

Community Education and the Labour Activation Challenge

**A Literature Review on Community Education in a Context of Labour Market
Activation, Employability and Active Citizenship in Ireland and the EU.
Executive Summary**



CEFA

Community Education Facilitators' Association

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Introduction

The vision, definition and purpose of community education were stated by the Community Education Facilitators Association (CEFA) in their position paper in 2011 *Community Education: Enhancing Learning, Fostering Empowerment and Contributing to Civic Society* and confirmed in 2012 by the Department of Education and Science in their Operational Guidelines for Providers. In these documents community education has been described as ‘outside the formal sector’, ‘fostering empowerment’ and ‘contributing to civic society’ with ‘particular emphasis on reducing educational and social disadvantage’. Of particular note in the DES Guidelines is the recognition of non-accredited provision which ‘enables individuals to explore their full potential and to contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of their area’.

This literature review entitled *Community Education and the Labour Activation Challenge*¹ which was commissioned by CEFA in 2013 and carried out by Liam McGlynn focuses on the contribution community education makes to employability, labour market activation and active citizenship in Ireland. This publication is an executive summary of that literature review and CEFA would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the work undertaken by Mary Flannery, Barbara Hammond, Siobhán Lynch and Dónal Walsh in supporting this piece of work.

The literature is examined under three headings; policy, research and practice, reflecting the range and type of literature available. It summarises Irish, British and European policy, research, reports and academic studies across all three headings. Policy is not defined in a vacuum and builds on practice and research. Community education in particular features widely in academic research journals and periodicals in the EU, Britain and Ireland.

¹ Community Education and the Labour Market Activation Challenge full literature review is available at <http://www.cefa.ie/publications.html>

Policy

In EU policy community education is situated in the framework of lifelong learning. From the *Lisbon Strategy 2000* to *Europe 2020*, the EU has produced a number of significant policy statements in the area of lifelong learning, adult education, vocational education and training, and recognition of informal and non-formal learning. These policies clearly locate the space which community education occupies in European policy.

The Lisbon Strategy (2000) committed the EU to a knowledge based economy and all subsequent policy firmly included the role of active citizenship allied with employability skills as two equally important aims for lifelong learning. This alliance has been reiterated in Education and Training 2020, with the requirement that education and training ensure “sustainable economic prosperity and employability whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue”.

A “greater openness towards non formal and informal learning” was articulated and so the development of the new Europe is not solely the business of accredited formal education but also requires non-formal and informal learning.

Common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning have been agreed by member states and the Council of the European Union has adopted a “recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning” (Council 2012). Ambitious average targets of 15% participation by adults in lifelong learning set in Council 2009 need sustained efforts particularly in Ireland where in 2011 the rate was below the European average at 7.1 % (Eurostat, 2011). While over 80 million people in Europe have low or basic skills, lifelong learning benefits those with higher education levels (EC, 2010). Community education as a first step or entry point within the informal and non-formal learning sector can extend the scope and reach of lifelong learning.

The lifelong learning policy context in Ireland is set against the backdrop of the current economic, unemployment and jobs crisis. Education and training is one of the sectors tasked with addressing the crisis. The dimensions of the crisis itself and the key labour activation and jobs policies pursued by government necessarily impact on how programmes such as community education, working with those who are unemployed and vulnerable groups, respond to the current challenge. With this focus on the labour market activation Irish policy has de-emphasised the importance of recognising and valuing non-formal and informal learning.

The National Action Plan for Jobs 2013 seeks to develop conditions for job creation through 333 actions which include community and local level employment. Action 227 states that “through the LCDP, access to formal and informal educational, recreational and cultural activities will be resourced”. Community education in partnership with the LCDPs plays a key role in developing and implementing such actions. The CSO special survey on lifelong learning undertaken in 2008 demonstrates that community education is particularly adept at engaging unemployed people and those outside the labour market in non-accredited, non-formal and informal education. Equally statistics provided by the Department of Education and Skills for 2012 indicate that 20% of community education participants declared as unemployed. This was a marked increase over the 11% declared unemployed in 2009 evidencing the success of community education strategies and approaches in reaching people furthest from the labour market

What is clear from the review of EU and Irish policy on the role of lifelong learning in relation to labour activation, employability and active citizenship is the relatively high status which non-formal and informal learning occupies in EU policy. Clearly, this orientation in EU policy ought to have a stronger impact on Irish policymaking in the area of lifelong learning and further education and training. Successful integrated labour activation policies depend on a co-ordinated approach involving a number of partners including the further education and training system of which community education is a part.

Research

There are a number of strands in European, British and Irish literature that have a bearing on the question posed at the outset of the literature review, *in what ways does community education meet the labour activation and employability challenge of the current unemployment crisis in Ireland?* These strands include the wider benefits of lifelong learning, recognition of non-formal and informal learning, employability outcomes of lifelong learning, and active citizenship.

The majority of academic writing in adult and community education in Britain and Ireland rightly challenges a narrow ‘skills for the economy’ paradigm in education policy and practice which side-lines the social purpose of education. This narrow focus on the needs of the economy in education policy to the exclusion of social cohesion is regarded as counterproductive because as the expression goes ‘we are more than an economy, we are a society’.

In recent years the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) while recognising the lack of research into social benefits of education has undertaken research into the social and non-market benefits of vocational education and training. The studies argue that there has been too much focus on the potential of education and training to develop human capital to the exclusion of social, cultural and identity capital (Cedefop, 2013). It argues for VET investment based 'not only by economic considerations but also by social (market and non-market) returns' while acknowledging the difficulty in financially evaluating these returns (Cedefop, 2013a, p.13).

In considering the recognition of non-formal and informal learning Colardyn & Bjornavold (2004) document much of the EU's thinking and rational and emphasise visibility and value as key cornerstones to any system of recognition. Werquin (2008) writing from an OECD vantage point argues for the need of 'recognition of non-formal and informal learning as opposed to validation or accreditation' (p.114).

Much work has been done in the UK to develop models to measure the benefits of adult and continuing education. Fujiwara (2012) measures the benefit of adult and continuing education across four domains; health, employment, social relationships and volunteering using one such econometric model. He reports that people's participation in part-time courses has positive effects on all four domains and in relation to employment 'taking a part-time course in the previous year has a statistically significant positive effect on the likelihood of someone being employed in the current year' (p.12). There is also a statistical significant increase in volunteering. These positive gains are then valued in monetary terms using his model.

Writing at a time of scarce financial resources in the UK Spear (2012) acknowledges 'the skills agenda, with preparation for work being the main show in town' (p.5) but he also argues for the importance of providing 'appealing activities' (p.5 to encourage people to take up learning again 'particularly those who may lack confidence'). Udon (2009) writing on the cycles of growth and recession and the impact on unemployment argues the importance of adult learning which is flexible and learner centred in helping people gain or maintain personal and interpersonal skills which are key to employability.

In the Irish context AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, has carried out research into the DES funded community education programmes. Bailey, Breen and Ward (2011) report on their country-wide survey of learners, that a significant number of learners see employability as one of the many outcomes of their participation in community education. The DES-funded

community education which is non-accredited and non-formal, is viewed as an important building block for progression to 'further education and training' according to 64% of providers and for 'labour market progression' according to 30% of providers. An analysis of the learner responses to the survey on what progression they wished for reveals that learning a new skill (70%) and 'to do a non-certified course with this group or centre' (55%) feature highest. However 23% wanted 'to get a job because I am unemployed', 16% wanted to 'get a better job' and 33% wanted to 'get advice on employment/education' (p. 36)

The National Economic and Social Forum reporting in 2006 on the labour market, at a time of high economic growth, note that Ireland has a poor record on equality in accessing job opportunities. 'Long term unemployed, lone parents, ex-drug users, ex-offenders, members of the Travelling community, asylum seekers and refugees, people with disability and women returners ' all experience high levels of inequality in accessing the job market (Duggan and Loftus, 2005). Among the NESF recommendations is the expansion of part-time, flexible training and education with specific regard to improving employability skills.

This summary of the salient research in the EU, UK and Ireland points to the fact that FET in its various forms, including non-formal and informal learning, contributes in positive ways not only to social objectives but also to employability objectives. The research also indicates work continues in the sector in relation to measurement of these outcomes.

Practice

There is a dearth of documented practice examples in the literature of adult and community education, particularly where the practice demonstrates a connectedness to employability or labour market outcomes. The good practice examples highlighted in the review adhere to the authentic values of empowerment and community-based education. They cover a range of practice in Ireland, England and Scotland.

The sample of community education practice which follows illustrates the benefits to be gained in relation to active citizenship, labour market preparedness and employability while still holding the commitment to seek structural change for a more sustainable economy and society informed by values of community solidarity, equality and social justice.

Among the relatively few documented case studies is that of Patterson and Dowd (2010) in The Longford Women's centre. Here a work experience and education programme using a women's community education approach delivers positive outcomes including 70% external employment

approach is described as:

A potent collective education process that supports the empowerment of women and seeks to address the socio-political aspects of women's experience through collective activism.

Patterson & Dowd, 2010 p.123

Employment as well as a specific community benefit is significant in the case of a Sligo Traveller Women Health Care programme which trains women to become primary health care workers within their own community. In addition to the direct employment outcomes there are better health gains for Traveller women and the general Traveller community (Grundtvig, 2010).

Similarly the City of Galway VEC community education programme which adopts a 'bottom-up' approach has developed a Diploma in Community Development and Community Education in cooperation with NUI Galway. A Grundtvig report describes the impact of the programme with '80 people from vulnerable communities now trained as community educators and actively engaged in working back in their communities' (Grundtvig Partnerships, 2012, p.11).

In 2013 an AONTAS lobbying initiative focused on the role of community education in serving the needs of people most distanced from education and training and the labour market, and as a valid form of activation. The testimony of community education participants highlights the important role of community education in preparing people for the workplace particularly in developing confidence and improving self esteem (AONTAS, 2013). 'My confidence was diminished to the stage where it was almost impossible to apply for positions as I would get another rejection. My mentor has supported me to keep going and not to get discouraged'... after feeling isolated with low self-esteem community education offered me a new lease of life.'(p. 45)

Slevin's (2009) account of working with unemployed men in Donegal is a good example of balancing the long term social change objectives of community education and the need for practical labour market skills training. She describes a mini bus driver training programme which is designed, delivered and supported around the needs of the participants for re-entry to the labour market while striving also for collective social change in the area which is one of the most economically deprived in the country.

Galligan (2008) also reporting on community education practice in Donegal cautions on the

‘radical agenda’ of women’s community education getting lost where it is used merely as an ‘access route to the labour force’ (p.25). This tension is further described in Evoy & Mc Donnell (2011) working with the City of Waterford VEC where a respondent cautions against losing the space occupied by community education with ‘everything moving in the direction of labour market outcomes’ (p.47).

Limerick Community Education Network, Limerick City Adult Education Services and Limerick Regeneration Agencies (2011) work on the social value of community-based adult education finds that learners demonstrate increased confidence in participation at a political level through voting and lobbying on local issues.

Smith (2013) reports on the development of resources in for use with groups in Knockanrawley Resource Centre to identify and validate their non-formal and informal learning. While Jackson and Whitwell (2010) writing about community education provision in practice settings in Yorkshire affirm the value of non-accredited community-based learning across arrange of informal settings.

Tett (2010) gives example of radical community education practice in Scotland working with local people to ‘build a curriculum’ (p.6) around their health issues and successfully campaigning collectively for improved housing stock.

These examples provide evidence of the connectedness of community education to employability and important social outcomes. However the sector would benefit from the publication of more practice case studies and a research hub would certainly contribute in this regard.

Conclusions: Opportunities and Challenges for Community Education

The literature review condensed in this document seeks to assemble a range of policy, research and practice papers from EU, International, UK and Irish sources which address the question *in what ways does community education meet the labour market and employability challenge of the current unemployment crisis in Ireland?* A number of conclusions emerge from the literature.

Policy

At the level of policy, it is clear that there is strong recognition at EU level for the contribution which non-formal and informal learning makes to participants’ employability and labour market

readiness as well as their involvement as active citizens in shaping the social Europe. Irish policymakers are somewhat behind the curve compared to the EU when it comes to recognising and valuing informal and non-formal learning such as community education. This is reflected in the fact that 'Ireland lags considerably behind leading countries in LLL participation rates' (Cedefop, 2013c, p. 3). The statistics presented in this review support this argument. However, there are signs that Ireland is embracing the EU agenda of lifelong learning. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007, p. 99) recognised the need to engage higher numbers of adults in lifelong learning.

It is against the backdrop of an unemployment crisis in Ireland and labour market activation policies that the community education sector seeks to maintain the space ascribed to it in *Learning for Life* the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000). The dual meaning of community education as both an extension of education into the community and individual and collective empowerment for social change, gives it focus and flexibility. In terms of policy, the Community Education Facilitators Association, the Department of Education and Skills, and AONTAS have stated policy positions on community education which reflect this meaning. Community education is described as 'a continuum of personal development, community development, social analysis and political participation' (CEFA, 2011, p. ii). It is focused on meeting the needs of marginalised groups and communities and therefore forms part of social justice work and aligns closely with community development. It is a participative and collective educative process.

In seeking to stay true to its mission defined in policy, community education as a sector must also pay heed to current reality. In Ireland that reality is recession and unemployment, though there are signs of recovery. In the midst of the current economic crisis, governments across Europe including Ireland could make the mistake of reducing education down to a purely economic purpose, jobs-driven focus. European lifelong learning policy and Irish lifelong learning policy would suggest such a choice would be a mistake. Community education is not anti-jobs. If anything community education is actually quite effective in supporting people to grow in confidence and self-esteem and gain skills which support their access to the labour market in the future.

Research

In a time of budgetary constraints across the EU and in Ireland, it is usual to give a higher priority to frontline services over research. Yet in other sectors of the economy, research and development (R&D) is an economy in itself. This literature review has attempted to assemble

research which points to the positive impacts which community education makes as the first building block for disadvantaged adult learners to engage with the labour market.

The research papers considered here from Cedefop at EU level, NIACE at UK level and AONTAS in the Irish context among others, cover important avenues of enquiry. These include; recognition of non-formal and informal learning, measuring the wider benefits of lifelong learning, research on employability and active citizenship. These research papers trace the positive impacts which non-formal and informal learning including community education hold for participants accessing the labour market.

Specific research still needs to be done. In particular there is a need to document good practice in the field of community education, particularly in relation to employability, labour market activation and active citizenship. Whether we accept or resist the box-ticking in education and training, the demand for evidence of the impacts of interventions such as community education is unlikely to dissipate. Some of the tools being developed by the sector, such as social return on investment (*sroi*), are illuminating the wider benefits of non-formal and informal learning. The community education sector requires dedicated resources to strengthen its research capacity in Ireland on a par with other sectors of the education system here.

Practice

Policy and research affirms that not only formal education but also non-formal and informal learning taking place in local communities has an important place on the education landscape. The evidence from practice demonstrates this also. The connections between social exclusion and labour market vulnerability are clearly linked. The issues of low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence are clear barriers to people from disadvantaged groups and communities entering the labour market. On the other side, the INOU conference report (2012) noted that employers 'have not traditionally regarded the public employment service as their first choice as a source from which to recruit staff' (p. 29). The NESF study (2006) also referred to 'discrimination and prejudice' on the part of employers and this must be challenged as well. The unemployed will play their part by enrolling on courses. Employers need to play their part too by providing meaningful jobs. There are many incentives now for employers to create jobs, including JobsPlus (Department of Social Protection, 2013b).

Community education has a clear set of principles and practices which are effective in addressing the barriers experienced by participants. The first steps for disadvantaged learners in returning to learning and engaging with the world of work are often first taken in local

in returning to learning and engaging with the world of work are often first taken in local community education centres. It is if anything, an important stepping stone in the continuum of education and training. The small sample of practice studies presented here demonstrate the effectiveness of community education in supporting people with re-entry to the labour force in very practical and meaningful ways. As stated above, there is a need for more research and recording of these important lessons. What is presented here is but a sample of the ordinary yet vibrant changes which community education facilitators, tutors, community workers, trainers and learners are collectively achieving in their work on the ground. These narrative accounts make concrete the lines of policy and research.

In conclusion this literature review has attempted to assemble in one place the current policy, research and practice snapshots of community education as it relates to the ongoing crisis of jobless communities in 2013 Ireland. Like other sectors, the community education sector is adapting to the challenge posed by current labour market activation policy and the employability agenda dominating education and training at this time. At the same time, the sector retains its commitment to a core ethos which seeks deeper structural change to a more sustainable economy and society informed by the values of community solidarity, equality and justice. Such a vision, if allowed to flourish, may create a world of work, end labour market exclusion and empower citizens.

A synopsis of the conclusions which emerged from the literature review is presented below;

- EU policy support for non-formal and informal learning.
- UK adult and community education sector as an ally facing similar challenges of labour activation and employability agenda as Ireland.
- Meeting the challenge of quantifying the seemingly unquantifiable.
- Measuring the social and non-market impacts of community education.
- The EU 15% target of adult participation in lifelong learning by 2020 (Ireland currently 7-8%).
- The need to develop a research and evaluation capacity in the community education sector.
- Recognition of non-formal and informal community education.

- The need to further research good practice case studies in the area of employability and labour activation.
- A time of opportunity: the policy literature points to a strong convergence of DES, CEFA & AONTAS understandings of the ethos, purpose and nature of community education.
- Opportunities in education for active citizenship.
- Literature shows that as participants gain experience as active citizens, their employability skills are enhanced and vice versa.
- The challenge of asserting social purpose in community education and demonstrating its benefits for economic purpose.
- The challenge of making compatible, hitherto seemingly incompatible, objectives for community education empowerment and employability.

