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**Mental Capital and Wellbeing:
Making the most of ourselves in the 21st century**

**State-of-Science Review: SR-A10
Models of Provision of Lifelong Learning: How is it Done Around the World?**

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Summary

This review was commissioned with a view to exploring models of lifelong learning around the world. There are many such models, and this paper therefore focuses on the most significant as seen from the standpoint of UK policy development. While the primary focus is on arrangements for post-compulsory education and training and adult learning, it takes account of all stages of learning, from infancy to old age. It considers: the principal sites of learning, both formal and informal; transitions between ages and sites; and the role of policy in shaping and supporting models of lifelong learning. It also identifies those groups in the population who are either prioritised or excluded under current arrangements. The recent focus among policy-makers, educationalists and researchers on the ability to learn continuously after the phase of initial education, and across a variety of contexts of which educational institutions are one among many, distinguishes the debate over lifelong learning from previous policy discussions of education and training as levers across a range of economic and social policy domains. The review therefore concludes with a brief summary of strengths and weaknesses in policies for lifelong learning.

1. Introduction

In recent years, lifelong learning has moved steadily towards the centre of the policy stage. Its supporters include international bodies like the OECD, European Commission, World Bank and International Labour Organization, as well as a wide variety of national governments (Schemmann, 2007). While economic concerns such as globalisation, competitiveness and innovation remain central to policy-makers' interest in lifelong learning, the agenda also encompasses a plethora of policy challenges such as population ageing, social inclusion, public health, migrant assimilation and active citizenship.

Of course, there is nothing new about policy interest in education and training as the solution to many ills. What is distinctive, though, about current debates is that they emphasise the ways in which people build up new skills and capacities throughout the life span and across different life spheres, and thus give a central place to people's learning, as opposed to education, teaching and institutions. To use what has become a common abbreviation, current policy concerns are with education that is lifelong, and also life-wide.

This is not to say that the idea of lifelong learning necessarily downplays the role of initial (compulsory) education. Initial education, including early-years development, is important for wellbeing in its own right. It is additionally important because it provides a platform for learning later in life. A number of commentators argue that family and neighbourhood influences in the early years are particularly significant in determining patterns of learning across the lifespan. From this perspective, high-quality education during the earlier years is important primarily because of its role in providing the abilities and motivation to engage effectively in learning later in life (Hargreaves, 2004; OECD, 2001).

Sociologically, many of the factors that are associated with adult wellbeing are already present in the early years. One recent longitudinal analysis of adult learning in Wales demonstrated that most of the factors that affected the probabilities of participation in adult life were present by the time that the child entered primary school for the first time (Gorard et al., 1999). As Plank and Maclver put it: "achievement trajectories begin to be predictable or established as early as age three – certainly as early as first grade" (Plank and Maclver, 2003, p349).

Education and wellbeing have often been associated. The idea that education can promote individual wellbeing indirectly, by improving earnings and promoting social mobility, is an old one. So too are notions of education helping to promote the good society by contributing to economic growth and equality of

opportunity. Recent debates about the wider benefits of learning have added a new dimension to the relationship, linking education to other facets of individual and collective wellbeing, such as health (including mental health), security from crime, and political tolerance (Schuller et al., 2004; Desjardins and Schuller, 2006). Through strengthening self-identity, learning is also said to help people develop a sense of authorship over their own biographies and take responsibility for their life choices (Côté, 2004).

2. International comparisons

Much recent literature on lifelong learning policies has been heavy on analysis but light on evidence. Considerable numbers of quasi-scholarly critiques have appeared since the upsurge of public interest that followed the European Year of Lifelong Learning. Most of these draw on a very narrow range of evidence, largely consisting of public texts, and are primarily polemical rather than rigorous or investigative in nature. Recent years, by contrast, have witnessed a sharp growth of interest in the evidence base on which policy is formed (OECD, 2007).

Relatively few systematic, empirical studies have gone beyond the national (see Hodgson et al. (2006) for a strong example from the UK), but this is currently changing. Partly, this arises from the increasing number of international datasets now being made available to policy researchers (Tuijnman, 2003a). These include one-off cross-sectional surveys such as the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the European Community Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS), as well as a range of continuing sources such as the linked household panel surveys and labour force surveys. These datasets are already being used to conduct transnational studies, for example, of gender and the propensity to participate in training (Arulampalam et al., 2004), and to construct league tables of participation in adult learning (Tuijnman and Boudard, 2001).

Britain tends to rank highly in league tables of participation in adult learning. In IALS, for instance, the UK ranked fifth out of the 20 participating nations in respect of overall adult participation in education and training, and fourth in participation in job-related training (Tuijnman and Boudard, 2001, pp49 and 52). In the European Community Continuing Vocational Training Survey, the UK was ranked fourth of 16 nations in the proportion of workers participating in training (European Commission, 2002, pp58-9). In absolute and relative terms, then, participation in adult education and training are verifiably high. In some ways this might suggest that the UK has no great problems with lifelong learning, and should direct the focus of policy attention elsewhere. Comparative research, however, suggests that this might be a rather hasty conclusion.

Comparative researchers have identified a number of variations in post-compulsory education and training, in spite of the convergent pressures of globalising economic forces and the modernisation of education systems. Particular attention has been paid to the roles of three distinct components of the lifelong learning systems:

- Systems of transition between initial education and the labour market;
- Higher education systems;
- Arrangements for adult education and training.

These components have attracted the attention of policy analysts as well as academic researchers (see for example the OECD's thematic reviews (OECD, 1999; OECD, 2005)).

The three dimensions of national lifelong learning systems differ significantly from each other. The most complex, from both a policy and an analytical perspective, is the adult learning system which involves a

variety of actors and stakeholders, including a wide range of non-government bodies as well as individual citizens themselves. Youth transition systems are only slightly less complex. As well as institutions, which may or may not be publicly-funded, the key stakeholders generally include employers and sometimes trade unions, as well as varying degrees of state provision and regulation. Some national studies note that military service may also affect youth transition processes (e.g. Tsai, 1998), and schools are also often influential actors in their own right.

Initial education systems at first seem relatively unproblematic from a policy perspective. The major players are usually publicly-funded schools and the state itself, though policy implementation is often influenced by teachers, particularly where the latter are able to exercise a significant degree of professional autonomy (Timperley and Robinson, 2000). However, initial education is often less straightforward than at first appears. Particularly in the early years, non-governmental providers are often involved in nursery level education, and families and communities exercise significant influence over children's 'cultural capital'.

Patterns of youth transition have attracted considerable attention from researchers. An OECD overview distinguished between two broad western systems: those with institutionalised routes to work, directly connected to defined occupational labour markets, with welfare safety nets for those who slip through the system; and countries where broad education offers access to generic qualities, leading into competition for positions in open external labour markets (OECD, 1999). A number of researchers, particularly in continental Europe, argue that the first of these produces smooth transitions combined with commitment to a secure occupational identity. Others, however, suggest that more broad and open systems are more likely to generate initiative and the ability to manage a career through life (Dubar, 2000). Andreas Walther (2006) has recently developed this distinction, identifying four different transition regimes: the universalistic (Nordic nations); the employment-centred (Germany, France); the liberal (UK, Ireland); and what he calls the 'sub-protective' (southern European).

A number of policy analysts have taken these categories further, arguing for a broad, socio-cultural approach that situates policy not only in its institutional settings, but goes further to identify the contextual factors, forces and influences that shape education and training systems. Taking such an approach, Green et al. (2006) identify three, distinct regional models of lifelong learning and the knowledge economy. Two of these – the Anglo-Saxon, neo-liberal, model and the continental European, social market model – are relatively well-established, and are clearly based on the dominant social policy models of welfare regimes. Following the thinking of Esping-Andersen (1990), Green and his colleagues add a third, Nordic model, which combines high levels of social cohesion with strong support for economic competitiveness.

Green and colleagues note that each model is identified with different strategies for skills formation. The liberal Anglo-Saxon model is associated with sharply-polarised skills distributions, 'combining high-skills elites with a substantial number of poorly qualified low-skill employees', and typified by rather weak initial education followed by high levels of compensatory education and training among adult workers. Because this skewed pattern often corresponds to labour market requirements and is associated with flexibility of labour, it tends to correlate with high levels of employment.

By contrast, the continental social market model is characterised by high levels of skills distributed widely across the workforce, usually as a result of strong investment in initial education, leading to high productivity and high average wage levels, but inhibiting innovation and often producing unemployment (Green et al., 2006, pp141-3).

The Nordic nations, though, tend to combine high levels of attainment in initial education with strong support for general adult education and training, promoting a relatively equal distribution of skills, and fostering both strong innovation capacity and high levels of employment (Green et al., 2006, p145).

Because of its perceived, relative success in combining comparatively equal participation with high overall participation in adult learning, the Nordic model has recently been subjected to particular scrutiny (Tuijnman, 2003b; Rubenson, 2006; Milana and Desjardins, 2007). Overall participation rates in all the Nordic countries are consistently close to, or over, 50% of the population of working age (OECD, 2000). Further, the Nordic participation rates are high both for job-related adult education and training and for non-job-related learning (Eurobarometer, 2003). The roots of this pattern have been traced back to the 1960s, when governments and the social partners identified adult education as a distinct and significant field of policy, linked closely to labour market policy, which itself was geared primarily to securing full employment and industrial consensus (Rubenson, 2006; Milana and Desjardins, 2007). Policy instruments since the 1960s have increasingly included targeted funding measures aimed at engaging disadvantaged groups in the adult education system.

Despite high overall participation, and relatively high participation by disadvantaged groups, Milana and Desjardins (2007) note, in a systematic review of recent international survey data, that the same broad distribution is found in the Nordic countries as in other nations. The least likely to participate are older workers, those with lower skills levels, unemployed people, migrant workers, and those with weak initial educational qualifications. Nevertheless, on the basis of data from the International Adult Literacy Survey and a survey conducted by the EC in 2003, published by Eurobarometer, they conclude that the Nordic nations have created popular adult education systems that have led to 'the attenuation of differences among these otherwise disadvantaged groups', particularly older adults of working age and less educated workers (Milana and Desjardins, 2007, p3). They further analyse Eurobarometer data to show that, although adults in the Nordic countries reported similar constraints on participation as did respondents in other EU member states, the average incidence of the constraints was generally lower in the Nordic countries, and adults in the Nordic countries were more likely to participate even if they faced these constraints (Milana and Desjardins, 2007, p6). Interestingly, this was true for dispositional barriers as well as for more material and institutional constraints.

Milana and Desjardins conclude that public policy has been particularly significant in producing high levels of overall participation, firstly by maintaining a strong public adult education system, and secondly by adopting 'special targeting measures' to ensure that an open and broad system of provision is not simply colonised by the already well-educated (Milana and Desjardins, 2007, pp14-15). In addition, Nordic economies are typically characterised by forms of organisational networking that are likely to promote informal learning. Peter Maskell and his colleagues (1998) have demonstrated that high levels of informal exchange of information, techniques and skills are critical to the competitiveness of Nordic enterprises, particularly those affected by high labour costs and low levels of technological development and which must, therefore, compete on grounds of quality and added value (Maskell et al., 1998). Finally, the Nordic nations tend to demonstrate high average attainment in initial education, but with relatively limited deviations from the mean by either the high or low achievers (Valijarvi et al., 2002).

Nevertheless, significant gaps and unevenness remain within the Nordic systems. In an assessment of the Norwegian competence reforms, Jonathan Payne notes that policy-makers "appear to be moving beyond the 'easy part' of skills policy – simply boosting qualifications levels among the workforce – to embrace a far more difficult and challenging agenda", which tackles the "systems of work organisation, job design and people management, that are crucial in shaping the levels of skill and learning required by employees," (Payne 2005, p32). This is consistent with analyses of IALS (Desjardins, 2003), which demonstrate that literacy and other basic proficiencies are influenced not only by initial education but are also significantly mediated by experiences at work, including both formal and informal learning in the workplace.

How does the UK compare with the Nordic nations? While overall rates of participation in adult learning in Britain are high, there are considerable variations by socioeconomic status, occupation, level of education and qualifications, and to some extent gender and ethnicity. There are also significant disparities by region

and nation. These patterns have been repeatedly documented in surveys conducted by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, and appear to be deep-rooted and persistent (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2007).

Inequalities of participation in adult learning are considerably wider than in the Nordic nations. Moreover, the structure of the UK labour force is not such as to promote a culture of continuous, work-based learning (Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Payne, 2005). And, as the PISA study confirmed, while mean attainment in UK schools is relatively high, the gap between the top and bottom deciles was among the widest in the survey. Correspondingly, in IALS, a comparatively high proportion of the adult populations in all four UK nations fell into the lowest categories of literacy and other basic skills – just as a high proportion in the UK were in the highest categories, mirroring the unequal attainment patterns of Britain's schoolchildren.

3. Conclusions

Successful achievement in education and training contribute to mental and physical wellbeing, both directly and by enabling individuals and groups better to achieve their goals.

In an ageing society, successful participation in adult learning plays a particularly critical role, not solely in enabling workers to adapt and adjust to the rapidly-changing requirements of their jobs, but also in helping adults lead an active and satisfying life.

Survey data suggest that the UK has high patterns of overall participation in adult education and training. But they also suggest that there is continuing inequality, and that many UK adults start from an unacceptably weak platform of literacy, numeracy and IT proficiency. This appears to reflect continuing inequalities of attainment among schoolchildren. By Nordic standards, then, the UK finds itself in a situation requiring constructive attention.

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