

# Adult learning and mental well-being

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## **Introduction**

This paper is intended to provide a background analysis of research into adult learning and well-being, in advance of the NIACE seminar. Well-being and happiness have attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. There also seems to be a wider public interest in research on these issues, judging by the success of Richard Layard's book on the economics of happiness (Layard 2005). So far, though, this surge has still to make any significant impression on research into adult learning. Many professionals in the field firmly believe, as a government committee of inquiry claimed thirty-five years ago, that their work "is of crucial importance for the health of our society and the quality of life of individual citizens" (Department of Education and Science 1973, 20).

Intuitively, these assertions make sense, on the principle that as with muscles, so with the brain, "if you don't use it, you lose it". Yet these claims have been largely untested.

Twenty-five years after the Russell Report was published, one of Britain's leading adult education researchers – himself a trained psychoanalyst - wrote that:

Adult educators have consistently emphasized the re-creative function of informal learning and its importance to personal wellbeing, yet have lacked a language to describe the dynamics involved and to explain why these may be crucial to emotional and psychological wellbeing (West 1996, 97).

It remains the case that there is a dearth of rigorous investigation into the relationship between adult learning and mental well-being.

This paper summarises research into adult learning that is relevant to well-being<sup>1</sup>. Some of this work examines the effects of adult learning upon factors that are directly relevant to well-being, such as self-efficacy, confidence or the ability to create support networks. Others address factors that are indirectly associated with well-being, such as earnings and employability. There is a body of literature which describes practice and its relation to mental health, but it generally does so without an underpinning of systematically collected evidence. It is therefore not considered here. That is not to dismiss this literature, which collects and reflects on a wide range of professional experience in the field, but little of it is sufficiently rigorous to constitute robust evidence of the impact of adult learning on mental well-being.

The concept of well-being is a notoriously difficult one. It is hard to define, and is therefore not easy to operationalise for research purposes. Happiness is equally problematic. Both concepts refer to a subjective state, which represents the way that people feel about their lives. Setting the definitional problems to one side, they have been adopted by researchers largely because they encourage a focus on positive outcomes rather than problems and disease. The idea of well-being in particular has a strong orientation towards policy and practice. In the words of Kirstin Moore and Corey Keyes, two American social psychologists, “the investigation and application of positive human development is a new perspective that is needed now more than ever” (Moore and Keyes 2003, 2). A positive sense of well-being implies a belief in our own worth and the dignity and worth of others (HEA 1997).

The absence of well-being is also a cause for policy concern. The Confederation of British Industry (2005) estimates that there are there are over half a million instances where work-related stress results in people being absent from work, costing UK

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<sup>1</sup> The thinking behind this paper has been informed partly by work commissioned for the current Foresight project on Mental Capital and Well-being, which I am helping to co-ordinate on behalf of the Government Office for Science. I particularly owe a debt to John Vorhaus and Leon Feinstein of the Research Centre on the Wider Benefits of Learning, who led process of commissioning science reviews on well-being and learning across the lifespan. However, the Foresight project should not be blamed for the content of this paper, which has been written specifically for the NIACE inquiry.

employers an estimated £3.7 billion. On average it is estimated that each stress related absence involves 29 working days lost making around 13 million working days lost through stress each year (HSC 2004). In 2005/2006 an estimated 2.0 million people suffered from ill health which they believed work related, some 21% of which was said to involve stress, anxiety or depression (Health & Safety Commission [HSC] 2006). Yet while it is true that “work can make you sick”, being out of the workforce can be more damaging still. The association between unemployment and mental ill-health is a well-established one (Jahoda date; Warr **date**); as well as reducing income levels, unemployment also removes people from an important social network, and harms their sense of worth and self-esteem. And the relationship between employability and learning – including basic skills - is well established (see e.g. Bynner and Parsons 1997). So if we cannot precisely define well-being, we can nevertheless say a great deal about its absence.

## **The context**

Well-being is a highly topical issue, which is of concern to a wide range of professions and relevant to a number of policy fields. It has come to the fore for a number of reasons. One is a general sense of malaise that appears to be common to most affluent, secular societies. More specifically, a number of happiness researchers have shown empirically that average happiness does not increase with rising levels of prosperity (Bell and Blanchflower 2004??; Oswald 1994). If that is not bad enough, given our society’s obsession with growth and competitiveness, we can also frighten ourselves with headlines about a rising tide of stress and depression - though of course, it is not at all clear whether rising levels of reported depression indicate a growth in misery or simply a change in socially (and medically) accepted definitions. What is certain is that in a post-scarcity society, personal and communal well-being acquires a new salience as a hot political topic.

At the same time, we are witnessing the apparent erosion of traditional sources of support. Family is the most important of these, and in recent years it has been transformed. Most public attention has focussed either on the emergence of post-nuclear families as a result of separation and divorce, or on the supposed growth of transgressive family forms (single parent families, same-sex parenting, and so on). These are certainly significant: reported levels of life satisfaction are significantly lower on average for separated and divorced individuals than for married people (Argyle 1998, 35). However, it is important not to overlook the exceptionally dramatic changes in the role of women and the elderly. These have had complex consequences for the range of social support available to people at times of need.

Communitarianism, with its emphasis on the 'parenting deficit' (Etzioni 1993), sees 'family breakdown' as the source of many of the ills of modern society. Undoubtedly, the high rate of divorce and separation in western societies has changed the context in which children acquire a sense of their own place in the wider world; it is quite conceivable (though as yet unproven) that this has had some effect on overall levels of social trust in the west. Nor can there be much argument that stability and security are needed in childhood; family breakdowns can be catastrophic for children's sense of self-esteem. Yet the non-nuclear family can also provide access to a wider range of sources of social support, and also enhance confidence and build social skills. Further, as Misztal points out, although step families have a higher rate of collapse during the first two years, thereafter they tend to outlive more conventional relationships (Misztal 1996, 169). So perhaps we should see the family as a changing source of social support, rather than one that must be in decline. In so far as there are problems of family support, there appears to be a far higher probability of threats to well-being – for parents as much as for children – within single parent families, rather than in other growing types of child-rearing arrangement.

If the family is proving resilient and adaptable, some other established sources of social support are not thriving. Since the 1950s, faith-based organizations have generally lost considerable ground, despite continuing adherence among some social and ethnic groups;

among the indigenous white population, church and chapel membership has collapsed. Trade unions have also experienced a long-term wane of both their aggregate membership and levels of engagement among the members who remain; indeed, a number of large-scale voluntary associations have undergone similarly processes of decline over the last half century. Newer social movements have taken their place, but often in the form of ‘credit card activism’, rather than as social spaces where people directly interact over time to advance their common interests (Field 2008). There is also evidence of a growth in informal care networks like baby sitting circles and school run car-sharing, largely created by women and arising from the decline of the extended family and continuing increases in labour market participation (Lowndes 2000, 536). However, this general pattern may obscure important variations in the experiences of different parts of the population; in industrial societies like Britain, middle-class participation may well be relatively stable, or even rising slightly, but working class access to social capital has declined significantly over the last three or four decades – particularly, it seems, among women (Li, Savage and Pickles 2003).

Finally, the welfare state has, if not declined, significantly changed its shape and emphasis over the last half century. For a variety of reasons, publicly provided welfare has been replaced or supplemented by policies designed to promote more active approaches to welfare, which seek to replace ‘passive support’ by ‘active strategies of insertion’ (Rosanvallon 1995). Such strategies typically require individuals to behave as entrepreneurs of the self, willing to be endlessly flexible, mobile and resilient – such as, typically, the ‘permanently learning subject’ of lifelong learning (Field 2006).

For Ulrich Beck, the replacement of collective support mechanisms by reliance on one’s own individual initiative is a characteristic feature of what he calls ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992). The sources of collective identity and meaning which underpinned western industrial societies - family, national state, faith community, ethnicity, class and job – are, Beck argues, exhausted and no longer provide for either personal security or social integration. While this may be overstated, it is clear that inherited social support

mechanisms are no longer as widely available as in the past, and that increasingly responsibility for one's well-being has fallen onto the individual.

### **The benefits of learning**

Until recently, much of the evidence on the benefits of learning was anecdotal, and some was, frankly, aspirational. This was particularly the case for post-school learning; while there were serious studies of the benefits of schooling, further education and above all higher education, relatively little attention had been paid to the benefits of learning in adult life. As recently as 2003, a review of research on the benefits of workplace basic skills training concluded that “the available research base is extremely poor, and had never been thoroughly reviewed and evaluated” (Ananiadou, Jenkins and Wolf 2004, 291). In respect of schooling, by contrast, the evidence is reasonably clear. In respect of happiness, Layard suggests that initial education makes little if any direct impact; its main indirect influence is through its impact on earnings (Layard 2005, 62). Schuller and Desjardins (2007, 13) conclude from a number of studies that “More years of schooling are substantially associated with better health, well-being and health behaviours”, with some indication that the relationship may be a causal one. So there is some robust evidence on initial education and its impact – direct and indirect – on well-being. The evidence base on adult learning is, though, still relatively weak.

This is changing. International interest in the benefits of learning has generated a significant body of research outside the UK as well as within it, though again the great majority focuses on initial education (defined as school, further education and higher education). Since 1997, the UK government has promoted considerable research into the benefits of learning across the life span. The then Department for Education and Skills commissioned research centres to examine the economic benefits and the wider, non-economic benefits of learning, and their work has created a most significant and comprehensive body of evidence. Arguably, this research has produced a unique

knowledge base in Britain which has no parallel anywhere else in the world. Certainly both centres have attracted extensive international interest, and are widely recognised as at the leading edge of educational research. Building on the work of the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre in London, the OECD in 2004 initiated a systematic review of research into the social outcomes of learning, focusing particularly on health and civic engagement; while the OECD project did not focus on well-being as such, both of these factors influence well-being, at both individual and collective levels.

While limitations and gaps remain, recent studies of the benefits of learning have generated a number of significant findings on the impact of learning across the life span. Much of the recent UK work rests on the analysis of large scale data sets, primarily national level cohort and household surveys, which allow for the presentation of statistical associations and estimates of causation at the level of population and sub-group, as well as qualitative analyses of individual cases. Methodologically, the analysis of learning benefits is challenging, as while we may be able to identify clear measures of association between learning and various benefits, it is not always possible to conclude that learning is the primary cause of these benefits. Both participation in learning and any given benefit may arise from some unobserved third factor. The most frequently advanced such factors are inherited cognitive assets or ‘innate’ ability<sup>2</sup> and family background, which can produce non-cognitive inheritances of the type described by Pierre Bourdieu as cultural capital and social capital.

### **Economic benefits**

Human capital theory suggests that investing in skills and knowledge is an economically rational choice, since it leads to additional income. Most recent research on the rates of return to learning has focussed on the returns to the individual and less frequently the

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of ‘innate ability’ is a controversial one, particularly in the social sciences. It has also been called into question, or at least redefined, by recent findings in brain science, which show that the brain’s potential capacity is profoundly affected by experience, for example through the process of ‘synaptic pruning’ by which areas of the brain that are not used are discarded. This process is particularly associated with infancy.

organisation (enterprise) rather than estimating the rate of return to the community. This research faces a range of well-known methodological challenges, including the difficulty of measuring educational investments and returns, and the problem of unobserved factors such as innate ability and individual commitment. There has also been a very marked concentration on initial education. The problems are illustrated in the frequent use of the number of years of schooling as an indicator of education investment, and formal qualifications as an indicator of output; both are very crude proxy indicators of what economists are seeking to measure, and both reflect a focus on the initial education system.

Much of the research into rates of return has concentrated on higher education, apparently in response to broad policy debates over the financing of third level studies. Broadly, this research demonstrates a continuing return to higher education, with degree qualifications producing a higher rate of return than higher national qualifications, but both outstripping the return on A Levels (McIntosh 2004). When disaggregated for gender, rates of return on higher education are greater for women than for men; this is at least partly explained by the lower earnings of women in the relevant benchmark groups (Dearden, Goodman and Reed 2000). These findings have been broadly replicated in a series of studies of rates of return from higher education. Studies of vocational qualifications again suggest clear returns both for men and for women for intermediate and higher qualifications, but with clear differences between men and women in respect of subject studied; low level qualifications produce rather low rates of return for women and men (Dearden, McIntosh, Vignoles and Myck 2002).

In adult learning, most of the literature concerns work-related training. Blundell, Dearden and Meghir (1996) examined changes in wages between 1981 and 1991, finding that employer-provided training leads to raises in average earnings for men; the findings for women were not statistically significant. Courses leading to a higher vocational qualification (N/SVQ Level 4 or above) produced a positive return of 8% for men and 10% for women. They also found higher returns for longer courses. Feinstein and ??? also found that work related training yields higher wages, but that considerable variations

were hidden by the raise in average earnings rates, with mid-career male workers benefiting most (Feinstein et al 2004). However, they also noted a marked selection effect, with employers singling out the most capable employees for training, so that it is unclear whether it was the training or the workers' ability which yielded higher earnings.

Barely any research exists on general adult learning. Jenkins and colleagues (2003) examined the impact on individuals of qualifications gained between the ages of 33 and 42, controlling for a range of other factors. Men who had left school with weak formal qualifications and gained a degree were the only group to show any clear wage effect. However, there was an overall effect on employability for all groups who gained qualifications in that period.

Two British studies have examined rates of return on basic skills improvements. An analysis of respondents in the National Child Development Survey (NCDS) between ages 16 and 37 showed little if any changes in earnings as a result of taking basic literacy or numeracy courses. Underlying changes in numeracy and literacy test scores appeared to yield higher earnings for men, while self-reported improvements in basic literacy and numeracy appeared to produce higher earnings for both women and men (Dearden, McIntosh and Vignoles 2001). A more recent study of participants in the 1970 British Cohort Survey showed significant gains in earnings associated with improved performance in literacy and numeracy tests; the gains were broadly comparable for both genders (De Coulon, Marcenaro-Guitierrez and Vignoles 2007).

Finally, some studies have been undertaken into the impact of training on enterprises. These are summarised by Ananiadou, Jenkins and Wolf (2003), who show some caution – to put it mildly – in accepting the common sense view of training's positive effects on productivity and growth, a belief which has not been sufficiently robustly tested. However, they do identify evidence of a negative association between training and labour turnover, indicating that those workforces who receive training are less likely to leave. Green, Preston and Janmaat (2006) demonstrate a close correlation at national level between participation in continuing training and economic performance, but they

emphasise that there are other important variables at work in this relationship, including the degree of social cohesion.

Studies of the economic benefits of education show clear evidence of significant returns to individuals on basic literacy and numeracy skills, as well as some mixed evidence of more modest returns to individuals on participation in training. There is no comparable evidence of economic returns from participation in general adult education. Nor is there yet much evidence of a wider economic benefit from learning, for example in terms of raised growth rates. Although population-level studies broadly show a positive association between participation in continuing training and rates of economic growth (eg Green, Preston and Janmaat 2006), it is not possible to determine causation from the data used.

### **Wider (non-economic) benefits**

As well as helping to raise earnings, which indirectly affects well-being, learning can also create wider, non-economic benefits. Of course, it can also have negative consequences, as when people experience stress, and even severe anxiety, in reaction to educational experiences such as examinations or entry into unfamiliar institutional settings. In balance, though, it seems reasonable to conclude that learning is more likely to produce benefits that either directly or indirectly influence well-being.

A number of the wider benefits of learning can be seen as directly influencing well-being, since they act as protective influences against poor mental health and low levels of life satisfaction. Examples of such factors include self-efficacy, autonomy, social competences, health maintenance, civic engagement, community resilience and a sense of agency or control over one's own life. Yet although these wider benefits are often said by policy makers and professionals to be important outcomes of adult learning, the research base is much less developed than in respect of the economic outcomes. A review of

research into the benefits of basic skills workplace learning, for instance, was confined to reporting “on evidence relating to individuals’ wages and employability probability, since we have not identified any well-founded studies relating to other outcomes” (Ananiadou, Jenkins and Wolf 2004, 291).

Few systematic studies have been undertaken into adult learning and mental health. McGivney’s review reports that participation in learning has positive consequences for mental health (McGivney 1997). Indeed, some medical authorities now prescribe adult education courses as a treatment for some types of mental ill health (Wheeler, Smith and Trayhorn 1999). In turn, learning providers have been encouraged to improve services to people with mental health difficulties. Local examples include Gloucestershire adult education service’s programme of activities for staff and users in care homes. The programme is offered in partnership with health professionals, the county primary care trust, and the local care providers’ association; its aims include ensuring that care home staff have an effective understanding of nutrition and hydration, as well as a basic understanding of dementia and expertise in person-centred care; it also aims to promote exercise programmes, reminiscence groups and arts and crafts for residents; and it undertakes an outreach programme with preventative aims that includes development of second careers for older adults (Austin 2007). Nationally, the Learning and Skills Council’s strategy for improving services for this group identifies a number of ways in which providers can deliver improved opportunities (**Reference needed**).

To what extent is this professional practice based on evidence? There is certainly evidence to show that adult learners themselves believe that education produces well-being. A study of older adults involved in courses at a Dublin museum showed that the overwhelming majority believed that their learning was beneficial in tangible ways for their mental health (Fleming 2005). This is broadly supported by existing longitudinal research. Sabates and Feinstein (2004) report that learners were better able to understand health-related information and guidance, communicate with health professionals Feinstein et al (2006) summarise work showing that learning appears to protect individuals against depression, but they also conclude that it has little or no impact on happiness (see also Feinstein

2002). However, Feinstein and Hammond (2004) show that participation in learning does have an impact on adults' levels of life satisfaction, which is closely connected to well being. A later study by the same authors showed gains among learners in optimism and self-rated well-being (Hammond and Feinstein 2006).

A number of studies have been conducted into adult learning and civic engagement. Field's study of social attitudes survey data demonstrates a close association between participation in adult learning and engagement in a variety of social and civic activities, though again it does not conclusively show causation in one direction or the other (Field 2005). The Research Centre on the Wider Benefits of Learning has demonstrated that participation in learning tends to enhance social capital, by helping develop social competences, extending social networks, and promoting shared norms and tolerance of others (Schuller et al 2004). Both studies showed that participation in learning can also cause stresses to close bonding ties. A survey of over 600 literacy and numeracy learners in Scotland over time showed behavioural changes including increases in the proportion going out regularly, at a level which was statistically significant for females and older people; greater clarity about future intentions on community involvement; and in the proportion who could identify someone they could turn to for help (Tett and Maclachlan 2007, 154-7). The learners were particularly likely to have extended their 'bridging' networks, through contacts with tutors, other staff and fellow students (Tett and Maclachlan 2007, 163).

A small number of studies have examined adult learning and health. Feinstein and Hammond (2004) used the 1958 cohort survey to compare changes in the health behaviours of learners and non-learners between the ages of 33 and 42, showing that participation in learning had positive effects in terms of smoking cessation and exercise taken. The same authors also found a growth in self-rated health among those who participated in learning as compared with adults who did not (Hammond and Feinstein 2006). Finally, Sabates and Feinstein (2006) found that adult learning was positively associated with the probability of taking up cervical screening for women. While the

effect sizes are small ones in all these studies, again it is important to note that adult values and behaviour rarely change much, so this finding is of consequence.

Finally, a number of studies have examined the effects of adult learning on personal attributes. A study of basic adult education students reported a marked growth in average levels of personal confidence across a range of contexts (Tett and Maclachlan 2007, 159). While the variations were statistically significant, they were also relatively small; and without a matched control group of people not taking similar courses, it is difficult to ascertain causality. Hammond and Feinstein's longitudinal analysis (2006) similarly indicated that learners were more likely to report gains in self-efficacy and sense of agency (perceived control over important life choices).

## **Conclusions**

Participation in adult learning appears to have some influence on attitudes and behaviours that affect people's mental well-being. Some of the influence is direct, in that learning appears to promote skills – particularly non-cognitive skills, including confidence – that lead to positive well-being. Learning also has a large number of benefits, including economic benefits such as higher earnings and employability and non-economic benefits such as the strengthening of social support networks, which influence well-being indirectly. These benefits can be quantified. Indeed, in principle the benefits could be assigned an economic value, which could then be set against the costs of investing in adult learning (in practice, there are enormous data weaknesses and complexities in adults' life courses mean that modelling the benefits and costs would involve vast assumptions, so it is highly unlikely that a realistic cost-benefit analysis is feasible). But in general, the evidence suggests a clear positive relationship.

Yet a number of qualifications need to be made. First, at best these are probabilistic relationships; their existence does not mean that everyone who takes a course will feel happier and better about themselves. Simply put, a statistical relationship implies only that on average people are more likely to experience greater well-being as a result of adult learning than not. Second, in all the studies reviewed above, the relationship is a relatively small one. It is reasonably consistent, and we know – for example from health promotion campaigns or health and safety training - that attitudes and behaviour in adult life are entrenched, so even small shifts are significant. Nevertheless, the evidence does not suggest an enormous impact. Third, it is not possible to be confident about causation. While there are some grounds for believing that it is participation in learning that causes improvements in well-being for some people, the possibility remains that unobserved factors might explain both findings. This can only be clarified through further research. However, we can say with some confidence that learning does impact positively upon a number of factors, such as employability and earnings, that influence well-being in turn. Finally, there are some areas of well-being where education and training are powerless. We do not have any evidence that learning inhibits the onset of dementia, for example, nor that participating in adult learning can counter infant-acquired disabilities such as dyslexia or ADHD (though it is possible that it can help to address some of the problems that these disabilities produce). So we should not over-state the case.

Key evidence gaps remain. Inevitably, then, further research is required to provide an evidence base on which policy and practice should be developed. What are the priorities for research, and how urgent are they? It seems particularly pressing that there be firmer evidence on the benefits of adult learning for mental health, for tackling depression, and for promoting resilience in the face of workplace stress, for example, but there may be other priorities as well. From the perspective of provision, we know relatively little about the differential impacts of different types of adult learning: do particular types of learning programme, pedagogy and subject matter to the well-being of learners? Given our current knowledge base, it is not clear whether all adult learning has a small but significant impact; or whether some types of learning have a marked and significant impact, while others are neutral or even negative. There may also be important methodological issues.

Thus while we now have an emerging body of quantitative analysis of longitudinal data, it remains to be seen whether newer techniques might bring greater certainty and clarity to the analysis. And much of the literature reporting on professional practice remains largely anecdotal and small scale in nature. This can have considerable value, not least in enabling practitioner reflection on practice, but it needs to be supplemented by larger scale and more systematic studies than currently exist.

Finally, what are the implications of our existing knowledge base for policy and practice? First, it is clear that adult learning has tangible benefits, directly and indirectly, for wellbeing. I am not entirely persuaded, despite Layard's caution, that it makes no direct contribution to happiness; that presumably depends mainly on the nature of the learning experience. Layard himself identifies two main implications for adult learning of his own analysis, favouring courses in parenting for those who are about to have their first child or who are facing family disruption of some kind; and for workers who are displaced from their job in a declining sector, "retraining of real quality" (Layard 2005, 176-8). It would be hard to take issue with either proposal, but are they sufficient? Given the evidence of tangible benefits for well-being, are there more ambitious proposals for practice and policy, for example with respect to different pedagogic approaches and curricular content, modes of assessment and expectations of accreditation and progression?

The seminar provides an opportunity to open up such questions for wider debate, and to see whether there is broad agreement on what the key issues and concerns are, as well as the prospects for sketching out the next steps. This paper is designed to provide a background for this discussion.

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