Improving basic skills in adulthood: Participation and Motivation

Literature Review prepared for the European Commission Working Group on Adult Learning

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For more information about this paper please contact:

JD Carpentieri
00 44 207 612 5355
j.carpentieri@ioe.ac.uk
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Introduction
This paper provides an overview of key academic research on the participation of adults in activities aimed at raising their basic skills. These activities include: 1) classroom-based programmes in a variety of formats and with a range of focuses, and 2) more general policy initiatives, such as efforts to increase reading for pleasure. Where relevant to basic skills, the paper also summarises research on participation in adult education more generally. The paper does not seek to be exhaustive; rather, it aims to highlight key themes and to provide a general overview of policy-relevant findings. In doing so, the paper draws on research published in English, French and German-language academic literature.

The paper is organised as follows:

- Section 1 provides an introductory overview of key theoretical issues relevant to improving our understanding of motivation and participation.
- Section 2 summarises research on “Getting learners through the door” – that is, motivating adults to participate in courses (whether in classrooms, workplaces or elsewhere) that may improve their basic skills.
- Section 3 turns the focus to retention and persistence – i.e. keeping learners coming back to courses they have enrolled on, or maintaining their learning journey over a number of years.
- Section 4 moves away from a focus on courses, to look at the relationship between basic skills proficiencies and basic skills practices. Policies aimed at improving or increasing these practices may contribute to improved proficiency.
- Section 5 provides a brief summary of key themes.
- The Appendix offers a discussion of the definition and characteristics of adult basic skills education.

Theoretical issues: motivation and related concepts

1.1 The Life course
Longitudinal studies of the life course reveal complex relationships between motivation and participation:

- Adults' interest in and motivation for adult learning may alter over time, reflecting changes in opportunities for participation, transitions between social states (e.g. employment status), changes between or in relevant social environments (e.g. workplaces) and individual changes related to adult development over the life cycle (Hostetler, Sweet, & Moen, 2007; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). Rubenson (1976) argued that an individual’s motivation (or lack thereof) for participation today is only a weak indicator of that individual’s likelihood of participating in the future.
- Longitudinal studies of participation in adult learning reveal that a significant majority of adults (two-thirds or more in many countries) participate at least sometimes in organised learning (Friebel, 2008; Friebel et al, 2000; Gorard & Rees, 2002). Even socioeconomic groups that typically have low participation rates over 12-month reference periods, show relatively high participation rates when looked at over a longer (multi-year) time period. However, background-related inequities in participation tend to be even greater in longitudinal studies than in cross-sectional ("one snapshot in time") studies: differences in the average frequency of participation accumulate over the life course. Disadvantaged individuals are thus likely to suffer from significant cumulative disadvantage over the life course (Blossfeld et al, 2014).
1.1.1 “Self” and identity-based theories
There are generally considered to be three key components to personal motivation: (1) future time perspective; (2) self and identity-based concepts, including self-efficacy and self-concept; and (3) the interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Reading, writing and numeracy are not skills that can be developed in one great burst of motivation and effort; they require patience, persistence, and the constant renewal of motivation, as an extended series of hurdles are encountered and (hopefully) overcome (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

A key contributor to the persistence required to overcome these hurdles is self-concept, which refers to belief in oneself as competent and capable, and which is closely tied to identity: for example, does a parent see himself or herself as someone who reads well enough to help a child with homework? Research suggests that many older adults who do not engage in learning do not have strong self-concepts as learners. For example, in a UK survey, one in four adults over 55 who had engaged in no recent study said they felt too old to learn (Aldridge & Tuckett, 2007).

1.1.2 Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation
The components of intrinsic motivation – including curiosity, involvement, importance, and preference for challenges – are important predictors of the amount and breadth of reading (Wigfield and Guthrie, 1997). The interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to learn may be particularly important for older adults.

1.1.3 Adult development and socio-psychological frameworks
Participation in adult learning can support various developmental activities (Hefler 2013; Anderson et al., 2012; Sugarman, 2001), even when these activities are not the primary objective of participation. For example, participants in adult literacy and basic skill programmes often gain great value from the social aspect of courses (Courtney, 1992; Fenwick, 2008; Grotlüschen & Riekmann, 2012; Kastner, 2009), with potentially positive impacts on social participation, self-esteem and other outcomes.

1.2 Deliberate versus mandatory participation
Within the overall framework of active labour market policies and welfare to work programmes, adults may be required to participate in adult learning, including basic skills programmes. Given the high levels of personal involvement and commitment required for making progress in basic skills, there are questions about the effectiveness of mandatory programmes.

UK research has found that making receipt of welfare benefits conditional on attendance at training provision is unlikely to result in an increase in literacy skills. O’Grady & Atkin (2006) found that adults whose participation was voluntary typically had clear ideas about their short term and longer-term goals, whereas many adults on mandatory training courses either could not see how the programme would improve their skills or disputed their need for training in the first place. These researchers concluded that adults who had been coerced or forced onto basic skills courses as a condition of receiving benefits gained little if anything from participation.

Wolf & Evans (2011) found that voluntary participation in workplace learning was correlated with higher rates of participation in further education (FE) later on. However, Workplace learners who were required to participate by their employers did not experience an increased likelihood of undertaking further learning. The differences between the two groups were small and not universal, but were statistically significant.
“Getting learners through the door” to improve their basic skills: Motivating adults to participate in courses

2.1 Motivating factors for adults
Adults may be motivated by a range of factors. Brooks et al (2001) concluded that adults are principally motivated to improve their basic skills for “self-development”, be this personal, social or occupational. Ward and Edwards (2002) found that although learners’ motives for joining classes were diverse, they were most often related to: the practicalities of improving job performance and/or employment prospects, supporting their children’s learning, and moving on to study at a higher level and improving confidence, rather than a simple desire to be more literate or numerate.

2.1.1 Economic motivations
Higher earnings and better, more secure employment are prime motivations for improving literacy skills, both for natives with poor reading or writing in their first language, and for migrants, many of whom may be well-qualified and highly skilled in their country of origin, but may lack the language skills needed for full economic participation in their new home.

Roberts et al (2005) argued that a key motivational factor for learners can be the possibility of a new professional identity offered by a vocational training programme acting as an entry point to a new vocational “community of practice” (Lave & Wagner, 1991). This new professional identity is often in contrast to their former experience as school pupils, and can enable them to overcome their antipathy to the process of trying to improve their literacy or numeracy skills, by helping to contextualise the learning in a vocational context.

The UK’s “Learner Study” (Rhys Warner and Vorhaus, 2008) found a broad range of extrinsic motivations, including goals related to gaining employment or progressing within education, where qualifications were often important to achieving these goals.

Wolf et al (2009) found that when learners were asked about the benefits they expected from their workplace learning, increased earnings were ranked last and increased chance of promotion second last, demonstrating that short-term gains had a low priority. Instead, learners wanted or expected to learn new skills (just over half the sample) and to be more effective in their current job. Looking back on their learning, two-thirds (66%) of the sample reported that their confidence at work had increased as a result of learning.

2.1.2 Non-economic motivations: enrichment, enablement, empowerment & engagement
Personal and social goals can be as important as, or more important than, economic ambitions. Adults enrol in literacy courses to improve their self-confidence, to become better parents or grandparents, or as a stepping stone towards future lifelong learning goals.

For adults of all ages, but particularly older ones, computer literacy provides a strong motivation for improving literacy skills. These adults recognise that the “digital divide” exists not just in the workplace, but within families and homes: grandparents who know how to use Facebook and email can more easily keep in touch with their grandchildren than those who do not, particularly in today’s highly mobile world.

There is evidence that recruitment messages focusing on other motivations – such as learning to benefit one’s children or grandchildren – may help adults overcome or avoid the shame and taboos associated with poor literacy. Family literacy programmes, for example, provide parents with the strongest possible motive for participation: improving their child’s chances in life (Carpentieri et al., 2011).
2.1.3 Adults’ views on their own basic skills

For many low-literacy adults, poor skills are a source of embarrassment and even shame, a weakness to be hidden from others, including close friends and family. This can be a major barrier to participation. Such adults may have strong motivations to improve their reading and writing, and may be aware that their coping mechanisms mask their problem but hold them back. At work they may be constrained in their career routes; at home they may be unable to help their children with their homework or simply read them a bedtime story. Despite this, they find it difficult to publicly acknowledge their need to improve their literacy by seeking out a course or undergoing an assessment. There is evidence that media campaigns can reduce the sense of taboo surrounding illiteracy while informing the general population about the true extent of the problem and increasing attendance in adult literacy courses. For example, Ireland has had success with television- and radio-based campaigns and provision (NALA, 2005). In the UK, the “Gremlins” campaign contributed to large increases in uptake of provision (NAO, 2004).

Among adults who perform poorly on literacy assessments, most feel that their skills are average or better, and that they therefore have no need of improvement. For example, more than 80% of adults with low literacy scores on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) rated their reading as good or excellent (Van der Kamp and Boudard, 2003). For these individuals, literacy improvements are not a “felt need”, so motivation to improve is low (Rogers, 2004). In the UK, however, research has found that more than one in four adults who feel their literacy is poor would like to improve it, though only one in 25 has taken a course to do so (Parsons & Bynner, 2006).

2.2 Barriers to enrolment: institutional, situational, dispositional

Adult learning, in contrast to compulsory schooling, is a voluntary endeavour. Low literacy adults must make an active decision to improve their skills, and almost inevitably must overcome an extensive range of situational (day to day life) and institutional (rules and procedures) barriers blocking their way to improvement, including work and family commitments, lack of time, limited funds, and lack of available instruction.

Dispositional barriers (barriers from attitudes to learning) stem from the attitudes that adults have about learning, and are the least understood and potentially most important factors influencing adult literacy motivation (Porter et al, 2005). Despite literacy’s ever growing importance, many adults are disengaged from reading and writing, and have little or no interest in improving their skills. Other adults may feel that basic skills learning has little to offer them. As Rogers (2004) argues, for learning to take hold, it must be based on adults’ perceived needs, as well as their aspirations, intentions and beliefs.

Policies aimed at overcoming situational or dispositional barriers to participation may face unexpected challenges. For example, one Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) found that small financial incentives for attendance at adult literacy courses reduced rather than improved attendance, perhaps because this external incentive crowded out internal motivations for participation (Brooks et al. 2008).

2.3 Cohort-specific findings

Despite literacy’s ever growing importance, many adults are disengaged from reading and writing, and thus feel little incentive to improve their skills. This is particularly true of males: throughout Europe, women are much more likely to read books than men – this is the case in all Member States for which data are available (Eurostat, 2011). However PIAAC (OECD, 2013a) shows that men in most countries have a higher “everyday reading practices” score (meaning that, on the whole, they read more frequently and in a broader range of formats) and are more likely to engage in everyday numeracy practices. There are limited international data on gender differences in participation in adult basic skills courses, but we do know that in adult education in general, women participate more than men (EC, 2011b).
Just as European women are more likely than men to participate in adult education, **migrants are more likely to participate than natives** (EC, 2011b). (Migrant women participate more than migrant men.) Policies such as “Swedish for immigrants” and the Norwegian Introduction Act encourage migrant participation in language courses by providing free courses and obligating migrants to attend (NRDC, 2010). In other Member States, such as the UK, free language courses are available to only some groups of migrants, e.g. those seeking employment. This more targeted approach can produce negative externalities – for example, migrant mothers may be denied free provision, preventing them from acting on motivations to improve their language skills, help their children and integrate into their new culture. Evidence indicates that the longer such migrants go without learning the national language, the less likely they are to ever do so (Baynham et al., 2007). Another barrier for some migrants is a lack of literacy skills in their native language. Migrant language programmes may therefore need to provide not only language learning, but literacy training.

Poverty creates a range of motivational barriers to literacy improvement, both situational and dispositional. **Low-income and poorly educated adults tend to be the least likely to engage in education and training, in part because of poor experiences in compulsory school, but also because employers tend to be reluctant to provide training for low-skilled staff** (Ananiadou et al., 2004). Low-literacy adults tend to face a range of other socio-economically related situational barriers which make it difficult to engage in learning. For example, research has found that females with poor literacy skills are more than twice as likely as those with good skills to be a teenage mother, and three times as likely to have four or more children by their mid-30s (Parsons & Bynner, 2007). They are also more likely to be single mothers. These situational factors reduce the likelihood of low-literacy women being able to act on dispositional motivations to improve their skills – thus increasing the likelihood of the intergenerational transfer of poor skills.

### 2.4 Awareness raising, outreach, cooperation, networking

European countries have engaged in a broad range of outreach activities aimed at increasing participation in adult basic education. This has included support at European level – for example, within the framework of the European Social Fund. While rigorous analyses of the effectiveness of outreach interventions are rare, two programmes have been well studied. Finland’s NOSTE programme ran from 2003-2009, with the aim of improving the general education and skills level of disadvantaged adults (Ministry of Education and Culture Finland 2010). Noste reached a large number of disadvantaged adults, eventually managing to enlist 7.3% of the 350,000 individuals eligible for the programme. Looking at strategies which helped to increase engagement and participation, the programme evaluation concluded that **key success factors were:** 1) free tuition; 2) outreach activities, particularly those targeted at workplaces; 3) expansion of local educational offerings; and 4) the possibility to study while working.

In Sweden, the Adult Education Initiative, also known as the “Knowledge Lift”, was a five-year adult education and training programme that sought to half Sweden's unemployment rate. Despite struggling to make the desired economic impacts (Albrecht et al 2005), the programme did significantly increase participation in adult education via **mechanisms such as study grants, paid leave and additional classroom spaces.** However, the Knowledge Lift struggled to reach all its targeted groups, particularly middle-aged men and older workers (Veeman 2004).

### 2.5 Programmes / courses on offer

Stand-alone basic skills programmes have emerged in the majority of the European Union member states – for an overview, see the forthcoming Eurydice report on adult learning (expected for early 2015). This section focuses on programmes which are integrated into other forms of learning, work which target specific groups.
2.5.1 Integrated (aka embedded) programmes
In many countries, adult literacy and basic skill elements are embedded in broader vocational or social and occupational rehabilitation programmes (Höghielm, 2011). In countries where vocational programmes at upper secondary level have a significant general (academic) component, they often include an element focused on basic skills improvement. There is evidence that embedding basic skills education in vocational programmes can benefit participants. However, there is also evidence that, if done incorrectly, such embedding or integration of basic skills can have negative consequences. For example, Casey et al. (2006) explored the impact of integrating literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) training into 79 vocational programmes in the UK. They found that where a single teacher was asked to take dual responsibility for teaching vocational skills and basic skills, the probability of learners achieving their literacy and numeracy qualifications was much lower than when courses were delivered by a team of teachers with vocational and literacy and numeracy specialisms working in combination. The benefits of integrated learning found in this study cannot be achieved by simply adding basic skills to the vocational teacher’s responsibilities. Rather, learners benefit when taught by teams of staff, with their own different areas of expertise, working closely together.

The integrated courses also had higher success rates than the non-embedded courses. For learners on the fully- integrated courses, 93% of those with an identified literacy need achieved a literacy or language qualification, compared to only 50% for those on non- integrated courses. For learners on the fully- integrated courses, 93% of those with an identified numeracy need achieved a numeracy qualification, compared to 70% for those on non- integrated courses.

2.5.2 Academic formal education (Second chance programmes)
Providers of Second Chance Education (understood both as remedial education for drop outs from lower and upper secondary education and as pathway to higher education for adults who hold no HE entrance permission) play a significant role in the provision of adult basic education in many countries (Inbar, 1990; Saar et al., 2013).

2.5.3 Programmes targeted at particular cohorts
Workplace literacy initiatives have been successful in attracting adults who will not participate in other forms of learning (Wolf et al, 2008). In some cases, unions have played a central role in this process. Research on employees taking part in workplace literacy programmes suggests that while individuals are initially motivated to take part because of a desire to improve their earnings or position, motivations to persist tend to focus on improved job satisfaction (Wolf et al, 2008). In workplace provision employees require the motivation and opportunities to exercise their (improved) skills. Employers and managers therefore need to create environments that allow or encourage the use of new skills. Conditions for effective workplace learning include voluntary engagement, extensive contact and study time, and sustained formal and informal opportunities for acquiring and improving skills (Vorhaus et al, 2011).

In a study of UK workplace literacy programmes, Wolf and Evans (2011) found that workplace basic skills courses reach people who are not normally involved in continuous education or training. Two thirds of the programme participants were male, compared with only 41% and 23% male learners in publicly funded courses available through nearby colleges and community-based adult learning centres. Older learners were more in evidence in the workplace literacy sample than in other forms of adult education provision. Many of the learners in the sample had not undertaken any learning in the recent past and very few of them said they might be attracted to a basic skills course at a college.

Likewise, family literacy/numeracy programmes have a record of attracting individuals who would not otherwise seek to improve their basic skills (Carpentieri et al 2011). In many cases, such programmes capitalise on parents’ strong motivation to help their children: even when parents do not see themselves as capable of or interested in improving their own skills, they may in role on
family literacy programmes in order to benefit their children. Many policy makers see this as a process as a means to “lure” parents into learning, with family literacy programmes serving as a stepping stone to further education.

“Keeping them coming back”: Learner persistence and retention

Learner persistence is not the same as learner ‘retention’. While the latter is an organisation-focused concept, persistence puts the learner at the centre of the equation. “Persistence” was first used in the US to describe enrolment patterns, and was later generalised as a quality of the students themselves. Unlike “retention”, a word that pivots on the time spent with a provider, “persistence” embraces a longer, a more complex, and more student-centred learning journey. Persistence extends over a lifelong and life-wide learning journey and includes periods outside of formal education. The most widely-used definition of persistence is that developed by National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL, year): adults staying in programmes for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study or distance education when they must stop attending programme services, and returning to programme services as soon as the demands of their lives allow.

For adults, literacy motivation requires both the initial effort of will required to enrol on a course and the long-term persistence needed to overcome obstacles along the way. Just as situational, institutional and dispositional barriers must be overcome in order to begin participating in a literacy course, they must be overcome – often time and time and again – in order to achieve the desired gains.

Goals have been shown to play a key role this process. Adults who have specific objectives for their literacy learning are more likely to persist, as are those who purposefully monitor their progress towards those goals (Comings et al, 1999). For some adults these goals may be external incentives, such as qualifications; in other cases the goals may be more personal. Key actors influencing persistence include family and friends, who have tremendous influence on motivation. Other key actors include colleges and other education providers – by limiting institutional barriers, creating positive learning environments, and offering timely information, advice and guidance, these organisations can help learners’ motivations be realised.

The MDRC/NCSALL persistence study identified as the first (of four) supports to persistence (Comings et al., 1999) the need to manage the positive and negative forces (the barriers) that help and hinder persistence, by identifying these forces, prioritising those that have the most significant effort, and deciding which ones can be managed (by being made weaker or stronger, depending on whether these are negative or positive forces). With reference to strengthening positive forces, the literature suggests that learners who develop a learning identity are more likely to persist (St Clair, 2006). For providers this can mean supporting self-efficacy – the second of four supports to persistence identified by MDRC/NCSALL (Comings et al., 1999) – through building the feeling in adults that they can be successful learners, through regular recognition of learner progress, and by using successful adult learners as role models.

A number of studies (including UK work by NIACE on ‘Catching Confidence’, Eldred et al, 2006) have stressed the importance to learner persistence of recognising soft outcomes within a broad framework of achievement and a system of formative assessment which recognises small steps. Research on formative assessment for the OECD (Derrick and Ecclestone, 2008) stresses the importance to progress of scaffolding, so that learners have challenges at the right level of difficulty, and of tailoring learning to the individual learner’s needs (which implies the need for a broad repertoire of teaching methods and substantive expertise). The third and fourth supports to learner persistence identified by MRDC/NCSALL were that learners establish a goal, and that progress
is made by learners towards this goal, a process supported by measuring progress, but not necessarily by the same measures that are used for programme goals in terms of accountability (Comings et al., 1999). By acknowledging gains already made, flexible and innovative assessment can support learner persistence when adults ‘drop out’ of formal programmes (NAO, 2004).

In addition to building self-efficacy and self-confidence, research shows that assistance with childcare, transport and access to social services can make a difference to learner persistence, and there is some (albeit more tentative) evidence to suggest that persistence is supported where providers are aware and manage the critical periods when learners are more likely to withdraw or to fail; when pastoral care is provided; when there are adequate financial resources and facilities and where there is administrative leadership (Benseman et al., 2005, citing Comings et al., 1999; Eldred, 2002; B. A. Quigley and Uhland, 2000; Yaffe and Williams, 1998).

3.1 Information, advice and guidance services
With respect to critical periods for withdrawal, Quigley (2000) identifies the first three weeks of a course as vital, thus emphasising the role that induction and orientation processes have to play in supporting persistence. Appropriate placement supports learning (Martinez, 2001) whereas poor, inadequate or inappropriate information, advice and guidance (IAG) can cause students to withdraw (Lopez et al., 2007). Many basic skills learners will have had negative school experiences, so the transition to the learning environment must be handled sensitively.

Effective IAG occurs where potential learners are aware of all the learning possibilities and the best match is made between learning needs and the learning offer. Sustained attendance in a learning programme appears to depend upon the appropriate level of support available, in accordance with learners’ needs – particularly during the early stages after enrolment – and the efforts made by the providers to link the learning programme to the outcomes desired by learners (Taylor et al., 2005). In reviewing the evidence on widening adult participation in learning, Taylor et al. cite an evaluation of the then Department for Education and Skills’ Adult Guidance Pilots (Tyers et al., 2003) which found that in-depth guidance offered as a complement to traditional IAG had a positive impact for ‘hard-to-reach’ groups, with successes including qualifications gains for those with no prior qualifications and a quarter of those who had been unemployed for less than six months moving into work. The main lessons learnt from these pilots were that the needs of the target group should be understood; families and communities of clients should be considered as well as the individual; advisers need to be clear about what they are offering; and provision should be flexible and tailored to need. MacLeod and Strawn (2010, citing Hillage et al., 2006) point to evidence from the evaluation of the Employer Training Pilots (ETPs) which suggests that adults engaged in work-based learning who receive IAG services are more likely both to be satisfied with the learning programme and to progress to further learning.

3.2 Dropping out, dropping in
Kambouri & Francis (1994) found that in almost half of cases, tutors in their sample did not know why a student had left the class; yet 88% of tutors said that they could tell if a learner was likely to leave the class. The NCSALL Persistence Study concludes that most demographic variables (including gender, ethnicity, employment status, and parental education) do not tell us much about whether learners will persist or not. Immigrants, those over the age of 30, and parents of teenage or grown children were more likely to persist. Research from the UK (Martinez & Munday 1998) likewise concludes that students who withdraw do not have markedly different demographic profiles to students who complete courses.

Belzer (1998) observed that most learners leaving courses do not feel that they have ‘dropped out’ – learners do not perceive leaving the course as either failure or an end to learning. Martinez & Munday’s (1998) research showed that students had complex reasons for withdrawing, and that, from the student’s point of view, this decision can be seen as rational and positive. As a label, “drop
out” is limited. McGivney (1996) writes, ‘What surprised me was that so many so-called drop-outs are actually back in. People aren’t leaving education. They’re shifting around.’

Not taking part in formal learning can represent a very rational approach, where the individual has weighed up the costs and likely benefits and judged the outcome unfavourable (Taylor & Cameron 2002). Beder (1991) suggested that adults’ decisions to participate are often based on cost-benefit analysis. The California Distance Learning Project research (2005) indicated that distance learning and blended learning can be effective; reducing the need to drop out. However, learners with particularly low basic skills may struggle with ICT and may need face-to-face motivation and support.

Learning can continue through asynchronous distance lessons that place the learner in charge of the pace and place of instruction. The Adult Learners Lives project found that vulnerable young people who leave a course before completion do not consider this failure: in the context of their lives even a short attendance at college is a significant step, and when they leave they can participate in informal learning.

Re-engagement should be built into a student’s learning plan, including supports for learning during non-participation, and supports transition into other programmes (Comings, 2005). Provision could have flexibility: adults are often attracted by learning in “chunks” that can be accumulated over time (LSDA, 2002). Informal learning should be linked with mainstream provision: the lack of clear paths from informal to formal learner and from non-accredited to accredited learning can inhibit progression (Taylor & Cameron 2002). Stops and starts can be seen as building blocks to learning.

Providers of learning which support persistence will offer services which enable learners to continue learning or to return to learning. NRDC’s study of embedded learning (Casey et al., 2006) found that learners were less likely to drop out of basic skills provision if it was embedded in vocational training.

Do we need to “get them through the door” into classroom-based provision? Complementary routes to improve basic skills

As noted previously, most adults with poor basic skills are unlikely to participate in courses aimed at improving those skills. Therefore, it behoves policy makers to think of alternative routes through which to influence national skills levels. Such routes would not be substitutes for classroom-based or workplace-based provision, but a complement. One such route is that of everyday literacy and numeracy practices, e.g. reading for pleasure or using maths in everyday life.

4.1 Everyday practices

Some academics emphasising the importance of social practices argue that literacy and numeracy are contextually and culturally embedded, and cannot be readily understood or measured outside those contexts. Others (e.g. Reder 2009), argue that basic skills must be understood both in terms of context-independent proficiencies which, at least to some degree, can be measured on standardised tests, and as social or individual practices which programmes and policies should seek to cultivate. Proficiencies and practices are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing (Smith 1996), and if we are to understand literacy and numeracy as skills, we must also understand them as practices.

Accompanying this body of literature is a broad range of studies analysing the impacts of adult basic skills courses on literacy and numeracy practices – for example, reading for pleasure and using maths in everyday activities such as calculating household budgets or restaurant tips (see Carpentieri 2014 for a brief summary of this literature). Longitudinal research in this area has reached some promising conclusions. For example, in an American study, Sheehan-Holt & Smith (2000) found that participation in adult literacy courses leads to measurable improvements in everyday reading practices – that is, adults who take such courses tend to begin reading for pleasure more often, and
tend to continue doing so well after course completion. Reder (2009), in a nine-year longitudinal study, found that changes in literacy and numeracy practices lead, over the period of several years, to quantifiable improvements in literacy and numeracy scores, as measured on standardised tests. As with children and adolescents, adults who start reading more go on to read better.

There is, however, little if any rigorous research demonstrating the impacts of non-classroom-focused policies that seek to increase adults’ everyday literacy and numeracy practices. Such policies may include national reading campaigns targeted at adults (as well as children), library promotion initiatives and digital literacy campaigns. However, academics such as those serving on the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (EU-HLG 2012) have argued that countries seeking to improve their literacy and numeracy skills levels need to enact policies facilitating a “more literate environment” – that is, an environment that facilitates more adults to read more often, particularly adults who typically read little if at all.

PIAAC collects a previously unprecedented amount of quantitative data on everyday literacy and numeracy practices, opening the possibility for rigorous, cross-country comparative study (Carpentieri 2014). Table 1, for example, ranks participating OECD countries in order from, at top, countries with the highest percentage of their population classified as reading for pleasure little or not at all. For example, in Russia, 72.75% of the population does little or no reading for pleasure. In Norway, on the other hand, only 19% of the population is classified as reading for pleasure little or not at all.

Table 1: Percentage of the population (aged 16-65) who read for pleasure only a little or not at all (based on the PIAAC “Everyday reading practices” index (OECD, 2013))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>72.75</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>36.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>67.39</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>32.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>51.32</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>30.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>50.84</td>
<td>Holland</td>
<td>29.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>50.15</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>29.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>49.96</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>28.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>48.44</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>27.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Rep.</td>
<td>47.05</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>26.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>45.14</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>26.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>42.99</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>24.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>38.55</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>24.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>19.21</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Summary
This paper has sought to offer an overview of key academic research investigating the participation of adults in activities aimed at raising their basic skills. Section 1 looked at key theoretical issues in the field, including concepts such as the life course, identity and different forms of motivation. Basic skills cannot be improved in one great burst of motivation; for most learners, skills gains require patience and persistence. Evidence suggests that adults must be motivated to improve their skills – this may have significant implications for the potential effectiveness of mandatory programmes.

Section 2 focused on “Getting learners through the door” – that is, motivating adults to participate in courses. Motivations may be economic, personal or social. Adults enrol in literacy courses to improve their skills, to increase their self-confidence, to become better parents or grandparents, or as a
stepping stone towards future lifelong learning opportunities. Poor skills can be a source of embarrassment and shame, and these factors can be barriers to participation. Individuals may know they have a problem, but be too embarrassed to seek help. There is evidence that media campaigns can reduce the sense of taboo surrounding illiteracy while informing the general population about the true extent of the problem. However, most adults with low skills (as measured on standardised assessments) feel that their skills are average or better, and that they therefore have no need of improvement.

**Low-income and poorly educated adults tend to be the least likely to engage in education and training, in part because of poor experiences in compulsory school, but also because employers are often reluctant to provide training for low-skilled staff.** Situational factors such as the need for free childcare or subsidised transport may also serve as barriers to participation. Policy interventions which have increased participation amongst the low skilled have pointed to supply-side success factors such as the expansion of high quality provision, and demand side factors including: 1) free tuition; 2) outreach activities, particularly those targeted at workplaces; 3) expansion of local educational offerings; and 4) the possibility to study while working.

There is evidence that integrating basic skills education into vocational programmes can benefit participants, while reaching individuals who would not choose to participate in a standalone basic skills programme. However, there is also evidence that, if done incorrectly, integrated programmes can fail to improve basic skills. Workplace literacy initiatives have been successful in attracting adults who will not participate in other forms of learning, as have family literacy programmes. Both types of initiatives have been shown to reach adults who would not normally enrol in education or training, and to encourage further learning. Conditions for effective workplace learning include voluntary engagement, extensive contact and study time, and sustained formal and informal opportunities for acquiring and improving skills.

Section 3 focused on learner retention and persistence. While the former is an organisation-focused concept, persistence puts the learner at the centre of the equation. A number of studies have stressed the importance to persistence of formative assessment and the recognition of “soft outcomes”. Research also emphasises the importance of scaffolding, so that learners face challenges at the appropriate level of difficulty. High quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) is also key. For some learners, distance learning and blended learning can be effective; however, learners with particularly low basic skills may struggle with ICT and may need face-to-face motivation and support. There is a need for greater flexibility in adult provision, with greater connections between formal, informal and non-formal learning.

Classrooms are not the only places where skills are improved. Indeed, most adults with poor basic skills are unlikely to participate in courses aimed at improving those skills. Therefore, it behoves policy makers to think of alternative routes through which to influence national skills levels. The final section of this paper therefore looked at the relationship between basic skills proficiencies and basic skills practices. Policies aimed at improving or increasing these practices may contribute to improved proficiency. Longitudinal research has produced promising findings. For example, in an American study, Sheehan-Holt & Smither (2000) found that participation in adult literacy courses leads to measurable improvements in everyday reading practices – that is, adults who take such courses tend to begin reading for pleasure more often, and tend to continue doing so well after course completion. Reder (2009), in a nine-year longitudinal study, found that changes in literacy and numeracy practices lead, over the period of several years, to quantifiable improvements in literacy and numeracy scores, as measured on standardised tests. As with children and adolescents, adults who start reading more go on to read better.
Appendix: Definition and Characteristics of Adult Basic Skills Education

In this paper, adult literacy and basic skills education is understood as any form of course or planned intervention supporting adults in achieving levels of literacy, numeracy and ICT equivalent to that of students completing lower secondary education. The provision of language education for speakers of another language is also included in the definition. Programmes supporting various other generic (e.g. communication skills) and vocational skills are not addressed, unless they also include support for literacy, numeracy, or ICT. It is acknowledged that there is no commonly agreed definition of adult literacy and basic skills education and that various other definitions are in use, in particular in policy-related and program steering documents (Derrick, 2012).

Moreover, it is acknowledged that the paper’s applied definition refer to a different universe across European Union member states, as despite investments in instruments of cross-country comparative research (as the ISCED), comparability in educational research remains challenging. For example, lower secondary programs on ISCED 2 level across Europe differ in their length (e.g. up to age 16 in the UK, up to age 14 in Austria) and consequently in their expected educational achievements (Schneider, 2008)) Adult basic education is therefore differently related to the initial education system and to adult education on upper secondary level across countries.

Adult basic education is differentiated from adult education on upper secondary level, both academic or vocational. Upper secondary education typically prepares for acquiring higher education entrance permission of or for vocational qualifications. While student bodies’ in adult basic education and upper secondary education for adults differ considerably in their learning needs, resources and social backgrounds (Stephen Reder, 1999), the two levels of provision are interconnected. A significant part of adults in adult basic education intend to progress to provision on upper secondary level and beyond. Finally, in countries, where the completion of upper secondary education – academic or vocational – have become the societal norm, skill levels in literacy, numeracy and ICT equivalent to upper secondary education may become the new standard for basic skills. For example, in the United States, adult basic education is more often understood as comprising the equivalent of lower and upper secondary education (=the completion of high school) (see (Baker, 2014), 219-247, (Solga, 2005, 2008)

Participants in adult literacy and basic skills provision are certainly a heterogeneous group refraining simplistic characterization. However, when comparing the average participant in this type of learning activity to the average participant in the majority of job-related or non-job related non-formal activities, one will observe that

- Programmes include more teaching units and stretch over considerably longer periods of time compared to short non-formal courses in many other areas. When single courses on literacy and basic skills are relatively short or low in intensity (e.g. 30 units of learning; two hours per week for half a year), it should be remembered that many learners follow a succession of courses or combine various courses for achieving their learning goals. (Stephen Reder & Bynner, 2009)
- Significant progress in basic literacy, numeracy and ICT programs require considerable resources, speaking of teaching units, time devoted to homework and practices related to learning goals (e.g. ‘reading for pleasure’) and so on. While many job-related courses take up to two days only, measurable progress in adult literacy require – according to one often quoted estimate - 100 units of teaching (Comings, 2007), critiqually on this rule of the thumb (Vorhaus, Litster, Frearson, & Johnson, 2011 )
- Participants experience the courses typically as challenging as they try to learn what they are typically not good at or have already failed to learn once. Supporting adults to persist is
therefore of paramount importance, an need less pressing for many other fields of non-formal education.
- during the relative extended periods of participation adults have to deal with various life events and life transitions; balancing the responsibilities of adult life and the requirements of adult basic education is therefore quite often an issue
- Beyond intangible personal goals, many tangible goals of adult basic education, as acquiring entrance permission for other educational opportunities or improved employment prospects, are likely to take place only after the completion of multi-year learning pathways and typically not immediately after a single spell of course participation, which forms only one element among others in the intended trajectory.

Adult literacy and basic education has been recommended to be classified as formal (adult) education (UNESCO, 1997 [Re-edition 2006]). Speaking of its demands on learners, it shares many characteristics of other opportunities in formal adult education (Heffler 2013), even when, historically, literacy courses for adults have been developed as “non-formal” alternative to schooling. (Rogers, 2004). Within educational statistics, adult basic education is classified differently across European Union member states; while in some countries, most of adult literacy and basic education is classified as formal education, in others, it is mainly classified as non-formal. (Heffler 2013).

The paper addresses the educational sector (or the related organizational field (Heffler & Markowitsch, 2013)) of adult literacy and basic skills education. However, while many other educational sectors demonstrate considerable similarities across Europe, the provision of basic education (ABE) differs strongly across European countries (Abraham & Linde, 2011; Saar, Ure, & Holford, 2013). In particular, one can observe differences in
- applying concepts and definitions
- spreading provision across types of educational organizations
- combining and embedding provision (e.g. in vocational programs, social work etc.)
- engaging groups of practitioners/professionals
- funding sources and public oversight over the sector

Differences in the institutionalization of adult basic education across European Union member states – including programs fighting functional illiteracy – imply that groups of participants targeted as well as the number and the composition of participants grossly vary between national contexts. For example, participants in adult literacy courses in Germany (with German as mother tongue; about 20,000 to 25,000; (Projektträger im Deutschen Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt, 2011)) represent a much smaller, stronger selected group facing on average even more severe challenges than their much more numerous counter-parts in the UK ((Grotlüschen & Riekmann, 2012)).

A systematic, cross-country comparative overview on the history and institutionalization of adult basic education across European Union member states is currently missing. In the UK and Ireland, adult basic education has a comparatively long history and shows a considerably high level of institutionalization (Hamilton & Merrifield, 1999; Tett, Hamilton, & Hillier, 2006), in line with other English-speaking countries such as the US, Canada, Australia or New Zealand (Cain & Benseman, 2005; Shohet, 2001; Sticht, 2002) in Scandinavian countries, provision of basic skills had been a traditional focus of liberal adult education on communal level and became more strongly integrated in the provision of formal programmes, leading to qualifications in the past two decades (Eurydice, 2011; Rubenson, 2001, 2006; The National Adult Literacy Agency, 2011) . In Southern and Central Europe, formal basic education has seen a more recent reentry on the stage of educational policy, however, with many pre-running initiatives still in place (see also the relevant entries in Postlethwaite, 1995, e.g. for Spain, with 200.000 participants in adult basic education already in 1987; Gil (Gil, 1995)1995, 906). In post-communist states, a lively landscape of adult basic skill
provision had been forcefully interrupted by Stalinist reforms and political interference later on ((Kulich, 1989)). The transition to democratic capitalism had further eroded structures existing prior to 1989. From the 1990s on, considerable different new systems of provision have been implemented (see related information in (Saar et al., 2013)).

The body of research literature in the field of adult literacy and basic skills education refers strongly to examples from the UK, the United States and Canada. Research (available in English) based on the situation in other countries is much more scarce. With growing policy interest across EU-member states, more research on other countries may become available. One example is Germany, where a large scale research and pilot project programme (2007-2012) has boosted research on basic literacy and skills provision, however, the literature is available to considerable part in German only (Müller, 2012).

Currently, Eurydice works on a study on educational provision for low qualified/low skilled adults across the European Union member states’ education systems (announced for early 2015). The study will provide a comprehensive overview on programs available. Other recent reviews on policies implemented by various European states include (GHK, 2010)
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