

Cumulative Advantage and Labor Market Impact on Adult Education

Veronica Scheidler

Colorado State University

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the unequal participation in adult learning and education (ALE) in Europe and the United States as it relates to the labor market. Kilpi-Jakonen, De Vilhena, and Blossfeld (2015) argue that national and international educational policy's emphasis on increasing participation in adult learning does not take into consideration social inequalities and thus, increased participation does not benefit adults at a disadvantage. In their research, the authors focus specifically on educational inequality and argue that those with limited prior educational attainment are less likely to participate in ALE. The authors' main thesis is that there is a "cumulative advantage" to participation, meaning those already skilled or educated are more prone to be targeted for additional learning opportunities. This pattern is reinforced by employers and the labor market where jobs requiring greater knowledge often require continuous education to remain relevant. The research derives its empirical basis from an *eduLIFE* comparative international study of 13 countries –11 European countries, Australia, and the United States. The *eduLIFE* study collected longitudinal data related to participation rates in formal and non-formal ALE and labor outcomes of the respective forms of adult education.

The *eduLIFE* data provided evidence that cumulative advantage was most apparent in non-formal adult learning, a finding the authors believe is linked to most non-formal education being sponsored or encouraged by employers. However, this correlation was less pronounced in Germany and Denmark where formal degrees are necessary for most high skilled jobs, and those with tertiary degrees were *less* likely to participate in non-formal learning. The evidence for cumulative advantage was present though less pronounced in formal adult learning. The authors allege that one explanation for this discrepancy could be that in countries such as the Russian Federation and the United States, where many citizens hold advanced degrees, those with less

education may perceive a greater need for formal credentials. In the end, the authors assert that “almost no country is truly able to reduce social inequalities through adult learning” (Kilpi-Jackson et al., 2015, p. 541). Their suggestion to rectify this is to remove the spotlight from “increasing participation rates” to “equality in participation rates” (p. 542).

Kilpi-Jakonen et al. (2015) are certainly not treading new ground when they assert inequalities exist within adult education. Nonetheless, their research supporting the concept that cumulative advantage in ALE is closely tied to previous education attainment and employment status highlights an important weakness of ALE. UNESCO (2016) also recognizes the impact of inequality on the labor market benefits of adult education when it poses the following idea:

Consider a country where the income that individuals earn is strongly associated with their qualifications. If, in that country access to education is very unequal, then the distribution of the labor-market outcomes will also be very unequal.

Therefore education does not always reduce inequality, but may actually increase it. (p. 92)

This appears to be the case in Europe and the United States. Education is often considered an equalizer, but if an individual enters adulthood with limited education, that person is likely to have less access to ALE.

Currently, ALE is tightly bound to the labor market. According to the results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which has thus far surveyed 21 European nations at the United States, 80% to 90% of adults who report participating in adult learning say they do so to for job-related purposes such as getting a job or advancing in their current job. Further, in the countries surveyed by the PIAAC, employers finance between 60% and 85% of adult learning, and countries with a higher percentage of

employer sponsored learning result in higher reported participation (UNESCO, 2016). Merriam and Bierman (2014) describe that with increased globalization there has developed a “knowledge economy” where staying relevant in the market is tied continuous learning. They cite that American company Hewlett Packard estimates that a degree in engineering becomes outdated in 18 months. However, even in high-income countries some low-skilled jobs are on the periphery of the knowledge economy and workers in these fields may have less ready access to formal and non-formal education, if their employers do not recognize the benefits.

Kilpi-Jakonen et al. (2015) conclude their paper by admonishing that “states need to take more responsibility in distributing opportunities for learning equitably” (p. 543). This is a policy suggestion based on the reality that allowing ALE to be controlled mostly by the economic sector has produced the current gaps in access and participation. Europe and the United States could perhaps look to and learn from South Africa’s Employment Equity Act and Skills Development Act. After recognizing serious stratification among racial lines, the country passed both laws in 1998, to influence employers target designated groups and to specifically develop the job skills of traditionally disadvantaged persons and transform the corporate workplace to mirror the diversity of the country (Groener 2006, p. 9).

The work of Kilpi-Jakonen et al. contributes to the burgeoning research assessing advantage and disadvantage in ALE. While not specifically critical of free market systems, it conveys that cumulative advantage is largely perpetuated by the labor market. If ALE is to become an instrument of social equality, it will need to follow the authors’ advice to move away from increasing participation to increasing participation among the less educated and to do that, countries in Europe and the United States need to evaluate who is delivering ALE programming.

References

- Groener, Z. (2006). Adult education and social transformation. In S. B. Merriam, B. C. Courtenay, & R. M. Cervero (Eds.), *Global Issues and Adult Education* (pp. 5-14). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kilpi-Jakonen, E., De Vilhena, D. V., & Blossfeld, H. P. (2015). Adult learning and social inequalities: Processes of equalisation or cumulative disadvantage?. *International Review of Education*, 61(4), 529-546. doi:10.1007/s11159-015-9498-5
- Merriam, S. B., & Bierema L.L. (2014). *Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning. (2016) *3rd Global report on adult education and learning*. Hamburg, Germany: Author.