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## Lifelong Learning: Capabilities and Aspirations

### Abstract

The present paper discusses the potential of the capability approach in conceptualizing and understanding lifelong learning as an agency process, and explores its capacity to guide empirical studies on lifelong learning. It uses data for 20 countries from the Adult Education Survey (2007; 2011) and focuses on aspirations for lifelong learning. The study results show that there are considerable country differences in the level of people's aspirations. They highlight the fact that, despite the growing emphasis on lifelong learning, the level of aspirations has decreased in half of the European countries. However, this decrease occurs to a greater extent among people who did not participate in lifelong learning, but wanted to participate, than among people who had already participated in some form of education or training in the previous 12 months.

Keywords: lifelong learning, capabilities, aspirations

### Introduction

The last two decades have been marked by an increase in the valuing of education over the course of a lifetime on the one hand, and an inflation of credentials on the other. In this context, the emphasis on lifelong learning (LLL) has grown, both in policy context and in literature. It has become one of the Europe 2020 strategy priorities for education and there is a growing body of literature on it. Despite that, data show considerable country differences in participation in education and training (last 4 weeks) of people aged 25-64. More specifically, in 2014 it ranged from below 2% in Bulgaria and Romania to more than 20% in Finland, Iceland, and Denmark (Eurostat, code: trng\_lfs\_01. Data extracted on 02.03.2016). Thus, although EU countries have set a target, according to which, by 2020, 15% of adults aged 25-64 should be taking part in LLL, in 2014, only seven countries had reached the target rate. Recently, current practices and policies in lifelong education have been criticised as narrowly-defined, i.e. as related mainly to employability of people and not enhancing agency and good lives (Walker, 2012). So far in the literature, more attention has been paid to actual participation and less on aspirations for LLL. Against this background, the aim of the paper is twofold: to theoretically outline the potential of the capability approach (CA) in conceptualizing and understanding LLL as an agency process, and to show the capacity of this approach to guide empirical studies on LLL.

### Literature review

There is a huge body of literature on LLL (e.g. Aspin et al., 2012; Boyadjieva et al., 2012; Crowther, 2004; Milana & Holford, 2014; Usher, 2001). The concept gained popularity given the huge insecurity in the labour market and the permanent need for acquiring new skills. Nevertheless, the debate around it remains extremely vibrant – LLL has not only been defined as a new paradigm of education in the

contemporary societies (Usher, 2001; Boyadjieva, 2006), but also as a ‘deficit discourse’, which places the responsibility of economic and political failure at the level of the individual, rather than at the level of systemic problems (Crowther, 2004). In this context, the CA has a potential to balance both views. It allows us to take into account both the individual agency and the role of structures when studying the participation in LLL by the acknowledging of the so-called ‘conversion factors’. They influence how a person can be, or is, free to convert the characteristics of the good or service into being or doing. There are three different types of conversion factors: *personal*, *social* and *environmental* conversion factors (see Crocker & Robeyns, 2009).

This approach pays special attention to agency, and regards people as dignified and responsible individuals, who shape their own lives in the light of the goals that they have reason to value. Understanding LLL, not only as agency achievement but also as an agency process, is very important in order to capture its difference from traditional school education, with respect to the positions of the actors involved in it. In LLL, students are subjects of their own action, for their inclusion in education can only occur as a result of their personal decision. Furthermore, the ‘lifelong learning’ may be understood as “a positive process of deepening understanding and reflection in which learning forms our distinctive agency as rich human beings who are economic agents, but much, much more than this” (Walker, 2012, p. 190).

The CA is associated with the names of the Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen and the political philosopher Martha Nussbaum. In essence, the CA is based on a view of living seen as a combination of various ‘doings and beings’ (called ‘functionings’), with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings (Sen, 1993, p. 31). More specifically, the concept of ‘functionings’ reflects the various things that a person may value being or doing (e.g. being employed or happy). In contrast, a person’s ‘capability’ refers to the alternative combinations that are feasible for a person to achieve. It is a special kind of freedom and, as such, is associated with “our ability to achieve various combinations of functionings that we can compare and judge against each other in terms of what we have reason to value” (Sen, 2009, p. 233).

Research has shown that education is crucial for well-being and, as such, should be directed towards expanding people’s capabilities (Walker & Vaughan, 2012). This can be understood both in terms of *capabilities to access education* (e.g. is schooling affordable for all; can anyone aspire to go to university?), and also in the *capabilities that persons gain through education* (e.g. self-confidence, economic skills). Although the link between education and capabilities has been widely explored (e.g. Walker & Unterhalter, 2007), the majority of studies focus on formal education and there is scarce research which applies to LLL.

Talking about capabilities in access to education, it is worth acknowledging people’s aspirations. Aspirations are recognised as an important signifier in education policy discourse nowadays (Unterhalter et al., 2014) and can play an agency-unlocking role (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013). Some of their main features are that they: i) are *goal-oriented*, ii) *concern the future* of the self in relation to the self or the agency of the self in relations to goals concerning others, iii) have a *dynamic and multi-faceted nature*, and iv) are *deeply context dependent* (Hart, 2012; Conradie & Robeyns, 2013). Via the CA lens, aspiring can be seen as a *functioning*,

as a *capability to aspire* or as a *meta-capability* (Hart, 2012). The way in which aspirations are generated, together with factors which help and hinder students, may have an effect on the agency an individual has to achieve their aspirations (ibid.).

## Methodology

The study draws on data from the Adult Education Survey. It has been chosen because it contains questions on aspirations. This survey is a part of the EU Statistics on LLL and uses a 12-month reference period for participation in education and training. The new wave is yet to be carried out in 2016. Given this, only the data from the pilot phase (in 2007) and from the first wave (in 2011) are used. The target population of the survey is composed of people aged 25 to 64. The pilot phase was carried out in 29 countries, and the first wave in 30 countries. However, the analysis is limited to only 20 countries, for which data on aspirations for both years are available at the Eurostat website (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>). These are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden.

In order to capture the level of aspiration at country level, we were interested in the distribution of the will to participate, or participate more, in LLL (code: `trng_aes_175`). We also looked at the obstacles reported as the most important for people who did not participate, but wanted to participate, in LLL in a given country (code: `trng_aes_180`). These data are available only for 2007. Data were extracted on 02.03.2016.

## Results

The analysis shows that the level of aspirations for LLL differs considerably depending on the country people live in. More specifically, the countries with the lowest proportion of respondents who wanted to participate in 2007 were Hungary (9.7%), Bulgaria (12.6%) and Portugal (14.3%). At the other end of the scale were Cyprus, Sweden and Norway, where more than 35% of people wanted to participate. Although this paper does not aim to explain these differences, it suggests that they may be due to a wide range of factors, which determine how people convert the resources and opportunities they have into aspirations for LLL. Countries have different public policies towards LLL and different traditions in this area. Thus, it is worth acknowledging that the LLL paradigm is quite new in post-communist countries. For instance, the first National Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Bulgaria, which is among the countries with the lowest level of aspirations for LLL, was adopted in 2008. Despite its adoption, the participation rate in LLL has increased, between 2007 and 2013, by only 0.5%. It points to the acknowledgement of a wider country context, in which the policies operate and which determines their effectiveness. The variety of state welfare regimes where people live (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009) may explain the levels of participation, and also why the levels of aspirations for LLL are so uneven across countries. These are all examples for social conversion factors, which may potentially explain the differences in the level of aspirations for LLL across countries.

The study also shows that the level of aspirations seems to differ according to whether the respondents have already participated in LLL or not. This is in line with Walker's study (2007), which shows that school may open new aspirational possibilities, and expand girls' horizons for action and life. Although here it is not possible to make a distinction by gender, and the analysis is limited only to aspirations regarding LLL, the results suggest that LLL also expands people's horizons for action.

Data analysis reveals that Italy and Greece had the lowest proportion of respondents who had already participated in education but wanted to participate more. At the same time, they are among the countries with the highest rate of people who did not participate in education or training but wanted to. It is well-known that the higher the level of education, the higher the participation rate in LLL. Furthermore, different studies have shown that the advantages (or disadvantages) in early adulthood continue to influence LLL capability throughout life (Yaqub, 2008; Walker, 2012). However, this controversy questions the quality of the educational or training activities offered in these two countries. At the same time, Cyprus seems to be a high-aspiration country, regardless of whether people participated in any form of LLL in the previous 12 months or not.

As mentioned above, aspirations have a dynamic nature. People may change their aspirations over time. Data show that, despite the growing emphasis on LLL, in 11 of the countries the aspirations of people aged 25-64 to participate in LLL have decreased in the period 2007 to 2011. The most significant decrease is seen in the Czech Republic, Cyprus and Lithuania, but the level of aspirations also decreased in Slovenia, Sweden, Latvia, Bulgaria, Belgium and slightly in Finland, Austria and Greece. However, this decrease seems to differ according to whether people had participated in education in the previous 12 months or not. Thus, in 12 of the countries there was a decrease and only in seven countries we see an increase of aspirations among people who did not participate in education. This increase was very modest and ranged from 0.4% in Hungary to 3.2% in Estonia. However, among respondents who had already participated in some form of education and training, this increase was much more considerable. It occurred in 11 countries and ranged from 0.2% in Poland to 13.6% in Slovakia. Most probably, one of the determinants of this decrease is due to the effects of the economic crisis in 2008. In times of crisis, not only businesses but also individuals may spend less money on education. Nevertheless, it seems that the crisis did not hit the countries in the same way and respectively had uneven effect on people's aspirations towards LLL.

To shed more light on the barriers to the participation in LLL, we explored the obstacles reported by the highest proportion of people in a given country. We looked at the group of people who did not participate in education, although they wanted to and identified three main groups of countries where the highest proportion of people reported that: 1) the cost was too high: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia, 2) family responsibilities: Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Austria and Portugal, and 3) the training conflicted with work or that it was organised at an inconvenient time: Finland, Norway and the United Kingdom. In Sweden, the highest proportion of people reported that health problems hindered their participation in LLL, although they aspired for it.

## Conclusion

The paper has explored the potential of the CA in conceptualizing and understanding LLL as an agency process. Agency is of a crucial importance when we consider forms of education that go beyond the compulsory stage. The study has also focused on the aspirations for LLL, because their raising is perceived as key to enhancing the capabilities of people to access LLL, and because of their agency-unlocking role. Drawing on data from the Adult Education Survey (2007; 2011) for 20 European countries, this paper has identified that there are considerable country differences in the extent to which people aspire for LLL. The data analysis shows that, despite the growing emphasis on LLL, the level of aspirations has decreased in half of the countries. However, we found that this decrease occurs to a greater extent among people who did not participate, but wanted to, than among people who had already participated in some form of education or training in the previous 12 months. This suggests that LLL may be seen also as an agency process. This paper has also shed light on some of the obstacles that hinder participation in LLL across European countries. Overcoming these barriers requires using different measures but also paying attention to problems in other spheres of life such as income, family and health.

The main limitation of this study is that it relied on data only at aggregate level. Thus, it was not possible to identify whether there are within-country differences in the aspirations towards LLL among groups of people with different educational level, gender and labour market status. It is a matter of further studies to use data at individual level, which would allow the employment of more sophisticated statistical analyses and thus enable us to take into account both the context features in which aspirations for LLL are shaped and the individual characteristics which may influence these aspirations. This will help us to explain the country differences which we have identified in the present study.

Overall, the present study suggests that making LLL a reality demands widening its participation as a matter of enhancing the agency of people, which has not been achieved for many European countries so far. It would require raising the people's aspirations and overcoming the obstacles that hinder participation in LLL, which are context-specific and affected by the economic situation of the country people live in, but also widening the capabilities that people gain through LLL, which may go beyond the purely economic gains.

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