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CAN LIFELONG LEARNING RESHAPE LIFE CHANCES?

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ABSTRACT: Despite the expansion of post-school education and incentives to participate in lifelong learning, institutions and labour markets continue to interlock in shaping life chances according to starting social position, family and private resources. The dominant view that the economic and social returns to public investment in adult learning are too low to warrant large-scale public funding has been challenged by recent LLAKES research that shows significant returns to participants in lifelong learning with improvements in both their employability and employment prospects. It is argued that, under conditions of growing social polarisation and economic uncertainty, lifelong learning can have a significant protective effect by keeping adults close to a changing labour market. In this paper we review research from different disciplinary and epistemological traditions, providing evidence of the beneficial effects of lifelong learning, especially when taking into account the dynamics of the life course. Transitions and turning-points in youth and in adult life are markers of diversification of the life course; how far these diversifications amount to 'de-standardisation' of the life course is debated. They involve biographical negotiation, in which any decision is consequential upon previous decisions and involves the exercise of contextualised preferences as well as the calculations of 'rational choice'. Gaining a better understanding of how changing demands are negotiated at different life stages offers a new perspective, moving from narrow versions of rational choice theory towards models of biographical negotiation as promising avenues for effective policy-making.

Keywords: lifelong learning, life chances, social and economic returns, agency, youth and adult transitions

1. INTRODUCTION: CHANGING SOCIAL LANDSCAPES

Research into the ways in which life-chances are shaped by structures of opportunity and risk has been increasingly influenced by theories of reflexive modernisation focusing on the role of human agency, and the availability of large-scale data sets and cohort studies to model relationships between structure and agency from the early years into and through adult life. Reflexive modernisation refers to a condition in which the growth of knowledge 'forces decisions and opens up contexts for action'. It is assumed that individuals are released from the chains of social structures, and that they must 're-define their context for action under conditions

of constructed insecurity' (Beck, 1998, p. 85). Arguments that the dissolution of traditional class, gender and family parameters has, in post-industrial societies, created both conditions and expectations¹ for people to shape their own destinies (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) are juxtaposed with consistent evidence of persistent social inequalities in aspirations and attainment (Bynner, 2001; Evans, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Jones, 2002; Portes, 2011; Schoon and Silbereisen, 2009). Lifelong learning is held to provide avenues for people actively to improve their life chances by building capabilities, changing direction and overcoming setbacks (Aspin *et al.*, 2012). This paper highlights variations in the processes and consequences of learning across different subgroups of the population. We focus in particular on the factors that promote participation in education after leaving initial education as well as the benefits associated with adult 'lifelong' learning, in particular modes of learning which might be adopted by less advantaged individuals in order to improve their life chances.

While a substantial body of research evidence on the wider benefits of learning through the life course has been established in the UK through the work of Schuller *et al.* (2001) and Feinstein *et al.* (2008), empirical research on the economic returns of learning beyond initial and conventional, front-loaded higher education² is extremely limited (Beder, 1999), with assumptions about the general benefits of adult learning based largely on extrapolation from the benefits of mainstream education. Nevertheless, Jenkins *et al.* (2003) showed that enrolling for adult learning has a significant association with the likelihood of unemployed adults re-entering the labour market even though qualifications obtained in one's 30s do not lead to much immediate earnings benefit. Their conclusions were limited, however, by the narrow definition of lifelong learning adopted and neglect of the wider benefits and social returns.

In this paper we adopt a life course approach, with its emphasis on multiple influences on human development over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1998; Elder and Crosnoe, 2002) in order to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of learning throughout the life course and to uncover diversity and fluctuation in education participation over time. We argue, with reference to UK data, that the much-debated 'de-standardisation' of the life course is more usefully conceptualised as diversification, combined with increasing polarisation. This is manifested in a multiplicity of transition patterns, with individuals' prospects for finding themselves caught up in one pattern and not another (their life chances) strongly shaped by economic and social structures. Furthermore, the analysis reveals how different disciplinary approaches that are themselves rooted in 'standardised' models with fundamentally different sets of assumptions about human behaviour can be brought together in an extended discussion of ideas and evidence (Ragin, 1991). Interdisciplinary exploration of the processes and consequences of learning in a life course perspective reveals the scope for moving beyond assumptions of standardised models that illuminate only part of human behaviour towards models that take into account and depict the complexities of factors that impact on choices and decision-making through the life course.

'De-standardisation' of Life Course Transitions

The life course approach understands human development as being shaped through the interrelationships between individuals and society. It evolves 'as a time-dependent, dynamic linkage between social structure, institutions and individual action from birth to death' (Heinz *et al.*, 2009, p. 15). Destandardisation³ refers to processes by which specific states or life stages (for example, being in education, paid employment, marriage or family formation) and their sequencing either occur at more dispersed ages and with more dispersed duration, or characterise an increasingly small part of the population. At the heart of the issue is the question whether there are clear 'norms' that govern the order and timing of events and the stability of life course structures across time and place, and whether these norms have changed. It has been argued that life course transitions, such as making the step into economic independence, have become more variable and less uniform; that the transition into employment has been prolonged; that it takes longer for young people to establish themselves in the labour market than was the case thirty years ago (Arnett, 2000; Shanahan, 2000).

Observed changes in the sequencing of 'normative life events' (in developmental psychology) or normative biography (in life course sociology) have generated debates in most industrialised societies (see Kohli, 2009) on the issue of 'de-standardisation' of life course and transition experiences and on whether such a trend even exists. For example, in an analysis of the German Life History Study, Brückner and Mayer (2005) concluded that there is little evidence for de-standardisation in the transition from education to employment. Likewise, a study of changes in the timing and sequencing of major life transitions in Australia showed that the majority of Australians followed well-established conventional life course pathways (Martin, 2007). Evidence of stability regarding the timing, prevalence, and spread of role acquisitions of young Mexicans in their transition to adulthood was also reported by Fussel (2005) using Mexican census data for 1970 and 2000. Evidence from the British birth cohort studies (Schoon *et al.*, 2009) suggests mixed findings, indicating both stability and change in transition experiences and variations between as well as within social groups.

The Limits of Individual Agency

Changes in transition experiences in youth and adult life have been associated with increasing individualisation throughout the life course (Beck, 1992) as individuals are assumed to have gained greater control over their lives, pursuing a wider variety of life trajectories. On the other hand, there is persisting evidence that connects variations in transition experiences and individual agency with structural factors and opportunities (Heinz and Marshall, 2003; Schoon, 2007; Shanahan, 2000).

While most studies have reported that transition experiences of young people have remained highly structured through institutional or social forces, Evans *et al.* (2001) have shown that the more structured environments of education-employment transitions in Germany and the less structured context in England

support different sets of beliefs concerning agency and individual responsibility among 18–25 year olds and adults. There are however significant variations between regions in both countries. For example, within Germany, Evans, Behrens and Kaluza's study of young adults and their educators in Leipzig investigated what happens when institutional and social forces change dramatically, as was the case following German unification and the political changes of 1989 in the eastern states, the former East Germany. Asking whether 'social transformations create more open conditions for the exercise of greater personal agency' the study concluded that structural factors remained paramount in shaping life chances. The findings were consistent with those of Diewald's (2000) analyses for the wider adult population, in showing that 'personal agency, while significant in some situations, is unlikely to produce dramatic changes in stratification' (Evans *et al.*, 2000, p. 134).

Developing the concept of 'bounded agency'⁴ to explain findings from a series of comparative sociological analyses of learning in early adult life, Evans (2002, 2007) has illustrated how dominant beliefs about life chances in England can be understood by comparisons between England and the (western) and new (eastern) states of Germany. The concept of bounded agency developed in this context sees actions in the contingencies of the present moment as influenced not only by past habits and what people believe to be possible for them in the future but also by subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate, the social landscapes which affect how they act. Bounded agency is socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments and emphasising internalised frames of reference as well as external actions: multiple flows of influence 'turn into modes of agency through a process of internalization' (Evans, 2002, p. 264). The Anglo-German findings have supported the thesis that environments which are highly 'visibly' structured are associated in people's minds with the idea of reduced scope for individual, proactive effort. In highly structured environments opportunities are open only for those following clearly defined routes. Consequently, structural barriers are often held responsible by individuals for failures to achieve their intended goals. This was particularly evident in accounts given by young adults in the western states of Germany, of reasons for failure to obtain apprenticeships, sometimes after many applications (Behrens and Evans, 2002; Evans *et al.*, 2001). These tended to focus on insufficiencies of places and failures of 'the system'. Furthermore, findings suggest that fluid environments, such as the English labour market, in which the workings of structures are strong but increasingly 'illegible' can foster a belief that 'opportunities are open to all', so that people blame themselves for their failures in education and the labour market. This illegibility is a consequence of the pursuit of flexibility and has produced new structures of power and control which are less visible and therefore less easy to read than those which characterised the 'old capitalism', according to Sennett (1998). In the highly structured western German system, external structural factors that impinge on life chances are more visible and can, in this interpretation,

more easily be held responsible for failure, giving people greater scope to develop a positive sense of self in early adult life.

What do these perspectives and findings mean for the conceptualisation and empirical study of learning and life course transitions? Taking a closer look at how lives actually unfold, instead of conceptualising 'the life course' as one assumes it to be, leads to a more differentiated yet nonetheless structured view. Contemporary youth and adult transitions involving learning and working life vary within and between countries, according to socio-historical conditions, socio-economic structures (Green, 2002) and social positioning (Evans *et al.*, 2000), yet they also remain highly structured (Schoon and Silbereisen, 2009). They can be understood as processes of biographical negotiation, as bounded agency is exercised over time with actions and decision-making consequential upon previous actions and decisions.

Lives unfold in multidimensional ways, and careers are seen not so much as a choice made in early life, but rather as 'a series of choices or forced transitions that individuals make over a lifespan' (Fouad, 2007, p. 544). Transitions are strongly influenced by the resources the individual can draw on. For example, in the current UK context, as unpaid 'internships' increasingly provide ways into the labour market for families who can afford them and who have the connections, and as the prospect of home ownership becomes dependent on high levels of parental financial support in early adult life, the variations in transition experiences are likely to become more, rather than less strongly shaped by social and economic inequalities. While there is evidence of growing diversity of the pathways, the underlying trends in Britain are towards greater rather than less polarisation of the advantaged and disadvantaged. Lifelong learning, in this context, will not fundamentally redefine life trajectory chances for the majority of those who participate in it. But to what extent can it be shown, in terms of evidence that policy-makers are likely to accept, that lifelong learning has the potential to influence life chances during the adult life course?

Our analysis focuses on some factors that shape life chances in youth and early adult life and the conditions which may prompt individuals to engage in lifelong learning. Evidence on the overall patterns and effects of adults' involvement in lifelong learning in Britain is followed by exploration of ways in which experiences in social and labour market institutions in adult life can also play a role in re-shaping life chances and opportunities.

Life Chances and Opportunities for Young People in Transitions from School to Work

Decisions regarding education and employment transitions are shaped by individual capabilities and preferences, which in turn are influenced by experiences in the family and school contexts as well as by the prevailing education and training facilities (Schoon, 2007, 2010; Schoon *et al.*, 2007). Recent socio-economic changes, especially changes in education and labour market opportunities, place

increasing demands on young people's initiative and ability to navigate possible options and multiple demands. While until 30 years ago individual lives were supposed to be more strongly shaped by structural forces such as social class, gender and ethnicity, it has been argued that young people are now increasingly expected actively to shape their own destiny (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). On the other hand, there is evidence of persisting or even increasing social inequalities in aspirations and attainment in the UK (Bynner, 2001; Jones, 2002, 2009; Portes, 2011; Schoon, 2006). Table 1 shows the association between parental social class and education participation using data collected for the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) born in 1989/90. LSYPE is a panel study of just over 21,000 young people born between 1 September 1989 and 31 August 1990. Here, we use information collected in May 2007, 2008 and 2009. Parental occupational status was coded according to the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) which has been used since 2001 for all official statistics and surveys, replacing Social Class based on Occupation (Registrar General's Social Class) and Socio-economic Groups (SEG). We used information of mother's or father's occupational status, whichever was higher (this avoids disproportionate sample loss for single parent families usually headed by the mother). The data are based on 8843 weighted cases with data on education participation and parental social status.

These data suggest that the influence of parental background on children's educational experience remains stark, confirming evidence provided by HEFCE 2010, which furthermore shows that participation in higher education is influenced by the social characteristics of the areas in which young people live. Despite a

TABLE 1: *Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE): Age still in full-time education by parental social class*

Percentages	Not in FT education at 16		Still in FT education at 18/19		Per cent of total in each NS-SEC group
	male	female	male	female	
Higher managerial and professional occupation	8.8	5.2	56.2	60.3	13
Lower managerial and professional occupation	17.5	11.4	45.3	53.1	24
Intermediate occupations	24.4	15.5	38.5	46.4	7
Small employers and own account workers	25.5	15.0	34.7	42.3	11
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	34.0	25.0	29.5	32.9	10
Semi-routine occupations	29.9	19.5	32.5	39.7	11
Routine occupations	35.0	27.5	27.2	34.1	11
Total	23.4	16.1	39.1	45.8	

general upward drift in participation between 1994 and 2009 the evidence does not suggest any reduction of the influence of parental background over this period. Furthermore there is evidence to suggest a drastic widening of income inequalities since 1980 (Alderson *et al.*, 2005; Westergaard, 1995).

Working Lives – a Changing Social Context

Future developments in the supply and demand sides of a changing labour market as identified by Karoly (2009) comprise a marked trend towards slower work-force growth coupled with an ageing population (which implies improved chances for employment for young people but also increasing burdens on national social-insurance systems and possibly an increase in immigration), as well as less rapid advances in educational attainment and acquisition of skills. Karoly also identifies two key factors shaping changes on the demand side of the labour market which are rapid technological change and global integration. These changes lead to changes in knowledge and skill requirements – specifically in higher level, non-routine, and self-reliant working skills that characterise the knowledgeable worker – as well as the need for lifelong learning. All workers will bear more risks as access to traditional workplace benefits become more selective, especially in light of increasing freelance occupations. The implications for lifelong learning are great: they require a rethinking of existing education and training institutions and the interaction between labour-market changes and aspects of family life. How are workers to maintain a motivation for lifelong learning and build up basic skills and ‘practical knowledge’ (especially in mathematics and science) as well as critical-thinking skills, abilities to work in teams, and effective communication skills? Karoly (2009) also emphasises the need for interlinked thinking about demographic changes, technological advances, and global competition and their impact on work and family life. There is, for example, evidence to suggest that the problems young people face in establishing themselves in the labour market are also associated with difficulties in attracting a suitable partner (see Blossfeld and Timm, 2003; Ermisch *et al.*, 2006).

The most recent research findings, taken together, indicate that young people making the transition from school to work are experiencing increasing difficulties and uncertainties. However, given current demographic trends towards a slowdown in population growth and population ageing in the developed world, prospects for young people might look better in the future. Conversely, the current economic downturn as well as changes in immigration might shift the balance of experiences. A key factor that supports a smooth transition into the labour market is educational attainment. When compared to their less educated peers, young people with higher-level qualifications generally encounter fewer problems in establishing themselves in the labour market. They are less likely to experience extended periods of unemployment or job loss, which in turn have been linked to lasting negative effects on employment and earning – the so-called scarring effect (Clark *et al.*, 2001). Table 2 shows employment rates for both young adults and

TABLE 2: *Employment rates by qualification*

	Men			Women				
	Age 20–24	N	Age 25–60	N	Age 20–24	Age 25–60	N	
Degree or equivalent	80.1%	331,467	93.3%	3,405,187	80.5%	382,598	86.7%	3,238,677
Other higher education	81.6%	113,908	91.6%	1,254,632	79.1%	115,370	83.3%	1,573,744
A-levels or equivalent	68.0%	752,116	89.8%	3,556,184	66.0%	668,045	79.2%	2,272,952
GCSE A–C or equivalent	79.4%	428,658	87.4%	2,310,562	64.9%	451,389	74.7%	3,573,645
Other qualifications	73.4%	258,407	83.9%	1,987,410	50.4%	208,329	64.9%	1,832,930
No qualifications	57.7%	170,742	63.3%	1,533,323	31.1%	162,850	43.0%	1,894,035
Total		2,055,298		14,047,298		1,988,581		14,385,983

Source: Labour Force Survey, September–December 2007.

Note: Observations weighted. Qualification ‘Don’t know’ excluded.

TABLE 3: *Gross weekly earnings in main job by qualification*

	Men		Women	
	Mean pay	N	Mean pay	N
Degree or equivalent	£723	2,932,285	£524	2,871,532
Other higher education	£573	1,151,495	£373	1,308,934
A-levels or equivalent	£477	3,017,187	£290	2,038,437
GCSE A–C or equivalent	£453	2,042,271	£263	2,742,086
Other qualifications	£424	1,489,660	£260	1,187,422
No qualifications	£354	748,481	£201	780,603
All	£531	11,381,379	£345	10,929,014

Source: Labour Force Survey, September–December 2007.

Note: Observations weighted. Qualification ‘Don’t know’ responses excluded.

people aged 25–60 for late 2007 before the current economic crisis started to have its effects, and demonstrates this.

Education attainment also has, of course, a large impact on people’s earnings once they are employed (Mcintosh, 2006) throughout their working life (see also Blundell *et al.*, 2000; Blundell *et al.*, 2005; Dearden *et al.*, 2002; Dearden *et al.*, 2006; Feinstein and Vignoles, 2008; Walker *et al.*, 2010.) This is illustrated in Table 3 which presents average earnings by education from the Labour Force Survey. It should be remembered that, while these data illustrate the point, there are a number of factors other than qualifications which influence earnings. In particular, some of the differences between men and women arise because women are much more likely than men to work part time.

However, while these data illustrate the point supported by the studies mentioned above, and many others, that qualifications enhance people’s earning power, the large majority of people whose pay is used to calculate the figures in Table 3 probably gained their qualifications in the traditional way, i.e. from a continuous period of compulsory and post-compulsory study without any important interval between the various stages of study leading to the acquisition of qualifications. It is therefore not possible to infer, without further research, that the benefits implied by Table 3 accrue to people independently of when they acquire their qualifications. It is possible that the benefits of qualifications acquired later in life than is traditional are different from the effects of qualifications acquired in the traditional way. The dominant view, based on findings such as those of Blanden *et al.*, has been that the economic and social returns on public investment in adult learning are too low to warrant large-scale public funding. This view is challenged by recent LLAKES research. We turn now to this issue.

2. PARTICIPATION IN LIFELONG LEARNING

A broad indication of patterns of lifelong learning in the UK can be drawn from the British Household Panel Survey. This asks respondents about their educational qualifications and whether any qualifications have been gained since the previous

interview. We show in Table 4 how qualification levels change over time. The tables show the qualification level for people aged 25–60 throughout the data period 1991–2007 and thus compare the initial and final qualification levels of people who were aged 25–44 in 1991. The data describe the original sample members of the British Household Panel Survey who remained in the survey until 2007. The price for an extended period of coverage is inevitably substantial attrition as the sample sizes show.

Qualification levels are defined with reference to the national scales where, broadly speaking, level 1 covers GCSEs or equivalent, level 2 is represented by one A-level or AS-level, level 3 is two or more A-levels, ONC, OND or BTEC General Certificate or equivalent and level 4 is HNC, HND, a university qualification (including a diploma or foundation degree) or equivalent or higher qualification. In addition to showing the proportions of people changing their qualification levels we also indicate as participating in lifelong learning but without upgrading, the proportion of people who gained at least one qualification without changing their qualification levels.

TABLE 4: *Transitions between qualification levels*

		Qualification Level in 1991					
		0	1	2	3	4	All
Men							
Qualification Level	0	78%					16%
	1	7%	81%				28%
In 2007	2	6%	9%	83%			13%
	3	5%	5%	8%	93%		19%
	4	5%	5%	8%	7%	100%	24%
Upgrading		22%	19%	17%	7%	0%	14%
Lifelong Learning but not upgrading		20%	29%	38%	49%	58%	37%
N		87	140	48	74	83	432
Women							
		Qualification Level in 1991					
		0	1	2	3	4	All
Qualification Level	0	79%					17%
	1	8%	80%				42%
In 2007	2	6%	7%	90%			9%
	3	6%	6%	7%	81%		11%
	4	1%	7%	3%	19%	100%	21%
Upgrading		21%	20%	10%	19%	0%	17%
Lifelong Learning but not upgrading		14%	31%	52%	30%	72%	34%
N		154	358	29	57	109	707

The tables show that participation in some form of lifelong learning is relatively common with about half of both men and women reporting that they have gained qualifications over the period, even though, for people initially at level zero the qualifications may not be enough to take them to level 1. However, participation which leads to an upgrading of qualification levels is rarer, being done by 14 per cent of men and 17 per cent of women.

An indication of the economic benefits of lifelong learning is shown in Table 5. This shows the earnings and employment rates of the people aged 25 or more in 1996 and no older than 60 in 2007 who were present in all relevant waves of the British Household Panel Survey. The data are pooled across years and the earnings figures are represented as multiples of the means of the pooled data for men and women separately.

Table 5 presents no more than summaries of the data. However, it does indicate that people who gain qualifications even without upgrading tend to earn more, and that upgrading their qualification levels delivers further financial advantage. The data also suggest that people who gain extra qualifications are more likely to be employed. But such observations might simply reflect the possibility that the people who gain qualifications while of working age have higher earnings and employment potential than those who do not and a number of more formal studies have attempted to examine whether the higher earnings and employment can be attributed to lifelong learning.

Most of the work on economic returns to lifelong learning in the UK (Feinstein *et al.*, 2004; Jenkins *et al.*, 2003; Jenkins, 2004) has been built round either the 1958 or the 1970 cohort survey. Since participants in these surveys are interviewed only very intermittently, it is not possible to use them as a basis for exploring the impact of either conventional or lifelong learning on earnings dynamics. Blanden *et al.* (2008) explore the question using the British Household Panel Survey which provides annual data on people's earnings and on their education and employment history. The studies mentioned above have found only limited benefits to lifelong learning where the latter is defined in its most restrictive sense, as participation in further courses and qualifications separated from people's first period of more or less continuous education by a significant gap, with the most obvious beneficiaries being women aged 35–49 and men aged under 35. There is also the suggestion of a favourable impact on women's employment. By contrast much clearer benefits are generally found for immediate post-compulsory education as well as for qualifications gains during the compulsory phase of education.

However, Dorsett, Lui and Weale (2010) find substantial benefits from lifelong learning. They suggest that 25-year-old men who gain qualifications without increasing their overall level of qualification from their initial NVQ level to a higher one increase their remaining life-time earning power by 5–6 per cent. The benefits are lower for older people but for 40-year-olds with initial NVQ levels of 0 are still at least 5 per cent greater. The benefits of upgrading of qualification levels are higher, at just over 20 per cent for someone who initially has no qualification falling to 12–13 per cent for someone initially with NVQ level 3. These

TABLE 5: Earnings and employment of people with life-long learning qualifications

Initial Qualification	No Life-long Learning		Qualification without Upgrading		Qualification with Upgrading	
Men						
	Mean Hourly		Mean Hourly		Mean Hourly	
Level	Pay*	N	Pay	N	Pay	N
0	0.70	485	0.84	121	0.86	139
1	0.82	922	0.94	358	0.87	198
2	0.88	282	0.89	165	1.28	62
3	1.00	444	1.11	341	1.04	35
4	1.44	515	1.39	430		
Total		2648		1415		434
Level	Percentage Employed		Percentage Employed		Percentage Employed	
		N		N		N
0	65%	751	89%	136	89%	157
1	85%	1084	94%	381	92%	215
2	85%	333	92%	179	97%	64
3	92%	483	93%	365	88%	40
4	92%	557	98%	439		
Total		3208		1500		476
Women						
	Mean Hourly		Mean Hourly		Mean Hourly	
Level	Pay*	N	Pay	N	Pay	N
0	0.72	685	0.78	125	0.76	185
1	0.87	1920	0.95	866	1.02	484
2	0.84	106	0.90	133	1.26	18
3	1.04	291	0.97	154	1.30	83
4	1.47	411	1.56	623		
Total		3413		1901		770
Level	Percentage Employed		Percentage Employed		Percentage Employed	
		N		N		N
0	48%	1424	75%	167	72%	257
1	71%	2722	84%	1025	88%	549
2	60%	177	87%	153	100%	18
3	70%	413	85%	182	93%	89
4	73%	560	83%	748		
Total		5296		2275		913

*Hourly Pay is measured as a multiple of the mean for the total population surveyed.

are similar at age 25 and age 40 and arise largely because an increased qualification level is found to have a substantial favourable impact on the probability of employment. Similar effects are found for women.⁵

The LLAKES research which has led to these findings makes contributions on both substantive and methodological fronts. Substantively, the results further

our understanding of the effectiveness of lifelong learning. Methodologically, the research examines this within a mover-stayer model that factors in the wage effects of moving between jobs, allowing for the fact that people were movers at some times and stayers at other times. The analysis allowed for the possibility, which was supported by the data, that while, in the majority of cases, people's earnings are closely related to those of previous periods, they are subject periodically to large disturbances. Such disturbances might arise, on the downside, because people lose their jobs or, on the upside, because they are able to take advantage of some particularly favourable opportunity which emerges. It is perfectly possible that people will move from one post to another offering sharply better pay within the same employer. It is rather less likely that someone's wage rate will fall sharply while they remain with the same employer, if for no other reason than that such a change would be likely to appear as constructive dismissal. Nevertheless, one might expect to see some connection between being a mover and a change of job. Dorsett, Lui and Weale have been able to identify the routes by which lifelong learning might affect wages, assessing not only whether lifelong learning affects wages directly but also whether it has a role in assigning individuals to be movers or stayers and thereby have their wages subject to differing sets of influences.

Research that adopts life course perspectives takes the complex dynamics of change in learning and work histories as its starting point and focuses on the multiple factors involved in individual actions such as moving jobs or engaging in forms of lifelong learning (see for example Bynner and Parsons, 2009). Statistical modelling of these relationships is complemented by qualitative accounts of 'learning lives', also based on longitudinal analysis, that bring different dimensions into view and focus our attention on the biographical negotiation processes involved. For example, Biesta *et al.* in a study which explores 'ecological' understandings of agency through the life course, argue that it is the *quality* of involvement of lifelong learning that determines how learning might influence life chances, through its effects on identity development, personal agency and action. It may be that the 'deep learning' that Biesta *et al.* identify as most significant is what keeps adults both mobile and employable, rather than the increase in qualification level *per se* and its recognition in the labour market. It is more likely to be a combination of the two, keeping in view the evidence that some forms of lifelong learning that do not increase the qualification level are also shown to yield economic as well as social benefits (Biesta *et al.*, 2011;⁶ Dorsett, Lui and Weale, 2010).

Thus complementary insights result from analyses that focus on the processes and consequences of participation in lifelong learning, also taking into account the experiences of sub-groups (such as movers and stayers in the labour market) and the antecedents and consequences of life events. The findings emphasise dimensions and features of learning that might be significant, proposing that public policy incentives are insufficient or inadequately targeted to promote large-scale engagement. However, the studies are unable to shed further light on the variations in involvement and outcomes found in large-scale, publicly-funded programmes of adult learning that are explicitly aimed to reshape the life chances of those who

are most at risk in changing labour markets. Research that explores how far the protective effects of lifelong learning might apply in the case of adult literacy and basic skills education goes some way towards filling this gap.

3. ADULT LEARNING IN LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LITERACY AND 'BASIC EDUCATION' IN ADULT LIFE

Research using cohort studies and large data sets (reviewed in Reder and Bynner, 2009) has identified the importance of basic skills, education, vocational training and work experience on dynamic progression through the life course, identifying both the average effects of such factors and their impact on the disturbances people face to their income and employment. Moreover, 'acquisition of skills generally is critically dependent on acquisition of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, without which educational processes are unable to proceed' (Schuller *et al.*, 2001, p. 61).

Rees *et al.* (2000) have noted that most statistical analyses have tended to detach individuals from the social and economic contexts in which participation in lifelong learning takes place, arguing that highly simplistic versions of human capital theory have involved 'an unwarranted abstraction of economic processes from the wider social system' (p.174). Their research, conducted as part of the ESRC Learning Society Programme, has been based on the premise that individual behaviour in economic markets is embedded in social relations and '*contra* human capital theory' explores the ways in which the determinants of participation vary systematically over time and from locality to locality (see Gorard and Rees, 2002; Rees, 1997). Consequently, their research into participation in learning in adult life was carried out in a particular region, South Wales, using a questionnaire survey in three electoral divisions⁷ (n = 1104), semi-structured interviews, and archival data that were analysed in a way that allowed for reconstruction of the life course.

Their analysis has aimed to show how and why an analysis of patterns of participation also requires an analysis of the shifts which have taken place in the structure of learning opportunities in given areas and the constraints on access to these opportunities that stem from variations in the social and cultural resources that different social groups have at their disposal. Recognising that an individual's capacity to take up learning is constrained or enabled by previous history and that the resulting trajectories are products of choices that fundamentally reflect social identities, these researchers have argued that an adequate analysis has to produce an account of the interaction of 'learner identities' and the individual choices to which they give rise. Significantly, Gorard and Rees's modelling of the determinants of what they termed lifetime learning (based on logistic regression) showed that, while experience of initial schooling is crucial in shaping long-term orientations towards learning, more detailed modelling of the determinants of 'lifetime learning trajectories' highlighted some different factors. Most notably, the research found that, in this social context, those adults with no qualifications

were more likely to return to learning later in life (between the ages of 34 and 64) than those who gain some qualifications but fall short of five GCSEs or equivalent. Furthermore, in line with the theoretical prediction of life course approaches, determinants of later participation are different, reflecting the circumstances of adult life and the access people have to learning, including through their work.

According to Gorard and Rees, these findings provide ‘important correctives to the conventional view of participation in lifetime learning’, showing also through their individual accounts (10% sample, semi-structured, in-depth interviews) how it is the diversity that is the most striking. While there are no simple patterns (consistent with Evans and Waite’s own qualitative evidence) this evidence of diversification in adult life is argued by Gorard and Rees to be consistent with theoretical perspectives that foreground choices made by individuals over their own participation in learning, but also confirms that choices that were made were heavily constrained by external circumstances (Gorard *et al.*, 1998, 2001). Gender differences regarding social role expectations are highlighted; also highlighted are the learner identities that are rooted in prior experiences of education, particularly in schooling. Sacker and Schoon’s (2006) findings, based on analysis of the NCDS data set for the 1958 birth cohort, show that earlier educational credentials of any kind promote lifelong learning. However, they also show that those who are unsuccessful in achieving school credentials can and do take up learning opportunities in later life. They also highlight the multiple routes that people can take to improve their skills and qualifications in later life.

The findings of these two studies overlap in most respects. The differences may arise from the differences in the sample, who were aged 42 in the Sacker and Schoon study but in the Gorard and Rees study spanned a wider age range of adults aged from 34 up to 64; some of the Gorard and Rees South Wales sample had been exposed to substantially different educational and labour market opportunities and structures and many of them would have left school for employment without qualifications at 15, prior to the 1972 raising of the school leaving age. Sacker and Schoon note that their own analysis did not include events in adult life after leaving school, acknowledging that Entwistle *et al.* (2004) had shown that experiences of employment increased the likelihood of return to learning. Gorard *et al.* (1998) did include such events, showing that age, gender and family background predicted later ‘lifetime learning trajectories’ with 75% accuracy. Adding into the logistic regression the initial schooling variables increased the accuracy of prediction to 86%, rising to 90% when variables representing adult life experience and present circumstances were included. Sacker and Schoon’s conclusions are consistent with these findings, including the recognition that confidence and achievement gained in a variety of settings are effective in ‘resilient reintegration’ into education in later life.

Skills, employment and earnings gains from participation in adult programmes, including adult basic education, are further elucidated by research investigations such as those of Reder *et al.* (2009), Comings (2009) and Bynner *et al.* (2009) in the UK. Gains of confidence and enhanced social capital in the

wider domains identified by Schuller *et al.* are evidenced through other large-scale ESRC studies with a more qualitative orientation, such as those conducted by Tett and Maclachlan (2007) and by Appleby and Barton (2008). Most importantly, Reder and Bynner (2009)⁸ show that literacy abilities change across life span after people leave school. Variations in the extent to which individuals increase their proficiency or lose ground over given time spans is 'patterned' with respect to background, origins (where they grew up) and life experiences including access to adult literacy programmes or whether a job facilitates learning and use of literacy skills in the workplace, reflecting the importance of the workplace as a site of learning and access to learning in adult life. Work-related training has been found to be linked positively to levels in adult literacy among men, and the experience of paid employment is generally associated with the development and maintenance of basic skills (Parsons and Bynner, 1998). Furthermore, findings from Wolf and Evans' 2011 research have confirmed that the workplace provides access to learning for some adults who have not found it possible to attend conventional classes. It also underlines the importance of a far wider range of factors than the wish to improve job performance; boosting confidence, helping children with their homework, pursuing interests outside work. Many employees are able to cope adequately in their jobs with present skill levels, although a significant minority report struggling with some aspects of literacy and numeracy.

The underuse of skills is a bigger problem that is now becoming more widely acknowledged in the literature (see also Felstead *et al.*, 2009). According to Wolf and Evans (2011) workplace literacy courses produced very small average gains in performance, but participants' average performance continued to improve over a two year post-instruction period. Employees who engaged voluntarily in basic skills programmes were significantly more likely to participate in further courses, when compared with a matched sample in the Labour Force Survey, as Metcalf and Meadows (2009) have also shown. UK Government-supported workplace 'Skills for Life' courses have been inefficient, as courses are too short to have much impact, but they may stimulate learners to use their skills more, and so continue improving. In-depth interviews underlined, in congruence with the findings of other longitudinal research in the field (see Reder and Bynner, 2009), that perceived and actual gains come with practice and with application. Unless people's jobs demand and encourage literacy, the effects of workplace interventions are likely to be small and short-lived. Conversely, among Evans and Waite's (2010) in-depth sample, it was the learners who used their literacy skills actively, in and out of the workplace, who showed consistent gains. Changes in job responsibilities are positively correlated with progress in measured skills.⁹ Related research (Riley, 2010) has shown the presence of substantial knowledge spill-overs from work experience within the workplace, showing that workers gain from their collective experience. All of these processes contribute to the further diversification of life and work trajectories even within the apparently narrowly defined group of routine workers in low-waged work, as longer term tracking of sub-samples is revealing (Evans and Waite, in press).

Yet most workers in low-graded jobs cope well in their existing jobs; those in Wolf and Evans' study had worked for their existing employer for an average of nine years. Nevertheless, these workers are held to be at higher risk of becoming long-term unemployed than more qualified workers in economic downturns (see OECD, 1997; Social Exclusion Unit, 2009) as redundancy, adult unemployment and interrupted career patterns increase. Diversification can be understood, in these contexts, in terms of a sizeable (but declining) core of people who follow a 'standard' life course combined with an increasing proportion of people who are following diverse non-standard paths (or are caught up in diverse non-standard circumstances). Learning in adult life can, under these circumstances, be shown to have a protective effect beyond that derived from initial education and qualification, according to Dorsett, Lui and Weale's findings. Interventions in promoting literacy through work are shown here to provide a platform for further learning among adults held to be most at risk in the event of job loss or enforced moves.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper illustrates how youth and adult transitions and associated patterns of participation in lifelong learning vary according to socio-historical conditions and social stratifications; yet they remain highly structured as opportunities and risks continue to reflect the socially positioned lives that people lead. An interdisciplinary exploration of sources and patterns of uncertainty in people's lives reveals the scope for moving beyond standardised models that illuminate only part of human behaviour towards an appreciation of the complexities of factors that impact on choices and decision-making through the life course. This life course approach has four core tenets:

- First, that development takes time and that it reflects cumulative experiences (e.g. the accumulation of individual resources such as educational credentials and the progressive development of capabilities).
- Second, the social contexts within which human development is embedded range from close interactions with significant others (proximal) to macro-social conditions (distal).
- Third, life course transitions that involve changes in work and employment, up to and including retirement, are not only shaped by institutional and labour market structures. They also involve developmental tasks that challenge the individual actors *as well as* institutional regulations and environments.
- Fourth, individual decision making, bounded by the socially positioned life the person leads, by social institutions and by wider macro-social conditions, can also be understood in terms of 'social-ecological' interdependencies.

The adult life course is shaped by a process of biographical negotiation, in which any decision is consequential upon previous decisions and involves the exercise

of contextualised preferences as well as the calculations of ‘rational choice’. At points of transition, new learning options are generated (Ecclestone *et al.*, 2009; Evans, 2009; Field *et al.*, 2009). Participation in adult learning, as well as having wider social benefits, is associated with employability and with probabilities of employment. Substantial uncertainties surrounding the benefits of upgrading qualifications in adult life may explain lower than expected take-up of lifelong learning opportunities. The workplace often has an important effect in boosting employees’ motivations towards learning, yet positive impact on career attitudes and trajectories of employees is likely to be eroded over time unless the broader organisational setting supports the ongoing practice and development of skills and pathways for career development. Furthermore, confidence and achievement gained in a variety of settings, including work, are important for renewed engagement with education later in life.

Growing diversification of the pathways into and through adult life is evident, but the underlying trends indicate growing polarisations according to socio-economic status. Lifelong learning, in this context, will not fundamentally redefine life trajectories for the majority of those who participate in it. However, there is significant evidence of the potential of lifelong learning to influence life chances. Lifelong learning can have a significant protective effect by keeping adults close to a changing labour market and can potentially provide a route out of poor labour market experience. Life course perspectives are attuned to an understanding of divergent patterns of life chances and allow realistic assessments to be made of new opportunities that may be opened up through learning in adult life. A pluralist framework for understanding the learning through the life course in terms of long-term processes of biographical negotiation rather than discrete rational choice events offers promising ways forward for future policy-making.

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6. NOTES

- ¹ Beck argues, using Sartre’s terms, that people are ‘damned’ to individualisation, which involves a ‘compulsion, paradoxical of course, to produce, arrange and stage not just their own biographies but also their moral, social and political commitments . . .’ Beck, 1998, pp. 33–34.
- ² i.e. end-on to initial schooling for 18–21 year olds.
- ³ This is a very specific definition used in models to test the assumption of destandardisation, as for example in the work of Bruckner and Mayer, 2005; Schoon *et al.*, 2009.
- ⁴ Concepts of bounded agency are also discussed, from different perspectives, in Shanahan (2000) and Rubenson (2009).
- ⁵ In their regressions terms are included for people who gain qualifications in the future but have not yet done so; these are not found to be statistically significant suggesting that the effect arises from the qualifications gained.

- 6 Moving or changing long-term partnerships is often taken as a prime indicator of intentions to act in pursuit of different life goals; employment moves are often integral to this.
- 7 Repeat systematic sampling from household lists, stratified to span 35–64 years and men/women equally. A booster sample was drawn from children of members of initial sample (aged 15–34 years) to allow analysis of family relationships.
- 8 Using a combination of statistical modelling methods to analyse changes over time in measured literacy proficiency, literacy practices, programme participation, employment earnings and other variables.
- 9 The relationship between job change and change in reading score was positive: learners whose jobs changed showed a 5 or 6 point larger improvement in reading scores between first and second tests, using a specially designed (NFER) reading test. This was indicative of these employees utilising the new skills at work.

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