

LEARNING LATER IN POLICY, LEARNING LATER IN LIFE: REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AS AN OLDER, WORKING CLASS STUDENT IN FORMAL EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

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ABSTRACT

The policy parameters of lifelong learning, widening participation and ageing provide the context for an analysis, based on data collected from a longitudinal, qualitative study in the West of Scotland, of the realities of later life learning for older, working-class students in formal learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines empirical data on later life learning within the context of Scottish lifelong learning, widening participation and ageing strategies. The data emerge from a longitudinal qualitative study of the engagement of older adults (defined as 50+ in age) in further and higher education in the West of Scotland. Our concern has been to track the experiences of older people in these formal learning institutions in a holistic way, linking their learning episodes with their wider life issues. Initially, we discuss some of the pertinent policy considerations which impact on their lives (from both lifelong learning and ageing frameworks) before presenting perspectives from selected participants themselves; finally, we draw links between the policy proclamations and the actual lives of older learners.

Participation rates of over-50s in formal education have traditionally remained very low, prompting the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum to support investigation into ways in which current levels of engagement can be enhanced. The project has a strong emphasis on exploring relevant practice developments for this student group, in nationally prioritised areas such as recruitment, retention and progression. Over a period of two years, each interview of an initial sample of 85 participants explores different areas of the learning experience within the context of their wider lives; these include educational histories, current teaching and learning experiences, benefits and drawbacks associated with participation, and projected learning futures.

POLICY

Lifelong learning policy

In the last five years there has been a raft of reports concerning lifelong learning and the development of a learning society within Scotland. In 2003 the Scottish Executive published its lifelong learning strategy (*Life through learning: learning through life*) in which it emphasises five “people-centred goals” (p. 6) as part of its vision: people participating in

economic, social and civic life; where high quality learning experiences are expected by people and supplied by providers; where knowledge and skills are usefully employed in the workplace; a network of guidance and support is available to assist decision-making; equality of learning opportunity exists regardless of personal circumstances. The report asserts that “lifelong learning policy in Scotland is about personal fulfilment; employability and adaptability; active citizenship and social inclusion” (2003, p. 7). These are laudable sentiments indeed. While recognising the wide remit for lifelong learning, the document soon slips into economic speak – “investment in knowledge and skills brings direct economic returns to individuals and collective economic returns to society” (p. 7). The authors’ definition of lifelong learning builds upon that offered by the national strategy for the same. We argue that for older adults, learning propensity and engagement is significantly more multi-dimensional, encapsulating ‘active’ ageing, as well as ‘second-chance’ opportunities. However, to the credit of this government report, in its acknowledgement of the importance of older workers in the economy, it points to “the need for access to appropriate training opportunities for older people, both for those in employment and for those seeking employment” (p. 16).

A more recent report from the Scottish Funding Council (2006), *Learning for All*, focuses on those groups in Scottish society excluded from education. In the Foreword, it is noted that “In Scotland today, educational participation and achievement is highly skewed, particularly by socio-economic background, geography and gender” (p. 5). It might equally be added “by age”. In line with Scotland’s over-riding concern for social inclusion, this report supports the attempts by the further and higher education sectors to redress educational inequalities. Given that older people have been virtually invisible in formal education, constituting estimated participation rates of 0.68% in Universities and 3.03% in Colleges, *Learning for All* provides a

policy framework related to social injustice (Findsen and McCullough, 2006).

Lifelong learning policy in Scotland is consistent with international trends towards a vocational and youth-centric focus, while widening participation efforts are working towards more proportional engagement with learning among marginalised groups.

Policy on Ageing

It is possible to trace the development of national policies on ageing from the more global policy scene. Many of the imperatives expressed in Scotland's three volumes of *All Our Futures: Planning for a Scotland with an Ageing Population* (2007) can also be detected in the United Nation's Vienna International Plan of Action (1982). The Vienna Plan's Principles for Older People – independence, participation, dignity, care and self-fulfilment – are very much those emphasised in “active” and “successful” ageing strategies, regardless of context. These principles are primarily basic humanitarian concerns applied in this instance to older people who may be more prone to marginalisation in societies (Bernard & Scharf, 2007).

At a global level, the World Health Organisation (WHO) launched its policy on an Active Ageing platform, accentuating a lifecourse perspective in which the ageing experience is coupled with an understandable focus on healthy ageing. Its primary contribution resides in the recognition of the interplay between social, behavioural and situational factors across the lifespan. Drawing on the earlier espoused UN Principles for Older People, this active ageing strategy includes a “rights” rather than a “needs” based approach. This policy is built upon the three key areas for action: health; participation; security. WHO defines “active ageing” as:

“The process of optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age...The word “active” refers to continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs, not just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labour force.” (2002, p. 12)

Scotland's own ageing strategy, *All Our Futures* (2007) has been just recently released. Much of its content mirrors that of the global organisations of the United Nations and WHO in its emphasis on activity theory by way of improved opportunities for sustained societal engagement throughout the lifespan. Older adults' learning, fortunately, is receiving increased attention due in part to the need for

sustained, internationally competitive skills of a ‘greying workforce’ in the global arena.

Amid the 47 priority areas for action, six are explicitly connected with lifelong learning. These six priorities include improving lower skilled workers' employability; fostering a learning culture in which older people can play an increasing role; greater information and guidance for older people, together with more targeted financial support; the inclusion of older people in the Executive's review of learner support for part-time study.

The study reported here conceptually links with the two policy areas enunciated above. It is unapologetically linked to social justice for older adults because the recruitment of older adults used in this research is from officially identified areas of high deprivation in the West of Scotland. Its primary purpose is to depict the realities of older adults' experiences as they connect with Colleges and Universities (Findsen and McCullough, 2006).

Experiences of older adults in further and higher education

We use the stories of three participants as a basis for comparing policy frameworks with students' life and learning experiences. Randomly selected from the overall cohort, two of the students are at Colleges, and one is at a University; many of the issues experienced and discussed by students in the following section are common to the broader data analysis carried out to date.

Mae

Mae had been studying a community-based College-certificated IT training course for 12 months at her first interview in December 2006. In her early-mid 60s, she retired just over three years prior to interview; while not registered disabled, she suffers from rheumatoid arthritis which increasingly limits her activity. This course is her first engagement with formal learning provision since leaving school almost 50 years earlier. She read about the course in her local Housing Association's weekly newsletter six months prior to enrolling but, lacking the confidence to take the course at the time, was spurred to enrol after buying a computer for her grandson.

Her work history is one of retail sales and management. Her current motivation for learning is almost wholly responsive to increased care responsibilities for her young grandson after her daughter's sudden disappearance three years' previously. “I just wanted the bits and pieces

that I could relate to my grandson. It's useful to me and it was useful to him. And that's what I really wanted to do."

She does not pay fees for her course through a means-tested 'Fee Waiver' system in operation for part-time students, and receives a small bi-annual cash 'bonus' for high attendance of the course. She is entitled to lunch and travel expenses although does not claim the latter, instead using national free public transport entitlement for senior citizens.

Mae is enthused about the course in several ways. She praises the skills she has acquired, as useful in and of themselves, but in providing a means of support for her grandson's own learning, and supervision of his exploration of the internet. She has also been passing on her learning to her husband. She is delighted that provision is free, praises the teaching and learning environment unreservedly, and expresses bewilderment at the low uptake of such provision, particularly by younger people, as well as a regret that she's found it only recently herself:

"...if this had been available years ago, I could have taken things a lot further. I could have made more use of it. You know, in the outside world...I would've went a bit further with things, the learning."

On a more personal level, the process of taking a class has given her greater self-confidence and acted as a springboard to regaining her engagement with life to the level that it was prior to her daughter's disappearance.

Int 2 *"When I first started I'd never leave the house. And I've achieved now [sic] to open up. I mean it's stark. And being able to, you know, do like Word and all these things is absolutely, you know, and to be involved and be able to participate with my grandson has made a big, big difference in my life."*

On discussing any changes in her general outlook as a result of the programme, Mae says:

"Well basically I've always had a good outlook. Up until what happened...The only change I see is that I have a lot more confidence. It's instilled more confidence. Oh aye. I used to hide in shops and things."

Discussing her future plans, she hopes to move into voluntary work, in patient care or counselling by 'phone and hopes to use what she has learned in her study to a greater or lesser extent.

Stewart

Stewart is enrolled on a college-run computer networking course which awards a recognised vocational qualification. In his late 50s, he had been unemployed for 13 years at first interview, although previous to this had worked in marine engineering and electrics. In receipt of incapacity benefits, he receives a fee waiver for free study, and for an additional course hosted by another institution, he uses the Individual Learning Account (ILA), a means tested award of up to £200 towards study fees.

His study is a continuation of a reasonably recent return to formal learning four to five years previously; the motivation for this arising from inactivity:

Int 1 *"I was away back into the learning again and there was a reason for that because I was starting to get a wee bit bored and depressed."*

Int 3 *"I do have mental health problems through alcoholism, you know, but what actually saved my life, I mean I should have been dead about five years ago, and what actually saved my life was taking up full time education without a doubt, unreservedly..."*

His motivation for studying this course is responsive to an identified national skill shortage in qualified technicians. He describes the last thirteen years as a time where he has tried constantly to find paid employment, but struggled with age discrimination:

Int 1 *"I took my date of birth off my CV. I wasn't getting called for any interviews and almost immediately I got called for two interviews so that definitely had a bearing. Usual story I think, getting too old."*

He talks briefly about funding, and expresses a desire that advertising of the ILA scheme be increased:

Int 1 *"...because not everybody knows about it. ...I think it was on the television but, you know, in the short-term they should get to work with some serious advertising. Because it's absolutely brilliant."*

When asked about staff expectations in the institution, he outlines a strong emphasis on attendance because of uncertainty that the course can continue due to insufficient numbers. At the third interview, one year on, the course has been cancelled, and he has completed his qualification at the HEI which was also providing the course.

Currently he is trying to find an IT administrator's role to get work experience, prior to completing the course. He discusses how his health has improved as a result of the learning. 'I'm really happy studying, you know? It gets my mind off the depression, woes, you know...' For him, the immediate future is taken up with completing the course and managing its workload; after this, he plans to complete another short 12-week course at another institution in the same field. He also discusses the possibility of voluntary work on basic computing skills 'so I can pass on what I know to the others'. The current 'gap' for Stewart is practical work experience, but he still struggles to successfully get a job and attributes this to ageist employer attitudes:

Int 3 *"I enrolled myself in a full time 10 week call centre training course, and since I've done that course I've had 9 job interviews, and I never had like a 9th of that figure over a 9 year period previous to that. As soon as they found out, oh he's too bloody old, he's too much of a smart ass, you see. That's the impression I got. I can tell you, I believe it to this day."*

Maureen

Maureen is studying for a post-graduate certificate in practice education at a Glasgow based HEI. In her first of a two year course, she is studying part-time, working full-time and self-financing. Her engagement with formal learning is more continuous than the previous two examples; with reasonably regular College and University study over the last 20 years.

Her current role is divided between being a trainer of auxiliary and qualified nurses working in elderly care, and working as a charge nurse in the nursing home where she is based. She describes her motivation to study as being a means of moving into an alternative role (focussing on nurse education), as well as enhancing her current teaching skills and better understanding the needs of the student nurses that she mentors. She talks in her third interview of an acute need to move jobs as well as for intellectual stimulation:

Int 3 *"I have to quite honest, I mean I hope that I'm not there in five years time doing the same thing, because I think it would mentally destroy me. I think because I would need to go on and do something else, education-wise. I would need to another course to keep my brain active."*

The workload for the course is described as heavy and challenging; Maureen mentions at each interview that she is struggling but remains

confident that she will complete the course. With part of her job entailing regular staff training, she is able to continuously incorporate the principles of teaching into her practice and use this reciprocally with the university-based theoretical learning.

Within her field of nursing, despite there being allocated self-study and training days for all staff, Maureen discusses a culture of resistance to ongoing CPD and training, including the increased vocationalism and associated requirement for recognised qualifications:

Int 2 *"I have a colleague who said, 'I don't see why I need to have a degree', and I said 'Well, I do understand what you're saying and maybe ten years ago I felt the same thing...but the bottom line is you know, nursing and nurse education is changing and it will constantly evolve and at the end of the day you will need a degree'...and the thing is now people with Bachelors'...it's not enough, you need a Masters degree..."*

She describes the learning as having been personally very valuable, in terms of its applicability in the workplace, as well as making her job 'a lot more bearable'. The study gives an intellectual dimension to her work which the pressures of her job do not normally allow:

Int 2 *"...Your primary focus is on making sure that you've got enough staff to cover the shift to deliver the care and a planned nursing practice in the philosophy and the ethos is on another level. You can't integrate the two because you're so focussed on trying to get bodies in to cover your shift, and again I suppose that's why I like being at university because it takes me back onto that level..."*

DISCUSSION

From the biographies of student experiences summarised above, it can be seen that there are a number of pertinent points of comparison between learning later in policy and practice.

Scotland's lifelong learning policy framework has been shown to have a clear economic goal of (inter)national competitiveness by way of an increasingly qualified and productive workforce. Within this snapshot of our broader findings, increased professional accreditation and educational inflation are seen to be directly impacting on people's personal and professional lives often as a point of imposition rather than choice. Increased individual competitiveness in the labour market, especially from younger colleagues, necessitates professional

development despite personal misgivings about its importance. Work plays a demonstrably significant role in all students' motivations, although it is not always explicitly stated at the point of commencing study, and while it is not always in the form of paid labour, it yields direct national economic reward.

Age discrimination is recognised as being a significant issue for older adults in most life spheres but particularly in seeking (re)employment. In the case of Stewart, his efforts to find work have been exhaustive and span more than a decade. Efforts to change employer attitudes in the UK have been made through campaigns such as Age Positive (by the UK-wide Department for Work and Pensions) which seek to promote the benefits of a multi-age workforce, as well as good practice. If such a culture of resistance to later life employability continues to be pervasive within our society and employers' attitudes, this particular barrier to older adults' achievement of 'successful ageing' represents a significant wastage of not only economic but also social and cultural capital (Field, 2003).

Widening access initiatives, by way of relieving funding constraints through the use of initiatives such as the Fee Waiver policy and ILA, have been demonstrated by the study cohort to be popular. This is in respect to levels of uptake, particularly among this socio-economic group, given the high level of older adults who are in receipt of qualifying benefits (such as Incapacity Benefit and JobSeekers' Allowance). These policies are to be praised for their efficacy and in the ways they open doors. General awareness of these policies appears to be low, however, with some students in the study being funded by Fee Waiver provision, but unwittingly so. There is capacity for greater uptake with an improved knowledge of entitlements: provision just less than one full-time equivalent and beyond degree level of study.

Scottish lifelong learning strategy recognises the multi-faceted nature of learning in its acknowledgement of personal fulfilment, active citizenship and social inclusion in its definition. These aspects are all demonstrable to varying degrees in the stories of the students – for Mae, her re-engagement with society has been striking and restorative; for Maureen, she is moving towards a more fulfilling job and enjoying the intellectual stimulation of the study in the process; for Stewart however, his struggle is ongoing despite increasing qualification and working towards sector skill shortage training as an employment strategy. The area of personal

fulfilment is a dominant theme but achieved with differing levels of success, and the same can be said for active citizenship and social inclusion. Age discrimination appears to be a significant barrier to both in this students' case.

The themes arising from students' stories appear to be better located within ageing policy frameworks and humanitarian principles, of which lifelong learning is part, rather than lifelong learning policy itself. Learning is located within the wider context of peoples' lives, and takes varying degrees of priority, whether it be a vehicle for fundamental life change (intentionally or not), benefiting mental health, encouraging active engagement with community and wider life, work (paid or voluntary), or personal fulfilment. Learning has been shown to be a significant vehicle for fulfilling the principles espoused by both international and national ageing policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Successful widening access to education initiatives such as assistance with funding has been seen to be well-received by older students, but there is scope for increased awareness-raising among this group. In the light of the recent release of the ageing strategy in Scotland, the time is right for working with this momentum and undertaking a concerted media campaign.

In this climate of greater tracking of student outcomes, there is an implied scope for greater articulation between sector skill shortages and graduates (demand and supply). Such a strategy could offer increased choice, as well as successful achievement of students' learning goals, and decrease wastage of valuable human resource.

Lifelong learning and ageing taken together encapsulate a sense of optimism for the future in the Scottish context if rhetoric is to be believed. Both sets of policy point to the significance of an active citizenry albeit overshadowed by the ideology of instrumentalism in the form of the skilled worker. Learning should not be disconnected with the rest of life; it is both a process and a product in which older learners have a right to engage.

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