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What are the attitudes, motives and experiences of adults who return to education? A comparison of learners with different levels of previous qualifications

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The Scottish *Lifelong Learning Strategy* (Scottish Executive, 2003) and the EU *Lisbon strategy* (CEC, 2000) emphasise the importance of lifelong learning for economic development as well as for social cohesion and personal development and focus on post-compulsory education and learning. However, the indicators used in the *Lifelong Learning Statistics 2005* (Scottish Executive, 2005) measuring the success of the strategy suggest a focus on education that is relevant to employment and work training. The recently published *Scottish Skill Strategy: a lifelong skills strategy* (2007) stresses the need to ensure equal access to and participation in learning for all irrespective of their starting point. Current policy initiatives reveal a tension between human capital approaches that will help to strengthen the Scottish economy and more personal and social goals of learning.

As can be seen from this brief overview of the policy, continuing education and lifelong learning has increasingly become a tool for policymakers to achieve economic growth and social justice. This has led to an emphasis on participation in all kinds of learning. Participation rates in adult education have therefore been and, still are, a key issue (Courtney et al., 1998; Gorard & Rees, 2002; Antikainen, Harinen & Torres, 2006). Other research has considered the nature of lifelong learning and its usefulness as a concept. Field (2006) argues that the term is useful for a number of reasons; one of these is that it reflects changes in society that are evident in the ways that people nowadays acquire new skills and capacities. However, he cautions that it can become a mechanism for exclusion and social control. Field also notes that the discourse emphasises individual agency and that learners are expected to take control of their own learning. There is thus an inherent tension in the concept between human capital, social capital and personal development, and structure and agency.

Motivation is a hypothetical construct which has been used to provide causal explanations of behaviour. Boshier (1991) stressed the need to improve our understanding of what motivated adult learners to engage with learning. He suggested it was a means to a better understanding of why students dropped out and that it could contribute to enhancing the quality of the learning experiences. Boshier focused on the learning experience and also on dropping out. It could be argued that it is equally important to understand the motives of adults who decide to reengage with learning, especially those that come from groups who traditionally are more reluctant participate in learning. Earlier surveys such as the National Adult Learning Surveys (Ormston, et al, 2007; Snape, et al, 2006) show considerable differences in engagement with learning influenced by the learners' previous qualifications and parental background.

All policy measures in relation to lifelong learning stress the need for social justice and education is one domain in the recently published Equalities Review (Cabinet Office, 2007). It proposed a new framework for measuring inequality covering all six equality strands based on ten main domains and one of these domains is education. Within this domain a list of suggested capabilities are included, one of which relevant to this paper is to: *access to education, training and lifelong learning that meets individual needs*. In order to measure equality within each domain the Equality Measurement Framework is being developed using three distinct aspects for assessing equality (Burchardt and Vizard, 2007). The first one is substantive equality measured by the *outcome* attained by individuals; this is to be supplemented by:

- *autonomy*, reflecting the degree of choice and control individuals have in obtaining the outcome;
- *process*, referring to the process through which the outcome has been attained

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The framework intends to draw on a wide range of data to examine inequality. Data from a survey such as the one reported here cannot address this to any great extent; however, it is worthwhile considering the three aspects when examining the experiences of adult returners. The aim of this paper is to examine motivations and attitudes to lifelong learning in adult returners who arguably have been disadvantaged by earlier learning outcomes, learners who have no previous qualification. Their motives and experiences are compared to those who already had previous qualifications. It draws on a survey of adult returners in Scotland which was conducted as part of a Sixth Framework European project entitled: Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Education System (www.lll2010.tlu.ee). The key focus is:

- What, if any differences are there between learners with no previous qualification and those with previous qualifications?
- Is there evidence of differences in terms of outcome, autonomy and process, as defined by the Equality Measure Framework, for learners who have no previous formal qualifications compared to those with previous qualifications?

A quote from one of the learners in the survey demonstrates clearly inequality in earlier outcome:

[I] was in a children's home and did not receive any full-time education when [I] was a] youngster. (female, 50)

Methodology

The Scottish survey included 1021 adult learners stratified by ISCED¹ levels of study. Within the Scottish education system qualifications at ISCED level 2 are those that provide basic skills, ISCED level 3 encompass Standard and Higher grade qualifications, ISCED level 4 refers to Access courses and ISCED level 5 includes HNC/D, undergraduate and masters degrees. It was not feasible due to resource and time constraints to do a stratified postcode sample, instead we sampled according to institutions focusing on further education colleges as key player in the promotion of lifelong learning. Thirteen colleges were included based in the central belt, central Scotland and the north and north-west. Of the voluntary organisation included one had learners throughout Scotland and one was based in a large city; the local authority learners were from the east of Scotland.

Table 1 shows the location and number of learners at each level. As can be seen the majority came from further education colleges. An online version of the survey was used with some students studying online at ISCED level 5.

Table 1: Location and level of study of the learners

ISCED level ¹	University/ HEI	Further Education	Voluntary organisation	Local Authority CLD	Total
2		37	29	5	71
3		277	17		294
4		292		9	301
5	125	230			355
Total	125	836	46	14	1021

1. Qualifications were converted from Scottish/UK qualifications using the NEAC classification also used to convert qualifications in the National Adult Education Survey, 2005 for Eurostat

Findings

The majority of respondents (73%) were women and most were born between 1960 and 1989 which meant they were aged between 18 and 47. There were more, older learners

¹ International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is an instrument for classifying educational programmes to allow cross-country comparison (OECD, 2004).

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doing basic skills (level 2) courses. Most, over 90%, considered themselves to be either Scottish or British and the majority spoke English as their first language, for that reason no analysis has been carried out in relation to ethnicity. Seventy percent of those that responded were not doing another course and had not been involved in another course over the past 12 months. About 22% had done one other course but few learners had done more than one other course. The programmes of study were mainly in the area of education, social science and health and welfare as is shown in the table below.

Table 2: Courses surveyed showing percentage on each type of programme

Programme of study	Frequency	Percentage
General programmes	76	7.4
Other: includes engineering and services	66	6.5
Teacher training and education	199	19.5
Humanities, languages and arts	91	8.9
Social sciences, business and law	239	23.4
Science, mathematics and computing	88	8.6
Health and welfare	262	25.7
Total	1021	100.0

Examining the data according to previous level of qualification it can be seen from figure 1 that there were 8% of learners stating they had no previous formal qualification, 66% with ISCED level 3 and 26% with ISCED level 5. There are more learners aged 41 and over who had no previous formal qualification (11%). This is in line with statistics for the overall working population as can be seen from Table 2. Unlike the national statistics our sample contained a higher proportion among those over 41 who had a degree. This is likely to be due to the fact that the Annual Population (based on the Labour Force Survey) draws on both non-learners and learners and excludes those in formal full-time education, our survey focused specifically on learners in formal education including adult returners on full-time courses. The National Adult Education Survey, Scotland (Ormston et al, 2007) includes learners and non-learners. It has an overall sample of 993, it can be estimated using the data in the report that around 9% had no qualification which is similar to our sample.

Figure 1: Learners' previous level of qualification showing percentage of total sample

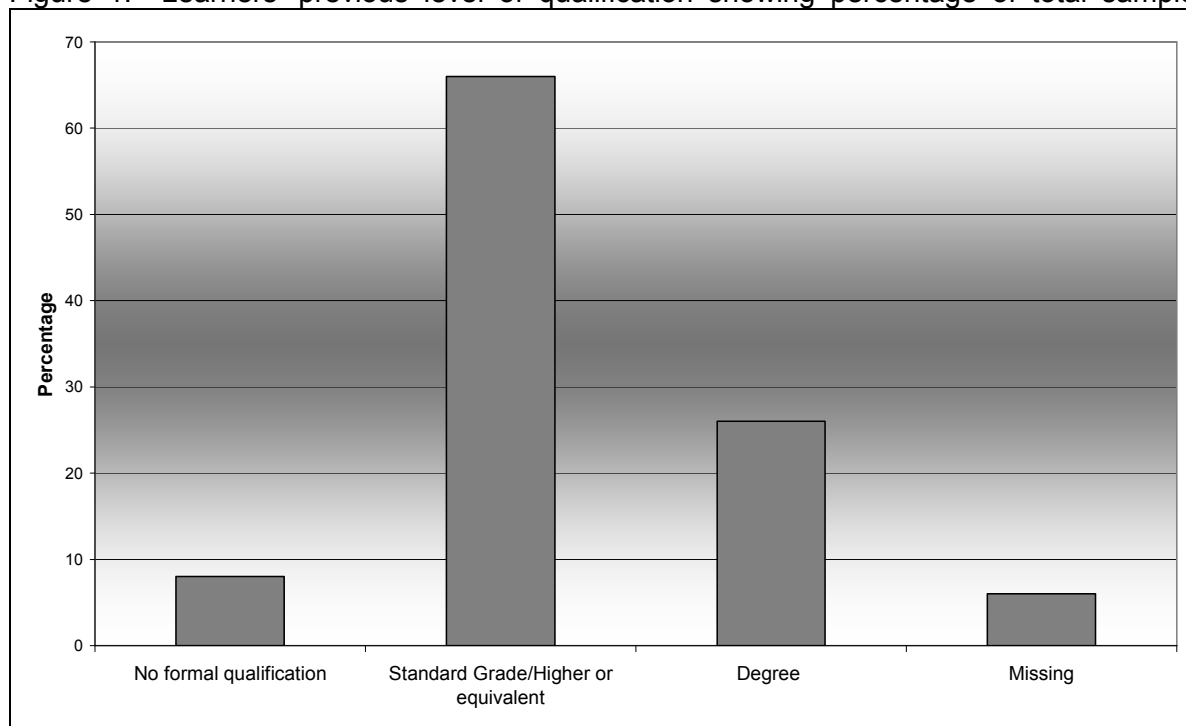


Table 3: Qualifications in the working age population by percentage, 2006-07

Age	Standard Grade General or equivalent ISCED 3c	Higher or equivalent ISCED 3a		Degree ISCED 5-6
18 – 21	89%	64%		
22 – 29	90%	72%		
30 – 39	88%	69%		
40 – 49	84%	67%		
50 to retirement	75%	65%		
All working age 18+	85%	67%	Age 25 to 59/64	24.9%

1. Source: Scottish Government, 2008 (annual pop survey)

Learners with no previous formal qualifications were significantly more likely to be male and over 41 years; however, 7% fell into the youngest age group. There was, as would be expected a difference between the different groups in terms of parents' educational background; those with no previous formal qualification had parents with no or low levels of qualifications. There was limited data on fathers' backgrounds, especially from those with no formal education. More than half stated that they did not know or preferred not to disclose, compared to 30% of those at ISCED level 5. This group of learners were significantly more likely to not to have been married; it was the case for half of the group compared to 43% of ISCED level 3 and 28% of ISCED level 5 learners.

The majority were located in further education with just over quarter in voluntary organisations/CLD. These latter types of institutions cater mainly for adult learners with either no formal qualification or ISCED level 3, especially those undertaking basic level courses. General programmes such as literacy and numeracy, computer use followed by social sciences and health and welfare were their main courses of study. Only 14% from this group were in employment compared to 40% of those at ISCED level 5.

The main reason for leaving school/their initial education for just under half of this group was to start working, a similar proportion of those with ISCED level 3 qualifications also cited this reason, compared to only just over a quarter of those with ISCED level 5 qualifications. This group were considerably more likely to state that a dislike of the learning environment or personal/emotional problem had led them to leave. There is a strong contrast with those who had ISCED level 5 qualifications as their main reason for was that they had achieved the qualification they required. Those with formal qualifications were also likely to have re-engaged with learning, even if they had abandoned the course and, whilst the majority of all learners were only doing the current course, those with higher previous qualifications were significantly more likely to be doing more than one course.

Attitudes to learning and education were probed with nine statements on a Likert scale and attitudes were positive for all groups (see appendix, table 4). There were few differences between the learners according to previous level of qualification, the main exception that learners with no previous experience were more likely to view learning as something for those with little else to do.

In terms of main motivation, learners with no previous formal qualification were significantly more likely to be learning for personal rather than job related reasons than other learners. The difference was greatest between this group and those with ISCED level 5 qualifications. However, a significant proportion (43%) cited job related reasons as well as personal reasons as the following quote added by one of the respondents with no previous formal qualifications:

to learn to read and write, hoping to get a job (female, 44, Literacy course)

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ISCED level 5 learners were most likely to cite learning as a job requirement; this is because they were most likely to be in employment. Forty percent in this group were employed compared to 14% amongst those with no previous formal qualifications. Whilst the majority cited personal reasons, nearly 70% of those with no previous qualification also stated they wanted to get a job in a second question; however, this varied according to learning provider. Those studying in FE who had no previous formal qualification were considerably more likely to state job reasons than those in voluntary/local authority provision.

Examining motivation drawing on Boshier's eighteen statements (see appendix, table 5) demonstrated that learners with no previous qualification were more likely to be influenced by social motives for learning. Participating in group activities and meeting new people was particularly important for these learners, especially so if they were learning in a voluntary/local authority setting. Learners with no formal qualifications were more likely to have been advised to do the course by someone else and to be doing it to avoid redundancy or as a requirement of claiming benefit and this was particularly the case for those in a voluntary/local authority setting. Numbers were small and should therefore be treated with caution but it does seem that different types of learning providers attract a different profile of learners even in terms of those with no previous qualifications. Admittedly, the voluntary organisations catered specifically for adult learners; however, further education colleges also claim to cater for all ages and stages of learning.

The survey also considered other aspects such as the teaching and learning process. A set of fifteen statements, using a five point Likert scale, asked learners to indicate agreement and disagreement with these statements (see appendix table 6). There were a number of statistically significant differences between learners with no previous qualifications and the other two levels of qualifications. They were more likely to say that the course offered opportunities to make new friends, that students on the course enjoyed it and that students enjoyed working together. Once again, those learning in voluntary/local authority organisations were most likely to stress these aspects.

In terms of the overall organisation of the course it was those with no previous formal qualification who were most positive and, again those in voluntary/local authority organisations were more positive than those in further education; however it was students on ISCED level 5 and in HE who felt that coursework was focused on essential activities. Learners with no previous formal qualifications were most likely to experience a flexible curriculum as they were more likely to be able to question course requirements and select assignments that are of personal interest, with those in voluntary/local authority organisations most likely to say so. On the other hand, this group of learners was also most likely to say that the teacher insisted on them doing things her/his way.

The data on motivation for learning and the experiences of the learning process suggest that learners with no previous formal qualifications value the social aspect of learning that this need was satisfied by their course. They felt well supported by tutors who offered a flexible and learner centred curriculum. The data also indicate that this is particularly so for learners in voluntary/local authority organisations. It is interesting to note that Tett et al found similar institutional differences in terms of learners' satisfaction with the teaching and learning experience (Tett, et al., 2006). Their evaluation focused specifically on literacy and numeracy provision and included both quantitative and qualitative data, whilst our research included other basic skills such as ICT.

Finally, more than 80% of the learners were confident in their ability to complete the course, those with no formal qualification were slightly less confident but this difference was not statistically significant. There was little difference between the different levels of qualification groups in relation to support from family and friends; learners with no previous

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qualifications were slightly less likely to cite support from family and friends but this was not statistically significant. This group was significantly less likely to be involved with social activities such as recreation/leisure pursuits, voluntary organisation or church; however, there was no difference in participation in cultural activities such as music, cinema or sport. They were significantly less likely than the other groups, especially those with degree level qualifications, to be involved in political activities.

Summary and conclusion

The first question aimed to examine if there were any differences between learners with no previous qualifications compared to those with some previous qualifications in relation to attitudes, motivations and experiences of learning. There were no, or very limited differences between the different groups in relation to attitudes to learning. They all viewed learning as beneficial and valuable. However, there were some distinct difference in relation to motivation and the actual teaching and learning experience. Generally learners with no previous qualifications were significantly more strongly motivated by the social element of learning and they were less likely than other groups to be involved with other social activities or to ever have been married. It could suggest that learning offers an opportunity for engaging with other people and that this is less important for learners from other groups, especially ISCED level 5 who were more likely to cite human capital type reasons for learning. The social element was particularly important for learners in voluntary/local authority organisations. Looking at the experiences of teaching and learning it can be seen that these learners were well provided for in terms of social aspects of learning and that they were also highly satisfied with the flexibility of the curriculum and the overall organisation. Again, institution type mattered and the most satisfied were in a voluntary/local authority setting. The number of learners in a voluntary/local authority setting is low; however, our findings support those of Tett et al (2006). It would suggest that if one of the national indicators (Scottish Government, 2008) '*reduce the number of working age people with severe literacy and numeracy problems*' are to be achieved making effective use of this provision needs to be considered, including sufficient funding for these organisations to operate efficiently and effectively.

It is quite clear that those with no previous formal qualifications had experienced inequality of outcome at an earlier stage of their life but the data gathered only gave us limited insights into why this was the case. A second aspect of measuring equality is according to autonomy and making choices. The data suggest that there are significant differences in relation to the level of autonomy for those with no previous formal qualifications compared to the other learners who had previous qualifications. This would suggest that the process that they experience in accessing education and training differs from the other groups and is patterned by earlier life experiences. Considering the process of education once this group of learner re-engages with education it could be argued that they experienced a more beneficial process as they were in a more learner centred environment.

These data seemingly identify some potential dilemmas for learning providers and policymakers. Choice and autonomous decision-making is an important aspect of a democratic society; however, learners with no previous formal qualification, arguably a relevant group to engage in learning, required a certain amount of coercion or external encouragement to participate. However, once they engaged with learning they indicated that they were benefiting from it and it was fulfilling a need for many of them, not only in terms of learning but from a social perspective.

This group of learners seemed to benefit particularly from the process of teaching and learning offered by the voluntary/local authority organisations. They were extremely positive about opportunities on completion of the course but the survey was not able to ascertain the final outcome. However, it is not clear what will happen if they need to move out of this setting in order to progress on to other courses. Will they cope if there is a need

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to move to the settings that were rated as less learner centred by the other learners, especially those with ISCED level 5? This question cannot be addressed by our data but other research by Gallacher et al examined the impact of the informal relaxed setting in community learning centres in Scotland and suggested that there could be problems for learners to move on, to move out of what they called the 'comfort zone' (Gallacher, et al, 2007).

To summarise, learners with no previous formal qualifications seem to be a distinct group who benefit from an informal learner centred environment and who have required more encouragement to engage with learning than learners with previous formal qualifications. The issue of progression may require further attention if the aim is to create long term lifelong learners amongst this group. There is now a considerable body of research on the experiences of students in further education colleges but there is more limited research on those learning in voluntary or local authority organisations. The data from this survey suggest that qualitative studies of learners in these settings or other more specialist settings may enhance understanding of motivations, engagement with learning and needs of those who have no formal qualifications so that ultimately more students can have the same opportunities as those offered to one older student:

Due to many years of suffering from depression, and being well for the last two years, I felt confident to apply to [institution]. Thankfully the chance [occurred] even at a late stage in life, to be here without prejudice of age [and] not having to have formal qualifications. There should be many more places like this! (female, 55 Access course)

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Appendix

The appendix shows the statements used to measure attitudes to learning, motivation for learning and experiences of the learning process and the percentages of responses in three different categories: Agree, Disagree and Neutral. Missing numbers are included to indicate level of responses. The percentages are calculated in relation to the actual number of respondents, not the total sample of 1021.

Table 4: Attitudes to learning

Statement	Percentage			Missing Nos
	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	
1. I enjoy educational activities that allow me to learn with others	84.2	6.0	9.8	0
2. I dislike studying	7.0	67.5	21.6	52
3. I'm fed up with teachers and classes	5.1	75.6	13.1	63
4. Successful people don't need adult/continuing education and/or training	5.0	78.1	11.2	59
5. Adult/continuing education and/or training is mostly for people with little else to do	4.8	81.6	6.1	77
6. Money spent on adult/continuing education/training for employees is money well spent	87.5	2.8	5.5	43
7. Adult/continuing education and/or training helps people make better use of their lives	85.5	2.6	8.5	34
8. Adult/continuing education is an important way to help people cope with changes in their lives	69.8	3.6	23.1	35
9. Continuing my education makes me feel better about myself	89.8	2.9	4.8	35

Table 5: Motivations to learn based on the Education Participation Scale (Boshier, 1991)

Statement	Percentage			Missing Nos
	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	
1. To learn more on a subject that interests me	88.0	4.2	7.8	13
2. To earn more	60.9	19.2	19.8	60
3. My employer required me to do the course	12.1	70.1	17.8	96
4. To participate in group activities	30.4	30.4	39.1	74
5. To contribute more to my community	48.2	20.2	31.6	58
6. To gain awareness of myself and others	65.2	11.6	23.2	60
7. To get a break from the routine of home and work	39.0	37.5	23.5	67
8. To do my job better	46.2	26.6	27.2	87
9. Someone advised me to do it	30.1	46.3	23.6	77
10. To start my own business	12.7	66.0	21.4	90
11. I was bored	23.1	60.6	16.4	80
12. I had to do it, e.g. to claim benefits, to avoid redundancy	5.4	85.6	9.0	84
13. To get a job	56.0	28.3	15.8	67
14. To learn knowledge/skills useful in my daily life	73.1	10.4	16.6	67
15. To contribute more as a citizen	48.7	16.8	34.5	70
16. To meet new people	62.3	14.4	23.4	62
17. To be less likely to lose my current job	9.0	70.0	23.4	91
18. To obtain a qualification	90.4	3.5	6.1	52

Table 6: The teaching and learning process

Statement	Percentage			Missing Nos
	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	
1. The course provides opportunities for making new friends	89.8	2.4	7.7	26
2. Students often ask the teacher questions	94.9	1.9	3.2	27
3. The teacher makes every effort to help students succeed	91.5	2.3	6.1	41
4. Students can select assignments that are of personal interest to them	50.5	27.2	22.4	42
5. Activities not related to course objectives are kept to a minimum	57.2	10.1	32.6	53
6. Most students on the course achieve their personal learning goals	69.4	1.5	29.0	43
7. The teacher respects students as individuals	89.8	1.9	8.3	40
8. Getting work done is very important in the course	94.8	1.1	4.1	44
9. The course is well organised	76.2	10.3	13.5	49
10. The teacher insists that you do things his or her way	26.0	45.8	28.2	48
11. Students feel free to question course requirements	74.5	7.5	17.9	39
12. The course has a clear sense of direction	85.3	4.7	10.0	43
13. Most students enjoy the course	84.2	3.1	12.7	40
14. The students on the course enjoy working together	83.9	1.7	14.4	42
15. Students on this course have an opportunity to draw on their own personal experiences and relate it to their learning	87.9	2.0	10.2	47