

Making the case for lifelong learning: PIAAC and policy change.

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My paper looks first at why learning through the adult lifespan is important and valuable for individuals, communities, companies and for governments. Secondly, it looks at the relationship between the range of challenges facing countries in the light of economic, technological and demographic change, and the available evidence of adults' competence to address those challenges. For this it draws heavily on the very rich evidence in the OECD Programme of International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC) (OECD 2013). The paper notes PIAAC's primary focus on skills related to the labour market and productivity, and its useful survey of aspects of social capital. It complements this by considering other forms of quantifiable data, and qualitative studies relevant to policy making that affect a wider range of lifelong and life-wide learning. These include looking at evidence from longitudinal studies, more targeted surveys, and the rich range of narratives drawn on in advocacy work.

The paper thirdly considers the striking gap that exists between countries' international commitments to increase investment in adult learning and education, and the much smaller commitment made in many individual countries' national policies, then considers reasons for the gaps; whilst at the same time recognising that a smaller number of other countries do maintain high levels of commitment, and maintain consistency between commitments and outcomes (UNESCO GEM 2016, Council of the European Union 2010).

Fourthly it asks how far evidence of what can be relatively easily measured squeezes out proper attention to issues that are either much harder to measure quantitatively, or are not really susceptible to quantitative measurement at all? A remark regularly attributed to Albert Einstein, 'not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted' (Cameron 1957,13), captures this concern. Yet as the former Director of UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, Aaron Benavot has observed, 'what is not measured becomes invisible, and all too easily ignored'¹.

The paper draws heavily on evidence from the UK, where I have worked for forty five years, and is written from the perspective of someone who is convinced that in addition to learning for and at the workplace, adult learning and education has a key role in addressing values, has the potential to contribute to the well-being and fulfilment of adults, fosters a respect for difference and diversity alongside effective inclusive strategies. Adult learning encourages people's capacity for empathy and mutual understanding, and contributes to the development and

¹ Aaron Benavot speaking at CREFAL inter-ministerial conference, Patzcuaro Mexico May 2018.

enrichment of their communities. In short, there is an important role for adult learning in the promotion of social justice.

Securing economic prosperity and social inclusion are key challenges affecting a field where learners' purposes, and the impacts of their achievements are so diverse. They are complicated, too, when we measure individual accomplishment, whilst what we know together, as workers or communities, can be greater than the sum of our measurable individual skills.

Why does learning throughout life matter?

Learning throughout life makes sense. Research evidence shows that it is, overall, good for your health, your wealth, your civic engagement, and for your family's future prospects. It prolongs your independent life and enriches your quality of life (Schuller et al 2004, Desjardins and Schuller 2007, BIS 2012). Investing in the skills of the workforce makes sense, too, for companies - fostering flexibility and creativity, problem solving, team working and innovation, an increased sense of agency among staff and raising productivity. These are, of course, exactly the skills needed at a time when firms need agility in facing the challenges of the latest industrial revolution.

And for governments, securing major policy changes like those needed to address climate change or major technological innovation involves active learning by adults. Supporting learning in later life helps in delaying the onset of dependency among rapidly ageing populations. Learning plays an important role in overcoming inequality and exclusion; and supporting inter-generational learning creates more resilient families and communities. More broadly, learning fosters improved mental health and wider well-being (HMSO 2008, UIL 2016).

Jacques Delors, then President of the European Commission, summed this up in 1992 when he argued that lifelong learning is a key both to economic prosperity and to social cohesion (Commission of the European Communities 1993). Report after report from multi-lateral agencies reinforce the value of lifelong learning - from UNESCO's *Learning to Be* (1972), through PIAAC in 2013 to the World Economic Forum in 2017 (Faure 1972, OECD 2013, World Economic Forum 2017). The United Nations recognised the importance of adult learning in facing the world's development needs by including lifelong learning in the fourth of its 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015), and the UNESCO World Educational Forum agreed that the overwhelming majority of the seventeen global Sustainable Development Goals could only be achieved through the engagement and active participation of the communities affected - a process inevitably involving adults learning (UNESCO 2015).

As the World Economic Forum highlighted in 2017, the need for policies that enhance lifelong learning opportunities has been given new impetus by the onset of the fourth industrial revolution, fuelled by the increased use of robotics and artificial intelligence, which some analysts suggest will have the same devastating effect on white collar jobs that the globalisation of production and trade had on blue collar jobs in industrial countries. In particular, the WEF paper argues, problem solving in a digital environment (one of the key competences explored by PIAAC) will be at a premium, and whilst not all sectors will be equally affected, the trend is clear (World Economic Forum 2017).

The challenges and uncertainties generated by industrial, economic, ecological and technological change are of direct concern to governments and companies. But, of course, they also directly affect the lives of citizens at and outside work. Raymond Williams the cultural critic and adult educator, argued that people turn to learning at times of change to understand what is happening, to make adaptations, and to help shape change (Williams 1956). And Delors again summed up the domains of learning people need in a learning society in the UNESCO report *Learning: The Treasure Within*. They were he argued ‘Learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together’ (Delors 1996). There is, then, wide agreement that in the light of the range of challenges facing our societies there is a powerful case for increasing adult learning and education opportunities, both for the workplace and for the wider well-being of society.

What can PIAAC measure, and what does it omit?

PIAAC provides a statistically robust and extremely rich cross-country comparative study of just how well prepared adults, and the societies in which they live, are to address the challenges of economic, technological and social change. Its primary focus is on measuring the extent of adults’ literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills in technology-rich environments, and their relationship with labour market participation, security, reward and productivity. It looks, too, at how adults develop and maintain skills, how skills decline through under-use and with age, and how that process can be ameliorated. It is also extremely useful in its analysis of the relationship of the basic skills measured and important dimensions of social capital:- the extent to which adults trust others; their self-reporting of health; their sense of their own political efficacy; and their propensity to volunteer.

If many of PIAAC’s headline conclusions confirm the findings of earlier surveys and policy analyses, the report also generates a more sophisticated understanding of the capacity to use skills in a range of contexts, and goes further than earlier surveys in a number of directions.

PIAAC confirms that ‘What people know, and what they can do with what they know has a major impact on their life chances’ (OECD 2013, 26). PIAAC shows that people with poor basic skills do worse in the world of work; that employers offer opportunities for development to more highly skilled staff, and that many offer

little if any training and development to low skilled staff. It shows, too, that adults with high levels of skill and qualifications are also likely to take part in education and training, whilst adults with poor basic skills are less likely to do so.

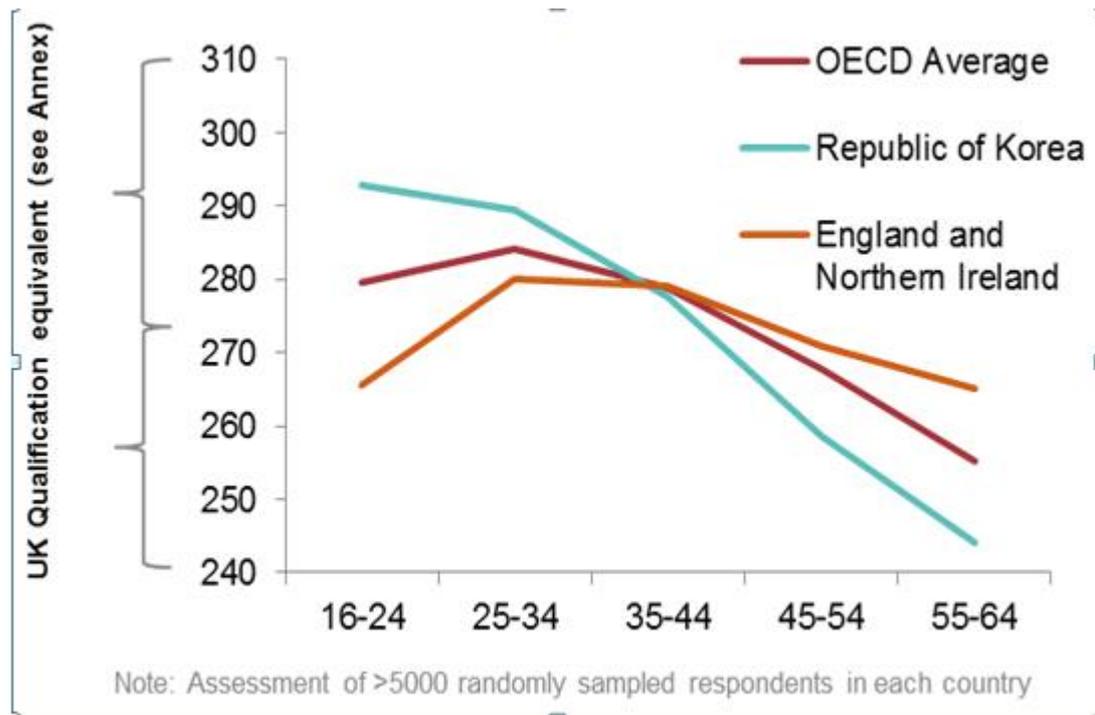
PIAAC confirms the long and growing impact of what Rubenson called ‘the long arm of the job’ on adults’ skills (Rubenson 2009). How far work offers the chance to use skills and to enhance them has a major impact on how well adults maintain skills. PIAAC shows that foreign language migrants do worse than native language speakers, and highlights the importance of learning the host language because it is key to integration. Overall, its findings reinforce the point that marginalised groups are disadvantaged in acquiring and maintaining skills as adults; by lower engagement with the labour market; by being offered fewer opportunities to learn at work; by the relative absence of publicly supported and targeted inclusion strategies; and by their lower levels of social interaction (OECD 2013).

The PIAAC survey instrument identified participants’ capacity to apply literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills, and as a result the report makes clear that whilst, overall, there is a strong link between the level of initial education and skill, the extent to which qualification level accurately reflects skills does vary significantly. For example, Japanese and Dutch adults with upper secondary education experience scored higher than Italian adults with tertiary experience.

I found the PIAAC survey’s approach to assessing literacy reassuring, despite the exclusion of writing from the skills assessed. After a lifetime of reading findings that reported a simple dichotomy between literate and illiterate, it was reassuring to see recognition that literacies are a continuum of situated skills, exercised in context. To illustrate this, the report highlights both the cohort effect and the impact of ageing on skills. In most countries younger aged cohorts, faced with a more complex and demanding labour market, are more skilled in literacy as they enter work than their elders. England, however is an outlier, and PIAAC highlights evidence that its 16-24s are no more skilled in literacy than 55-64s. PIAAC suggests this will have long-term and deleterious effects on productivity. However, perhaps at least as significant is the seminal finding that adults’ literacy skills rise sharply once engaged in working contexts in which the use of those skills is meaningful, and maintain those skills for twenty years before they decline (see Figure 1 below).

One particular strength of the PIAAC report is its focus on how skills are maintained and developed. Since the survey asked about participation in formal, non-formal and informal education, the report was able to conclude that there is a clear relationship between the extent of participation in organised adult learning

Figure 1. Literacy skills over the age span: OECD averages, Korea and England (from PIAAC, OECD 2013)



activities and average proficiency in key information processing skills. In addition, however, there is a ‘Matthew effect’ at play, where the more you have the more you get:

Participation in adult learning helps to develop and maintain literacy and numeracy skills, especially when the learning programmes require participants to read and write, and confront and solve new problems (OECD, 2013, 34).

PIAAC finds that making effective use of skills acquired outside of work, is closely related to proficiency:

Adults who engage more often in literacy- and numeracy-related activities and use ICTs more both at and outside of work show higher proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving. **Notably, engagement in relevant activities outside of work has an even stronger relationship with the skills assessed than engagement in the corresponding activities at work(my emphasis).** While reading often is likely to aid in developing and maintaining reading skills, having better reading skills is also likely to result in greater enjoyment of reading and, thus, in reading more frequently. Beyond instruction, the opportunity to engage in relevant practices is important both for developing proficiency and preventing its loss (OECD 2013, 36).

This finding is consistent with the evidence that those countries with the highest levels of participation in adult education, (notably Nordic countries and Japan), also show the highest scores in the assessment of literacy, numeracy and problem

solving. High scoring countries also report lower wage gaps between the highly-skilled and lower-skilled adults, and stronger evidence of the social benefits of learning. They point to social, political and economic policies that are focused on inclusion - reflecting Ban Ki-Moon's mantra that 'no one should be left behind' (UN 2015). These findings chime with the work of Wilkinson and Pickett that can be crudely summarised as the more equal the society, the better everyone thrives (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

It is clear that whilst the PIAAC conclusions offered positive evidence of the interplay of some social and economic dimensions of adult learning, it is nevertheless focused on the human capital issues central to OECD's lifelong learning policy perspective. Adults over the age of 65 were excluded from the samples surveyed, despite the dramatic growth in the number of older adults in and outside the workplace. These adults can provide evidence of the different blend of working, civic and social activity and skills use which they could bring to our understanding of social change. By limiting the survey to the traditional working life of Fordist and Taylorist manufacturing economies, (i.e. between the ages of 16-65), PIAAC missed the chance of helping decision makers to re-frame their thinking on lifelong learning. In particular, they miss reflecting on how skills are passed on, how older workers can effectively downsize responsibility, and how older adults can move into part-time work. These are all significant policy concerns in countries where dependency ratios are shortening markedly.

Demand for adult learning

Again, given the interests of the survey's nation state partners, PIAAC is stronger on policy advice concerning the supply of skills than how best to generate demand. The PIAAC survey reports that the major extrinsic motivations that adults identify centre on work related reasons for taking up study. But as Desjardins, (a major contributor to the work of PIAAC) observes on PIAAC's findings on motivation for learning:

The divide between job- and non-job related reasons is not clear-cut since motives are often interrelated (Courtney 1992; Rubenson 2001). The purpose and design of a survey can bias the reasons reported by adults (Rubenson and Desjardins 2009). For example, a careful analysis of the motivation questions in PIAAC reveals that they were designed in favour of identifying job-related reasons rather than being more comprehensive (Desjardins 2017, 186).

PIAAC has less to say about intrinsic motivations to learn, and the challenges faced by people with little confidence and low self-efficacy in imagining the relevance of participation in learning to their lives. Indeed, taking the perspective of low skilled adults in and outside the labour market, the progress of the fourth industrial revolution leaves them increasingly precarious, at risk of being unable to find jobs or of being stuck in low waged employment.

Changes to labour markets that reinforce the hourglass economy, where jobs requiring intermediate levels of skill are less and less available, leave a formidable skills challenge for the least qualified to be able to escape insecure low waged employment. For many individuals, at least, (as alas for many employers and some governments) the answer to the question of participation, when it is framed solely around a labour market rationale for learning is, undoubtedly, why bother? It is a question which can be more confidently addressed on the one hand where active labour market and welfare systems integrate with lifelong learning programmes; and on the other where adults are convinced of the broad benefits for social, and civic life, as well as for work. There is peer to peer engagement through union learning programmes which have successful track records in successfully engaging sceptical low -skilled adults in learning. But the challenge of engagement in learning remains formidable. It is a challenge not best addressed by too single-minded a focus on the economic dimensions of lifelong learning (McIlroy and Croucher 2013).

What dimensions of life-wide learning can be measured in other ways?

To return to the Delors' formulation in *Learning: The Treasure Within*, the very real strengths of PIAAC lie in its capture of skills related to learning to know and learning to do (Delors 1996). Learning to be - being clear about one's identity and having the confidence to engage with the world - and learning to live together are less well captured, as is made clear by the focus on the perspective of low skilled adults illustrated above. Recognising and valuing learning, as an aid to fully realising potential in life outside work, is also of critical importance.

The British politician David Blunkett put it well, arguing that in addition to its key role in fostering economic prosperity and inclusion:

Learning enables people to play a full part in their community and strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake and are encouraging adults to enter and re-enter learning at every point of their lives as parents, at work and as citizens (DFEE1998, 5).

Blunkett articulates the key dimension of a lifelong and life-wide learning policy that adult education can provide, in fostering community development, respecting difference and diversity; and recognising those things we know together that are greater than the things we know alone. These include the passing on of traditions and values, the fostering of critical reflection and active citizenship, as well as a love of languages, the arts and of making things. They also include the Freirean pedagogy of popular education grounded in social movements- learning which is focused on power relations and how they can be named and contested. Taken together, the span of life-wide learning is broad, and its impacts are felt across a wide range of social policy domains - not least in the world of work.

The experience of the Ford motor company and its unions offers a clear illustration of the interplay of learning for leisure and personal development and its spill over into work, incidentally confirming one of PIAAC's findings. After decades of poor industrial relations, demarcation disputes, and biennial wage bargaining rounds ending in headline grabbing strikes, Ford and its unions agreed in 1987 to put 0.3% of the wage bill into funds, to be managed locally by representatives of blue and white collar unions and management. Workers could apply for up to £200 for any kind of learning activity other than industrial training. The project was immensely popular as workers learned plastering, how to play golf, or took an Open University degree. Management saw reduced absenteeism, improved worker retention and an end to major strikes. Learning leaks, and the pleasure staff took in learning for pleasure gave them skills they applied at work (Moore 1994).

As PIAAC's useful findings on dimensions of social capital make clear, some outcomes of life-wide learning are susceptible to representative sample surveys taken at one point in time. Others are not. However, the complementary evidence of longitudinal birth cohort studies, where the same individuals are re-interviewed every five or seven years, can show, as a minimum, the powerful association of participation in formal and non-formal education with a range of positive social outcomes. The Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre analysed British birth cohort studies, which showed an 84 per cent increase in racial tolerance among adults who participated in at least three classes over seven years, as against peers who did not participate. These are causal links, determined through regression analysis. Comparable positive impacts were observable in giving up smoking, not developing cervical cancer, and in better general health. What is most distinctive about these findings is that they hold good whatever the subject studied and whatever the level of learning. The key message is that learning is a key catalyst to social change, beyond the ostensible purpose of studying. As in the Ford example, skills developed in one context are applied elsewhere. However, generating such evidence is time consuming and resource intensive, and the will to fund them is not universally available (Schuller, Preston et al 2004).

Representative survey samples, like PIAAC, are also unable to offer robust evidence on smaller sub-groups within the surveyed population, without major targeted boosts to sample sizes. Whilst surveys may distinguish between first and second language speakers overall, they cannot capture the differences which, in the UK for instance report very high levels of participation among men from the Horn of Africa, whilst Bangladeshi, Somali and Pakistani women are amongst the most under-represented. Evidence relating to them needs to be sought by more sophisticated sampling, by dedicated surveys, and by qualitative studies (Ward and Spacey 2008, Aldridge, Lamb and Tuckett 2008, Pennacchia, Jones and Aldridge 2018).

Reasons for participation change through the life span

Motivations change over time as well. This is an issue critical to recognise in responding to the lifelong learning policy challenges of an ageing society. For twenty years the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE - now the Learning and Work Institute) has surveyed a representative sample of adults over 17, but without a cut off at 64, in the UK, asking about their participation of learning, and using a very broad and inclusive definition. NIACE's 2007 study '*What Older people learn*' draws on the survey data (see Table 1) and shows that as people age very different priorities take over in the areas they choose to study. Taking the population as a whole, the NIACE survey chimes with the PIAAC findings that work related concerns dominate the learning that people undertake. Older people increasingly choose to study subjects like the arts, history and religion, to make sense of life. Whilst computer classes, which have both work and social purposes, were important across the age range, take up of business and specific vocational studies decline rapidly after 45.

Table 1 What adults choose to study by age group

What are older people learning?					
All adults		45+		55+	
Computer skills	24.0	Computer skills	31.8	Computer skills	40.6
Business studies	8.1	Foreign languages	8.1	Foreign languages	10.2
Health & medicine	7.6	Business studies	6.5	Arts	7.2
Foreign languages	5.7	Health & medicine	6.3	History	4.7
Social work	3.5	Arts	5.0	Religion	4.5
Arts	3.1	History	3.9	Health & medicine	4.0
Engineering	3.0	Social work	3.9	Music	3.2
English lang/lit	3.0	Religion	3.8	Business studies	3.1
Social sciences	3.0	Occupational H&S	2.8	Social work	2.5
Science & maths	2.9	Communication	2.6	English lang/lit	2.3

(Aldridge and Tuckett, What older people learn, 2007)

The challenges of an ageing demography are critical -PIAAC notes the weakening of cognitive skills with age, and the effect of continuing learning in ameliorating those effects. Differences across the life-span are a critical focus of '*Learning through life*' (Schuller and Watson 2009), which argues that there are four broadly distinct phases in lifelong learning beyond the years of formal schooling: preparing for and entering the labour market; mid-years where family, work and social pressures make time for learning a challenge to find; the third age where work

obligations lessen, caring responsibilities change, and civic, voluntary and leisure activity become more central for many, and a fourth stage where age-related illness and decreased mobility increasingly shape learning options. Each stage generates a different mix of motivations. Effective policy resists a one size fits all strategy for meeting the needs of adults at different stages of life

‘Education’s for other people’, or is it?

Throughout the sequence of NIACE/LWI UK participation surveys highlighted above some 25 percent (never varying by more than 2 or 3 percentage points) report that they have done no learning since leaving school. When asked in 2011 whether learning had a positive impact on various aspects of life, a significant majority identified learning as positive in all but one of the aspects identified in questions:

Table 2 Belief in the positive impact of adult learning on various aspects of life, by respondents reporting no participation in learning since leaving school

On self-confidence	79%
On career/employment prospects	74%
On your child’s education	71%
On family relationships	59%
On your health	58%
On involvement in local events and issues	49%

1,914 respondents from 4,957 in the total survey.

(Aldridge and Tuckett 2011, Tough times for adult learners, 17)

Despite this clear endorsement of the positive impact and value of participation in adult learning, the research showed that 84 percent said it was unlikely that they would take it up, arguing that ‘it’s not for the likes of us’. This confirmed qualitative research findings that where your family, your peer group, and colleagues at work have little experience of structured learning after school, it can feel outside the bounds of your own realistic options (Rubenson 2009, McGivney 2009, Gorard and Smith 2007).

More recent research by Lavender and others shows that despite reporting no participation since school, once interviewed people do report different formal and informal learning they have undertaken - explaining in different ways that what they have done does not feel either hard enough or formal enough to count as ‘learning’ (Lavender forthcoming). In part, this may be because what they have learned is not easily measured, unless given a grade, a score or a qualification.

Peer group members with successful experience of participation are, perhaps, the most effective in encouraging people to join learning activities, and people are more likely to consider participation at key life transitions, among them job change, parenthood, moving home, divorce, retirement, and bereavement (Schuller and Watson 2009). Nevertheless, attitudinal barriers are a core challenge in securing the engagement of under-represented groups, even where policy gives priority to reaching them.

Beyond measurement: liberal education and cultural change

There is, however, more to learning in adult life than outcomes that can be readily measured, either by a broad representative sample like PIAAC, or by birth cohort or more targeted population studies. How we measure the appreciation of a poem, the patient accumulation of experience, skill and sense of personal fulfilment in baking or dressmaking, the reflection prompted by a theatre performance, or the steady development of rigour in the study of philosophy are all beyond the reach of quantitative surveys. We may recognise the difference in quality of our own aesthetic production, when compared with that of the greatest painters or composers, but what value is to be gained by trying to measure it? In much of the liberal and civic education agenda achievements are often tacit, modest and incremental, and as Aaron Benavot has argued, the learning undertaken, and the value of it risks becoming invisible as a result². Yet as the Blunkett quote above makes clear, much of the individual and social learning we do in these domains is at the core of our idea of civilisation.

The same point can be made about education for social change. The impact of learning through participation in social movements, for example through the formal and informal learning central to the emergence of the women's movement, or of civil rights in the USA (each underpinned by adult education activities) is not susceptible to short term measurement - yet their impact on OECD countries has been marked (Thompson 1983, Horton 1988). So, too, is the impact of great festivals of innovation and imagination, like the World Social Forum, with its commitment to thinking through how to make 'another possible world'. The contribution these forms make to lifelong and life-wide learning is, and needs to be, captured through effective story telling. At their best, such stories have a powerful effect in advocacy making the case for support for lifelong learning to politicians and decision makers.

Policy recommendations and evidence-based policy making

PIAAC makes a series of key recommendations for policy, beginning of course with the importance of offering everyone sound foundations in initial education. It then calls for countries to 'make lifelong learning accessible to all', with a particular focus on the State offering second chance options for low-skilled adults, since employers tend not to offer them training. It calls for strengthened education and

² Benavot, A. op cit.

work links, it calls for employers to provide training relevant to the current needs of the labour market, opportunities to fit learning into life and work, improved guidance and information, and for the recognition and certification of skills proficiency. PIAAC makes a range of recommendations relating to people out of work, encouraging older workers to stay in the labour market, and on using tax incentives to encourage people with skills back to work.

Again, it scarcely needs pointing out that these recommendations are overwhelmingly focused on skills for labour market participation and for the most effective development of people at work. The Council of the European Union's 2010 Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning, like PIAAC's, prioritises learning for work. However, it also highlights priorities which are broad and inclusive, with a focus on the needs of low skilled adults, marginalised groups, including adults with disabilities, migrants, Roma and people in hospitals, prisons and other environments with limited mobility. It also encourages effective provision for older people to maintain active citizenship, notes current levels of adult participation at 9.1 per cent (with a range in countries from 1 per cent to 30 per cent) and sets a participation target of 15 per cent of adults by the year 2020. The CEU (2011) paper recognises that provision for adults is variable, but is, overall, the least developed area of EU education and training, and notes how hard it is to implement an action plan, given:

the difficulty of adequately monitoring the adult-learning sector, due to a lack of sufficient statistical data and evaluation of policy measures. Evidence-based policy-making in the field of adult learning calls for comprehensive and comparable data on all key aspects of adult learning, for effective monitoring systems and cooperation between the different agencies, as well as for high-quality research activities (Council of the European Union 2011).

In the global arena, the Mid Term review of UNESCO's 12 year cycle of international conferences on the education of adults (CONFINTEA-MTR), which met in Suwon, Korea, in 2017 identified many of the same key issues identified by PIAAC as central to life-wide learning:

Beyond work-related skills, it is important to support the development of capabilities such as problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, the ability to work in a team, and the ability to continue learning and be resilient to rapid change (UNESCO UIL 2018, 8).

That meeting was held in the light of the United Nations 2015 endorsement of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, to be achieved by 2030 which included, as Goal 4 a commitment to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all', within which there are sub-targets that, 'ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and

women, achieve literacy and numeracy’, as well as a broader commitment to adult participation (UN 2015).

The Suwon-Osun meeting argued for a more universal engagement of adult learning and education, grounded in the UN recognition of the right to education for all, and in the key foundational right to literacy for all men and women:

ALE (Adult Learning and Education) should be truly transformational, critical, empowering, participative and inclusive and address the needs of all citizens, in particular those who participate the least. Opportunities for open dialogue need to be developed.

ALE should ensure the participation of adults in learning, thereby promoting democratic values, peace and human rights through empowerment and active citizenship. Education for sustainable development and global citizenship education should therefore be fostered.

‘Popular education’ ... should be an underlying concept of ALE and inform education policies and practices (UNESCO UIL 2018, 8).

Once again, however, it noted the challenges in securing robust data, and in securing widespread skills in interpreting it, to inform evidence based policy making. Of course, what constitutes robust data, is itself a moot point. As Hillage notes, politicians and policy makers love numbers, and find it harder to appreciate the value of qualitative research (Hillage 1998), particularly perhaps in the field of educational research, which is overwhelmingly qualitative, seldom fits a positivistic framework, nor seeks to provide explicit evidence for policy makers.

One significant attempt to address the need to find evidence that is convincing to policymakers, outside the area of work related skills and labour market productivity, is currently being explored by the transnational EU funded ENLIVEN project. It is developing a transnational evidence base on lifelong and life-wide learning that spans the work-related and life-wide learning agenda, through case-based and bounded agency approaches, in order to develop an Intelligent Decision Support System. This is an AI tool to facilitate effective adult guidance. Given Amazon’s recent discovery that its HR algorithm developed a gender bias in its search for ideal candidates for employment, we must hope the IDSS avoids such pitfalls! (Reuters 9.10.2018))

The impact of evidence and international agreements on policy outcomes affecting the education of adults

Given such impressive international endorsements both for lifelong and life-wide learning, and given that five years have passed since the first PIAAC findings and recommendations were published, it is important to see how far what governments sign up to in international agreements has translated into practice on the ground. Past evidence at a global level is not encouraging. In 1990, and again in the

UNESCO Education for All agreement at Dakar in 2000, governments agreed to halve adult illiteracy by 2015. In the event, numbers of adults without literacy skills fell from 780 million in 2000 to 745 million fifteen years later: markedly the least progress made towards any EFA target. The SDG commitment to increased literacy provision for adults relies, of course, primarily on governments but also on global development partners, who marshal support through the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), whose remit covered the full range of Goal 4. The GPE chair, Julia Gillard, explained to the International Council for Adult Education that the GPE did not have the money to invest in adult literacy, so the challenge must pass to civil society.

A not dissimilar pattern has emerged in the European Union. Eurostat reported an increased participation rate in adult learning and education in 2016 of 10.8 per cent, up from 9.1 per cent in 2011, but significantly short of its 2020 target of 15 per cent. However, a significant proportion of the increase came from France's spectacular jump from a 2011 rate of 5.5 per cent to 2016's 18.8 per cent - surely an administrative re-rating, to include aspects of industrial training and development previously excluded. The European Commission recognises that the overall trend is that numbers are stagnating, and that just 8 countries have hit the target (EU 2018). 17 countries improved their rates of participation, none, apart from France by more than 3.3 per cent of the population surveyed, whilst 14 countries, including Slovakia and the UK saw falls. Eurostat also points to the range in countries' participation - ranging from just 1 per cent to 30 per cent. It is an important corrective to the broad argument of this paper that the Nordic countries, Switzerland and outside of Europe, Japan, have had, and maintain high levels of commitment to wide participation, which derives from deep rooted cultural commitments to citizens' education and inclusive cultural policies.

Given the quality of the PIAAC evidence, and the complementary quantitative and qualitative studies available, and despite the scale of the challenges facing OECD economies, it is clear that evidence alone has not won the hearts and minds of many government decision makers, and where there has been most response has been in renewed investment in young people's education.

It is, then, useful to reflect on whether there is a difference between evidence that convinces policy makers to sign up to international commitments, and evidence that persuades them to turn those commitments into practical policies, backed by appropriate financing? The reasons for the gap are numerous. First, the ministers who sign up to broad international agreements (often foreign ministers) are usually different from the finance ministers who influence domestic priorities for investment. This relates to a second reason, which is politics. The needs of schools and universities fill the education postbags of politicians. The needs of adults for education and training do not.

Third, the dominance of the neo-liberal policy perspectives of a majority of OECD governments, has led them to prioritise short-term and utilitarian programmes, focused primarily on labour market entry for young people. A fourth factor has been the success of arguments for the greater productivity to be secured from investment in early years' education, given the longer period of returns that derive from it (Heckman and Masterov 2007). Fifth, investing in adult learning and education, when measured by short term rates of return is often seen as comparatively uneconomic, and anyway difficult to target effectively at the most under-represented groups. As one World Bank economist explained to me, 'We tried adult literacy in the 1980s and it didn't work'. A sixth reason is, perhaps, the inability of educational research to provide the kinds of answers policy makers need in order to act.

The difficulty in capturing adequate data on the full range of adult learning, cited above by the European Council, coupled with the extraordinary variety and diversity of forms of adult learning and education together make investment and commitment harder to achieve, and evidence on outcomes harder to bring together. It is also true that whilst adult learning and education participation is funded at the margins of education budgets, it has health, including importantly, mental health benefits; it reduces recidivism amongst offenders; and it facilitates changed behaviours to address the challenges of climate change - all important social policy outcomes for other parts of government, but not a measurable priority for most education ministries.

Finally, the very professionalism and reach of the PIAAC evidence may have squeezed out the wider case for investment in adult learning. Despite its useful comments on trust, PIAAC's focus is on the competences of adults during the years of a conventional working lifetime which are relevant to labour market challenges. Almost inevitably this takes attention away from the role adult learning can play, for example in the citizenship education necessary for effectively addressing climate change, or for considering the learning needs of an ageing population. It is then, perhaps, unsurprising that governments have often targeted limited public investment to short term Vocational Education and Training, insisting on measurable outcomes, and strictly limited costs.

The difficulty of working across government ministerial silos, at national government level, (perhaps a seventh reason for my list above), has been one of the major drivers behind the development of learning cities. Local and regional government, education, health, civil society and business agencies more readily co-operate in learning cities across a broad range of activity to develop and sustain cultures and provision of learning locally. Cross silo work is easier to secure when influencers and decision makers meet locally for a range of reasons, and where common problems and the persistence of tight budgets generates trust and co-operation (UNESCO UIL 2018).

Is evidence enough to make the case for adult learning?

My own experience, over forty years of advocacy for adult learning, has been that evidence on its own does not secure the kind of policy change that PIAAC makes such a powerful case for. Nor by itself does research evidence do the work of stimulating the decision to participate amongst previously under-represented groups. To take just a single example, our decision at NIACE in 1992 to launch a national Adult Learners' Week in the UK came at a time when the government of the day planned to end funding of non-formal adult education. The advocacy focus of the Week, the mobilisation of learners and sympathetic organisations succeeded in reversing the decision. Adult Learners' Week's subsequent adoption by UNESCO and its spread to more than fifty countries worldwide was, however, built on the belief that decision makers react to the lived experience of people who report that their lives have been changed as adults through participation in learning; and that it is possible to change the cultural stereotypes other people carry around with them by telling their stories powerfully and succinctly. Perhaps more importantly, celebrating existing learners, in all their rich diversity, acts as an encouragement to others to join in. Emulation is powerful, and if you see people like yourself talking with passion about the way learning has had an impact on their life, it becomes easier to cross the threshold to participate yourself. However, good stories and research alone won't usually do the trick either. A sympathetic media, willing to promote messages, using flair and imagination in their promotion, and a large mobilisation of learners arguing their case can make a difference (Tuckett, 2018).

In conclusion

So, in conclusion, PIAAC gives a rich evidence base. However, to change policy this evidence needs to be complemented with impactful and appropriate research and human stories that capture the benefits of learning that are not easily quantifiable, and needs backing with the mobilisation of partners, and above all learners. Winning the hearts and minds of powerful decision makers and politicians, most of whom will inevitably have had a successful passage through initial education, and had little need for a second chance, is also a necessary precondition for investment in adult learning and for progress to be made. They need to be convinced, through evidence, stories, plus sustained and systematic advocacy, that adult education is vital not only for our future prosperity but for the quality of our lives. There is, after all, more to life than work.

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