 1989 which meant they were aged between 18 and 47. There were more older learners doing basic skills (level 2) courses. Most considered themselves to be either Scottish or British and the majority spoke English as their first language.

Main reason for starting the course

The respondents were asked whether the main reason for learning was personal or job related. There was a statistically significant difference between ISCED levels 2 and 4 respectively and 3 and 5. Sixty percent at level 3 and 71% at level 5 said the motive was job related; only 22% at level 2 and 44% at level 4 said this was the case. Those undertaking ISCED level 2 courses were in the older age groups and this may be a reason for them stating that personal gain was the main motivator. However, those who were undertaking Access courses with the majority (75%) born after 1970 were also mainly motivated by personal reasons. There were no gender differences with just over half of men and women stating that the main reason for the course was job related.

Factors motivating learners to engage in learning

Participants’ motivations for undertaking the course were probed in greater detail. Eighteen statements were used and classified according to whether they were externally enforced or autonomous motivations and further divided into four types: social control, human capital, social capital and personal fulfilment. Examples of statements and their classifications are:

- ‘To learn more about a subject that interests me’ (autonomous/personal fulfilment).
- ‘Because my employer required me to’ (externally enforced/social control).
- ‘To do my job better’ (externally enforced/human capital).
- ‘To start my own business’ (autonomous/human capital).
- ‘To contribute more to my community’ (autonomous/social capital).

This classification is used here as a means of exploring the data gathered. The analysis excludes respondents using the neutral option. The autonomous/personal fulfilment category is examined first.

Respondents at all levels saw their course as a means of studying a subject of interest and also to gain skills relevant to everyday life, however, level 2 learners were more likely to value everyday life skills than the other three groups of learners. The difference between this group and the other three was statistically significant.
Respondents were also asked if the reason for studying was out of a desire to get a break from home and/or work and to combat boredom. There was a statistically, significant difference between the levels, again most marked between level 2 and 5. Nearly 80% of those at level 2 stated they were studying to get away from the routine of home and work, compared to 40% of those at level 5. The final statement relating to autonomy and personal fulfilment asked if respondents sought to gain greater awareness of themselves through engaging with learning. This was clearly an important aspect of studying as over 80% at all levels agreed this was one motive for learning.

The responses for this category of statements suggest that all the learners were motivated by the opportunity to gain new knowledge or skills and a greater awareness of themselves; however, engaging with learning as a means of combating boredom was most important for learners undertaking basic skills courses. It would also suggest that studying is an important aspect of personal fulfilment. Whether the responses here can be said to show autonomy or agency is not clear though and this will be addressed from the opposite end – social control – in the following section.

Turning to the externally enforced/social control category, there were statistically significant differences between the groups for all three statements relating to this category. Again, it was level 2 learners who stood out from the other levels. Around 30% of this group stated they had to do the course in order to claim benefit or avoid redundancy, had been required to do it by an employer and nearly two thirds of this group had been advised by someone else to do it. About 29% of level 5 learners stated an employer required them to do the course. Six per cent or less of levels 3 to 5 stated that they had to the course to claim benefits. The differences were statistically significant, mainly between level 2 and the other levels. This would suggest that there was a far stronger element of external enforcement to study and a higher level of control for those at level 2 – basic skills courses – and it could be argued that there is a lack of autonomy and agency for this group.

The next category relates to externally enforced/human capital and autonomous/human capital reasons for engaging with learning. The majority of learners were not undertaking the course to retain their job; however, 31% of level 2 learners were likely to agree with this statement. Fewer than 14% of the other levels agreed with this statement. The majority at all levels also agreed that they were learning in order to do their job better or to get a job. When it came to getting a job it was the learners at level 3 and 4 who were most likely to agree. Whilst the majority at all four levels indicated that they were learning to earn more but this was considerably more so for the level 4 and 5 learners. Level 4 learners were on Access to higher education courses and level 5 on degree/sub-degree courses and may therefore be more aware of the graduate premium. Almost all (95% or more) of learners at levels 3, 4 and 5 were doing the course to obtain a qualification and 87% of level 2 learners also stated this as a reason. This is not surprising given that they had enrolled on formally taught courses.

Most of the respondents were not doing the course in order to start their own business but there were considerably more level 2 (37%) and level 3 (28%) learners agreeing with this statement than the level 4 (11%) and level 5 (9%).

There is conflicting evidence here in terms of support for a controlled/human capital explanation which may be explained by the circumstances of the learners. The majority were studying either to get a job, to do a job better, to obtain a qualification and to earn more. Far fewer were doing it to retain their job. This may be because there was no threat of redundancy or because they were not currently in work (e.g. the Access students). Overall this would indicate that the job motive is a strong influence on learning.
In the autonomous/social capital category there were four statements. Two of these related to citizenship and participation/contribution to the community. More than two thirds agreed that this was one reason for them engaging with learning, though level 5 students were less inclined to agree with this statement and level 4 learners were most inclined to say that learning was an important part of contributing as citizens. Over 80% of level 2 learners indicated that they engaged in learning in order to take part in group activities and to meet new people. This was markedly more than for those at the other levels. Level 5 learners were least likely to (34%) to indicate that participation in group activities was an important aspect for choosing to learn; however, this may be due to the fact that just under a third of students at this level were doing an online course. Level 5 learners were also least likely to do a course in order to meet new people though this was important to them as nearly 70% indicated that this was one factor for engaging with learning. The social capital aspect, in terms of building new networks and also in engaging with the community seems to be an important reason for learning; however, it is not clear to what extent this is an example of autonomy. It would seem that the social aspect is particularly important for level 2 learners; however, they also seem to be the learners most affected by external and social control measures.

Summary and conclusion

It is clear that the motives for engaging with learning are complex and survey data of this nature can only provide tentative explanations. However, it seems that there are some real differences between learners at different levels. The most marked differences were between learners on basic skills courses (level 2) and those on degree courses (level 5). The key differences between the different levels were:

- Level 2 learners were most likely to have experienced external pressures to engage with learning
- Level 5 and level 4 learners were more likely to expect increased earnings as a result of learning
- Level 2 learners used learning as a means of escaping boredom and routine considerably more than the other groups of learners
- The social aspect of learning such as meeting new people was considerably more important for level 2 learners than for the other groups.
- Level 3 and 5 learners’ main motive for learning was job related, this was not the case for level 2 and 4 learners.

In spite of these differences there were some commonalities between the groups. Two thirds or more of the students at all levels emphasised learning as a means of contributing to society; most of the learners were doing the course to get a qualification and also to get a job or to do their job better. Not many of the respondents were doing a course in order to start their own business.

It could be argued that human capital, social capital and personal fulfilment are all motivators of learning. However, level 3 and 5 learners were strongly influenced by the human capital motive in relation to their main reason for studying; level 2 and 4 learners were more influenced by social capital motives. In particular, level 2 learners saw learning as a means of developing social networks. All learners engaged with learning as a means of personal fulfilment, level 2 learners also saw it as a means of avoiding boredom and routine. Finally external pressures to engage with learning seemed the greatest on those doing level 2 courses than learners at other levels – they were more likely to be learning because they had to do it.

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