

Well-being and Happiness

IFLL Thematic Paper 4



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Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Foreword	3
IFLL: principal strands	3
Thematic Papers	4
Next steps	4
1. Introduction	5
2. Headline messages	7
3. Rationale	9
4. The current position	12
4.1 Well-being and adult learning in late modernity	13
4.2 The benefits of learning: recent progress	16
5. Conclusions and evidence gaps	29
6. Links to other Inquiry themes	32
6.1 Prosperity, employment and work	32
6.2 Technological change	32
6.3 Migration and communities	33
6.4 Citizenship and belonging in a diverse society	33
6.5 Poverty reduction and social exclusion	33
6.6 Crime and social exclusion	34
6.7 Demography and lifelong learning	34
7. Key messages	36
References	41
Contributors	48

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Foreword

This is the fourth Thematic Paper to be published from the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL). The Inquiry was established in September 2007 and will produce its main report in September 2009. It is sponsored by the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), with an independent Board of Commissioners under the chairmanship of Sir David Watson. Full details of the IFLL can be found at www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry. The overall goal of the Inquiry is to offer **an authoritative and coherent strategic framework for lifelong learning in the UK**.

This will involve:

- articulating a broad rationale for public and private investment in lifelong learning;
- a re-appraisal of the social and cultural value attached to it by policy-makers and the public;
- developing new perspectives on policy and practice.

IFLL: principal strands

The Thematic Papers are complemented by several other strands of IFLL work:

- *Expenditure Papers*. These will provide a broad overall picture of expenditure on all forms of lifelong learning: by government, across all departments; by employers, public and private; by the third sector; and by individuals and households. We shall provide, as a complement, a summary of overall participation. The two in combination should provide a benchmark for mapping future trends.
- *Sector Papers*. These will discuss the implications of lifelong learning for each of the sectors involved in providing learning opportunities: pre-school, school, FE, HE, adult education centres, private trainers, third sector organisations and local authorities. The goal here is to encourage innovative thinking on how these parts do or do not fit together, as part of a systemic approach to lifelong learning.
- *Public Value Papers*. These will look, from different angles and using a variety of techniques, at the 'social productivity' of lifelong learning; i.e. what effects it has on areas such as health, civic activity or crime. The goal is both to provide evidence on these effects and to stimulate a broader debate on how such effects can be measured and analysed.
- *Learning Infrastructures*. Unlike the others, this strand consists not of a series of papers but of a set of scenarios, designed to promote debate and imagination on what the infrastructure for learning might look like in the future. This challenges us to integrate the physical environments of learning, the virtual environments of learning technologies, and people's competences and behaviour.

We have also been consulting in the four UK nations, and amongst learner groups and other stakeholders. Periodic updates on IFLL progress are to be found in our Bulletin (you can register for Inquiry Bulletins at: www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry).

Thematic Papers

The Thematic Papers form the core initial substance of the Inquiry's work. They cover the following:

Prosperity, Employment and Work
Demography and Social Structure
Well-being and Happiness
Migration and Communities
Technological Change

Poverty and Social Exclusion
Citizenship and Belonging
Crime and Social Exclusion
Sustainable Development

Each of these themes has been tackled in the same way: a call for evidence was issued; a day-long seminar was organised, with inputs from practitioners, policy-makers and researchers; and the results of these two stages, and subsequent discussions and contributions, are distilled into a Thematic Paper, written either by an Inquiry Commissioner or a member of the Inquiry Secretariat.

We have posted on the Inquiry website the evidence submitted specifically to the Inquiry, along with the papers and presentations contributed to the thematic seminar.

A list of those who submitted evidence on Well-being and Happiness is at the end of this paper.

Next steps

This Thematic Paper represents the culmination of one stage in the Inquiry's work on this strand. We are very grateful to all those who responded to the call for evidence, and who contributed subsequently to the seminar. However, we are very well aware that the process of debate and consultation has been limited. Some people will not have been aware of the call for evidence, or not had time to make a submission.

Others will have waited until there were some conclusions to respond to. Therefore, the publication of this Thematic Paper is also an invitation for a second round of comment, submission and debate. Are there important issues which are not covered here? What further evidence should be included? And, most importantly, what further conclusions should be drawn, to feed into the Inquiry's final recommendations? Please send your comments to lifelonglearninginquiry@niace.org.uk

Responses to these questions will be taken into account as we move towards preparing the Inquiry's main report. This is due to be published in September 2009. It will be followed by a further period of discussion – and revision.



Professor Tom Schuller
Director, IFLL



Sir David Watson
Chair, IFLL Commissioners

1. Introduction

What sorts of life do we wish to lead? What do we value most, and how can we lead a good life? How can learning help us achieve what we want from our lives, for ourselves and for our communities?

For some years, governments have emphasised the economic benefits of learning, directing funding towards types of learning that seem most likely to deliver skills, competences and employability. Given the fierce competitive pressures of modern global markets, as well as widely shared public desires for prosperity and growth, this is understandable. At a time of high unemployment and economic uncertainty, investing in economic success seems like a pretty good idea.

Growing evidence from the new science of well-being suggests that people derive enjoyment and fulfilment from a number of different factors. Leading a satisfying life certainly involves a steady and adequate income, but researchers have shown that money alone is not enough. People also value their health, their social connections (including family), and their ability to contribute to the wider community. People gain pleasure from doing a good job, and having it recognised by others. They enjoy grappling with, mastering and then using new skills and knowledge. All in all, they value freedom – which we can define, following Amartya Sen¹, not as the possibility of ignoring other people and their needs, but as the ability to shape our own destinies.

Public policy has only just started to engage with the wider role of learning in helping people flourish across as well as through their lives. In England, the Government has placed a legal duty on further education colleges to promote the social as well as the economic well-being of their local area, and the value of informal learning as contributing ‘hugely to the health and well-being of individuals and wider society’ is recognised in a recent White Paper (DIUS, 2009). But the focus on skills and employment has shifted public resources away from those types of learning that help to promote well-being, and policy has yet to engage fully with what we now know about the wider benefits of learning.

A focus on well-being presents significant challenges to public policy, to providers, and to learners themselves. It suggests the following:

- The evidence that learning promotes well-being is overwhelming. This has huge implications in a society that is experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, mental illness and anxiety about the future – combined with the adoption of public policies that require individuals to take responsibility for planning against future risk. Learning providers must make much more of their contribution to well-being, as well as promoting the well-being of their own staff.

¹ Sen (1997).

- Adults who are not currently working are likely to lose out as a result of public funding priorities. Current policy may meet many of the needs of some groups, particularly younger adults entering the labour market, but it neglects others, including some of the most vulnerable in our society. There is a strong risk that older adults listening to policy makers' remarks about 'holiday Spanish' will feel that their learning needs are seen as trifling and even frivolous, and conclude that publicly funded learning is not for the likes of them. People in poor physical or mental health may similarly conclude that their learning is a luxury that a hard-working nation cannot afford. Yet the evidence reviewed above shows that learning can help build resilience and promote autonomy. As well as improving subjective well-being, it pays – a message that is sharper still in times of high unemployment.
- Making the most of learning's contribution to well-being requires inter-departmental and inter-organisational co-operation. Many public bodies have an interest in well-being; policy makers and providers concerned with adult learning must collaborate with a wide range of partners in areas such as health, employment, social policy and culture and the arts.
- We need to develop well-founded approaches to measurement. Although there is compelling research evidence of a positive overall association between learning and well-being, the relationships are probabilistic ones, and we cannot confidently predict that all individuals will therefore benefit equally from any single type of learning. Measurement of well-being is still in its infancy, and there are opportunities for developing indicators that allow us to identify which types of learning we should prioritise.

Finally, the paper asks whether the well-being agenda is more than just another set of possible outcomes of learning – but instead poses much deeper challenges to the values and aspirations that currently drive the lifelong learning system in societies like our own.

2. Headline messages

Our values are changing. After a long period in which most people and communities judged their success by measuring material wealth, there is a new interest in the wider quality of our lives. Policy-makers and academics are increasingly interested in how we might gauge whether or not we are satisfied with the lives we lead, and whether people are able to flourish and enjoy their lives.² Improving well-being is an urgent challenge for all of us.

This paper argues that education has a measurable impact on well-being, through all the stages of life. With the exception of the Foresight project undertaken by the Government Office for Science, most UK government initiatives on well-being tend to ignore education, while very few education policy initiatives make more than a passing mention of well-being. The impact of education takes place at different levels: education has a *direct* effect on well-being, by helping people develop capabilities and resources which influence their well-being; it has an *indirect* effect, leading to outcomes that in turn allow people to thrive and increase their resilience in the face of risk; and it can have a *cumulative* effect, by influencing the social and economic environment in which people spend their lives. The effects on well-being themselves can be collective as well as individual.

“Learning encourages social interaction and increases self-esteem and feelings of competency. Behaviour directed by personal goals to achieve something new has been shown to increase reported life satisfaction. While there is often a much greater policy emphasis on learning in the early years of life, psychological research suggests it is a critical aspect of day-to-day living for all age groups. Therefore policies that encourage learning, even in the elderly, will enable individuals to develop new skills, strengthen social networks, and feel more able to deal with life’s challenges.”

New Economics Foundation (2009), 46

These well-being benefits complement the economic outcomes of education. Indeed, in some respects they supplement these economic benefits, for example by enabling older adults to maintain their independence, or promoting capabilities that help people cope with risks. Yet until recently, well-being has been largely neglected by policy-makers, who tend to view education – particularly for adults – primarily in terms of its contribution to skills, and thus to competitiveness: from this perspective social and cultural goals in turn depend on the achievement of economic growth. This paper reviews current evidence on the impact of adult learning on a key social objective of learning, namely well-being. Many of the links between learning and well-being are complex; and the evidence base is still emerging and poorly understood. Nevertheless,

² Allin (2007); DEFRA (2008); Government Office for Science (2008).

the case is a compelling one, and the paper therefore concludes that, while there is abundant scope for further research, we can be generally confident in arguing that adult learning has a demonstrable impact on well-being. This is significant for both policy-makers and practitioners.

3. Rationale

In recent years, the subjects of well-being and happiness have captured the headlines. Policy-makers, researchers and the media have all devoted considerable attention to these emerging fields, fed partly by a growing body of evidence that people derive satisfaction from a variety of sources, and not merely from higher incomes. Much of this research, though, is very recent indeed, with one economist speaking of ‘lessons from a new science’.³

In summary, well-being can be defined as a positive mental state⁴. Initially embraced by some psychologists as a means of focusing attention on health and satisfaction with life, rather than on mental illness and its remedies⁵, it has been adopted more widely by a range of social scientists and some policy-makers. Well-being has been defined recently as:

“A dynamic state, in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society.”
(Government Office for Science, 2008, 10)

It is associated with such social qualities as confidence, optimism about the future, a sense of influence over one’s own destiny, and the social competences that promote satisfying and supportive relationships with other people – and not simply with an absence of diagnosed illness, disability or dissatisfaction.⁶ It also, critically, involves the resilience needed to deal with hard times as and when they occur.⁷ In policy terms, it can be defined as the conditions which allow individuals and communities to flourish.⁸

It seems plausible to connect the rise of academic and policy interest in well-being and happiness with the dilemmas of life in an affluent but highly risky society. Analyses of survey data have repeatedly shown that, once a society reaches a particular level of affluence, further increases in material wealth produce very limited changes in people’s self-reported happiness.⁹ And in what may seem a remarkable paradox for an affluent society like Britain, there is widespread concern over rising levels of depression and stress, and over the resulting costs to society, organisations, and individuals. The concept of well-being has developed as a way of focusing on positive mental states, and the removal or reduction of those factors that are likely to prevent people from thriving. Well-being has become a political buzz-word, conventionally

³ Layard (2006); Offer (2006); Government Office for Science (2008).

⁴ Argyle and Martin (1991).

⁵ Moore and Keyes (2003).

⁶ WHO (2004).

⁷ Schoon and Bynner (2003).

⁸ Government Office for Science (2008).

⁹ Offer (2006).

complementing such policy goals as economic growth and social justice;¹⁰ from some Green perspectives, ideas of well-being can be seen as alternatives to growth.¹¹

A recent report for the King's Fund estimates that there are around 828,000 people with moderate to severe depression in England (McCrone et al., 2008), resulting in huge costs through lost tax revenue and dependency on incapacity benefits. The report puts the total economic cost of mental illness at £49 billion in 2007. Yet mental health accounts for a mere 13 per cent of NHS spending. Further, it is estimated that occupational stress costs UK businesses some £5 billion a year, and an additional £3.8 billion to British society (Dewe and Kompier, 2008, 13).

It is therefore timely for us to consider how adult learning might influence happiness and well-being – and also to examine the impact of these subjective states on people's capacity for learning. Although there is a widely held view that adult learning has a positive impact on well-being, this proposition has only recently been systematically tested. Previously, the argument rested largely on accounts of practitioner experience. Indeed, most of us who have taught adults can offer countless examples of learners who have become more confident, more sociable, more positive about life, and more cheerful as individuals as a result of their learning achievements (though by the same token we are less able to speak confidently from experience about those who have tried adult learning, found it unpleasant or unrewarding, and stopped attending). For many of the practitioners and learners who submitted evidence in response to the Inquiry's call for evidence under this theme, the idea of a positive relationship between learning and well-being is simply common sense.

Qualitative research has generally bolstered this experiential knowledge by providing persuasive learner accounts of the ways in which learning affected their lives. Since the 1990s this evidence has been complemented by quantitative analyses of the rich longitudinal data-sets that are available to British social scientists. Particularly through the work of the Research Centre on the Wider Benefits of Learning (CWBL), the National Research and Development Centre on Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) and the Centre on the Economics of Education (CEE), as well as some projects conducted under the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), we now know much more about the impact of adult learning on health (including mental health), social participation, earnings, employability, and sense of agency.

The paper also reviews recent research findings on the influence of adult learning on earnings and employability, both of which may influence well-being indirectly. These are more important for some groups than others: in economically advanced societies, additional earnings produce limited gains in well-being for most groups

¹⁰ OECD (2001).

¹¹ New Economics Foundation (2004).

except the poorest, while employability is most significant for groups that are most vulnerable in the labour market. The paper then reviews recent research findings showing that participating in learning in adult life has some positive *direct* influence on well-being; analyses of cohort studies suggest that the influence is comparatively small, but nevertheless significant. There has been less study of learning's negative consequences for well-being, and the paper draws on some recent life history narratives to illustrate some of these less desirable influences. The paper then identifies gaps in our knowledge, exploring concerns and issues for those involved in promoting adult learning, and outlining a number of implications for policy and practice. The paper says relatively little about happiness, partly because we still lack a rigorous evidence base linking happiness with adult learning, and partly because it is by no means clear what the relationship ought to be. While it seems reasonable to hope and expect that learning will increase well-being, and equally that a sense of well-being is likely to promote confident and effective learning, it is much less clear that learning ought to make you happy, and we might hazard a guess that people who are very happy as they are might not feel much desire to learn.

There is, then, a growing body of evidence on the relationship between learning and well-being, as well as on the impact of learning on factors that help to promote well-being. The practical implications are of enormous significance. We have very compelling evidence that adult learning has significant positive consequences for people's health, earnings and employability, and there is some evidence of effects on our subjective well-being. Adult learning is not the only influence on these outcomes, and it can have a negative impact for some people some of the time. And of course, adult learning is desirable for many other reasons, not the least of which is that we might reasonably see a broad and generous lifelong learning system as a basic feature of a civilised way of life. Nevertheless, if we know that adult learning significantly shapes whether we flourish through adult life, then there are important consequences for the type of learning society that we set out to create.

4. The current position

Well-being and happiness have attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. There also seems to be a much wider public interest in research on these issues, judging by the success of Richard Layard's 2006 book on the economics of happiness. Policy-makers are also exploring the implications for public policy; Layard was invited to advise the UK Government on his own work, while the Government Office for Science has undertaken a research-based Foresight exercise on ways of promoting mental capital and well-being (Government Office for Science, 2008). As a final mark of their maturation, the concepts have started to attract critical attention, most recently from Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes who attack this terminology for reinforcing 'popular therapeutic orthodoxies' (Ecclestone and Hayes 2008, 8), and so helping those who wish to evict 'the pursuit of knowledge, craft skills and understanding' from their once central position in the education system (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008, 162). Professionals working in adult learning are also showing considerable interest in this issue. Over eighty responses were received to the Inquiry's call for evidence for this theme, substantially more than for any other.

This surge is starting to make a major impact on research in the field of adult learning, as will be shown in greater detail in this paper. It is not new: researchers have long been interested in the influence of adult learning on personal development, while the impact of education on learner confidence and self-esteem are among the most frequently mentioned items in the professional literature. But the new focus on well-being has indeed led some to question the purpose and focus of public policy for adult learning, which since the 1970s has increasingly been directed towards skills enhancement as a means of improving national competitiveness. Some now view this as a shaky basis for policy.¹² In affluent western societies, general increases in material wealth are now creating more problems for the wider community, and even for many individuals, than they solve. Yet most governments (and most voters) are currently committed to growth in both production and consumption, and accordingly see adult learning primarily as of economic significance, highlighting its importance – or lack of it – in promoting greater competitiveness and growth and enhancing the employability of the disadvantaged.¹³ In exploring the relationship between adult learning and well-being, then, we are raising fundamental questions about wider purpose and values.

This section summarises research into adult learning that is relevant to well-being; it is followed by a section exploring issues, concerns, gaps, and implications for the field. A considerable body of recent research has explored the relationship between adult learning and well-being. Some of this work examines the effects of adult learning upon factors directly relevant to well-being, such as self-efficacy, confidence or the ability

¹² New Economics Foundation (2004); Offer (2006)

¹³ Field (2006); Rubenson (2006); Schemmann (2007)

to create support networks. Others address factors that are indirectly – sometimes rather loosely – associated with well-being, such as earnings and employability. In both cases, the accumulated evidence points to positive associations between participation in learning and subjective well-being, and between participation in learning and mental health. These are important findings, for even if the effects are comparatively small ones, they nevertheless offer policy-makers one possible way of influencing levels of well-being among the wider population. However, participation in learning also has a downside, and there is some evidence that for some people, in some circumstances, learning can be associated with stress and anxiety, and erode factors that have helped people maintain good mental health. The paper illustrates these negative consequences with learner accounts drawn from a large-scale study of agency, identity and change in the adult life-course (see www.learninglives.org). It concludes by identifying a number of implications for policy and practice.

4.1 Well-being and adult learning in late modernity

Many professionals in the field of adult learning firmly believe that their work makes people feel better about themselves and their lives. These claims have won acceptance in some if not all policy circles. As a landmark government inquiry argued 36 years ago, adult learning ‘is of crucial importance for the health of our society and the quality of life of individual citizens’.¹⁴ Intuitively, these assertions make sense. Logically, it follows that as with muscles, so with the brain: ‘use it or lose it’. My own experience of working with adult learners has shown plentiful examples of people who gain visibly in confidence and optimism as a result of successful learning. Similar experiences have been reported by a wide variety of practitioners in community-, workplace- and college-based adult learning.¹⁵

These claims have been repeated more often than they have been systematically investigated. This is not an original claim: 25 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 well-being, yet have lacked a language to describe the dynamics involved and to explain why these may be crucial to emotional and psychological well-being.” (West, 1996, 97)

Despite the importance of well-being to individuals and the community, only in recent years has adult learning’s claimed contribution come under close examination.

Of course, the concept of well-being is a notoriously difficult one. It is hard to define, and it should not therefore be used in a simplistic way for research purposes. It

¹⁴ DfES (1973).

¹⁵ Aldridge and Lavender (2000); McGivney (1999).

refers to a subjective state, which represents the way that people feel about their lives. The idea of well-being has a strong orientation towards policy and practice, as well as having currency in everyday life, and it is attracting research interest in those scientific disciplines that have traditionally studied mental health, such as psychology.¹⁶ 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. 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).

There are good reasons for considering well-being to be among the most important outcomes of adult learning, at least in its significance for the wider community as well as for learners themselves. It is not just that well-being is desirable in itself; it also has further consequences, not least for learning. For learners, a positive outlook on the future and a sense of one’s ability to take charge of one’s life are indispensable to further, continuing successful learning. Well-being is also associated with better health, higher levels of social and civic engagement, and greater resilience in the face of external crises.¹⁷ So if adult learning already affects people’s life chances directly, it can also affect them indirectly by enhancing their well-being.

More broadly, the absence of well-being is a cause for wider concern. Policy-makers tend to be most concerned with the economic significance of ill-being.¹⁸ In Britain, it is estimated that one worker in five reports finding their work either stressful or very stressful; official estimates are that around 13 million working days are reportedly lost through stress each year.¹⁹ Mental health problems are said to account for a high proportion of worklessness arising from incapacity.²⁰ If adult learning can raise levels of well-being, it should help reduce these costs on the economy.

But a flourishing society is not likely to be one that is concerned with wealth and consumption alone. On the contrary: one of the most consistent findings in the well-being literature is that the relationship between income and satisfaction (with work as well as with life in general) is a very loose one. While each unit of additional income has a marked effect on the happiness of the poor, its impact is reduced as the income level raises; among the wealthy, by contrast, additional units of income make barely any difference to happiness.²¹ While income does have an impact on well-being, once a society has dealt with extremes of inequality, the obsessive pursuit of economic growth for its own sake may solve few of the problems that individuals and communities face, calling into question the primacy of the economic

¹⁶ Huppert, Baylis and Keverne (2005); Huppert (2009).

¹⁷ Argyle and Martin (1991).

¹⁸ WHO (2004).

¹⁹ HSE (2005).

²⁰ Bloch and Prins (2001).

²¹ Kahneman et al. (2006); Layard (2006).

in determining education and training policy. Increasingly, people are questioning the idea of growth itself as the main goal of public policy, and some are even seeing it as part of the problem – in western nations at least – rather than the solution. If more – money, goods, services – does not make people happy, then what does? And can the education and training system help to produce it? In a post-scarcity society, personal and communal well-being becomes 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 focused either on the emergence of post-nuclear families as a result of separation and divorce, or the supposed growth of transgressive family forms (single-parent families, same-sex parenting, and so on). These developments are certainly significant: reported levels of life satisfaction are significantly lower on average for separated and divorced individuals than for married people.²² However, we should not overlook exceptionally dramatic changes in the role of women and the elderly in late modernity, as well as significant shifts in the nature and meaning of both family and work for women and men, and some evidence of cultural changes in people's attitudes towards different types of social support.²³

Some of these demographic shifts have been discussed in the first thematic paper published by the Inquiry (*Demography and Lifelong Learning: IFLL Thematic Paper 1*, McNair, 2009). Among the most important is an unprecedented and dramatic growth in the number of what would once have been seen as extremely old adults in their eighties and beyond, along with the growing importance of older adults as carers for grandchildren (a caring role predominantly taken by women) or frail partners (a role often taken by men as well as women). There have also been significant rises in the number of women undertaking paid work, whether full or part time; since late 2008, this has also meant that for the first time in modern history, large-scale unemployment is a direct experience for many working women. These shifts have had complex consequences for the range of social support available to people at times of need, as well as for the learning that people require through their life-course.

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'.²⁴ 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.²⁵

²² Argyle (1998).

²³ Anderson, Brownlie and Given (2009).

²⁴ Rosanvallon (1995).

²⁵ 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'.²⁶ 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, inherited social support mechanisms are no longer as widely available as in the past and, increasingly, responsibility for one's well-being has fallen onto the individual and his or her family. Yet at the same time as established forms of social support are losing ground, we have also seen far-reaching transformations in the economy. The highly dynamic capitalist economies of the early twenty-first century are based on permanent, institutionalised innovation and change, reducing the job security of many workers, and raising expectations of frequent episodes of up-skilling and re-skilling as people's jobs change and even vanish around them. Awareness of risk is pervasive, and many factors are coming together to reward those who plan for a flexible and uncertain future life, and to penalise those who hope that older support mechanisms might somehow reappear.

4.2 The benefits of learning: recent progress

Until recently, much of the evidence on the benefits of learning was anecdotal, and some was frankly aspirational. This was particularly the case for adult 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'.²⁷ The evidence base, then, was patchy and sometimes poor.

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 a third to examine adult basic skills.²⁸ Their work has produced a knowledge base in Britain which as yet has no parallel anywhere else in the world. The centres have attracted extensive international interest, and are widely recognised as at the leading edge of educational research.²⁹

²⁶ Beck (1992).

²⁷ Ananiadou, Jenkins and Wolf (2004).

²⁸ See www.cee.lse.ac.uk and www.learningbenefits.net/ and www.nrdc.ac.uk

²⁹ Schuller and Desjardins (2007).

Much of the recent UK work rests on the analysis of large-scale data-sets, primarily national-level cohort and household surveys. Birth cohort studies provide longitudinal information about people's lives over time which allow for the presentation of statistical associations and outcomes through the life-course, and allow us to infer estimates of causation.³⁰ Yet despite their strengths, they also have important limitations, especially in relation to lifelong learning. They tend to collect information about episodes of formal learning, or qualifications gained, and do not tell us much about informal learning. And, methodologically, the analysis of learning benefits is challenging: 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 of such factors are inherited cognitive assets or 'innate' ability³¹ and family background, which can produce positional resources of the type described by Pierre Bourdieu as cultural capital and social capital.³² Finally, up till now the analyses of cohort studies have not sought to identify specific features of learning that are associated with positive well-being; indeed, this may be beyond the scope of the data. These limitations notwithstanding, cohort-based data represent the most systematic attempt to date to identify the economic, social and personal outcomes of learning.

Economic benefits

Economic factors such as income and employment play an important part in well-being. In both cases, the relationship is more complex than we might at first suppose. In the case of health, for example, affluence on its own does not lead to improved health outcomes; rather, those countries with comparatively high levels of good health are characterised by relatively high levels of material comfort combined with relatively low levels of income inequality; in highly unequal countries, by contrast, average health levels are comparatively low – even, it seems, for the rich.³³ People's self-judgements of life satisfaction appear to be higher in countries that combine prosperity with low levels of social inequality, while above certain levels, increases in income make virtually no difference to people's happiness.³⁴

While the relationship between income and well-being is not linear, there are nevertheless clear connections between the two. Having a comparatively low income is often associated with low levels of life satisfaction, as well as with higher rates of

³⁰ Bynner and Joshi (2007).

³¹ 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.

³² Bourdieu (1986).

³³ Wilkinson (1996).

³⁴ Helliwell and Huang (2005); Layard (2005).

mental illness.³⁵ The association between unemployment and mental disorder was first established during the 1930s, and is now widely accepted.³⁶ So the economic gains from learning will have some impact on well-being, albeit largely indirect in nature.

Much recent research on the rates of return to learning has focused on the gains to the individual and less frequently the organisation (enterprise) rather than estimating the rate of return to the community. 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 in the post-compulsory sector has concentrated on higher education, largely in response to debates over the financing of third-level studies. Broadly, this research demonstrates a continuing return to higher education, even in countries like Britain where higher education entry rates rose sharply in the 1990s. In Britain, degree qualifications continue to show a higher rate of return than higher national qualifications (Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas recognise short-cycle higher education courses); however both outstrip the return on Advanced Level qualifications, which are taken mainly by school-leavers at 18).³⁷ For vocational qualifications, there are clear returns both for men and for women for intermediate and higher qualifications, but with some differences between men and women in respect of subject studied; low-level qualifications produce rather low rates of return for women and men.³⁸ Finally, among adults who had experienced unemployment in their youth, the long-term wage penalty among 33 year olds was 11 per cent lower for people who had taken educational qualifications between the ages of 23 and 33; however, relatively few of those who experienced a lot of youth unemployment had taken qualifications, so this positive effect is unlikely to make a considerable difference without vigorous efforts to promote learning.³⁹

In adult learning, most of the literature concerns work-related training. If we look at changes in wages in Britain between 1981 and 1991, employer-provided training leads to a rise in average earnings for men; the findings for women were not statistically significant. Courses leading to a higher vocational qualification (National – or Scottish – Vocational Qualifications rated at Level 4 or above) produced an earnings gain of 8 per cent for men and 10 per cent for women; there are also higher returns for longer courses.⁴⁰ Work-related training also yielded higher wages, but employers single out the most capable employees for training, so that it was unclear whether it was the training or a manager's belief in the workers' ability which produced higher earnings.⁴¹

³⁵ Jenkins et al. (2008).

³⁶ Warr (1994).

³⁷ McIntosh (2004).

³⁸ Dearden, McIntosh, Myck and Vignoles (2002).

³⁹ Gregg and Tominey (2005).

⁴⁰ Blundell, Dearden and Meghir (1996).

⁴¹ Vignoles, Galindo-Rueda and Feinstein (2004).

Recent research has investigated the benefits of Level 2 vocational qualifications, which play a particularly important role in policy thinking. Studies of workers who gained Level 2 qualifications during the 1990s showed that the wage benefits were extremely low or even negative.⁴² This may be because employers made rather negative assumptions about workers whose highest qualification is an NVQ2 gained in adult life. A more recent analysis showed that men who gained an NVQ between 2000 and 2004 earned no more as a result, and that the same qualification was associated with a drop in women's wages. However, by this time those workers who had taken their NVQ2 between 1996 and 2000 did experience higher earnings, with a marked gain for women workers and a statistically insignificant gain for men.⁴³ This suggests that there is a lag in the wage effects of lifelong learning, as well as a decidedly uneven effect for different workers. It is also highly probable, though the evidence base is currently thin, that different types of NVQ2 have different implications for workers' wages. In respect of gender, possibly women tend to experience wage gains because they are more likely to work in sectors and enterprises where NVQ2 is valued, but it should be noted that qualifications of all kinds are generally more influential on women's wages than men's. Finally, acquiring an NVQ2 had no discernable effect on employability for women or men, though this is partly because most adults who take NVQ2 already have a job.⁴⁴ Overall, then, recent research has shown no evidence that an NVQ2 produces earnings or employability gains for men, but some evidence of a delayed earnings gain for women workers.

Little research exists on general adult learning. However, two British studies have examined rates of return on basic skills improvements. 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.⁴⁵ 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, at broadly similar levels for both genders; moreover, the wage premium from basic skills has been increasing over time.⁴⁶ Interestingly, the value of basic skills in the UK labour market is comparatively high, suggesting a relative scarcity of these skills as compared with other some other countries.⁴⁷

Learning also has an impact on employability. This is particularly significant for well-being, as the association between involuntary worklessness and mental ill-health is a well-established one. As well as reducing income levels, unemployment also removes people from an important social network, and harms their sense of worth and self-esteem.⁴⁸ These are, moreover, lasting effects: cohorts of people who entered the

⁴² McIntosh (2004); Jenkins, Greenwood and Vignoles (2007).

⁴³ De Coulon and Vignoles (2003).

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.34

⁴⁵ McIntosh and Vignoles (2001).

⁴⁶ De Coulon, Marcenaro-Gutierrez and Vignoles (2007).

⁴⁷ Hansen and Vignoles (2005).

⁴⁸ Field (2008); Jenkins et al. (2003).

labour market at times of high and rising unemployment tend to show above average levels of depression and suicide through their life-course, and also make fewer efforts to find work, suggesting a lasting blow to self-confidence.⁴⁹ The UK Government recognises the importance of employment to social inclusion, particularly through the new deals for vulnerable groups such as single parents and people with disability, and in terms of its strategy of offering intensive support to Incapacity Benefit (IB) claimants, particularly when they first enter IB and are most highly motivated to remain in the labour market.⁵⁰ A World Bank review of research on active labour market programmes concluded that training has little impact on the life chances of young unemployed people, but generally raises employability levels among the adult unemployed, and this is broadly consistent with the experience of the new deal.⁵¹

So there is good evidence to show that learning has positive effects on income and employability. Intuitively, then, it must have a positive indirect influence on well-being, since higher income and avoiding unemployment are important both in helping avoid sources of anxiety and stress and poor mental health, and in supporting people when times are hard. Yet as Layard's comments on income suggest, things are not quite so simple. A study based on Canadian data similarly shows that increases in income level are associated with very limited changes in levels of job satisfaction and life satisfaction; interestingly, it found that being able to trust your manager produced a greater rise in well-being than an additional \$200,000 income.⁵²

Relative income inequalities tend to cause dissatisfaction and reduce well-being. Income improvements lead to high gains in well-being among the poorest; among the affluent, additional income has marginal consequences. On balance, then, improving income leads to relatively small gains in well-being for all but the poor, while improving employability is associated with a significant gain both in well-being and in resilience. The benefits that people derive from the economic outcomes of learning should not be overstated, then, and nor should they be generalised. They are significant mainly for those who are most exposed to economic insecurity and poverty, and this suggests that public support, especially for vocationally oriented learning, should be concentrated primarily on these groups.

Social benefits of learning: recent findings

Learning and personal well-being

As well as helping to raise earnings and employability, which indirectly affect well-being, learning can also create wider, non-economic benefits.⁵³ These can directly influence well-being, since they act as protective influences against poor mental health and low levels of life satisfaction. Examples include self-efficacy, autonomy, social

⁴⁹ Clark, Georgellis and Sanfey (2001); Gunnell et al. (1999).

⁵⁰ Bewley, Dorsett and Ratto (2008).

⁵¹ Betcherman, Olivas and Dar (2004).

⁵² Helliwell and Huang (2005).

⁵³ Searle (2008).

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'.⁵⁴

In a review of community learning, Veronica McGivney reported that participation in learning has positive consequences for mental health.⁵⁵ A survey conducted by NIACE of people short-listed for adult learning awards found that almost nine out of ten reported positive emotional or mental health benefits, albeit among what is clearly a rather skewed sample.⁵⁶ In one study, four-fifths of learners aged 51–70 reported a positive impact on such areas as confidence, life satisfaction or their capacity to cope.⁵⁷ Two out of five respondents in a German survey reported that being able to 'learn something new' made them 'very happy' – slightly above the proportion who said that a good holiday made them 'very happy' – while an overwhelming majority of 85 per cent agreed with the statement that 'Happiness and well-being are closely connected to your own skills and learning through life'.⁵⁸ There is also some evidence from a small number of pilot projects involving health providers in referring selected patients to learning opportunities. An evaluation of the Nottingham-based 'Prescriptions for Learning' project, in which a learning adviser worked with three GPs' surgeries, found that people experienced a marked sense of improvement in well-being from the moment that they became engaged with the learning adviser, and this continued throughout their learning experience.⁵⁹

Learning providers have been encouraged to improve services to people with mental health difficulties.⁶⁰ 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 include development of second careers for older adults.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Ananiadou, Jenkins and Wolf (2004).

⁵⁵ McGivney (1999).

⁵⁶ Aldridge and Lavender (2000).

⁵⁷ Dench and Regan (1999).

⁵⁸ Schleiter (2008).

⁵⁹ The evaluation is summarised in James (2004).

⁶⁰ See James and Talbot-Strettle (2008).

⁶¹ Austin (2007).

Such partnerships have also been initiated through healthcare providers, many of whom already refer some patients to adult learning provision. The Nottingham project referred to above was based in three GPs' surgeries in a deprived area of the city, with high levels of poor health. Healthcare staff tended to refer particular groups of patients to learning providers; these included people who had mild to moderate mental health needs, were lacking social contacts, had lost a central role through bereavement or retirement or redundancy, or had sustained an injury or accident. By the time that the project was evaluated, the learning adviser had seen 196 people (almost all of whom, it should be noted, came from 'low participation' groups, and a significant minority of whom were on incapacity benefit or were unemployed), about half of whom took up learning as a result.⁶² Given what we know about the association between poor health and social background (with ethnicity as an important dimension, additional to socio-economic status and income), this is an important finding, if still indicative rather than conclusive. It is remarkable that policy-makers concerned with mental health and social justice have not seized upon it with enthusiasm.

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) for England has developed strategic proposals for improving services for people with mental health difficulties, with the aim of ensuring that:

“By 2015, England will be an international exemplar in providing learning and skills opportunities for people with mental health difficulties.” (LSC, 2006b)

This is an extremely important ambition, and the broad strategic approach adopted by the LSC can only be applauded. Yet it is also limited in that it focuses only on how we can work effectively with those who already suffer from mental disorders, rather than identifying ways of improving people's resilience and well-being so that they continue to thrive. It also tends to ignore the needs of older adults, who are likely to be bypassed by initiatives tied to LSC funding criteria, yet who may particularly benefit from the impact of learning upon their cognitive reserve.^{63,64}

These studies have recently been supplemented by analyses of longitudinal data. Adults show clear cognitive gains from participating in adult learning, and this is apparent regardless of whether or not the learning involves qualifications.⁶⁵ Accredited learning appears to protect individuals against depression, though it seemingly has little or no impact on happiness, and there may be some association (whether causal or not) between depression and leisure courses.⁶⁶ But qualitative research suggests that general adult education helps counter depression.⁶⁷ Participation in learning does have an impact on adults' levels of life satisfaction, which is an important aspect of

⁶² James (2004).

⁶³ See Lee (2007).

⁶⁴ See Housden (2008).

⁶⁵ Hatch et al. (2007).

⁶⁶ Feinstein et al. (2003).

⁶⁷ Schuller et al. (2004).

well-being,⁶⁸ as well as showing gains among learners in optimism and self-rated well-being.⁶⁹

Survey data demonstrates a close association between participation in adult learning and engagement in a variety of social and civic activities, though again survey findings cannot show causation.⁷⁰ Participation in learning tends to enhance social capital, by helping develop social competences, extending social networks, and promoting shared norms and tolerance of others.⁷¹ Both of these 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 significant increases among females and older people in the proportion going out regularly; greater clarity about future intentions on community involvement; and a rise in the number who could identify someone they could turn to for help. The learners were particularly likely to have extended their 'bridging' networks, through contacts with tutors, other staff and fellow students.⁷²

Adult learning and health

Feinstein and Hammond 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.⁷³ Finally, Sabates and Feinstein⁷⁴ 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. Even though the size of the change was comparatively small, its importance is high.

Finally, a number of studies have examined the effects of adult learning on personal attributes. The most consistent finding in qualitative research and practitioner narratives is that adult learning produces gains in confidence.⁷⁵ A detailed qualitative investigation of adult literacy, numeracy and host language education in England found that participants identified both social confidence and personal confidence among the most highly valued outcomes of courses.⁷⁶ Additionally, Hammond and Feinstein's⁷⁷ longitudinal analysis found that learners were more likely to report gains in self-efficacy

⁶⁸ Feinstein et al. (2003).

⁶⁹ Hammond and Feinstein (2006).

⁷⁰ Field (2005).

⁷¹ Schuller et al. (2004).

⁷² Tett and Maclachlan (2007).

⁷³ Feinstein and Hammond (2004); Hammond and Feinstein (2006).

⁷⁴ Sabates and Feinstein (2006).

⁷⁵ Knasel, Meed and Rossetti (2000); Tett and Maclachlan (2007); See also: Dorset Adult Learning (2008); Johnston (2008); Open College Network (OCN) Yorkshire and Humber Region (2008); St Anne's Community Services (2008); Tai, Dysgu a Gwaith Operational Group (2008) .

⁷⁶ Barton et al. (2007).

⁷⁷ Hammond and Feinstein (2006).

and sense of agency (perceived control over important life choices) than non-learners. There is, then, general agreement among researchers that learning produces greater confidence and self-efficacy.

Norfolk Adult Education's Older People's Project uses reminiscence as a way of reaching older people with learning experiences. One of the Project's tutors asked 20 learners what they got out of their programme: Firstly, the item of most overall importance was 'keeping my mind active keeps it healthy'. This implies that these older learners wanted intellectual stimulation that was going to give them some challenges, and that thought-provoking material would be appropriate for them. Secondly, the next two items suggest that they want that material to be meaningful and relevant to their interests.... This highlights the importance of involving older people in planning their learning by asking them *how* they'd like to learn as well as *what* they'd like to learn. The items on the questionnaire which were considered least important by the participants were 'it fills my time' and 'it gets me out of the house'. This indicates that these learners wanted more than time-filling entertainment and that there was something about the learning situation and its challenges which attracted and motivated them.

Evidence submitted to IFLL by Norfolk Adult Education

Self-efficacy and confidence make people more resilient in hard times. There is also a good case for supposing that self-efficacy combined with strong numerical literacy help people to judge and manage risk, including financial risk. Recent research has shown that debt, along with the risk of falling into uncontrolled debt, is a much stronger factor than low income alone in causing mental disorders.⁷⁸ Yet survey evidence published by the Financial Services Authority suggests that 'A significant minority of people seem not to understand the risks they face'.⁷⁹

Taken together, these findings suggest that adult learning has positive direct effects on well-being. This influence is measurable and consistent. While most of the quantitative studies suggest that it is comparatively small, this by no means suggests that it is trivial. Given that policy-makers repeatedly find that influencing the behaviour of adult citizens is difficult, and sometimes downright impossible (as illustrated by the limited success of public health campaigns in many countries), it is highly significant that adult learning has these positive results, both for individuals and for collective groups more widely. Of course, these findings are usually at the aggregate level, and they tend to rest on bodies of evidence that take little account of the experiences of people who drop out along the way, or who are deterred from enrolling by poor provider behaviour. For some people, experiences of learning are deeply unsatisfactory, and the

⁷⁸ Jenkins et al. (2008).

⁷⁹ FSA (2006).

next section explores this issue further. But we should not lose sight of remarkably consistent findings from research that suggests an overall positive influence of adult learning on the way people feel about themselves and their lives.

Learning and its discontents

It is natural to focus on the positive consequences of learning, especially when so many researchers come from a background of practice. Nevertheless, participation in learning can sometimes have negative consequences; far from improving people's well-being, it can actively damage it. This is rather different from acknowledging that serious learning can be demanding, even painful, yet worthwhile in the longer term. Thus Aldridge and Lavender's study of people nominated for Adult Learners' Awards – a sample that is likely to be biased towards comparatively successful learners – found that, while there were many benefits, most of their respondents also experienced 'disbenefits' such as stress, broken relationships and a new dissatisfaction with one's present way of life.⁸⁰

This section will be illustrated from interview material collected during the Learning Lives research project, a four year multi-method study that interviewed a sample of people repeatedly over time.⁸¹ Several of these learners experienced anxiety, stress and frustration through learning, and I quote from interviews with Kathleen Donnelly, a working-class woman in her mid thirties from urban West Scotland, who had successfully completed a higher education course and was trying to become a youth worker. I present this case in order to illustrate what has so far been an under-researched dimension of adult learning and well-being, but I am certainly not claiming that Kathleen is typical.

A number of different mechanisms appear to be at work here. First, teaching styles can cause anxiety and stress. The most common experience of anxiety for learners appears to involve assessment. Even where assessments are routine, predictable and pedagogically appropriate, the possibility of failure is always present.

Kathleen Donnelly, for instance, completed a Higher National Diploma in a further education college before going on to study for a university degree. She was used to pressure in her work, as well as in her family life, and she was also used to study. She also experienced enormous fulfilment from academic achievement:

“When you get there there's no feeling in the world, like when you've passed an exam and you've got a good mark and you're like that, 'Yeees!', d'you know what I mean; like, 'Celebrate!' and happiness like that doesn't really come in your life a lot.”

⁸⁰ Aldridge and Lavender (2000).

⁸¹ The Learning Lives project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, through its Teaching and Learning Research Programme. It was undertaken by a consortium of four universities, involving Phil Hodkinson, Heather Hodkinson, Geoff Ford and Ruth Hawthorn at Leeds, Paul Lambe and Flora Macleod at Exeter, Norma Adair and Ivor Goodson at Brighton, and Gert Biesta, Heather Lynch and Irene Malcolm at Stirling. Full details, including a description of methodology, can be found on the project website: www.learninglives.org

But “studying for a degree, I do know studying, see the pressure of exams, that was a whole new pressure”. Faced with the double challenges of preparing for examinations and lobbying to move away from housing conditions that she found extremely stressful, Kathleen left her course; although she hoped to return, or to take an Open University degree, she told us that “I don’t think it’s the right time for me to go back to university yet, I just feel as though I can’t deal with the pressures of sitting the exams and studying ‘til late at night because when you work and you’ve got a family it’s like, it’s slotting things in”.

Second, there may be deep-rooted problems of curriculum structure. The examples cited most frequently in the Learning Lives interviews were connected with national vocational qualifications (NVQs), which are designed as ways of assessing competences gained primarily through work-based experiential learning. These NVQs, known in Scotland as SVQs (Scottish vocational qualifications), therefore involve learners in a working environment that has not normally been designed primarily for learning and teaching purposes. They are also primarily designed to assess work-related skills rather than inculcate knowledge and understanding. The sample is a small one and may not be representative, but it illustrates the extent to which any problems can disrupt learning and demotivate learners. A study of part-time adult foundation degree students at Somerset College⁸² concluded that work-based learning in particular led to feelings of isolation from peers and college, despite supervisor visits; this in turn was breaking down the peer support system. Of course, good teachers in a supportive institution can change some of these conditions. The solution in this case was to have a break in the middle of placements, with a group tutorial to explore concerns together. But the point is that not all learning environments provide the level of learner support that is often viewed as core to good teaching practice.

Kathleen, who took an SVQ in community work after completing an HND and withdrawing from a degree, experienced the skills-led content of the SVQ as narrow and repetitive.

“I kind of knew all the theory before it through doing the HND in social sciences, so it wasn’t like when I was doing that – I was like ‘Oh my God, is that how that’s happened to me’, d’you know what I mean? While I’ve been doing this it’s been quite boring, really quite boring ‘cause I already know it, but I suppose for the folk that have just started an SVQ and haven’t been to college before, I see it as a stepping stone for them to get into college and stuff like that, but for myself I feel as though it’s been a backward step.”

Her boredom meant that she effectively sat out the taught component of the SVQ, aiming simply to ‘tick boxes’. The result was that “I made up my SVQ, the whole lot of it, in a few weeks. It was easy, it was ridiculously easy”. In total contrast to her earlier studies, Kathleen experienced no sense of fulfilment or achievement.

⁸² Pugh (2008).

Kathleen was also involved in two unsatisfactory placements. As she described it, the manager in the youth agency was authoritarian and a bully. The most important piece of learning for Kathleen was not to do with her SVQ, but discovering towards the end of her placement that she could stand up to her manager. Completing the SVQ, in itself, was more a source of frustration and even cynicism than of achievement and fulfilment.

Third, education can evoke – even if unintentionally – unpleasant and stressful experiences from people’s earlier lives. A study of adult basic education participants found that anxieties were particularly acute ‘if elements of the learning environment recalled people’s previous negative experiences of education or authority, or other traumatic or painful events from their histories’.⁸³ In Kathleen’s case, this was only an issue where examinations were concerned. She spoke of her further education lecturers with praise, explicitly contrasting their friendliness and concern for her with her earlier experiences at school.

Further, although learning can help extend some social networks, it can also disrupt existing ones. This is inseparable from the processes of social mobility and change that learning produces. In particular, while it tends to extend those wider and more heterogeneous networks that some social capital analysts call ‘bridging ties’, it can also disrupt ‘bonding ties’, such as close kinship and neighbourhood connections. And while bonding ties can often form a barrier to social and geographical mobility, they can also provide access to types of social support that can be extremely important in times of trouble.⁸⁴ This can in turn increase vulnerability to ill-health, including poor mental health, and undermine resilience. Kathleen had built new networks of fellow mature women students, and she had also managed to persuade her mother and sister to return to learn. She had managed to adapt her existing bonding ties, while creating new bridging ties that helped provide support in her new environment. Fraser Smith, another participant in the Learning Lives project from a working class West of Scotland background, had found a different solution. Believing that his old connections had held him back, he had cut his ties to his old friends and even his mother, who he described as “a hell of a person for saying ‘You’ll not be able to do it, you’ll not stick that’”; he had built new networks (including bonding ties with his wife’s family). Now in his mid thirties, he had not spoken to his mother since “I was seventeen, eighteen, which is quite sad”.

Social networks are important sources of personal support, but learning more generally involves a process of transformation, in which something is gained while something is left behind. Sometimes this loss can be felt as painful. In their detailed study of people engaged in adult basic education programmes, the Lancaster group noticed that learning does not simply mean the acquisition, and perhaps assessment, of new skills and knowledge. It can also involve people in ‘entering a different culture or taking on

⁸³ Barton et al. (2007).

⁸⁴ Field (2008).

a whole new identity, a process that could be experienced as difficult and sometimes even as dangerous'.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Barton et al. (2007).

5. Conclusions and evidence gaps

Adult learning influences 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. Other benefits, such as higher earnings and employability, influence well-being indirectly. 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, the relationship seems to be non-linear, and adults' life-courses are complex and highly context-dependent, so it is highly unlikely that a realistic cost-benefit analysis is feasible or even worthwhile (some might argue that it is better not to know, either because the answer might be inconvenient or because they think it tends to reduce everything to cash). Nevertheless, even if we cannot assign a simple economic value to the well-being that people derive from learning, in general the evidence suggests a clear positive relationship. These effects can be found for some general adult learning as well as vocational learning, and they are particularly marked for basic literacy and numeracy.

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. Second, in all the studies reviewed above, the effects are relatively small ones. Even so, the findings are 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. Third, it is not possible to be confident about causation, as it is possible that unobserved factors might explain both findings. This can only be clarified through further research. Fourth, much of the quantitative research takes learning as a given, and does not identify those features and types of learning that are particularly likely to promote well-being. Finally, there are some areas of well-being where there is no evidence – at least, not yet – of well-being effects from education and training. We do not yet have any evidence that learning prevents the onset of dementia (though it seems to delay the appearance of symptoms) nor that participating in adult learning can counter infant-acquired or genetic disabilities such as dyslexia or ADHD (though it is possible that it can help to address some of the problems that these disabilities produce). We should not over-state the case.

I can now sketch out a provisional scorecard for current UK government policies. First, the evidence reviewed here suggests that recent government policies aimed at increasing the volume and quality of literacy and numeracy provision are well founded. Equally, it suggests that policies prioritising funding for Level 2 qualifications are not rooted in evidence; indeed, all the available evidence until 2008 pointed to low or negative returns from Level 2 qualifications. More recent research suggests that 'an NVQ2 has some labour market value for women, particularly those with poorer

cognitive ability'.⁸⁶ This policy may then be helping some groups in the population, but is by no means relevant to all.

More broadly, it is unclear whether vocational learning has greater social and economic benefits than general opportunities for adults in general, but it is certainly clear that general adult education holds greater attractions for older adults, while vocational upskilling is more important for the young. Current policies aimed at increasing public support for vocational learning and reducing it for general learning may lead to economic benefits for younger adults, though this depends on the nature and level of the provision; what is clear is that such policies are certain to penalise older adults, and will particularly hit those who are outside the workforce. In identifying a broad range of benefits from learning, this review also points to important public messages that should be stressed in social marketing campaigns; conversely, an undue public emphasis on the narrowly economic outcomes from learning is unlikely to inspire people to become enthusiastic lifelong learners.

As well as this broad scorecard for the impact of current policy, this review has suggested several areas where further research is more than justified in order to overcome limitations to the existing evidence base.⁸⁷ As well as investigating the issue of cause and effect in greater detail, as suggested above, much of the recent quantitative research has been carried out in Britain, so there is a strong case for looking closely at other types of society. For example, we know little about the role of adult learning in shaping well-being in European societies with different regimes for social support, particularly those characterised by strong and universalistic welfare states such as the Nordic nations, and those characterised by strong and particularistic family support structures such as the Mediterranean nations.⁸⁸ Nor do we have much evidence in respect of non-Western societies, whether already economically advanced (Japan), rapidly emerging (China, India) or currently still poor (sub-Saharan Africa). There are also areas where the evidence base has yet to go beyond the collection of scattered experiences of particular projects and programmes; more systematic research is particularly needed in such areas as financial literacy.

In addition, we need a more differentiated view of the impact of learning. The quantitative studies draw on longitudinal data-sets that tend to aggregate all learning together as if it were the same; qualitative studies tend to be confined to one very particular learning context. Can we bring these research traditions closer together, so as to investigate whether the general evidence for well-being effects are distributed across all types of learning? Or, as much well-being research and practitioner narratives might suggest, do people experience greater gains from types of learning that engage them in activities that create what Csikszentmihalyi⁸⁹ has described as moments of 'flow', of complete and utter absorption? And finally, we need to apply a differentiated

⁸⁶ De Coulon and Vignoles (2008).

⁸⁷ Desjardins (2008).

⁸⁸ Kääriäinen and Lehtonen (2006).

⁸⁹ Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

view of learners and learning. Are the well-being effects distributed more or less equally across different types of learner? Or do some people experience stronger gains than others? Similarly, can we identify particular approaches that are more likely to produce well-being effects than others?

6. Links to other Inquiry themes

Well-being has implications for all other areas of the Inquiry's work, and it is touched on in other thematic papers. Some of the most critical connections are discussed below.

Prosperity, employment and work

Changes in the labour market are also a major driver of change in other areas of people's lives. Tendencies towards work intensification, the extension of working life into other life domains, and sharply rising unemployment are all common sources of stress and uncertainty in people's lives, affecting families and communities as well as individuals. Other aspects of workplace life – bullying, abusive or violent customers, or poor management – also have a marked effect on workers' well-being. Trade unions – a source of collective identity and security for many workers – have modernised their involvement in learning. At the same time, different surveys have shown that workers increasingly prize job satisfaction as a goal in their lives.

Survey data show that most British managers recognise the importance of 'people management', placing a high value of training and development, while the best employers are committed to engaging workers actively when re-engineering aspects of the business process. Previous recessions have shown, though, that many employers still treat training and development as a discretionary cost, which can be cut to make savings in tough times. Areas such as 'stress management' and non-skills-specific training are particularly vulnerable to budget cuts. It remains the case, though, that improving work skills across the board is not only at the heart of competitiveness in the global economy, but is central to maintaining resilience and adaptability for workers.

Rising unemployment brings particularly acute risks, including uncertainty and anxiety among workers who are not now unemployed but are worried about the long-term sustainability of their jobs. Learning is particularly important in enabling people to maintain employability, extend their working life, and cope with the challenges of redundancy, unemployment, and retirement – particularly when it is enforced.

Technological change

Technological changes have the potential to transform learning, and promote new types of social networking, thereby contributing to resilience and well-being. Equally, there are risks of a sharp digital divide, where some groups – particularly older adults – are unable to adapt and apply new technologies in the light of their own circumstances and needs, and may indeed be unable to access new learning opportunities (including

information and guidance) that are supported by information and communications technology (ICT). Learning and support need to be targeted, to enable such groups to:

- access information, guidance and learning support through ICT;
- gain understanding of the nature and wider role of new technologies;
- engage in responsible social networking (instead of free television licences, perhaps we need to make sure that all older adults can use Facebook).

Migration and communities

Migration can bring both opportunities and challenges, for the host society as well as for migrants. This can be true for people who move within the UK, as well as those who come here from other parts of the world. Migration and ethnic diversity can change patterns of social cohesion, as well as bringing new bases for hybrid identities and promoting tolerance of difference. As we saw in early 2009, sharpening labour market pressures will increase competition for jobs, leading to tensions between workers from different communities.

Migrants have different aims in moving. Some see themselves as temporary residents, here to work for a short time before returning, though some of these will decide later that this is their home. Others intend to settle here, though again some may return if life here is not to their liking. It follows that migrants have different learning requirements, but for many there is likely to be a strong language element, with needs that must be met if we are to make the most from our diverse communities.

There are also particular challenges to well-being among some ethnic minorities, whose members may be vulnerable to specific mental conditions and illnesses such as depression.

Citizenship and belonging in a diverse society

A flourishing society will be at ease with itself, enjoying its collective identity as one based on many cultures and traditions; equally, though, a high level of social trust requires some common sense of shared values and understandings.

Poverty reduction and social exclusion

Poverty is concentrated among particular social groups and varies by nation and region. Many people are particularly vulnerable at key stages of their lives, including the early years of parenthood and after retirement. Poverty is accentuated by certain lifestyles, such as regular use of addictive drugs or heavy levels of debt, both of which are closely associated with damaging mental conditions and mental ill-health.

Government has set clear targets for poverty reduction, and has invested heavily in poverty reduction measures. Overall, the Government believes that 'work is the best

route out of poverty', and its policy priorities reflect this.⁹⁰ Given what we know about the strong links between debt and depression, this is generally welcome, though the heavy focus on learning for work among those who are already on benefits needs to be complemented by concerted efforts to improve financial literacy across the population at large.

More broadly, there is some evidence that high levels of relative inequality can harm the well-being of individuals and communities. First noticed by health researchers, this connection has also been noticed by researchers interested in education and in social capital. While this evidence is not yet conclusive, it is potentially very important, and certainly should not be brushed aside.

Crime and social exclusion

Crime impacts on well-being in a number of ways. First, crime directly damages the well-being of victims, and experience of crime – especially violent crime – can massively erode the ability to trust others. Second, crime undermines community well-being, and tends to be associated with a vicious downward spiral in levels of social trust. This community effect can often be a product of people's perceptions of crime rather than actual trends. Third, criminal behaviour often harms the well-being of those who carry it out, not only among those who are detected and convicted as a result. Fourth, crime is often associated with other behaviours that can harm well-being, including excessive alcohol use and drug addiction. Most crime is committed by young men, though there is some evidence of a recent rise in some types of alcohol- and drug-related criminal activity among younger women. Evidence on young men's behaviour suggests that most tend to adopt a more stable lifestyle in their mid 20s, with far fewer encounters with the criminal justice system thereafter.

The implications for learning include preventative measures (including those designed to promote transitions into employment for young people, as well as lifestyle interventions such as health education), as well as much greater investment in education for prisoners, as part of broader strategies to reduce re-offending. Some groups are particularly vulnerable, such as looked-after children, a group whose needs are often neglected, with serious long-term consequences.

Demography and lifelong learning

Demographic change has raised the question of how we handle key life transitions, as well as the crises that attend certain life phases. Resilience is required if people are to flourish during these periods of change and crisis, which otherwise threaten people's well-being, health, and life satisfaction. *Demography and Lifelong Learning: IFLL Thematic Paper 1* (McNair, 2009) proposes ways in which people can benefit from learning to negotiate transitions effectively, including those associated with:

⁹⁰ DWP (2008).

- initial labour market entry;
- relationship breakdown, divorce, separation;
- bereavement;
- the onset of dependency;
- moving location.

It is also important to recognise the skills and knowledge that older adults already have in abundance, and find ways of helping them to contribute these resources to our society.

7. Key messages

The paper concludes with a baker's dozen of key messages for policy-makers, professionals and individuals concerned with adult learning and well-being.

1. First, people interested in promoting adult learning have a *powerful argument* at their disposal. Well-being is of growing significance in policy circles and in wider public debate, and adult learning makes a small but significant, measurable positive contribution to well-being. Any government that ignores this evidence is open to serious criticism.
2. Second, adult learning is likely to be particularly effective in enhancing *the well-being of our most vulnerable citizens*. There should be a particular focus on older women and men, marginalised ethnic groups, stigmatised communities, people with learning disabilities, those particularly likely to experience toxic pressures such as debt or addiction, people living in remote areas, and institutionalised groups such as prisoners or young people in care. There are also gender dimensions; among young adults, for instance, there is a comparatively high incidence of suicide among young men, and a marked propensity for eating disorders among young women. And there are risks of a newly-enlarged group of people who are socially isolated and financially stressed as a result of unemployment. Policies and programmes that are aligned to a particular type of learning, or one specific type of qualification, may not meet effectively the diverse learning needs of these groups.
3. Professionals in adult learning may need to *align themselves with other services and campaigning bodies* that are concerned with well-being. Health professionals and mental health campaigners, for instance, should know more about the possibility that adult learning might benefit some of their own clients. Organisations concerned with older adults should be aware of evidence that learning can help protect against cognitive decline,⁹¹ and support continued autonomy. Organisations concerned with physical and mental health, as well as those concerned with debt or financial literacy, should be aware of evidence on the role of learning in increasing people's confidence and belief in their ability to make decisions affecting their own lives. Partnership working can also help reduce the isolation in which many teachers of adults often work, and provide access to wider support networks for learners.
4. There are at least two highly damaging gaps in current policy debate. First, we need to tackle *the persistent gap between medical and other approaches* to well-being. Medical policy bodies rightly focus on clinical interventions, but generally ignore the evidence that other interventions can also play an important role in an integrated strategy for promoting well-being. Across the piece, there are too

⁹¹ Kirkwood et al. (2008).

many policy initiatives that appear to be undertaken in isolation from one another. Much has been done to address this gap in recent years, but it remains remarkably durable.

Second is the gap between curing and preventing. We need much closer alignment between interventions designed to cure or limit the damages of mental ill-health, and those designed to promote positive flourishing throughout life. The latter are intended to help to prevent or limit mental disorders from developing in the first place. This gap is reinforced by the interest of the pharmaceutical industry in promoting sales of remedial treatments. Both gaps are, of course, reinforced by the usual divisions of responsibilities between different government departments; and a similar 'silo effect' can be seen in respect of government policies for financial capability. These issues are discussed in detail in the recent Foresight report on mental capital and well-being, which proposes that a high-level strategic approach should be adopted across government and involving other key players.⁹² If the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) Health, Work and Well-being initiatives are to have any impact, they must bring together units and policies that span health, employment and skills, as well as working with a range of non-governmental stakeholders, including unions and learning agencies.⁹³

5. There are important examples of public health bodies that acknowledge the important role of learning in improving health outcomes, including mental health outcomes. Yet, almost invariably, these bodies *focus primarily on children and young people, neglecting developments through the adult life-course*. The Chief Medical Officer for Scotland, for example, has placed considerable emphasis on the important part that education can play in tackling massive health inequalities and helping to improve the health and well-being of the population; interestingly, he also acknowledges the importance of maintaining health and well-being among the education workforce. But the focus is exclusively on the role played by schools and schoolteachers in fostering health-promoting attitudes and behaviour among pupils.⁹⁴
6. This paper has reviewed a considerable body of evidence on well-being and adult learning. Organisations providing adult learning should consider *how to promote well-being more effectively*. Some providers already refer to well-being in publicity materials, but this may be largely aspirational. We are on firmer ground in pointing to a need for adult learning that promotes resilience and agency, and also supports social network building, which in turn has a positive influence on self-efficacy and self-esteem. There is also a strong case for providing learning opportunities in subjects directly related to well-being, including depression and learning disabilities. This is likely to involve a stronger and more focused investment in preparation and development for professionals working in adult learning. This is not to suggest

⁹² Government Office for Science (2008).

⁹³ DWP (2008).

⁹⁴ NHS Scotland (2007).

that providers start offering 'happiness training' – yes, it really exists, and perhaps unsurprisingly, research into its impact is largely inconclusive⁹⁵ – nor that learners should dose themselves with fish oil during the tea break.⁹⁶ On the contrary: a basic understanding of neuroscience should help to dispel at least some of the most pervasive myths.⁹⁷

7. *Teaching approaches should actively seek to promote well-being.* While this may involve therapeutic interventions for those who are most vulnerable to poor mental health, it must also involve taking account of the ways in which adults' biographies interact with learning environments. A well-being perspective also draws attention to the role of anxiety and stress in adult learning environments. It is neither possible nor desirable to eradicate stress from human existence, including education and training provision for adults, but it is hard to see how the rigid and universal application of assessment regimes can contribute to learner well-being. Repeated testing reduces well-being and damages motivation among schoolchildren.⁹⁸ Yet a number of governments, including Britain's, link funding for adult learning to the number of qualifications gained by learners.
8. Work plays a central role in most people's lives, and is critical to their well-being. The entire *workforce requires skills, resilience and flexibility* to cope and thrive in the changing landscape of work. Even before the 'financial tsunami', many people experienced stress and ill-health at work. Since late 2008, wave after wave of redundancies have broken over a range of industries and jobs, affecting services alongside manufacturing, and women alongside men, and generating a pervasive sense of insecurity among many workers. Trade unions, managers, and workers themselves have a critical role to play in ensuring participation in learning not only meets the skills needs of today, but generates a broad portfolio of capabilities for the future – including, centrally, the capability of being a confident and enthusiastic learner.
9. Training and skills development are important. But given the dramatic pace of change in the workplace for many people, as well as the urgent pressures to work non-stop (eating at the desk, phoning from the car or train, emailing from the coffee shop), there is a strong case for looking at a new *learning life balance* for employees.⁹⁹ This allows us to think creatively about learning beyond formal course provision, and improving the workplace conditions for nurturing and sustaining learning at work.¹⁰⁰ It may also allow us to think constructively about tackling the imbalance between long hours for those in work, and unemployment for those who are unable to find the jobs they desire.

⁹⁵ Argyle and Martin (1991).

⁹⁶ Goldacre (2006).

⁹⁷ OECD (2007).

⁹⁸ Harlen and Deakin Crick (2002).

⁹⁹ Schleiter and Schoof (2009).

¹⁰⁰ Felstead et al. (2009).

10. Organisations providing adult learning also need to consider the *well-being of their workers*. Teacher stress and burnout have been widely debated in recent years, with growing concern over the consequences in absenteeism and the loss of highly qualified staff, but virtually all of the attention has focused on teachers working in the primary and secondary sectors.¹⁰¹ There is no reason to suppose that professionals working with adults are immune from similar pressures. Capability development is an important way of achieving this.
11. Learning providers and policy-makers need to develop *agreed approaches to measurement*. Measuring well-being is still in its infancy, but there are some promising approaches, including exciting recent work by the New Economics Foundation. These need to be further developed in the context of adult learning, focusing on the conditions under which learning can contribute to such capacities as self-efficacy, confidence, life satisfaction, and the ability to contribute to the wider community. An emphasis on appropriate measurement forms part of the Inquiry's wider programme of work on public value, which will examine the 'social productivity' of lifelong learning. Without trustworthy and compelling indicators, it will not be possible to have an informed debate about the impact of particular forms of learning on well-being, much less make evidence-based decisions on priorities.
12. More ambitiously, *a lifelong learning system that takes well-being as its primary purpose is likely to differ significantly from present models*. Policy-makers increasingly tend to justify adult learning in terms of its contribution to economic growth and social inclusion, with the latter usually being promoted through insertion into employment. Narrow policy goals focusing on skills almost always assume that continued economic growth is both desirable and possible, and these assumptions should be challenged. If nineteenth century industrial societies were founded on production, early twenty-first century western societies combine production with consumption as their twin economic goals. Powerful coalitions of interest – from corporations to labour unions – come together to promote increases in production (of goods and services) and consumption as shared goals, which are then pursued remorselessly, at enormous cost to other global regions and with huge risk to the delicate balance of the ecosphere. General agreement among environmental scientists on climate change, for example, has had minimal effect on the behaviour of western governments and their populations.
13. Finally, there are also implications for individuals. The Foresight project commissioned the New Economics Foundation (NEF) to produce an equivalent for mental well-being of the 'five fruit and vegetables a day' that we are urged to eat for our physical health.¹⁰² One of NEF's five well-being goals was to 'keep learning'; the others were to make more of your social connections, be active physically,

¹⁰¹ Guglielmi and Tatrow (1998).

¹⁰² Government Office for Science (2009).

take notice of your environment, and contribute to the wider community – each of which also has a significant learning dimension.¹⁰³ Governments, employers and public institutions on their own can make individual action possible, but individual behaviour is also required – and indeed can, if duplicated across entire societies, help to shift the priorities and goals of the other actors.

The mindless pursuit of growth will not continue, and the choice is between different ways of judging the value and desirability of a range of policies and lifestyle choices. The question then is whether we can imagine a system for lifelong learning that sees well-being not as an incidental (if desirable) by-product, but instead situates well-being as one of its core goals and values.

¹⁰³ New Economics Foundation (2009).

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