

The social benefits of learning

Report of the inaugural conference of the Centre, 3-4 July 2001, held at the Institute of Education, London.

The conference took place two years into the Centre's programme. Its purpose was:

- to review the state of knowledge in the field
- to engage the policy, practitioner and research communities in the development of the Centre's programme

Conference sessions comprised four keynote presentations in which leading experts provided different perspectives on research in the wider benefits of learning, including parallel workshops on methodologies and research in progress, expert and policy panels on learning and citizenship.

Plenary sessions

The keynote presentations spanned a wide range of research perspectives:

- Jere Behrman (from the University of Pennsylvania) gave an econometric perspective based on his longstanding research in the area.
- Walter Heinz (University of Bremen) gave a comparative perspective on the impact of the changing labour market on the life course in different countries and its implications for education.
- John Bynner drew together findings from the series of studies undertaken for the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), the Smith Institute and the Joseph Rowntree Trust based on the 1958 and 1970 birth cohort studies, to assess the impact of education on non-economic benefits across the main domains of adult lives.
- Lynne Chisholm drew on her experience in developing the European Commission Memorandum on Life Long Learning to present cross-European perspectives on the policies for Lifelong learning with special emphasis on citizenship and the way British approaches were perceived on the continent.

On the first day the workshops were devoted to methodology, under a variety of headings (quantitative studies, qualitative studies, comparative studies and cost benefits studies). On the second day, the workshops explored three facets of the centre's programme ('learning and adaptation', 'learning and social cohesion' and 'learning and the family'). Each produced exceptionally lively discussions among a wide and diverse group of participants.

Day one workshops

1. Life course approaches – Tom Schuller, Leon Feinstein, Cathie Hammond

Life course approaches are being employed by the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre to investigate the mechanisms through which education impacts upon peoples' lives. Such approaches highlight tensions between validity, precision and relevance, and raise issues around

temporality and causality. These issues were discussed in the workshop as themes for the quantitative and qualitative methods used to investigate the wider benefits of learning during the life course. An impressive mix of practitioners, policy makers and researchers attended the workshop. Discussion was lively and covered the following issues:

- How should learning be defined in the context of research into its wider benefits: what are the conceptual and observable boundaries?
- Negative outcomes of learning, and the policy implications of negative findings.
- The tension between validity and the precision of research instruments and questions relating to the wider benefits of learning.
- The complexities of individual life course trajectories.
- The values of quantitative approaches and the potential for mis-interpretation and mis-use of statistical findings.
- Testing causality using quantitative approaches.
- Above all the workshop began to sketch out how quantitative and qualitative approaches could be used complementarily.

2. Comparative approaches – Andy Green and Karen Evans

The object of this workshop was to explore the distinctive contributions that comparative approaches can make to the study of the social benefits of learning. Presentations by Andy Green and Karen Evans addressed, respectively, the WBL Centre research themes of learning and social cohesion and learning and life transitions. Andy Green's presentation sketched out the strengths and limitations of a number of different approaches to cross-national comparisons, stressing the need for comparative work for understanding societal effects and the institutional and cultures factors, which shape the contexts within which learning may impact on social cohesion. Karen Evans outlined a multi-layered approach to cross-national comparative research, drawing on her own work on learning and life transitions in Germany and England. The workshop included participants from policy, research and practitioner backgrounds and the full discussion, which followed the presentations produced a stimulating synergy from the different perspectives. The main issues addressed were:

- What does an analysis of societal effects add to individual level analysis?
- What national level indicators can be used in the study of social cohesion?
- What can cross-national quantitative analysis of learning and social cohesion variables tell us?
- How does comparative analysis of societal cultures and institutional structures add to the understanding of the contexts of learning effects?
- How does comparative study of student experience improve our understanding of policy in practice?

3. Cost benefit analyses – Rosalind Levacic and John Preston

This workshop attracted a diversity of interest from practitioners, policy makers and academic economists. John Preston introduced the conceptual work in the field with an overview of the ways in which cost-benefit analysis can be extended to give not only a social rate of return, but also a fuller private rate of return to include benefits such as improved health. Ros Levacic reminded the workshop of the assumptions of CBA, including compensation

criteria, and the need for adequate statistical controls in modelling wider benefits. The group discussion that followed addressed:

- Questions regarding the validity of CBA when assumptions were invalidated such that wages are equal to the marginal revenue product.
- The issue of external costs of education was raised - there is evidence that education may sometimes increase unhappiness, for example
- The general feeling of the workshop was that there was a need to progress towards the calculation of 'full' private and social rates of return that would include the wider (non-economic) benefits.

4. Longitudinal and quantitative approaches – John Bynner, Louisa Blackwell and Ian Plewis

The workshop session comprised three complementary presentations and discussions. John Bynner gave an overview of the British Birth Cohort studies datasets, demonstrating the opportunities they offered for investigating the effects of social change on the life course and how this impacted on the role of learning in adult life. Louisa Blackwell described the ONS longitudinal study. This comprises 1% of the Census population for England and Wales who have been followed up since the Census in 1991, through subsequent Censuses and Vital Registrations. The study offers opportunities for investigating age and cohort effects in considerable detail, especially in relation to employment, family formation and mobility. It can therefore be used to contextualise the more detailed longitudinal investigations which cannot encompass such a range of cohorts and ages. The third presentation was by Ian Plewis, who talked about some of the themes of the second WBL Series volume - on Evaluating the Wider Benefits of Learning. The focus was on the role of randomisation in robust evaluation designs, which provide a kind of benchmark, against which the more common non-randomised evaluations need to be set. There was a lively discussion in which the main points made were:

- Longitudinal data in the context of holistic (multi-domain) investigations are essential to analyse the dynamics of the effects of learning on later life outcomes.
- Monitoring the effects of social change on the processes through which learning translates into benefits, is also essential.
- Effective evaluation needs to be based on sound experimental principles - with statistical modelling an attempt to replicate these, in the absence of full design controls to eliminate selection biases in the assessment of causal effects.
- Evaluations need to be designed, i.e. thought about in advance of the implementation to maximise the opportunities for unambiguous judgements about effects, rather than after implementation, as is usually the case.

Day two workshops

5. Learning and Adaptation – Tom Schuller and Cathie Hammond

This workshop concerned the ways in which learning affects an individual's ability to cope with transitions during the life course. There were presentations on three topics, followed by discussion. A theoretical framework that has been developed at the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning for synthesizing and interpreting outcomes was described. Initial findings of the

Centre's research on the experiences of parents with small children were presented in the context of the framework. There was a brief presentation of some key life course transitions in terms of the issues associated with conceptualizing periods of the life course as transitions and the relationships between times of change and experiences of learning. In the wide ranging discussion the main points made were:

- The theoretical framework worked well and was a real advance, although aspects of learning outcomes might not be suited for it such as crime suggesting the need for further elaboration in the light of research.
- It was good that the Centre's work emphasised the context in which adult learning takes place and recognises the particular circumstances of individual adult learners.
- The concept of transition provides a useful focus for thinking about the role of learning in the life course.

6. Learning and Social Cohesion – Andy Green, Martin Gough and John Preston

This workshop was introduced with a presentation on the WBL Centre work in progress on learning and social cohesion. Andy Green outlined the rationale and design for this strand in the Centre's work; Martin Gough presented some of the interim findings from the fieldwork with learners in Camden, Essex, and Nottingham, with multimedia illustration; and John Preston ran through his analysis of British Social Attitudes Survey data on learning and civic participation. Andy Green concluded the presentation with a brief exploration of some of the hypotheses that have been developed from the Centre's analysis of social capital theory and the BSA and World Values Survey data sets. Several strong themes emerged through the following discussion:

- It was important of to understand the contexts which support different forms of adult learning and how they affect social outcomes for individuals.
- There was a need to gain understanding of the processes involved and how these can be explored by research.
- Learning may affect social cohesion at societal levels through the way in which education systems distribute educational outcomes and this in turn may have effects on income distribution and social solidarity, though this was open to debate.

7. Learning and the Family – John Bynner, Louisa Blackwell and Angela Brassett-Grundy

After a brief introduction by John Bynner on the work being done by the WBL Centre in the area of the family, there were two presentations on two very different but related aspects of the family and learning. Louisa Blackwell talked about the relationships revealed by research between levels of education, partnership and family formation. She also pointed out the problematic nature of modern transitions, in which increasing numbers of people postponed having children to later ages while gaining qualifications and work experience, with the prospects of a larger minority than in the past never having children and at the other end of the scale, young women rushing into pregnancy at ever earlier ages. Teenage mothers also varied enormously depending on their educational and family resources and the actual age at which they had children, e.g. those still at school. Angela Brassett-Grundy

presented the results of her high-speed qualitative study on family learning. This had involved focus group work in Croydon and Camden with groups of people (almost all mothers) who had participated in family learning schemes and one group who had not. The results, which are shortly to be published, revealed considerable value to the participants of family learning schemes, with benefits not only in the relationship with their children and their children's progress but through enhanced motivation and interest in education by the parents themselves. The experience had contributed greatly to confidence building and the likely return to education on a more continuing basis. The group, which comprised about 30 members, represented a wide range of interests from people active in family learning programmes as providers or researchers in community locations, to broadcasters and policy makers. In the lively discussion that both presentations provoked, a number of points were made:

- Education plays a critical role in family formation. Its extension raises major challenges to traditional views of family life.
- There must be an avoidance of pathologising those who have made choices to either have children early or have them late. Both faced challenges, which had to be met in different ways by the parents involved. What they needed was the right kinds of support.
- Family learning schemes appeared to be highly beneficial to those who participated, parents as well as children. But a substantial number of parents, put off by their own negative educational experiences, still remained to be convinced that the schemes were for them.
- There was a need to experiment with a more diverse range of options in the way family learning provision was offered, especially using novel community locations.

Expert panels

The final session on each day comprised expert panels. On the first day, the subject matter was learning and citizenship. The panel chaired by Frank Coffield comprised Karen Evans (Institute of Education), Audrey Osler (University of Leicester) and Tom Schuller (Birkbeck College). Derek Grover, Head of Adult Learning in DfES chaired the expert panel on the second day comprising Peter Lavender (NIACE) and Ursula Howard (LSDA). John Bynner wound up the proceedings at the very end.

Conclusion

Overall, the conference was judged a success in achieving its aims in a number of areas. The most important of these was to raise the profile of the non-economic benefits of education in a forum involving the widest range of people engaged in education as policy makers, practitioners or researchers. The working group discussions, particularly, were regarded as an invaluable opportunity to establish connections and exchange information and perspectives. We plan to pursue these further through our Advisory forum and Website discussion groups.