

Education, education, education



From social change to gender mainstreaming, cultural awareness to personal fulfilment, **Mary Honeyball** believes that lifelong learning can promote far-reaching societal benefits

The notion of lifelong learning may sound a little obscure initially. But given further thought it quickly becomes clear how it can enrich people's lives, or help them to fulfil the career ambitions they've always dreamed of but never thought they'd be able to reach. There is a need for investment in resources and structures which support the concept of lifelong learning. And the European Union has gone some way to encourage this with the Grundtvig programme, described as "practical learning for adults".

Launched in 2000, the Grundtvig programme focuses on the teaching and study needs of learners taking adult and 'alternative' education courses. It aims to help develop the adult education sector, as well as enable more people to undertake learning experiences, notably in other European countries. Those countries which embrace the idea of lifelong learning have higher levels of participation. The UK has good levels, for example, as does Finland where a greater emphasis is placed on non-formal learning. A study by Tom Schiller and David Watson shows the UK is comparatively good in its adoption of lifelong learning programmes, because of its flexibility in formal programmes.

Essentially, lifelong learning is good for those who wish to acquire new skills. But it has far reaching social benefits too, including happiness, general social cohesion and inclusion. This isn't to say that there aren't problems with the reach of lifelong

learning. The most notable of these is the demographic challenge and the balance of opportunity. Much of the focus of lifelong learning, and where a great proportion of the money is spent, is focused on continuing the education of 18- to 25-year-olds. And this is something which needs to be addressed.

However, it isn't just formal learning programmes which enrich our lives – non-formal education programmes play an important role as well. Research by Finnish academics which looked at the idea of informal learning in Finland produced some staggering results.

It found that some 50 per cent of the Finnish adult population was recorded as participating in some way in adult education in 2006. The research showed that the desire to learn was less tied up with advancing career opportunities, and the far greater motivation was simply the enthusiasm and desire to continue to learn.

The commission mentions lifelong learning in the EU 2020 strategy, and statistics show that some 80 million people have low or basic skills, but lifelong learning benefits mostly the more educated. The commission believes that by 2020, 16 million more jobs will require high qualifications, while the demand for low skills will drop by 12 million jobs. Achieving longer working lives will also require the possibility to acquire and develop new skills throughout the lifetime.

Lifelong learning is good for personal fulfilment, this is true but it can have greater societal effects and produce social change and active citizenship, gender mainstreaming and cultural awareness. These are all positive things which the culture committee is fully supportive of. ★

"Lifelong learning is good for personal fulfilment"

Mary Honeyball is a member of parliament's culture and education committee