

The Social Value of Community-Based Adult Education in Limerick City

Research commissioned by
LCEN, LCAES & Limerick Regeneration Agencies
November 2011

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Acknowledgements

The completion of this research would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of many people. We would especially like to thank the research steering group for all of the assistance that they gave us throughout the process.

Most importantly we wish to thank those who agreed to participate in this research, as without their generosity and input this research would not have been possible. In particular we wish to acknowledge the input of the adult learners themselves. We hope that this report has done justice to your views and experiences.

list of acronyms



AEIGS	Adult Education Information and Guidance Service
CE	Community Employment (FAS scheme)
CLVEC	City of Limerick Vocational Education Committee
DES	Department of Education and Skills
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
HSE	Health Service Executive
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
LCAES	Limerick City Adult Education Service
LCEN	Limerick Community Education Network
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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foreword

Community-based adult education has been an integral part of life in Limerick City for many years located in people's homes, school halls, community centres and even in the local pub when no other space was available. The community base describes more than the physical setting of adult learning. It reflects a strong sense of local ownership of the learning process, tremendous pride in the educational achievements of people from the local community and increasingly a determination to defend a form of learning which flourishes outside of the formal education sector.

People here in the City are often surprised at the number of people participating in adult learning in communities, over 3000 in both 2010 and 2011. It often operates below the radar, thriving among small groups of adults with a common interest in developing a new hobby, meeting new people, improving their reading and writing or gaining other skills.

For policy makers this report highlights a fundamental outcome of community-based adult education and one which is increasingly at risk of being overshadowed by macro-economics, namely the social benefit that people get from being involved in a class/course in their local community. There is a wealth of anecdotal information from learners and others about how adult education has opened up new worlds for people, marked a turning point in their lives or simply given them a reason to get up in the morning. Throughout this research project our primary focus was on hearing learners voices. Learners were given an opportunity to say what community-based education means to them. In doing so they spoke not just about their own personal development but that of their families and their local communities. Those voices are audible throughout the report telling stories that are deeply personal, sometimes uncomfortable but always uplifting.

This report is the culmination of a year-long process which was guided by a Steering Group including Lorraine Markham, Anita Martin and Mary Flannery, Limerick City AES, Yvonne Lane, City of Learning, Jim Prior, Limerick Community Education Network, Helen Fitzgerald, Paul Partnership and Declan Blackett, Limerick Regeneration. At one of our first meetings we talked about our expectations and what each of us was bringing to the research project. While these individual skills and understanding were important to the enterprise, it was our shared belief in the social value of community-based adult education and the importance of bringing it to a wider audience that motivated us to see it through to fruition.

On behalf of the steering group I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who contributed to this project. I would also like to thank the research team for their hard work and commitment to the process.



Mary Flannery
Community Education Facilitator
Limerick City Adult Education Service

Executive Summary

The social impact that learning brings to people cannot and should not be ignored. Mindful of this, the Limerick Community Education Network (LCEN), Limerick Adult Education Service (LCAES), and the Limerick Regeneration Agencies commissioned a team of researchers to undertake a qualitative study into the social value of community-based adult education in Limerick City. Qualitative research has been argued to yield a deeper appreciation for the nuances of adult learning emphasising *“the enormous complexity of relationships between learning, life events and the outcomes of learning”* (Feinstein and Hammond 2004, p.201). In particular, this research aimed to explore the social outcomes of learning for individuals, their families, communities and wider society.

Research context

It has been well established that Limerick City is the second most disadvantaged local authority in Ireland with high proportions of unemployment and lone parent households (McCafferty and O’Keeffe 2009). Much of the research literature has also documented the prevalence of low educational attainment in the city. Yet it is noteworthy that Limerick City has a strong history in relation to the promotion of learning. In 2009, the Limerick City of Learning document ‘A Collaborative Framework for Progress’ was officially launched. Its mission was “to ensure individuals, families, businesses, along with providers of learning opportunities work effectively and creatively together - to ensure people in Limerick City have equal access to learning opportunities and are supported to make the most of those opportunities to enable them to achieve their full potential” (2009, p.1).

The majority of adult education classes are funded through statutory agencies, such as the City of Limerick VEC, the HSE and FAS. Other agencies, based in the community but funded in



part by the state, also contribute to the availability of adult education classes in Limerick City. As a result, a partnership approach is taken in relation to the provision and funding of adult education in Limerick City. In 2010, 271 courses were offered in community education across 59 locations with participation rates increasing by 8% on 2009 levels (LCAES Annual Report 2010, pp.12-14).

The current, post-Celtic Tiger focus on the creation of a knowledge society recognises the fact that Ireland needs knowledgeable citizens to create cohesive and inclusive processes and institutions. Adult and community education have thus become the vehicles for applying this theory to practice, and are explicit in both their commitment to meeting the needs of adult learners and to addressing educational and social disadvantage. Principles that underpin community based education are grounded in the belief that each and every community member has a right to be involved in the identification and resolution of individual and community needs, through a process of participative democracy (Galbraith 1990) and flexible problem-solving (DES 2000). The application of such principles to practice is held to deliver a multitude of social benefits, such as the development of human, social, and identity capital in adult learners (as collective resources for the entire community).

In Schullers' (2004b) triangular model of the benefits of learning, learning is conceptualised as a process where people increase their human, social or identity capital, and then "benefit from the returns on the investment in the shape of better health, stronger social networks, enhanced family life" etc (Schuller 2004b, p.12). All of these forms of capital (Human, Social, and Identity) are interconnected in terms of the benefits they offer the learner, and should be seen as a platform for social inclusion and social cohesion. The literature suggests numerous ways of classifying and measuring the social benefits of learning, including:



- Development of learner capabilities: For example, increased confidence and self-esteem, improved communication skills, increased knowledge, skills and competencies, improved levels of motivation, increased awareness of educational and life opportunities and choices, critical thinking skills (Kenny p.11-12).
- Educational benefits offer people a new experience of learning (Bowman, Burden and Konrad 2000, p.2) which in turn allows people to develop an "educational self-concept" (Bowman, Burden and Konrad 2000, p.2).
- Support network benefits - within the class, in communities and families (Bowman, Burden and Konrad 2000, p.2)
- Positive mental health
- Critical consciousness - higher self and community awareness, increased use of community resources and facilities
- Community engagement and volunteering
- Intergenerational benefit - participation in community based education helps to address inter-generational educational disadvantage (Kenny p.12)

- Opportunities for social inclusion. Participants in this research were adamant that being involved in the course was a reason to 'get out of bed' and resulted in them forging new friendships
- Opportunities for social integration - people have a fixed concept of community.

Research Methods

This research undertook a qualitative study of the social value of community-based adult education in Limerick City. In particular, the research sought to explore the social outcomes of learning for individuals, their families, communities and wider society. Ethical Approval was received from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Limerick, approval reference number **FAHSS_REC327**.



Working in collaboration with the research steering group a purposive selection strategy was deployed in order to convene and run a series of twenty-five focus groups, with current and previous adult learners, funders of adult education and those who have responsibility for supporting community-based adult education in Limerick City. These focus group interviews were conducted in quiet, community locations, and recorded. All of the focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes and endeavoured to obtain the participants' views on their experiences of community-based adult education and the subsequent benefits they identified as a result of such participation. In order to determine the existence and extent of such impact, interviews with learners sought information about what motivated participants to take part in adult education; the types of challenges participants face when taking part in a course; the strengths and weaknesses of the programmes; whether the programmes empower participants; any benefits that participants received from the courses; whether respondents take an active part in their communities; family members' perspectives; and the challenges facing the provision of community based adult education.



Ten in-depth individual interviews were also conducted with current and past adult learners to examine and expand on issues emerging from the focus groups. The interviews varied in length but on average they lasted for approximately forty five minutes.

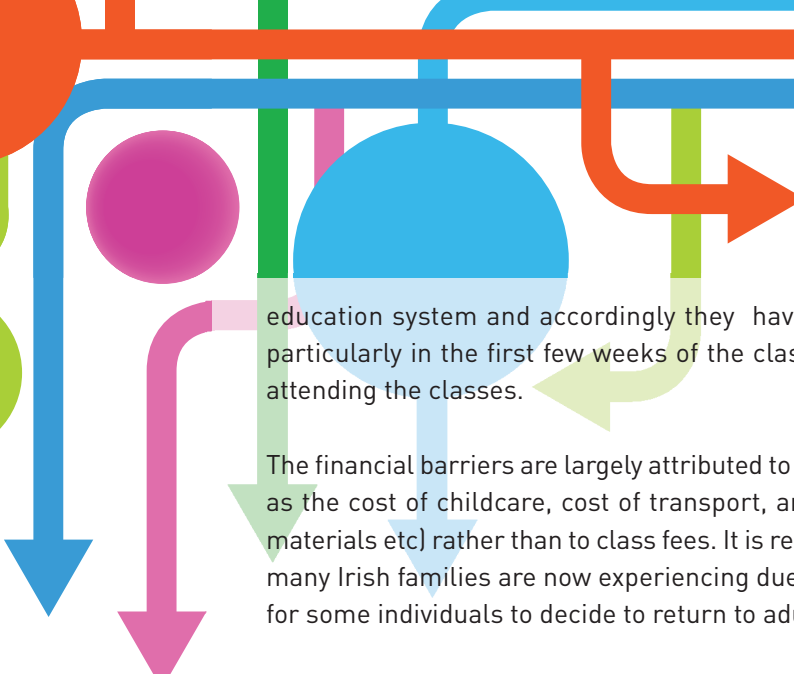
As a result of this sampling strategy a total of one hundred and forty five individuals participated in the research. As our sample represented numerous positions (state agencies, funders, tutors, a range of different types of adult learner etc) it meant that we could produce a comprehensive understanding of the topic we were examining.

The data collection generated a considerable amount of information, consisting of audio recordings, which were transcribed, and notes which were taken at some of the interviews. Our analysis was based on data reduction and interpretation of that data.

Key Research Findings

- The social benefits of participation in community-based adult education are multi-tiered, benefiting the individual learner, their families and the wider community.
- Participation in community-based adult education classes impacted on the individual adult learner in the following ways:
 - Recognition of lifelong learning and second chance education
 - The personal development of the adult learner - notable increases in self-confidence, and motivation
 - Educational progression
 - Improved social capital
 - Improved mental health
 - Increased identity capital
- The nature of such impacts has also led to significant benefits being experienced in the adult learners' families. These benefits include:
 - Positive influences on children's education, in terms of both providing practical support with homework and by serving as a positive role-model for the children
 - Transmission of a new view of education in the context of a lifelong process
 - Improved family communication
 - Affirmative changes in family dynamics
- Additionally, the research data clearly shows how participation in community-based adult education courses impacts on the learners' communities. These impacts are documented as:
 - Increasing awareness of social issues within the community
 - Enabling participation in adult education
 - Integrating learners into the community
 - Community engagement and giving back to the community
 - Increased use of community facilities and resources
- The benefits accruing to the wider society as a result of participation in community-based adult education include:
 - Opportunities for cross-community communication and understanding
 - Active citizenship
 - The development of positive/empowered relationships with social institutions
 - Participation in national associations and networks
 - Intergenerational awareness
- It is important to note that amidst these benefits there are two main barriers which may either prevent or delay people from accessing community education. These barriers are identified as:
 - Fear of participation in education as a result of previous educational experiences, and
 - Financial considerations

It is very encouraging to find that the adult education tutors are extremely aware of the fear that some adult learners have as a result of previous negative experiences in the formal



education system and accordingly they have made a conscious effort to address this fear, particularly in the first few weeks of the class, in order to reassure learners and keep them attending the classes.

The financial barriers are largely attributed to the costs associated with attending classes (such as the cost of childcare, cost of transport, and cost of materials e.g. craft material, cooking materials etc) rather than to class fees. It is reasonable to assume that the financial burden that many Irish families are now experiencing due to our economic difficulties may make it harder for some individuals to decide to return to adult education.

Conclusions

Human capital theory proposes that increased investment in education brings automatic economic benefits for society as a whole and also for the individuals concerned (see Drudy and Lynch 1993, p.31; Allen 2000, p.91). In addition, and in the context of this research, we would argue that investment in adult education brings a vast array of social benefits to the individuals concerned, to their families and communities, and ultimately to wider society. These social benefits include increased levels of human and social capital, which actively contribute to social inclusion.

While the social aspect of learning is often overlooked, this research clearly demonstrates that social contact is proving to be extremely important, particularly for those adult learners who are living alone. Increased opportunities to socialise and the new friendships that are emerging as a result of participating in classes are expanding people's social networks. This is hugely significant given that Beem (1999) argues that it is only when interaction between and across groups begins that people are enabled to build communities.

Findings from this research indicate that community-based adult education is having a positive impact on learners in overcoming their negative experiences of previous formal education. The most overwhelming evidence of this is rooted in the personal development of each individual learner, which has increased their self-esteem and confidence levels. The relationship between participation in community based adult education and secondary benefits for learners' children is very apparent in the data. In terms of social benefits this relationship extends beyond mere parent-child interactions, it has contributed to effective communication with school teachers and principals and to formal learning being supported in the home environment.

The fact that the majority of the parents (that we spoke to) participating in community-based adult education were women is of huge importance given that Kelleghan et al. (1995) have shown that:

"the characteristics of the mother, including schooling experience seem particularly important in structuring the educational environment of the home, and research findings indicate that children of poorly educated mothers do not do as well at school and leave school earlier, than children of better educated mothers. Women appear to play a key role in enhancing not just the life chances of individual women, but also their children, and therefore [women's education] complements and strengthens other initiatives such as 'Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage'".

¹ A flagship initiative launched by the Department of Education, seeking to use education to combat poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

In that context our findings should be seen as very strong evidence of the social value of community based adult education in Limerick City.


The fact that adult education is located within a local community, drawing from as well as strengthening existing community structures would appear to be augmenting people's awareness of, involvement in and commitment to their local community. In addition, attending community-based adult education classes seems to be increasing people's likelihood of volunteering in their community. Moreover, there is a strong link between being an adult learner and becoming more active in local community centres. These should be seen as highly significant impacts in terms of strengthening capacity within a community. In addition to these significant findings, it is apparent that there are a number of social benefits for society in general which have emerged.



Ultimately, the findings of this study reflect Schullers' (2004b) triangular model of the benefits of learning, whereby learning is seen as a process where people build up human, social or identity capital, which results in "better (mental) health, stronger social networks, enhanced family life" (Schuller 2004b, p.12), decision making skills, problem solving skills, leadership skills, improved communication skills (McNair 2002, pp.240-241), self-esteem, and self-motivation (Emler and Frazer 1999 cited in Feinstein and Hammond 2004, p.201). In conclusion, this research study has found that community-based adult education in Limerick City is having major positive impacts on individuals, their families, their community, and wider society.

Recommendations

- This research has revealed that community-based adult education is not just a means to an economic end. It also offers a number of positive social impacts for individuals, families, communities and Irish society as a whole, thereby creating social capital, community cohesion and social inclusion. Such findings reveal the significance of all forms of adult learning in the community and as a result it is vital that community-based adult education is actively supported at national, regional and local policy level.
- There was a notable connection between a sense of defined territory and the familiarity attached to being part of it. This sense of being on familiar ground proved to alleviate much of the initial trepidation that learners felt before they began classes. The research finds that learners derived a great sense of comfort and confidence from the familiarity of the community. Accordingly it is a recommendation of this research that adult education classes are located within communities in so far as possible in order to address both logistical and emotional issues which learners may experience. To this end it is also recommended that the community-based organ-



isations that are currently providing facilities, resources and co-ordination for community-based adult education continue to be supported and funded.

- The ability of community-based adult education to create a sense of community among and for its participants needs greater acknowledgement. More specifically, in the context of the Limerick Regeneration Programme, we would recommend that community-based adult educational opportunities should be recognised as playing an important part in the process of regeneration, offering a more sustainable approach to strengthening community bonds, community development and change than perhaps had originally been envisaged.
- While the research explored the social benefits of learning in community-based adult education it must be stressed that we should not underestimate the personal difficulties that adult learners face when they consider returning to adult education. Even when this learning is not accredited, the research participants expressed a certain fear of the 'new' and the 'unknown' and had moments of self-doubt prior to participating, as well as in the first weeks of their course. It is a recommendation of this research that supports (for example peer support and the learner 'buddy' system) continue to be put in place to ensure that potential adult learners can overcome such difficulties and participate in their course of choice.
- An issue which emerged during this research is the cost of attending education generally. In particular, the availability and prohibitive cost of childcare needs to be recognised. Moreover while there is a drive to include young unemployed adult males in particular in adult education classes, we need to be mindful of the fact that many of these may be expected to participate in adult courses despite the fact that as young adults they are on reduced social welfare payments. It is recommended that measures be put in place to properly resource community-based adult education in order to lessen the impact of these additional costs that adult learners may encounter.
- The social impact that has been identified in this research must be seen as a valid mainstream element of education in Ireland. Accordingly it is a recommendation of this study that information (e.g. 'impact statements') on the social value of adult education should be included in any reports that the LCAES returns to the Department of Education and Skills. If such details are not mainstreamed, named and reported on, then ultimately they will not be considered to be a valuable outcome of educational participation or indeed be funded accordingly.
- At the time of writing, Ireland finds itself in difficult economic circumstances which are impacting strongly on communities. We believe therefore that there is a need for more joined-up government / public administration. This research clearly documents the wider social benefits of community-based adult education which impacts positively on areas that are under the remit of the HSE and the Department of Social Protection for example. As such it is a recommendation of this study that these organisations (and others) in addition to the Department of Education and Skills should combine efforts in order to adequately resource the provision of community-based adult education.

- There are clearly beneficial mental health outcomes being experienced by participants in community-based adult education classes. In line with our call for more joined-up government / public administration it is recommended that organisations such as the HSE should continue to promote and support such programmes of learning. While the resources would come from the HSE budget, there are long-term savings to be made in terms of the impact on mental health which we believe at the very least may prove to be resource neutral.



- LCAES should be commended for its piloting and continued support of the Adult Learners Forum as a representative voice of adult learners in Limerick City. The research presented here documents the personal, social and civic impact it has had on its voluntary members. AONTAS is currently working in conjunction with some members of this Learners Forum to help bring about Learner Forums nationwide. The findings presented here should be seen as further evidence for the expansion of this initiative.
- It is a recommendation of this study that all tutors continue to consult with learners about how the classes will run. Given the previous negative experiences that many of our respondents had in the formal education system this engagement by the tutors was seen as giving the adult learners a sense of ownership over the classes that they were enrolling in.
- The promotion of community-based adult education programmes including their social benefits should be undertaken in a more targeted capacity. Many learners in this study highlighted the fact that community notice boards are only effective once classes begin and people are using community centres. Consideration therefore should be given to having advertising materials (such as posters and leaflets) planned, designed and delivered by learners through their various classes in order to ensure that (a) potential learners hear directly from current learners about the benefits of classes thus increasing the possibility of traditionally hard-to-reach groups being targeted in a more effective manner and (b) learners have the opportunity to practically use and display their new-found skills.



An abstract graphic on a black background featuring several large, overlapping circles in green, pink, orange, and light green. A network of thick, curved arrows in various colors (green, pink, blue, orange) flows through the composition. Several smaller circular icons are scattered throughout: a blue circle with a white building icon at the top left, a green circle with a white document icon to the right of the center, a blue circle with a white pencil writing on a document icon below the center, an orange circle with two white interlocking gears below the center, and a green circle with two white stylized human figures at the bottom. Faint, dashed grey arrows point in various directions across the background.

The Social Value of Community-Based Adult Education in Limerick City

Introduction

Internationally, over the last number of decades education has become increasingly tied to labour market needs. For many years in Ireland there has been a strong policy focus on developing a 'smart economy' as a means to meet the demands of changing labour markets and economic forces, with considerable resources being devoted to quantifying and illustrating the economic benefits of education, and in particular, adult education. Yet education also produces inclusion in ways other than through the economic return that people obtain on their qualifications. Education also can and should, strive to enable empowerment and emancipation (Inglis 1997).

The social impact that learning brings to people is something that needs to be documented. In 2011, over 3,000 individuals participated in community-based adult education courses in Limerick City funded primarily through Limerick City Adult Education Service. Anecdotal information from learners, tutors, and local community organisations in Limerick support the view that community-based adult education produces much broader positive outcomes for individuals and wider society than has previously been documented.

Mindful of this, the Limerick Community Education Network (LCEN), Limerick City Adult Education Service (LCAES), and the Limerick Regeneration Agencies commissioned a team of researchers to undertake a qualitative study into the social value of community-based adult education in Limerick City. In particular, the research aimed to explore the social outcomes of learning for individuals, their families, communities and wider society.

In addition this research

- Reviews the current literature on the social value of community-based adult education.
- Documents participants' motivations for participating on their course of choice.
- Documents participants' perspectives on the role of the course(s) they have undertaken.
- Documents the types of challenges participants face when participating on these courses.
- Makes recommendations to enhance the impact of community-based adult education in Limerick.
- Aims to enhance the profile of community-based adult education as a creator of social value within communities.

Research definitions

Adult education includes "any form of education that takes place after an adult has completed his or her uninterrupted full time education" (Lunch and Drudy 1993, p.264). Adult education in Ireland is highly diverse with distinct historical contexts and ideologies underpinning its development. For the purposes of this study there are several different types of adult education which we detail below.

Further education refers to the area of adult education where adult learning is accredited (primarily) through FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) serving the overall aim of offering access, transfer and progression to adult learners. Courses are delivered in FETAC quality-approved centres and assessed according to FETAC guidelines. Private educational providers, some secondary schools, and Colleges of Further Education in addition to community organisations offer FETAC accredited courses. An example of further education is the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) which provides flexible, customised, accredited training for people who need to update their existing work-related skills, or acquire new skills, to enhance their employ-

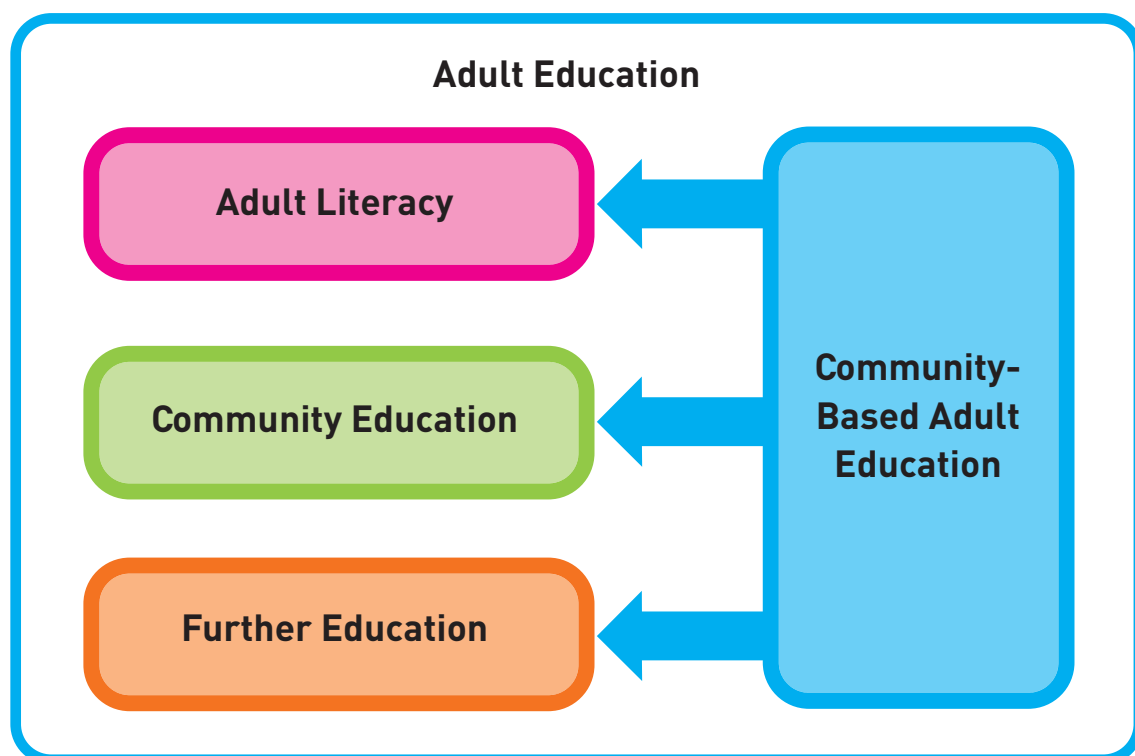
ability and improve their life prospects. Its intent is to make further education provision more accessible and to prioritise individuals and groups with less than upper secondary education.

Community education is a non-formal adult education approach, which is dedicated to the development of critical social awareness in its participants. Its overall aim is to bring about social change in communities through collaboration and collective action. The ethos of community education is rooted in principles of empowerment, equality and inclusiveness.

Adult literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change. The teaching of literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy, and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. It includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions.

Community-based adult education refers to the range of adult education classes which participants can avail of in their local community – in local community centres, Family Resource Centres, and local primary or secondary schools, as well as designated adult learning centres. Community-based adult education includes the different types of adult education as described above and illustrated in Fig. 1 below.

Figure 1: Overview of Adult Education and Community-Based Adult Education



This study focuses on the social impact of community-based adult education, that is, the community-based elements of further education, literacy and community education.

Chapter I

Community-based Adult Education in Limerick: A Profile

It has been well established that Limerick City is the second most disadvantaged local authority in Ireland² with high proportions of unemployment and lone parent households (McCafferty and O’Keeffe 2009 cited in City of Limerick VEC Education Plan 2011-2015, p.13). Much of the literature has also documented the prevalence of low educational attainment in the city. The Fitzgerald Report (2007, p.6) for example, remarked that there is significant educational disadvantage in specific estates and in Limerick City as a whole. In the 2006 Census the early school leavers rate for the city was 21%, above the national average of 18% (McCafferty and O’Keeffe 2009 cited in City of Limerick VEC Education Plan 2011-2015, p.13; see also Barrett, Walker and O’Leary 2008, p.3). In addition, the majority of city inhabitants had an upper secondary or technical qualification (27.41%) as their highest level of education (McCafferty and O’Keeffe 2009 cited in City of Limerick VEC Education Plan 2011-2015, p.14).

Third-level attainment figures also reveal an interesting trend. Humphreys (2010) illustrates an increase in third level participation in Limerick City, from 12% in 1991 to 24% in 2006. However, this increase in third level education remained below the national average of 30% in 2006. A closer examination of the data in figure 2 also reveals how disproportionate this local increase in third level participation rates is across certain estates in Limerick City. We see that some of the housing estates included in Limerick’s Regeneration project have very low levels of participation in third level education relative to the City and national average.

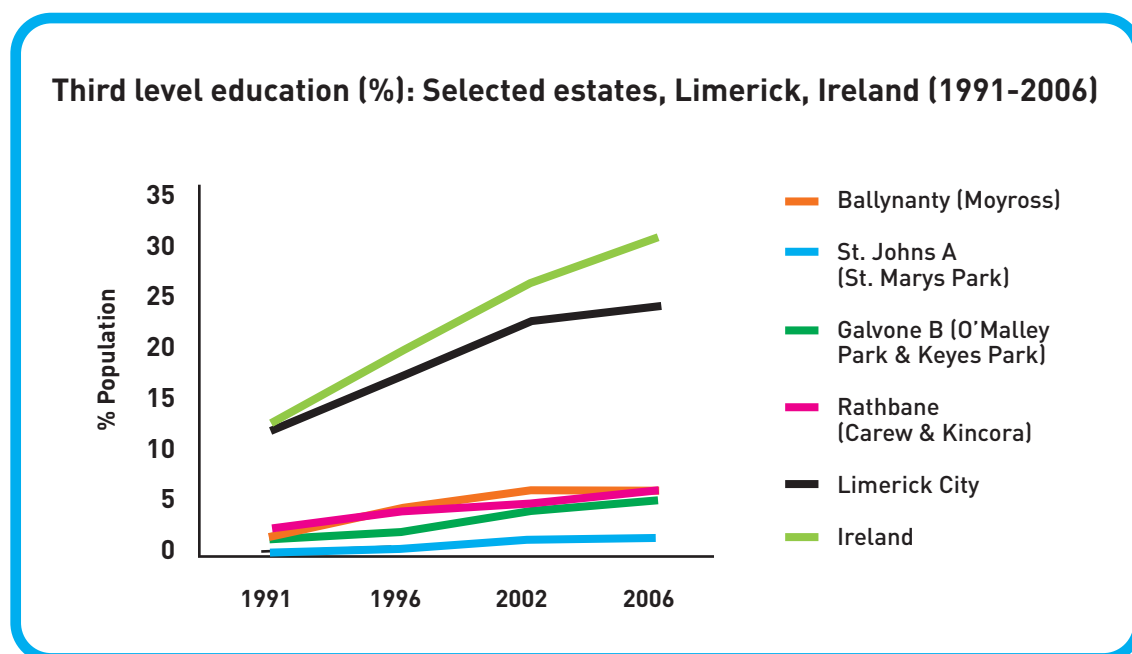


Figure 2
(Source: Humphreys 2010)

It is noteworthy that Limerick City has a strong history in relation to the promotion of learning. For instance, Limerick was the first city to have an area-based development partnership established

² The first most disadvantaged local authority is Donegal (Donegal Community Education Forum, 2008)

in Ireland (Dillon 2009, p.3). In 2003, A City of Learning Steering Group was established with the explicit aim of developing Limerick as a “vibrant successful city, which recognises and strives to meet the learning needs of all of its citizens” (Dillon 2009, p.3). This steering group recognised the benefits that learning offers to individuals as well as communities - acting as a resource to increase levels of social capital, encourage active citizenship and multiculturalism and challenge inequality and social exclusion (Dillon 2009, p.3). In 2009, the Limerick City of Learning document ‘A Collaborative Framework for Progress’ was officially launched. Its mission was “to ensure individuals, families, businesses, along with providers of learning opportunities work effectively and creatively together - to ensure people in Limerick City have equal access to learning opportunities and are supported to make the most of those opportunities to enable them to achieve their full potential” (2009, p.1).

Having provided a context, the remainder of this chapter will now sketch the educational opportunities for lifelong learning in Limerick City. It will document the key stakeholders in adult education, the numbers of people attending community based adult education classes, the range of courses, and locations where people can avail of community based adult education in Limerick City.

Providers of adult education in Limerick City

Adult education in Limerick City is directly provided and/or supported by a mix of statutory, community and voluntary organisations including;

Statutory

- City of Limerick VEC - Limerick City Adult Education Service
 - Limerick College of Further Education
- University of Limerick
- Mary Immaculate College
- FAS
- Health Service Executive
- RAPID
- Limerick Regeneration Agency

Local Development Agencies

- Paul Partnership

Community and voluntary

- Community-based organisation and centres
- Limerick Community Education Network (LCEN): this is an umbrella group for statutory and voluntary providers of community-based education in the Limerick City area. (See Appendix for LCEN membership)
- Limerick Community Connect. this is an independent network, consisting of community and statutory representatives, which seeks to address the issue of digital exclusion in Limerick City
- Limerick Resource Centre for the Unemployed
- Limerick City CDP
- Family Resource Centres

Other

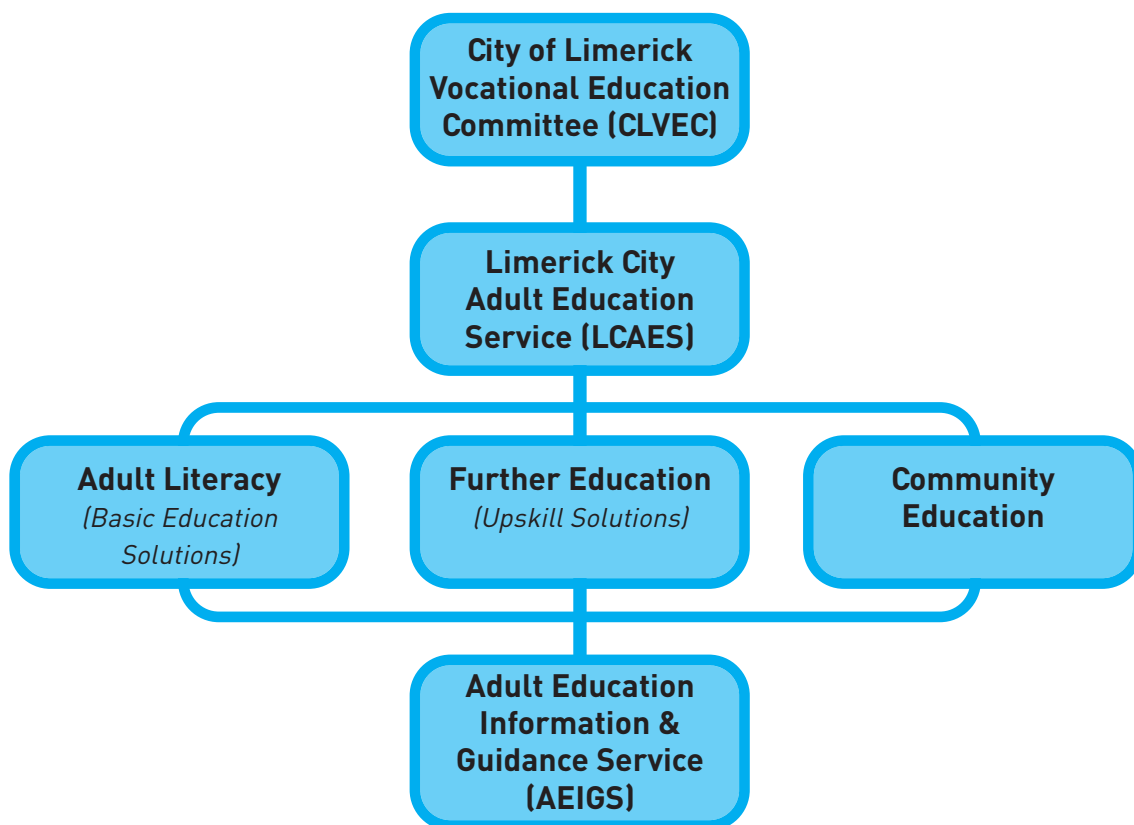
- Shannon Consortium Downtown Centre
- Limerick City Sports Partnership
- Private education providers

A leading provider of community based adult education in Limerick City is the City of Limerick VEC (CLVEC), which is a Public Service Education organisation providing a range of learning opportunities and education support services to the residents of Limerick City. Its mission statement is “to respond to the Lifelong Learning needs of the people of Limerick, by providing quality Education and Training programmes and support services” (City of Limerick VEC Education Plan 2011-2015 2010).

Limerick City Adult Education Service (LCAES) is the section of City of Limerick VEC that provides for the learning opportunities of youth and adults returning to education. It offers full and part time courses in two city centre locations. Moreover, the LCAES works in collaboration with community-based groups to provide community-based adult education in 59 locations across the city. For a full list of community-based adult education venues please consult Appendix I.

The LCAES provides adult education across three distinct and integrated programmes; Community Education, Basic Education Solutions and Upskill Solutions. The Adult Education Information and Guidance Service provide guidance support to the three programmes.

Figure 3: Services provided by the LCAES



The LCAES incorporates four different services:

1. **Community Education:** This service provides a wide variety of non-formal learning options such as active citizenship, arts and crafts, creative writing/drama, alternative health and wellbeing, personal development and basic IT. The option for accreditation is available but currently provision is mainly uncertified, as this supports the requirements of communities. Local groups play a key role in engaging learners, liaising with LCAES tutors and organising courses, which are located exclusively in community facilities across Limerick City.
2. **Basic Education Solutions: (Adult Literacy Service).** This service provides literacy, numeracy, computer skills, family learning, confidence building, the Junior Certificate subjects, and non-certified classes to adults who have low educational attainment. Some courses can be accredited through FETAC level 1 to 3 certificates. Adult literacy work starts with the needs and interests of the individuals. It is concerned with personal development and building confidence as well as technical skills.
3. **Upskill Solutions:** This is a BTEI initiative which offers flexible, part-time FETAC accredited learning programmes for people who have gained less than an upper second level education. These courses can be work-related or designed to up-skill the participant and include learning options such as healthcare and care of the older person, retail skills, exercise and fitness, communications and creative media.
4. **Adult Education Information and Guidance Service:** this support service provides impartial adult education advice and information to help learners make informed choices around their educational options.

It is important to acknowledge the distinct remits of each programme and how they complement each other in the provision of comprehensive learning and support programmes in community locations. Many learners for example simultaneously access courses in Community Education and Basic Education Solutions or Up-skill Solutions and Community Education. All of the above programmes / services are provided in community-based settings. Participants in this research on the social value of community-based adult education were drawn from these programmes.

Participation in community-based adult education in Limerick City

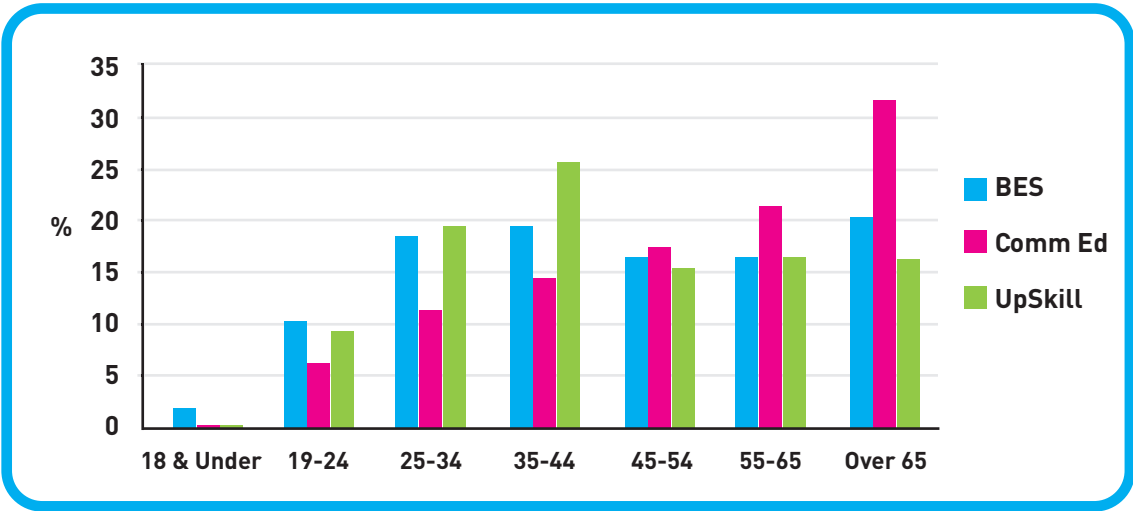
Figure 4 shows the number of people who attended courses in 2010 in community-based settings under Community Education, Basic Education Solutions and Upskill Solutions.

Figure 4: Distribution of community-based adult learners in Limerick City in 2010 across LCAES community-based provision

Community Education Service	Basic Education Solutions	Upskill Programme
1875	1013	535

Regarding the age profile of learners in LCAES community-based programmes Figure 5 below reflects a broad spectrum of age groups across the three learning programmes. However Upskill Solutions has a higher percentage of people in the 35-44 age bracket while Community Education sees a higher percentage of learners over 65. It would appear that there is a consistent age profile of learners who attend the Basic Education Solutions classes.

Figure 5: Age profile of participants in LCAES community-based programmes



The gender divide of participants appears to be quite marked, with men being under-represented in the learners enrolled overall, as shown in Figure 6 below. This has been a feature of adult education nationally (see for example Owens, 2000).

Figure 6: Gender breakdown of learners participating in adult education in Limerick City

Location	Male participants	Female participants
Limerick City Centre	269	697
Limerick Northside	183	939
Limerick Southside	278	1057
TOTAL	730	2693

[Source: LCAES 2010a, 2010b, 2010c]

This chapter has provided an overview of the community-based adult education landscape in Limerick city. It would appear that the provision of community-based education offers a significant platform for lifelong learning to the inhabitants of Limerick City.

Chapter 2

Review of literature: Community-based Adult Education

“Education is not only about developing economic productivity but also has wider implications for the lives of individuals, families and society. Although the existence of the wider benefits of education has been argued since the time of Ancient Greece, empirical evidence to support that argument in a modern context is limited and there are not clear conceptual frameworks for clarifying both the wider outcomes of education and the mechanisms by which education may impact on such outcomes”

(Flint & Hughes 2008).

The history of adult education in Ireland firmly locates its origins within the critical model of adult education. This activist ethos was apparent throughout the 1980s with many adult education initiatives being set up by women’s groups and groups supporting the unemployed. Since then the adult education sector has expanded in size and structure. The first policy document on the area of adult education was the White Paper ‘*Charting our Education*’ (Department of Science and Education 1995 cited in Grummell 2007, p.186). This document acknowledged that the adult education sector had been fragmented and delivered in an ad hoc manner up until that time (DES 1995 cited in Grummell 2007, p.186). It was not until the publication of the first Green Paper on Adult Education in 1998 that adult education was formally recognised by the state, which defined it as “all systematic learning by adults, which contributes to their development as individuals and as members of the community and of society; apart from full-time instruction by persons as part of their uninterrupted initial education and training” (DES 1998 quoted in Grummell 2007, p.186). Moreover, in the White Paper on Adult Education (DES 2000 cited in Grummell 2007, p.187) the concept of adult education was expanded to include “aspects of further and third level education, continuing education and training, community education, and other systematic learning by adults, both formal and informal”. As a result, adult education was defined as “systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training” (DES 2000 quoted in McNamara and Mulcahy 2006, p.42). Furthermore, six areas for specialist attention were established: “consciousness raising, citizenship, cohesion, competitiveness, cultural development and community development” (DES 2000 cited in Grummell 2007, p.187).

In that context, the Donegal Community Education Forum (2008) outlines the four main characteristics of the community education model in Ireland as being the lived experience of the learner as the starting point; that it is responsive to disadvantage and social exclusion; that it operates at an individual, community and political level; and that the community group delivers community education. Kavanagh’s (2007) framework for community education expands these characteristics to include group work (as opposed to individual learning) as a central tenet. Principles that underpin community education are grounded in the belief that each and every community member has a right to be involved in the identification and resolution of individual and community needs, through a process of participative democracy (Galbraith 1990) and flexible problem-solving (DES 2000). The application of such principles to practice is held to deliver a multitude of social benefits, such as increased self-reliance and empowerment, greater experience of the social aspect of learning and the generation of social capital (as collective resources for the entire community). These social benefits are dealt with in detail later in this chapter.

At its most basic, community-based adult education represents “a movement for education to go out into the community, rather than the community coming to it” (Lynch 1997 cited in Share et al., 2007, p.208). In this respect, adult education is a multi-locational educational system, being carried out in a wide variety of contexts - schools, community settings, universities, workplaces and leisure contexts (Strain 1997 cited in Grummell 2007, p.192, Edwards et al., 1996 cited in Grummell 2007, p.193). This approach is very apparent when examining the provision of adult education in Limerick City (see previous chapter).

Adult education and social inclusion

Clancy (2001, p.17) argues that education’s fundamental role in ensuring social inclusion is related to the role that it plays in the process of status attainment and reward configuration in our society, with higher levels of educational attainment being associated with declining prospects of unemployment. In 1970, UNESCO helped popularise an apparently broader understanding of education: ‘lifelong learning’, presenting education as an integral part of people’s life experiences pervading all stages and areas of their lives (Grummell 2007, p.185; Department of Education and Science 1998, p.7). The decision to pursue educational investment in people throughout their lives is linked with social cohesion, with the socially excluded understood as lacking appropriate education. Therefore investment in education is seen as fulfilling “both an economic agenda and a social agenda combining economic efficiency with social justice... This hope of combining social justice and economic success within a knowledge economy has become a common aspiration across European countries and their education systems” (Considine and Dukelow 2009, pp.297-298).

Over the last number of decades education in Ireland has become increasingly tied to labour market needs and there has been a strong policy focus on developing a ‘smart economy’ as a means to meet the demands of changing labour markets and economic forces. The current, post-Celtic Tiger focus on the creation of a knowledge society recognises the fact that Ireland needs knowledgeable citizens to create cohesive and inclusive processes and institutions. Adult and community education have thus become the vehicles for applying this theory to practice, and are explicit in both their commitment to meeting the needs of adult learners and to addressing educational and social disadvantage.

There has in the past been a strong conceptualisation of adult education as being non-accredited, leisure based learning and consequently it was / is seen by some as “a luxury and voluntary pursuit” (Bell 1996 cited in Grummell 2007, p.192). Indeed, Wickham (1998 cited in Share et al. 2007, p.203) criticised Ireland’s educational performance because the links between education and industry were underdeveloped, though such views reflect “a rather narrow view of education in Ireland” (Share et al. 2007, p.203). It is crucial to note that education produces inclusion in ways other than through the economic return that people obtain from their credentials. Indeed, when adult learners are asked to consider their motivations for learning, a range of personal and economic reasons emerge (see Cedefop 2003, p.19). Irish research suggests four main reasons why people participate in adult education – “social involvement and contact, acquisition of specific knowledge and skills, general self-improvement and a means of assessing ones potential” (Slowey 1987 cited in Share et al. 2007, p.208), while other learners use adult education as a means of improving their literacy skills (Aontas 1986 cited in Lynch and Drudy 1993, p.265). In that context it is crucial to note that education also can, and should, strive to enable empowerment - working

within the system - and emancipation - trying to change the system (Inglis 1997), particularly for disadvantaged groups participating in it. In Ireland an emancipatory approach to education has been expressed by Ó Súilleabháin who suggested that “the essence of education is ... the search for a personal identity which brings individual autonomy within a community structure” (Ó Súilleabháin 1986, p.91 cited in Drudy and Lynch 1993, p.29).

Considering the disparate age profile of adult learners, community-based adult education is informed by different teaching methodologies to other educational systems, catering for diverse types of learning - formal and non-formal learning – “educative, experiential and informal learning” (Sargant 1991; Klapper and Copley 1985; cited in Grummell 2007, p.183) that can be achieved in the adult education learning context. In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1986) Freire argues that people are oppressed by broad economic, social and political forces and, subsequently, they must be enabled to develop a critical awareness of the world around them and their relationship to it in order to become empowered. Connolly (1999) contends that community education is founded on these Freirean principles, in so far as it challenges power relations and situates education as the focal point of social change. Community education is further characterised by the fact that it connects with hard-to-reach groups, e.g. immigrant populations, early school-leavers, people with language and literacy difficulties and people who are isolated (by virtue of geographical relocation, recent unemployment, etc).

The benefits of learning

It is generally difficult to document the benefits of learning. In the first instance, most of the research on education is input or process focused, at the expense of an equal consideration for the outcomes of learning (Schuller 2004a, p.4). This lack of theoretical and substantive guidance is compounded by the fact that creating or defining a benefit is an incredibly arbitrary task. What could count as a benefit to one person might not register as a benefit for others (Schuller 2004a, p.7). Furthermore, benefits can be considered either direct or indirect (Schuller 2004a, p.6), impacting on the individual learner or beyond them (Schuller 2004b, p.7), as well as being immediate, medium or long term in their effect (Feinstein and Sabates 2008, p.56-57). They can also be specific in scope (whereby one particular class had a particular benefit for its participant) or the benefits could be “multiple and complex, with a learning episode combining other factors to lead to several different outcomes” (Schuller 2004b, p.12-13). This also leads to the situation in which benefits can cluster, where different benefits impact and interact with each other and cannot be easily distinguished from one another (Schuller 2004b, p.14). In this regard, benefits are not only singular in nature but can be multidimensional (Schuller 2004a, p. 7). Consequently, it can be difficult to create a classification of benefits of learning.

The way in which research has been conducted on the benefits of learning also has an impact on our understanding of these benefits. There has been a preference to study the economic benefits of learning. This can be attributed to the fact that the economic benefits of learning can be relatively easy to measure (e.g. Blundell, Dearden and Meghir 1996, Feinstein, Galvido-Reuda and Vignoles 2004 cited in Feinstein and Sabates 2008, p.50). Economic benefits can be observed through a variety of different indicators – for example employability, income levels and occupation (Carnoy 2000, Blondard et al., 2002 cited in Schuller 2004a, p.3), its impact on the rate of social mobility (OECD 1998 cited in Schuller 2004a, p.3), increased labour force participation rates for women (Jenkins et al., 2003, Jenkins 2006 cited in Feinstein and Sabates 2008, p.50), and an increased

probability of re-entering the labour market after periods of unemployment (Jenkins et al., 2002 cited in Feinstein and Hammond 2004, p.201). Health impacts can also be found where education has encouraged people to adopt healthier lifestyles especially in the area of smoking and exercise (Feinstein and Hammond 2004 cited in Feinstein and Sabates 2008, p.50). Existing quantitative research reveals that education has a direct impact on people's health and well being, with people with more education more likely to live longer and in more healthy environments (e.g. West 1996, McGivney 2002, McMahon 1999, Ferriet et al 2003 cited in Schuller 2004a, p.4). However, this type of research is not without its dissenters. Feinstein and Hammond (2004, p.201) for example report that quantitative research conducted on this issue has been restricted by "the use of crude indicators of the learning experience such as years of schooling or highest qualification attained".

The social benefits of community-based adult education

This research project openly interrogates and challenges the absolute focus on 'economic definitions of lifelong learning' (Tedder and Biesta 2009, p.76) that have come to prominence in recent years. As a result, it aims to explore the social benefits of learning. Qualitative research into the benefits of learning has revealed more of an insight into the psychological and social benefits (Hammond 2002a, 2002b, 2003 cited in Feinstein and Hammond 2004, p.201, Feinstein and Hammond 2004, p.201). Such a research approach has been argued to yield a deeper appreciation for the nuances of adult learning emphasising ***"the enormous complexity of relationships between learning, life events and the outcomes of learning"*** (Feinstein and Hammond 2004, p.201).

In order to consider the social benefits of community based adult education we first need to explain what we mean by social benefits. At their most basic understanding social benefits can be defined as "all non-material benefits that accrue to society" (Descy 2006, p.165; see also Feinstein and Sabates 2008, p.57). Descy (2006) adds an important distinction between 'ordinary' social benefits and macro-social benefits. Macro-social benefits are defined as the type of benefits that are diffused across society, and do not advantage one group or class at the expense of others (Descy 2006, p.165). These include: "social cohesion, social capital, income equality, trust in institutions or democracy, reduction in crime, of poverty etc" (Descy 2006, p.165).

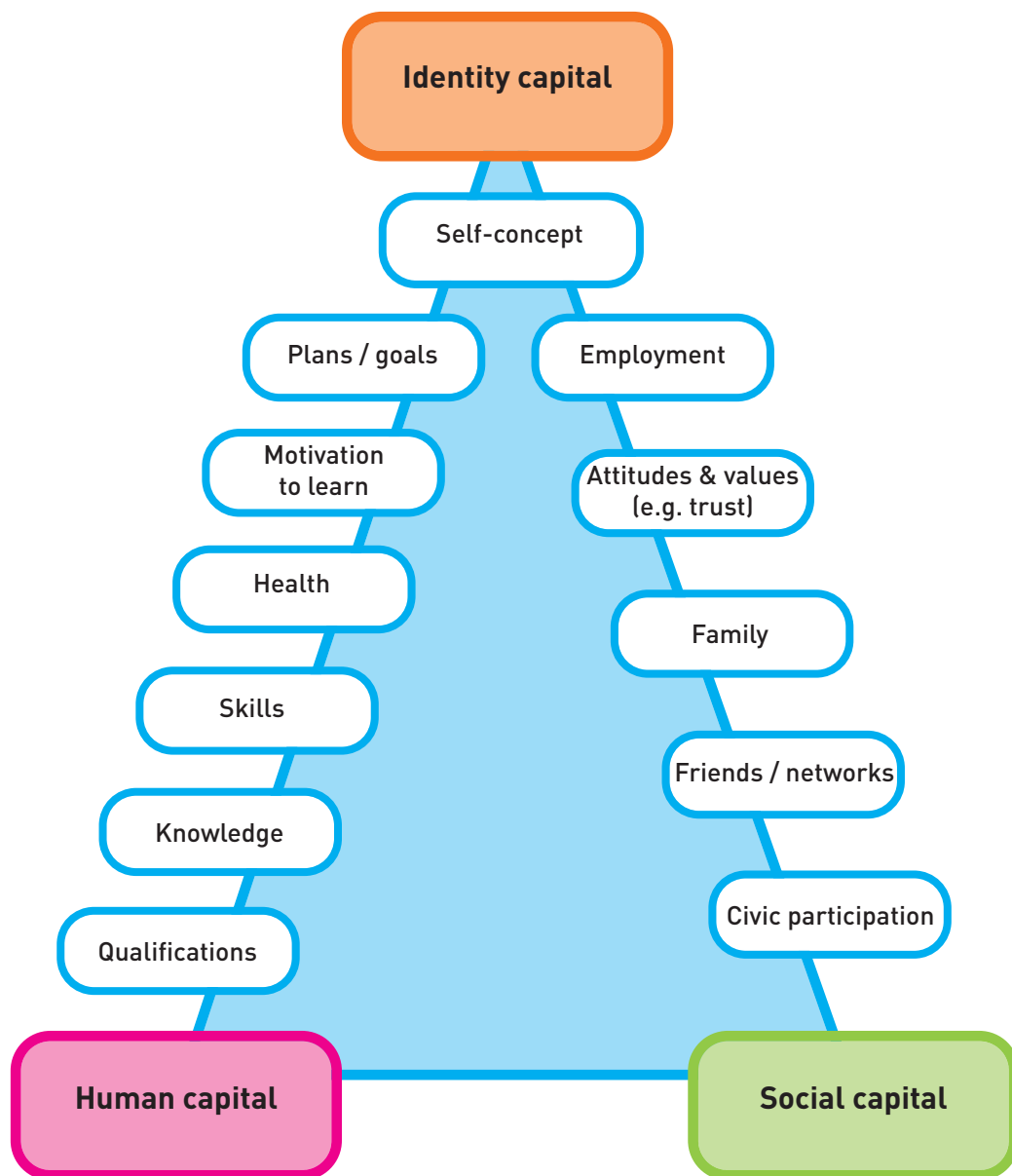
Remarkably, very little theoretical and empirical work has been conducted on the non-economic benefits of learning (Schuller 2004b, p.19; Feinstein and Sabates 2008, p.50). This can be due to the fact that it can take time for people to recognise in themselves the personal and social changes they have experienced (McNair 2002, p.243; Banks et al. 1992; Ball et al. 2000; Reay et al. 2005; Hodgkinson et al. 1996; Hodgkinson et al. 2007; Evans 2002; Hughes 2002; Fuller 2006; Colley 2006; cited in Ecclestone 2004, p.13). If formal education is characterised by the traditional three R's, - reading, writing and arithmetic - then 'second chance' learning (a term often applied to community-based adult education) could be defined by an alternative set of three - redundancy, recognition and regeneration (Walters 2000), where the learner engages in a transformative process, beginning at a point of deficit, becoming aware of their situation and how it can be changed and eventually reaching a point of empowerment and self-reliance (McNair 2002, p.232). At its most macro level, "community education fosters interdependence and leads towards educational and community practices that have the potential to impact people on a global scale" (Villani and Atkins 2000, p.121).

Research into the wider social benefits of learning originally developed from a narrow base, concerned with the numbers of people returning to second level education and its impact on the number of years people spent in education (e.g. Behrman and Stacey 1997 cited in Feinstein and Howard 2004, note 1, p.218). However, with the advent of the concept of social capital there has been renewed interest in this issue and a broadening of our conceptualisation of the wider benefits of learning. Research has shown there is a link between social capital, human capital and learning (see Coleman 1988, Falk and Kilpatrick 2000, Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998, Schuller and Field, 1998, OECD 2001a cited in Balatti and Falk 2002, pp. 283-284). However, the exact nature of these inter-relationships and how it generates social value is still a matter of some debate.

In Schullers' (2004b) triangular model of the benefits of learning (see Figure 7), learning is conceptualised as "a process whereby people build up - consciously or not - their assets in the shape of human, social or identity capital, and then benefit from the returns on the investment in the shape of better health, stronger social networks, enhanced family life and so on" (Schuller 2004b, p.12). Accordingly, various benefits of learning emerge from three core positions - human capital, social capital and identity capital. All of these forms of capital (Human, Social, and Identity) are interconnected in terms of the benefits they offer the learner

Human capital "refers to the knowledge and skills possessed by individuals, which enables them to function effectively in economic and social life" (Schuller 2004b, p.14). Attending community-based adult education classes can result in improved economic outcomes, which subsequently allows learners to secure better paid employment (McNair 2002, p.235). Further personal dividends which are often acquired, are a wider range of skills and attributes, that the adult learner gets from the learning process - such as decision making skills, problem solving skills, leadership skills and improved communication skills (McNair 2002, pp.240-241). Additionally, Human Capital includes personal development benefits such as self-esteem, self-motivation and resilience, as well as cognitive benefits such as better problem solving skills, life planning skills, and challenging negative attitudes or racism (Emler and Frazer 1999 cited in Feinstein and Hammond 2004, p.201). The development of such a knowledge and skills base can also yield benefits in terms of helping to create a positive orientation towards learning. As a result participating in community based adult education can help promote lifelong learning (Falk, Balatti and Golding 2000; Feinstein and Hammond 2004, pp.201-202). Finally, in terms of human capital, research has indicated that learning yields a positive health outcome for learners (see Stacey 1988). This positive health benefit relates to both physical as well as emotional health and well being (e.g. Campbell and Mzaidume 2001 cited in Feinstein and Hammond 2004, p.202).

Figure 7: The triangular model of the benefits of learning.



Source: [Schuller 2004b, p.12].

There are many definitions of social capital. Robert Putnam (1993 quoted in Bullen 2011) defines it as “features of social life - networks, norms and trust - that enable more participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives... Social capital in short, refers to social connections”. In the area of education, social capital focuses on the “identifiable social relationships” that defines education, such as the tutor / participant relationships, and class participants’ relationships. Equally, it attends to “the role of norms and values in the motivation to learn, as well as in the acquisition of skills” (Field and Schuller 1997 quoted in Balatti and Falk 2002, p. 284).

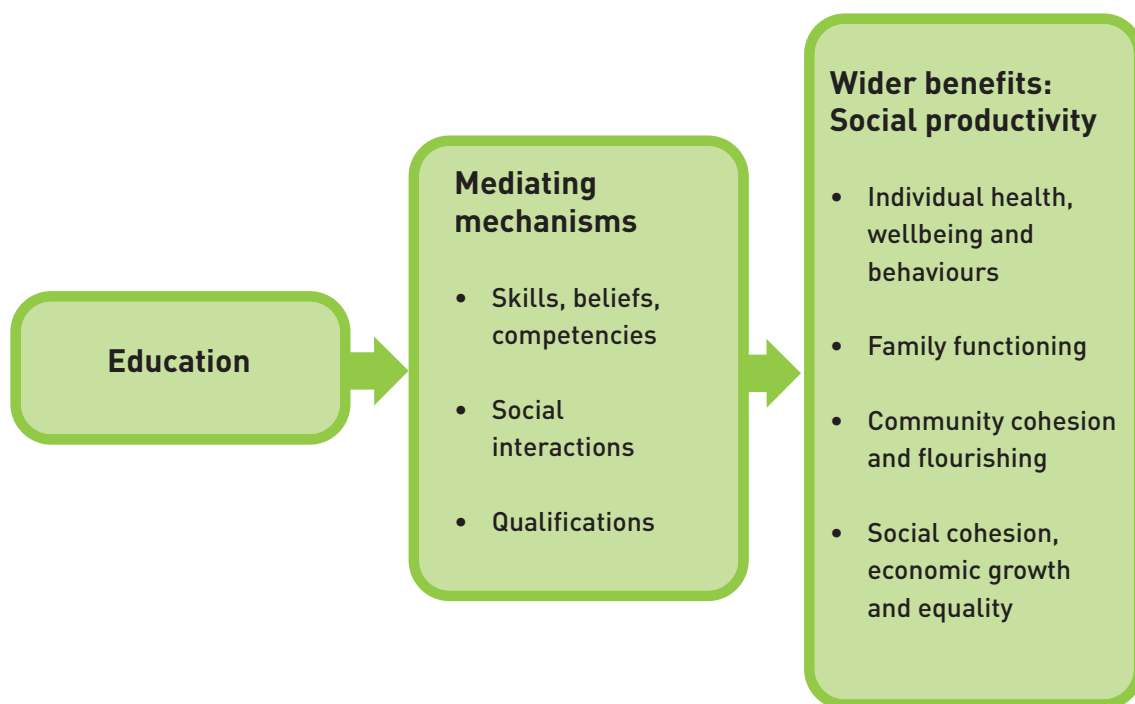
Every member of a community experiences that community differently. The reason they have a different connection with their community is very much influenced by the types of social networks and resources that they have access to and use regularly (Jack and Gill 2003, pp.9-10). Social capital, as already mentioned, “refers to the networks and norms which enable people to contribute effectively to common goals” (Putnam 2000 cited in Schuller 2004b, p.17) including “the relationships that exist between individuals or groups of individuals” (Schuller 2004b, p.18). In essence, the concept of social capital raises the issue that if a person doesn’t feel like they belong to their community, if they feel like they cannot trust their neighbours, or if they sense that they cannot rely on them or the services available in their community, then it will have a negative consequence not only on the inhabitants and the services available there but also on the community as a whole. However, if we build on individual personal resources or human capital, we will in turn strengthen the social capital currently available within, as well as for, the community.

Community-based adult education is a service / resource which can help build such social capital for a community, as well as for individual learners. The group / class itself can provide support for the learners and this mutually supportive environment can enhance the learning potential for all participants (McNair 2002, p.241). The “collective outcomes” (McNair 2002, p.241) include a better understanding of the process of change and social awareness (McNair 2002, p.241; Fleming 2004, p.5). Moreover, taking part in a community education class can present its participants with an opportunity to create as well as sustain a social support network for themselves. The classes act as a social outlet, an opportunity for social integration, a sense of camaraderie, and a source of social support. Community-based education achieves this by “calling on existing networks” and by ‘helping to create new networks (Falk, Balatti and Golding 2000). In these ways we can see how participating in community-based education can benefit the local community through the development of social capital (Balatti and Falk 2002, p.281; Feinstein and Howard 2004). Other social capital benefits can include the ways in which community education heightens a sense of community through the combined processes of recognition and regeneration. In this respect, the fact that community education is located within a local community, drawing from as well as strengthening existing community structures, means that community education can augment people’s awareness of, involvement in, and commitment to their local communities. This social benefit relates to the development of “critical consciousness”. Critical consciousness can be defined as “the stage at which connections are made with the way in which the structures of society discriminate, reaching into people’s being, shaping their lives in prejudiced ways” (Ledwith 2007 cited in Slevin 2009, p.52) in order that the individual concerned may then do something to address these inequalities.

Finally, identity capital refers to “the characteristics of the individual that define his or her outlook and self-image” (Schuller 2004b, p.20). This can include “socially visible” aspects such as qualifications as well as “intangible assets” (Human Capital) such as self-esteem, self-confidence and critical thinking skills (Côté and Levene 2002 cited in Schuller 2004b, p.20). Participating in community based education can also present participants with an “identity-building” benefit (Falk, Balatti and Golding 2000), which involves a processes whereby adult learners develop a sense of identity from their interactions in the classroom with fellow adult learners, as well as from their interactions with the tutor. A meso-level identity can also emerge where individual learners gain a sense of identity from being associated with a particular group, club or association.

Alternatively, Feinstein and Sabates (2008, p.57) ask us to consider how learning can help with “the sustaining of positive developmental trajectories or the achievement of potential, and the formation and generation of positive life choices”. In this way learning can benefit people in an affirmative way, by either empowering participants or providing them with “capabilities ...to accumulate the assets (of learning) from which the benefits (of learning) in turn flow” (Schuller 2004b, p.12). They also call attention to the way that learning can have a preventive function; preventing aspects of “personal and social dislocation” (Feinstein and Sabates 2008, p.57) such as exclusion, isolation, community breakdown, and anti-social behaviour. More “socially productive” benefits can include: “family functioning”, “community cohesion and flourishing”, “social cohesion, economic growth and equality” (Feinstein and Sabates 2008, p.57), as highlighted in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8: A simple model for the wider benefits of learning



[Source: Figure 2.4 in Feinstein and Sabates 2008, p.57].

To conclude, it is clear from the literature that there are numerous ways of classifying and measuring the social benefits of learning. These include:

- Development of learner capabilities: For example, increased confidence and self-esteem, improved communication skills, increased knowledge, skills and competences, improved levels of motivation, increased awareness of educational and life opportunities and choices, critical thinking skills (Kenny p.11-12).
- Educational benefits offer people a new experience of learning (Bowman, Burden and Konrad 2000, p.2) which in turn allows people to develop an “educational self-concept” (Bowman, Burden and Konrad 2000, p.2).

- Positive mental health
- Support network benefits - within the class, in communities and families (Bowman, Burden and Konrad 2000, p.2)
- Critical consciousness - higher self and community awareness, increased use of community resources and facilities
- Community engagement and volunteering
- Intergenerational benefit - participation in community based education helps to address inter-generational educational disadvantage (Kenny p.12)
- Opportunities for social inclusion - 'get out of bed', forge new friendships.
- Opportunities for social integration - people have fixed concept of community.

Barriers to adult education

Having now seen the many social benefits that participation in adult education can bring, it is important to note the barriers that exist to participation in order that these can be minimised in the future delivery of classes.

The existing literature reveals a number of common barriers to participation in community-based adult education classes. In Ireland, the 1983 Commission on Adult Education (cited in Lynch and Drudy 1993, p.262) highlighted a number of barriers to participation, which were identified as being either informational (a lack of adequate information on sources available), financial (costs incurred by attending adult education) and familial (childcare and family responsibilities) in nature. Twenty years later, Cedefop (2003, p.21) reported that family responsibilities were the main barrier to accessing adult education (21%), followed by work responsibilities (19%) and the perception that adult education and training would take away from other leisure activities (16%).

Other research has highlighted the challenges that are implicit in the process of deciding to pursue adult education and those arising from an individual's transition into learning (Ecclestone 2009, p.9). This transition involves not simply introducing yourself to a new social setting but also invariably impacts on one's sense of self and personal identity (Lam and Pollard 2006 cited in Ecclestone 2009, p.11). Both of these processes can be difficult to negotiate where the fear of the "new" and the "unknown" can present themselves as real obstacles or challenges to adult learning (Ecclestone 2009, p.13). In that context it is important to note the gendered aspect of participation in adult education. National research records show a predominance of women in both accredited and non-accredited learning (Commission for Adult Education 1983 cited in Lynch and Drudy 1993, p.263; King et al 2002 cited in Grummell 2007, p.193). It is argued that the flexible delivery modes associated with community-based adult education, allows it to fit in with the care responsibilities of women and the many competing financial and time pressures they face on a daily basis (King et al 2002 cited in Grummell 2007, p.193). However, working class women encounter added difficulties with accessing adult education because of their lack of money and difficulty with finding affordable childcare (O'Sullivan 1988 cited in Lynch and Drudy 1993, p.263).

Golding et al. (2004 cited in Golding 2009, p.69) took the feminised nature of adult education further and found that many men find adult education - the centres, programmes offered, staff and pedagogies adopted - to be very female dominated. This perception acts as a real deterrent, discouraging some men from taking part in adult education. Furthermore, Golding et al. (2007 cited in Golding 2009, p.65) found that men, especially older men, have a strong interest in

socialising and learning but have different educational preferences. They contend that men prefer to learn in “productive, social and informal contexts” with “a reluctance to be formally taught” (Golding et al 2007 cited in Golding 2009, p.65). This finding has resulted in calls for developing a better understanding of the different motivations, learning styles and learning needs of older men in particular (McGivney 1999a, 1999b, 2004 cited in Golding 2009, p.66).

Conclusions

The purpose of this research is to explore and highlight the social value of learning associated with community based adult education. Such a task is particularly timely considering the ever increasing economic focus on education in Ireland in recent years. The research literature presented in this section supports the broadening of our understanding of learning beyond the market-orientated focus. It requires us to also include personal, local, communal, familial, and social understanding of learning. Overall, it is clear that adult education improves opportunities for personal development; empowerment; social inclusion; and democratic awareness (see Aspin and Chapman 2001 cited in Tedder and Biesta 2009, p.76). The literature presented in this chapter reveals the many social benefits of community-based adult education. These benefits should be seen as a platform for social inclusion and social cohesion through the development of human, social, and identity capital in adult learners.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This research undertook a qualitative study of the social value of community-based adult education in Limerick City. In particular, the research sought to explore the social outcomes of learning for individuals, their families, communities and wider society. In this chapter we outline the methodological approach adopted.

Qualitative research

We chose to employ a qualitative methodology for this study. Creswell (1998, p.15) argues that qualitative research is a way of developing an understanding of social issues, by constructing a multifaceted picture, through the analysis of the participants' comprehensive views on the issues at hand. The qualitative focus of this research is very much in keeping with the participant centred philosophy of community education (Connolly 2004, p.11). Since community education offers us "a forum for listening to the voices of otherwise silenced people" prioritising "a process which valued the stories and enabled the participants to interrogate their own worlds" (Connolly 2004, p.9). This research focuses on a sample of the narratives of adult learners in Limerick City. In order to understand the social benefits of learning we need to focus on the participant's perceptions and conceptualisations of education and the benefits of community based learning. As such, we believed that qualitative research methods would allow for the intensity of interaction between the researchers and participants, which we deemed necessary in order to get to the core of the issues under investigation.

Selection of participants

Most qualitative research is guided by purposive sampling (Lindlof 1995) with the sample chosen to provide conceptual richness. Our sample consisted of individuals who were information rich, and reflected important aspects of our research questions. Working in collaboration with the research steering group a purposive selection strategy was deployed in order to convene and run a series of twenty-five focus groups. Those focus groups are detailed in the following table.

Figure 9: Focus Groups Conducted (x25)

Adult literacy learners (x4)	Adult learners participating in certified courses (x3)
Family members of Adult literacy learners (x1)	Adult learners participating in non-certified courses (x3)
Past learners (x2)	Non-LCAES learners (x2)
Mens Groups (x2)	Learners Forum (x1)
LCAES staff with responsibility for supporting learning provision in community-based settings (x1)	LCEN Community Education Development Workers; and Co-ordinators / Development Workers of community centres hosting adult education classes (x1)
Community-based adult education tutors (x2)	Representatives of funders of adult education in Limerick City (x1)
Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinators (x2)	

These focus group interviews were conducted in quiet, community locations, and recorded. All of the focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes and endeavoured to obtain the participants' views on their experiences of community-based adult education and the benefits identified as a result of such participation. In order to determine the existence and extent of such impact, interviews with learners sought information about previous experience of education; what motivated participants to take part in adult education; the types of challenges participants face when taking part in a course; the strengths and weaknesses of the programmes; whether the programmes empower participants; any benefits that participants received from the courses; whether respondents take an active part in their communities; positive or negative changes in family members / friends participating in adult education; and the challenges facing the provision of community based adult education.

When the participant said something of interest on the key themes, additional questions were asked to guarantee greater understanding of their answers. Gaskell (2000) explains that with appropriate probing and targeted questioning, the researcher can obtain clarification and amplification of interesting points. The flow of ideas and information from the participants was enhanced by being able to listen to each others experience and interact with each other, thus the group interview format facilitated the participants in building on each others ideas through their shared experience (Callahan 1983, cited in Reinhartz 1992, p.223).

Ten in-depth individual interviews were also conducted with current and past adult learners to examine and expand on issues emerging from the focus groups. These interviews were flexible in format and therefore participants talked about what they deemed to be important to them, relative to the topic that we were exploring. This resulted in the interviews varying in length but on average they lasted for approximately forty five minutes.

As a result of this sampling strategy a total of one hundred and forty five individuals participated in the research. As our sample represented numerous positions (state agencies, funders, tutors, a range of different types of adult learner etc) it meant that we could produce a comprehensive understanding of the topic we were examining.

Ethics

Ethical decisions were taken throughout the research process, from conceptualisation and research design, to data collection and analysis, through to the final completion of this report (Edwards and Mauthner 2002, p.19). In making these decisions we had an ethical responsibility to safeguard the interests of the participants and to report our findings truthfully and accurately (Bryman 2004; Mauthner et al. 2002; Seale et al. 2004; Creswell 1998; Flick 2006). Ethical Approval was received from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Limerick, approval reference number **FAHSS_REC 327**.

Informed Consent:

It was necessary and appropriate that reasonably informed consent was obtained from the participants before commencing data collection. Our consent forms included a brief description of the purpose of the participant's involvement. The accompanying information letter ensured in as much as was possible that participation was voluntary. These documents informed the participants of the nature and extent of the research and asked the individual to reflect on whether they wished to participate.

Analysis

The data collection generated a considerable amount of information, consisting of audio recordings, which were transcribed, and notes which were taken at some of the interviews. Therefore our analysis was based on data reduction and interpretation of that data. Once the transcription process was complete we used NVivo software to assist in the management of the data analysis. The software provides a formal structure for coding and storing data. This aids the researcher in developing the analysis and assists in conducting a more thorough interrogation of the data.

Chapter 4

The Social Value of Community-Based Adult Education in Limerick City: Findings

The research findings presented in this chapter are categorised to reflect the sequence of information as it emerged during the interviews with learners; the profile of the learners; the motivating factors for their participation in community-based adult education, and the impact of that participation on themselves, on their families and on their wider communities.

It is clear from the thematic data analysis that there are a number of categories against which we can assess the benefits of participation in community-based adult education. It is important to add the caveat that it is difficult to 'measure' many of these benefits. However, in the context of identifying the most prevalent, our findings indicate that the social benefits of participation in community-based adult education are multi-tiered, benefiting the individual learner, their families and the wider community. On an individual basis there was general consensus that participation in classes resulted in enhanced social and identity capital, in addition to improved mental health and educational progression. The cyclical nature of such impact has led to proportionately significant changes at both familial and community levels; the former manifested in greater involvement and influence on children's education, improved family communication and positive changes in family dynamics; and the latter evidenced through increased awareness of social issues, greater integration into local communities, community engagement and greater use of community facilities.

Learners' background and motivations for participating in community-based adult education

The impact of the recession has seen a proportion of learners made redundant from jobs they had held for many years. Such jobs, largely unskilled, constituted the next step after the departure from formal education. However, unemployment has placed learners in un-chartered territory in terms of having free time, mixing with new people and needing to up-skill. Those learners who came to adult education through Community Employment and Job Initiative schemes saw the classes more in terms of being part of their current 'job' (e.g. the training scheme) rather than as a progression route to other employment. This particular finding within the research is in contrast with that of the Commission on Adult Education, who estimated that 60% of adult learners engage in learning for employment reasons (1983, cited in Lynch and Drudy, 1993:263). What is remarkable about the disparity in findings is that, although thirty years apart, both pieces of research consider adult education during a recession. It would seem that while participation in adult education in the 1980s was financially motivated, the current model is typified more by social stimuli.

The following provides a general overview of what learners were doing immediately prior to beginning community-based adult education classes in Limerick City (it may not be a comprehensive list however as duration of unemployment, retirement and so forth was not sought explicitly during the interviews):

- Community Employment / Jobs Initiative scheme
- Recently unemployed / made redundant (from predominantly unskilled work)
- On disability payments
- Recently retired

- Recently widowed
- Relocated back to Limerick from other parts of Ireland and the UK
- Home-makers

One of the first gauges for understanding the importance or impact of community-based adult education was addressed in the interviews by asking learners about their choice of class or course. The motivation for engagement with community-based adult education stems primarily from a desire for self-improvement and / or the establishment of new social outlets. Where the Eurobarometer Survey (2003) estimated that 31% of learners engaging in adult education do so for personal satisfaction, the percentage within this research project is significantly higher, with the majority of learners seeking general self-betterment and social contact from their participation in classes. The much cited need to “get out of the house”, coupled with an acknowledgement of lost opportunities during their time in the formal education system, indicate that the decision to pursue adult education is a deliberate one that depends on a certain degree of self-reflection.

Awareness of being ‘short-changed’ by the formal education system, though pivotal to the research, should not be seen as the ultimate defining profile of the learners, as to do so would be to work from a deficit model. It would also suggest that the sole purpose of adult education, and the inherent motivation of learners, is to right past wrongs. Rather, their involvement should be seen as progressive – shaped by past experiences but advanced by the quest for self-improvement through learning and a more equal process of socialisation.

In order of frequency, the following factors emerged as the most common justifications offered by learners for their choice of class / course:

- For something to do “Something to get out of bed in the morning for”
- Self development
- Company of other adults / engage in adult conversation
- Ability to earn an income while learning / training (e.g. hairdressing)
- To be able to “get out of the house”
- To acquire knowledge
- Secure employment in the near future
- Better quality of life
- Motivated by personal experience / events – one man almost lost his house as he had been unable to read repeated warning letters from the bank
- Outlet for relaxation / some “down time”
- Because “it’s therapeutic”

There was an apparent distinction between certified and non-certified learners in this particular area – while the above factors relate generally to the non-certified learners, those taking certified classes described their involvement with classes as being an ongoing activity. Those with FETAC accreditation, for example, joined classes to move on the next level of that certification and others were hoping to pursue studies at the University of Limerick. However, it is highly significant that signing up for classes to acquire knowledge or to help in securing a job ranked below personal development and betterment in order of importance for the learners that we spoke with. As one learner emphasised

"Sometimes the subject you pick for the course... that might not end up being the most important thing about the course at all. It could be the people you meet... stuff that has nothing to do with the course" (Adult Learner Southside)

Indeed, it is fair to say that the majority of the responses relate directly to the broader social benefits of this type of education, such as self-improvement and socialisation. In particular, for those engaged in literacy classes, the need to stop feeling embarrassed was the single most influential factor in choosing to begin classes.

Impact on individuals

The following section highlights the reported benefits of participation in community-based adult education at an individual level. Asked to reflect on the role of this form of education in their lives, the learners offered a variety of answers that are reflective of significant progress in terms of self-image, social contact and involvement, and orientation towards learning. These included

- Recognition of lifelong learning and second chance education
- The personal development of the adult learner
- Educational progression
- Improved social capital
- Improved mental health
- Increased identity capital

These impacts are now discussed in detail.

Recognition of the role of lifelong learning

Community based adult education should be seen as having a significant impact on learners in Limerick City, in that it is providing them with 'second chance'³ educational opportunities. It was identified as offering a "second chance for a lot of people who didn't get the same chances in school" (Participant LCAES Focus Group). The provision of such 'second chance' education should be seen as very important given that the vast majority of the learners that we spoke to recalled their experiences of the formal education system without fondness. The sentiment of the overwhelming majority was summed up quite aptly by one man; "horrible" (Adult Learner Northside). Poor educational attainment and a lack of interest in schooling were the most tangible effects of the learners' learning experiences prior to participation in adult education classes. However, their participation in 'second chance' adult education has changed this situation considerably.

"Before I used to think I was really stupid and thick and people were looking down on me. I am so happy to come here, and, I said it the other day, out loud, no more looking down on me. I'm as good as the next person" (Adult Learner Southside - Literacy)

³ 'Second chance' refers to the fact that all learners involved in the research had attended formal education during their childhood years (albeit to varying extents) and their participation in adult education constitutes the first opportunity to avail of education since then.

In addition, a previous failure to understand the lifelong impact of education was identified by a majority of learners in almost half of the focus groups we conducted. These learners spoke candidly about not being interested in education when they were in school because they could not see how it would benefit them.

"Well for me like it wasn't important at the time you know because you were so young you didn't understand what education was, but as soon as you start going looking for work you realise then how important it is" (Adult Learner Northside - Literacy)

That situation has now changed considerably and recognition of what the benefits of lifelong learning are, was addressed repeatedly throughout the interviews with the adult learners. This (new) recognition was attributed to the learners' participation in adult education courses in the city.

The personal development of the adult learner

The previous negative experiences of formal education were generally overridden by the empowerment that arose from participation in adult education. The most overwhelming evidence of the value of community-based adult education on individuals is rooted in the personal development of each individual learner, which has increased their self-esteem and confidence levels, allowing them to "take ownership of their own lives" (Adult Learner Southside). Their willingness to engage with us as researchers was a clear example of this growth in confidence. As one adult learner pointed out, asking her "to talk with strangers six months ago [prior to commencing classes] would have made me sick with worry." The same learner later recalled how she went to her child's school to sort out a long-standing issue with a teacher, again something they would not have felt comfortable doing prior to attending these classes. There were repeated examples of this increased self confidence within every learner focus group.

"I think my confidence has gotten better since I did the course as well. I wouldn't have talked in front of a group of people before or, I wouldn't have really been around a group of people doing learning before. Yeah, definitely it helped my confidence, you know. I wouldn't be frightened of things as much". (Adult Learner Northside)

"It gives you more pride in yourself and I think if you've got more pride in yourself everything is easier. I think that, you know, you can deal with other people. You feel like, you don't feel you're not like, you're not beneath them any more. You feel more equal to everybody, no matter who they are. ... You don't think just because they have more of an education than you have that you're less of a person". (Adult Learner Southside)

Participation in adult education classes has also allowed a significant number of learners to develop much improved communication skills.

"I would never have even dreamt 2 years ago before I joined the learners forum that I would be standing up in front of 140 people giving a presentation and using PowerPoint" (Adult Learner Northside)

The increased level of self confidence evidently translates into a sense of accomplishment, increased energy, and the motivation for learners to continuously better themselves.

"I went into what I call the unknown, I didn't know what I was going into when I started back at school but it's the best thing that happened to me" (Participant Learners Forum).

"No matter what, you're gonna... me personally, if I think I'm going to fail, I'm still going to do it and I'm still going to try because as I say, God loves a trier. So, I'm going to try" (Adult Learner City Centre).

"My mum is dead and my dad's still alive and he couldn't read and write very well when he was younger so I think, you know, he sees I'm not sitting down on my ass at home. I'm actually trying to better myself and do something because I want to work and I want to make myself a better person at the same time". (Adult Learner Northside)

Finally, many learners spoke of the sense of ownership that attending classes gave them and expressed their pride in the fact that they did it themselves, for themselves. This sense of ownership was clearly tied into the fact that all learners felt that their contribution to the class was both appreciated and important:

"...you're bringing life experience and everybody is bringing life experience and it's very enriching" (Adult Learner Northside).

Educational progression

The data suggests that community-based adult education is also having a significant impact on the progression of adult learners in the city. While there is a definite point of difference between accredited and non-accredited learners, with the former group referring to up-skilling and job attainment and the latter concentrating more on looking for new classes to replace those that were due to end (in order to "keep busy"), both groups of learners are united in their aspiration to continue their education and the process of self-improvement. One woman, for example,

responded by vowing that she will “be a graduate sometime” (Participant Past Learners Focus Group). Another spoke of the continuous progression that they have been making in adult education in order to achieve particular goals.

“I have just gone on from one thing to another you know finished one started another and just continued up the steps until I have achieved what I want to achieve in life you know. I mean there are people in the world in their 70’s getting PhD’s and I mean I wouldn’t or anybody else would be no different to that” (Adult Learner Northside)

In that context it is interesting to note that some adult learners are adamant that they are not going to be “pushed along” before they are ready, reflecting another impact of community-based adult education – the empowerment of the learner. This is always framed in terms of the learner becoming comfortable at the level they are at before they would consider progressing on to a higher level (or different area) of education. In contrast, some learners wanted to get back into the labour market immediately, though significantly these individuals expressed an interest in undertaking further adult education classes even if they were successful in finding employment, as highlighted in the following comments by the focus group participant:

Interviewer: “What plans do you have once you finish this particular course?”

Participant: I think I’ll apply for a few more jobs that maybe I wouldn’t have before.

Interviewer: Oh really? So, you think that there’s things that you wouldn’t have considered before in terms of employment?

Participant: Yeah, like even factory jobs you need to, you know, there’s a lot of paperwork. You know you want to make sure that you know that’s not the hardest part of your day like. You know, you do your day’s work and doing the bits of paper shouldn’t be the thing that worries you. So yeah, I think I’ll look for work but even if I did [Find Work] I think maybe that I, maybe something in the evenings here I think I’d like to do as well”. (Adult Learner Northside)

Improved social capital

Evidence gathered from this research strongly suggests that participation in community-based adult education in Limerick City is having a significant impact on increasing the levels of social capital evident in the adult learners to whom we spoke. The social benefits of community-based education for individuals in this regard range from acting as an outlet for socialising to actively working towards social inclusion.

Participation in classes is generating a sense of freedom among the majority of learners that we spoke to. This ranged from the physical freedom of being away from the house and responsibilities for the duration of class time to the more long term, metaphorical liberation from previous obstacles to both learning and socialisation opportunities. One woman described community based adult education as “a real liberal education” that has “set me free” (Adult Learner Northside).

In that context, the socialising aspect of community-based education is a very strong theme in the learners focus group data. Classes are perceived by many of the adult learners as being like a social gathering, rather than a formal classroom setting. While it may often be overlooked, attending a class also gives people an opportunity to “get out” for a few hours every week (Learners Forum Group) or is seen as “something to do” with ones free time. In every single focus group with adult learners we repeatedly heard the phrase “It’s something to get up for in the morning” used. Related to this was recognition of how adult education classes introduced a new social aspect to their lives. This ‘social outlet’ appears to be enabling people to derive a sense of support from each other. Based on feedback from learners, peer support is subdivided into two sections – things in common with fellow learners and active peer support. As per Schullers’ (2004b) triangular model of the benefits of learning both aspects of this peer support are interconnected and overlap.

Responses in the first category ranged from the obvious (“well, none of us could read”) to the broader recognition of all being “in the one boat” (Adult Learner Northside - Literacy). Factors in between included having children and similar daily routines, negative experiences of the formal education system and the desire to get out of the house. All of these commonalities were acknowledged in informal group agreements⁴, which appear to have developed in almost all of the locations throughout the city. The willingness among learners to actively help each other was achieved in class by sharing information or books and outside of class by gestures such as bringing an absentee up to date with anything that they may have missed. Interestingly, the peer group that emerges in community-based adult education can help to inspire adults to progress further with their studies, in the process allowing learners to develop even higher levels of human capital. “There might be 2 or 3 would form a bond and they’d hear about another course and then they’d sign up to that as well” (Participant Tutors Focus Group). Other learners have formed study groups in order to ensure they achieve success in their accredited courses. Finally it is very significant that learners appear to be deriving a sense of pride from other people’s achievements in their classes, as this means that an overly competitive environment (which may not allow the development of such social capital) is unlikely to develop.

⁴ These largely related to respecting learners privacy. For example in most of the focus group discussions, informal agreements on ‘*what happens in class, stays in class*’ were frequently cited.

"I go once a week and there is an elderly lady and she amazes me. She is 90 years of age and for the last 3 months she is doing basic computers, opening it up in Word. Now she has her own email address, she is actually facebooking her grandchildren. She is brilliant" (Participant Learners Forum Focus Group).

Increased identity capital

A stronger sense of identity has emerged among many of our participants. For some, it was explained simply as "having a voice" while others described how they now see and present themselves differently. One of the learners explained that she began the classes by introducing herself as a housewife but now refers to herself as a childcare worker. Other female learners referred to the self satisfaction in realising that they have an identity beyond their parenting role. This is in keeping with Inglis and Bassett's (1988 cited in Lynch and Drudy 1993, p.270) findings that women engage in adult education in order to develop an identity for themselves outside of the domestic role and setting.

Tackling loneliness and improved mental health

A main finding from this study is that participation in community-based adult education in Limerick City is having an impact on tackling loneliness and improving the mental health of some adult learners. This is a very interesting, and indeed, a very significant finding. The classroom setting was noted by approximately half of the learners as a venue where personal issues such as loneliness, the impact of suicide and addiction issues etc., have been discussed with other learners (who have become friends), and in this context the learners appear to be offering tangible supports to one another.

For some, attending class operates as an antidote to loneliness. At times, this sense of loneliness was gendered, manifesting as a response to "empty nest syndrome" (Participant Tutors Focus Group). One tutor explained this in more detail; "One woman said to me there recently I feel as if I have so much more caring in me to give but I have no one to give it to". For such women, the fact that their children have grown up is the incentive to attend classes, and attendance is seen to improve their sense of self worth. Additionally, the data suggests that attending a class can support the grieving process. There were two recently widowed learners in the focus groups; one spoke about having spare time that she was unable to fill until she began classes and the other highlighted how attending classes was the only reason she knew she 'had to get up in the morning'. Thus attending the class contributed to this woman successfully negotiating the difficult grieving process. Other learners that we spoke with told us about experiencing personal problems and crying openly in class, assured by the fact that they were part of a supportive environment, where the need for privacy is acknowledged and respected.

"Well I found in all the different classes I was in that you very quickly... you're not there as an individual you are there as a team, and you really are because the person at either side of you and across the table from you.. you are all interested in getting the same goal and you're going to help each other" (Participant Past Learners Focus Group).

"I think it goes a bit deeper that that you might be sitting beside someone and they would come into the art class full of enthusiasm and within a little while they will start telling you about something that is bothering them or their family circumstances and it give them a little bit of release and then they will go back to painting again" (Adult Learner Northside).

This 'social element' of community-based education would also appear to extend beyond the classroom encounters.

"You know the situation. Does that person need somebody to go down to the house and say, come on, are you coming up?" (Participant LCEN Group).

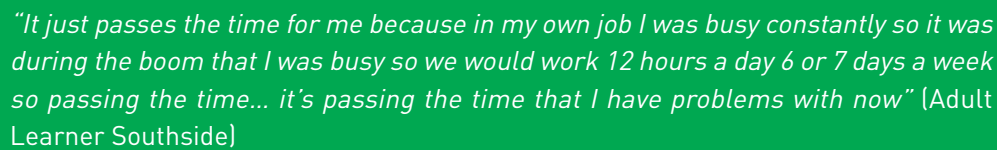
"We are sat down in the classroom for a few hours a day, I think you get to know someone and you'd be helping each other out and things... Ah, you do the odd thing. You might meet for a chat or whatever or things like that, a cup of coffee maybe sometimes" (Adult Learner Northside)

Such social contact is deemed to be extremely important for those participating in these programmes, particularly for those adult learners that live alone.

"I don't think there's anything there for people at the moment and anything that gets you together with other human beings rather than sitting down in your house I think helps" (Adult Learner Northside)

"Well the best thing about attending the course is it's getting out of the house because I live on my own and if I wasn't doing anything like this I would probably just be stuck at home watching the television" (Adult Learner Southside)

"I'm at home on my own now and I take my brother's kids to school I mean I'm up at 7 every morning there is no need for me to be up but if I hadn't anything on I wouldn't get up and I probably wouldn't go out. So you know getting involved in things like that it has brought me a long way" (Adult Learner Northside)



"It just passes the time for me because in my own job I was busy constantly so it was during the boom that I was busy so we would work 12 hours a day 6 or 7 days a week so passing the time... it's passing the time that I have problems with now" (Adult Learner Southside)

The psychological benefits of attending adult education classes were also evidenced in comments such as "you go away with a clearer head" (Adult Learner City Centre) and "the best thing for me was finding out that my brain did still work" (Participant Past Learners Focus Group). Similar type comments were expressed by the majority of the learners. The increased opportunities to socialise and meet new people and the new friendships that have emerged from participating in classes are found to have given many learners "a new lease of life" (Adult Learner Southside). This is highly important because there is a link between the socialisation aspect of classes and improved mental health on the part of learners. As people become more outgoing it helps to "keep people off Prozac" (Participant Home School Community Liaison Group). To illustrate the validity of this important finding one learner spoke about how he was both reclusive and "almost suicidal" after being made redundant, and believes that "the classes brought me out of myself", while another woman described how she was able to come off anti-depressant medication shortly after starting adult education classes. Such findings should be understood as a very significant impact of community adult education.

Just as the social benefits of community-based adult education develop from a domino effect in terms of beginning with the individual and eventually reaching the wider community, the benefits experienced by each individual learner are acquired in a similar manner. What begins as a decision to seek out new avenues of socialisation or as a break from the daily routine ultimately results in the recognition of the impact of lifelong learning, which generally leads to enrolment in further classes. The stages in between involves

- the personal development of the adult learner
- notable increases in self-confidence
- motivation and social contact
- improved mental health
- and educational progression.

This research indicates that, once learners make the decision to 'walk through the door', enhanced human, social, and identity capital are the returns that they receive on their investment.

Impact on families

This research clearly finds that the social benefits of participation in community-based adult education extend far beyond the individual learner to the wider community. The juncture in between these two points is occupied by the families of each learner who also reap significant benefits. These benefits include

- Positive influences on children's education, in terms of both practical support with homework and serving as a positive role-model
- Transmission of a new view of education in the context of a lifelong process
- Improved family communication
- Affirmative changes in family dynamics

The relationship between participation in community-based adult education and secondary benefits for learners' children is very apparent in the data. In terms of social benefits, that relationship extends beyond mere parent-child interactions. From examples provided by learners, it has contributed to effective communication with school teachers and principals and formal learning being supported in the home environment. Parents report being more confident in their dealings with their children not only in terms of helping with their homework, but in other areas also. This changing role in family dynamics and personal relationships is particularly pronounced among literacy learners where people adopt new roles thanks to their literacy training. In this respect, community-based adult education would appear to be playing a part in not only normalising learning in the family, but in turn helping to break the cycle of poverty or generational disadvantage experienced by some families. As such one learner summarised it as "empowering parents to empower their children".

Impacting on children's education

In every focus group with the learners, (grand)children were referred to in the context of being a motivating factor for choosing to commence community-based adult education classes. The notion of helping children with homework emerged in a number of different contexts. For those involved in literacy classes, for example, the fundamental need to be able to read school notes and books was the motivating factor. One mother described how the humiliation of not being able to read a school book to her four year-old son was the moment when she decided to begin literacy classes. This is very much in keeping with Lynch and Drudy's (1993, p.269) claim that women become involved in adult education often in response to the changing educational needs of their family. In particular women avail of adult education, especially literacy skills, in order to enhance their role as "parent-educators" in the family.

Significantly, the majority of our learners identified participation as enabling them to help (grand)children with their homework and to be positive role models for them. A good number of learners described using the requirement to help their children with homework as an opportunity to discuss with their children the importance of education and its impact on their futures. There were many anecdotes provided as to how this emphasis on education was transmitted to children. One woman described how she signed each of her children up at the local library when they reached the age of three in order to encourage a love of reading and learning. Others spoke about asking to see their children's homework in order to ensure that learning was seen as important and valued by their children. Indeed, one of the learners had taken a particularly interesting approach

to overcoming her fears about her children's (and indeed her own) ability to do mathematics, which we document below.

"...the tutor said is there anything else you would like to do because we thought the story sacks⁵ were done to death ... well how about if we done something around Maths ...and it just took off from there. ...We designed games, there were things like snakes and ladders, there was things like ...flash cards and you would show the child and there was like matching games there was colour by numbers... you know this kind of thing" (Adult Learner Southside).

These are extremely important impacts given that learners in almost all of the focus groups had stated that their own disinterest in education (when they were children) was reflective of that of their parents, who had little or no education themselves. One man summarised this as being a "product of its time", where generational patterns became cyclical – a person that has had little or no educational opportunity finds it difficult to see the importance of education and thus does not actively encourage or engage with their own children's education and learning. He pointed out that forty years ago parents "just wanted their children to get by, find paid work and get married". In contrast, the need to ensure that their children had better opportunities than they themselves had was an extremely common theme among the learners we engaged with. There was recognition among a significant number of learners that times have changed and there is a subsequent need for greater educational attainment:

"These days of getting trades are gone, you need something proper" (Adult Learner Northside - Literacy).

A new view of education

In that context the data suggests that the adult learners in the city that we spoke with are now cognisant of the need to demonstrate to children and grandchildren that learning is not something that should "stop at the school gates". This recognition was raised regularly during interviews with learners. Parents described drawing on their own biographies to act as an incentive for their children to do well at school.

"... you would talk to kids more to make sure they went to school cause they would turn out like myself and you don't want that" (Adult Learner Northside - Literacy).

"If you can't have it [education] yourself, make sure your kids have it because your kids, at the end of the day, are the future" (Adult Learner Northside - Literacy)

⁵ A story sack is a bag containing a children's book with relevant supporting materials which are designed to encourage language activities and make reading a more enjoyable experience for the child.

There were repeated references made to the role model aspect of engagement in adult education classes. There were three main components to such a role; that children would see the importance of staying in school now so that they would not have to depend on such classes in later life; that seeing their parents interested in education would influence their own interest; and that learning would be seen as important beyond the boundaries of formal education (i.e. as a lifelong process).

"It has encouraged her children to go to school on the Monday morning because Mammy's going to school for 3 hours" (Participant LCEN Focus Group).

Such benefits may have had humble beginnings, but they have gained huge momentum in the journey towards the most pivotal social benefit, that of breaking the cycle of social marginalisation.

"It broke a cycle in my family, you know the cycle of the mother does not work, does not educate herself, you get to a certain level in education and then you go get a job. Like myself I was working at 15, my mother was working at 13 so I was just repeating the cycle and then I was able to break it and education gave me the ability to break that, to realise that there is more" (Participant Past Learners Focus Group)

Improved family communication

There were many discussions among learners about the link between their participation in community-based adult education classes and improved communication with their children. Such communication was demonstrated through a variety of examples:

- One woman for example sat the Leaving Cert at the same time as her grandson and described how their communication had *"never been better"*, as it gave them something in common as well as providing an opportunity for mutual support and understanding.
- Learners referred to the fact that adult education provided a communication outlet with their grandchildren that they did not have with their own children. One learner for example now enjoys reading to his grand-daughter and enjoys better communication with his son as a result.
- Other learners described how they have a better understanding of the stress and pressure that their children are under as a result of study and exams (since beginning to do homework themselves) and *"aren't as hard on them"* as a result.

In addition to education facilitating communication between learners and their children, there were multiple references to the fact that the classes themselves provide a talking point. One woman for example described how conversations with her children were previously limited to household chores and daily routines but since she had begun classes *"there are actually things to talk about"* now.

New dynamics within the family

Finally, participation in community adult education is creating new forms of support for learners from spouses and family members, leading to a more equal distribution of domestic chores and

responsibilities. In particular for some women, commencing classes was their first time being away from home for decades, thus changing family dynamics. The practical skills attained through classes also affected this dynamic – one man, for example, told how literacy classes meant that he could attend appointments (e.g. with doctors or at the social welfare office) without his wife accompanying him for the first time since they had married. This, in effect, gave him a new sense of independence in addition to freeing up his wife's time. Another woman described how her new found confidence and social life had inspired her husband to look into classes for himself. Inevitably, shifts in family dynamics are not always easy to manage and accordingly were not always reported as being positive. There were a very small number of learners who identified some negative outcomes from participation in adult education classes. These individuals recalled occasions where the new skills acquired by learners can sometimes result in a change in relationship dynamics with family or friends.

"The missus [wife] had always taken care of the bills and all that so she didn't like it one bit after that when I could read them myself and see what was what.....she started to feel that I had taken over her job, I suppose." (Participant Past Learners Focus Group).

However, as the excerpt below illustrates, the growing confidence of learners goes a long way towards managing such transitions.

"Well like lots of young mothers I think I was not assertive and that's what attracted me, it was a basic assertive course and really all I felt I was up to at the time. I remember coming down from it and I was buzzing like because it was so long since I had done something that I enjoyed and about two weeks into it I said something that I was taught to do like say no or whatever... and my Mam was like 'you'd want to give up that thing it don't suit you at all you know'. But that actually made me more determined but I have to say my family changed, everyone changed, because I changed and all for the better" (Participant Past Learners Focus Group)

In summary, the relationship between participation in community based adult education and secondary benefits for learners' children is very apparent in the data. In terms of social benefits, that relationship extends beyond mere parent-child interactions. From the examples provided by learners, the process has contributed to effective communication with school teachers and principals and formal learning being supported in the home environment. Parents report being more confident in their dealings with their children, not only in terms of helping with their homework, but in other areas also. This changing role in family dynamics and personal relationships is particularly pronounced among literacy learners where people adopt new roles thanks to their literacy tuition. In this respect, community-based adult education would appear to be playing a significant part in not only normalising learning in the family, but in turn helping to break the cycle of generational educational disadvantage which has been experienced by some families in the city to date.

Impact on communities

Given the focus of the research and the fact that all focus groups were conducted in community settings, the theme of community was one of the most comprehensive that we encountered. Being a member of a community has a physical, psychological, and social connotation for participants. This sense of community in turn yielded a politicising as well as an educational impact on participants. The interrelated themes of how this sense of community impacted on the social benefits of community-based adult education, and how participating in community based adult education expanded people's sense of and commitment to their local community is explored under the following headings:

- Increasing awareness of social issues within the community
- Enabling participation in adult education
- Integrating learners into the community
- Community engagement and giving back to the community
- Increased use of community facilities and resources

Increasing awareness of social issues within the community

Participants in this study displayed an acute awareness of most of the social issues that affect their communities. Even from the outset of each interview, where experiences of formal education were sought, many stories were prefaced with lines such as “that [early school leaving] was kind of typical of areas like this” or “your address is your biggest problem when you’re trying to get a job”. A variety of other socio-economic issues were raised by learners, examples include young motherhood (“they are only babies having babies themselves”), long term unemployment, crime, drug use and the consequential stigmatisation that is experienced by the entire community. The correlation between class and educational exclusion was identified by many learners, particularly in the context of how opportunities were missed to recognise the talent of people from disadvantaged areas, thus preventing any effective progression: “...You know it’s a waste of talent. There is a lot of waste... here you know. There is a waste of talent in all these communities, definitely in council estates I think” (Participant Mens Group).

However, there does appear to be a greater overall understanding of the role of education in counteracting social marginalisation. The development of such awareness is important given that Freire (1986) argues that people must be enabled to develop a critical awareness of the world around them and their relationship to it in order to become empowered. Significantly some adult learners have taken on roles in the Learner Forum⁶ in the City. Such roles are seen by the learners themselves as having a major benefit for other learners in the community.

“That’s what we are there for if anybody has any problems they know now, now it’s more open since we had our open day and people know we are there and if they have a problem...it could be a basic little thing now that a tutor might say or just do that they would be afraid to open their mouth and ... we are there for them, now they mightn’t come and talk to you, they mightn’t go and talk to [name removed] but they will come and talk to a learner. A learner will talk to a learner that’s what we basically made it out to be ... so now we are in the open they will be knocking at our door” (Participant Learner Forum)

⁶ The Limerick City Adult Learner Forum is a learner-led group that highlights issues for learners on bodies including LCEN and Aontas National Adult Learner Forum. It also organises events local for learners and publishes a newsletter.

In this regard it is also highly significant that some of the adult learners we spoke to have progressed to become voluntary tutors themselves⁷.

"I was supposed to teach them next week or the week after. I'm supposed to teach them how to make cards because the tutor we had couldn't make it so I was asked would I just show them how to make cards. That will be interesting now you know to see how I will get on. It's alright doing them yourself but when your showing someone you know

This is the learner becoming the teacher " (Adult Learner Northside)

Locating courses in the community - enabling participation in adult education

The research findings highlight that community-based adult education is perceived as being "owned by the community" and that it should be kept "within the communities" (Participant LCEN Focus Group) because

"it can lead onto other things like community development and other kinds of progression within the community on a personal level and a social level".

All of the learners were asked whether the delivery of classes in their local communities impacted upon their decision to participate in adult education. For the vast majority of learners, basic logistics meant they felt this was indeed the case. Many, for example, spoke of having no means of transport and as a consequence, having classes within walking distance of their home makes the classes more accessible to these individuals. It also means that childcare arrangements (e.g. school drop-offs and pick-ups) are not adversely affected by attending classes and the lack of a bus fare is not an obstacle to attendance. One woman, for example, explained how the middle of the week is when she "doesn't have a penny so I'd never be able to get the bus fare together to head into town for classes". Another woman mentioned that she would openly say that she could not afford to contribute to the 'tea kitty' in her own community-based class as she is among friends and neighbours with similar financial difficulties, but would rather stay at home and miss a class if she had to "tell other people in other places that I didn't have a shilling in my pocket".

Community as 'territory' / integrating learners into the community

An important issue that arose in the course of the focus group discussions on the benefits of having adult education in community-based settings relates to that of territory; the sense that people belong to "certain parishes" and areas. For some, the range of courses available in the local community could be seen to limit the educational horizon of local residents. However, the sentiment was quite strongly expressed that adults have a bounded sense of community and "won't go outside of their own area" (Participant Tutors Focus Group).

"....if there was a course on here [in another community] people might think am I going into somebody else's area, I would think that way" (Adult Learner Southside).

⁷ Albeit a minor percentage overall in the context of the total number of volunteer tutors

There was a notable connection between this sense of defined territory and the familiarity attached to being part of it, with one learner commenting how “word of mouth is everything and everyone looks out for everyone” (Adult Learner City Centre). This sense of being on familiar ground / territory proved to alleviate much of the initial trepidation that learners felt before they began classes – many knew neighbours, friends or local people already attending classes, and believe that “...once you know someone in there that’s half the battle” (Adult Learner Northside - Literacy). People appear to derive a great sense of comfort and confidence from the familiarity of the community. In that context and considering how central the local community is to adult education the impact of having a welcoming centre where the classes were provided was widely recognised.

“It is the most important piece. It’s not about the class. It’s about how they were welcomed into the building . . . they will keep coming back” (Participant LCAES Focus Group).

It is especially important to note that some of those who participated in adult education courses in Limerick City perceive that their participation has helped them to overcome social dislocation, in turn offering them an opportunity to “reconnect with the community” (Participant Tutors Focus Group). This was found to be particularly the case for older residents.

“You get to know people in the community. You might be living there a long time, you wouldn’t even know them and you wouldn’t know they’re in the same situation as you’d be in. So, yeah, you have a bit of craic and get together and you get to know each other. Even somebody could be your neighbour. You mightn’t know but after this I’d know a few lads a lot better” (Adult Learner Northside)

As a result of the diversity of ages and life experiences of adult learners , those taking part in community-based adult education are afforded the opportunity to mix with a variety of people. In this way, community-based adult education is expanding people’s social horizons / networks and developing stronger levels of social capital within the communities.

“The people I met, the friends I have kept and all that has an impact on my life now you know. You can kind of sit back and you can see it. They were genuinely good people from the community here that I would have befriended and we are still very good friends today and I think if I never got anything else out of it I got that you know and to me that’s a very important part of my life.” (Adult Learner Northside)

Additionally, a number of the learners spoke of how community based adult education classes actually helped them to integrate into the community, which they saw as being extremely important given that they had moved into the community from elsewhere.

"I was born and reared in Moyross like and I left Moyross when I was 19 ... and when I moved here it was very different to what I had been brought up in you know like the stigma that there is now still attached to those areas people around knew that I was from there and some people would just walk past and that was their own thing they didn't know me and that was fine you know but as I got to know more that was around me it built my confidence to say I matter just as much as you do I might not have been born in the same area as you but it doesn't mean that I'm a scumbag you know" (Adult Learner Southside)

"My husband is from the community and he often says to me when we are walking up there like and he says your from another country and you know more people here than I do" (Adult Learner Southside)

A major benefit of community-based adult education which emerged during discussions involving territory, was when learners outlined how moving beyond their own communities for classes, or having people "from outside" join their local classes, exposed them to the fact that they have things in common with those in other locations around the city (e.g. similar biographies). Most highlighted that this was generally only achieved once they had commenced classes in their own community. The subsequent increase in self-confidence and communication skills made inter-community contact easier.

"... you go across communities ...when you're involved in the courses, you start off with your own little group and because of things like award nights you meet people from the Southside and the Northside that you would never normally come across otherwise" (Adult Learner Southside).

In all of these instances community-based adult education is expanding people's social horizons / networks and developing stronger levels of social capital within their communities.

Community engagement / giving back to the community

Tied closely to the social value of community-based adult education is the theme of community engagement. While those attending literacy and accredited learning seemed to focus more on the personal benefits (human capital) of their classes, those participating in non-accredited learning (particularly those involved in crafts and skills-based classes) tended to speak more about their involvement with their local community. For many there was a sense that they strongly believe that their experiences / empowerment / confidence from participating in class filters out to the wider community, with one learner significantly acknowledging that "if you get on you might be able to put something back into the community" (Adult Learner Northside - Literacy).

There were numerous examples of how participation in classes and the subsequent establishment of informal networks (social capital) and increased self-confidence (an element of human capital), led to increased community engagement. The majority of focus groups recalled examples of where

people got involved in activities that were organised by the local community. In these ways, adult learners in Limerick City are offered a number of different opportunities to be active in their local community. These opportunities include the establishment of parent-support groups, nominations on to Boards of Management of local schools and signing up to other locally-run activities such as yoga, and dancing. One learner for example is now involved in running local sports activities as a result of his participation in literacy classes:

"I kind of started after the course really. I suppose like I can read stuff they're giving me a bit better now and it makes me feel a bit more confident". (Adult Learner Northside)

Other community involvement initiatives were motivated out of personal interest or need, such as setting up women and men's supports groups in the city. Similarly, there was recognition by some learners that their own children had nothing in terms of facilities at community level and they collectively established a community play group (inspired by their participation in a positive parenting course).

In addition, attending community-based adult education classes would appear to be increasing people's likelihood of volunteering or at least being more active in their local community centres. We were told of people looking out for elderly neighbours by trying to encourage them to visit local community centres for "a cup of tea and a chat" to safeguard against social isolation. Such views were strongly supported by the learners (across all areas of the city) that we spoke with. One man explained that he volunteers two mornings a week at the local school, showing children how to plant and care for flowers. He believes that the arrangement is mutually beneficial as the children learn something new and he has an opportunity to "give back" to the community. Others spoke about volunteering at local sports days, or delivering leaflets to advertise adult education classes. This is an extremely important finding given that in general, community-based adult education classes are advertised via booklets that are distributed free of charge into every home in the locality. Many learners explained that their initial knowledge of community-based adult education classes was from a leaflet that was dropped through their door, or from posters in their child's school. The following quote is illustrative of how participation in community based adult education classes impact on a learners engagement with their community.

"It gave me the confidence and I just got involved in everything and you know even where I'm from and everything people talk to me that bit more...keep the area clean and all this and I would go out because I want a nice home to my kids. I would get involved in things around the community ... I live there too you know. You would have the street clean ups and stuff like that. I want my home to be tidy too and then after that I just get involved in everything in here and anything that was going on for the school over like. We will organise the sports day now for the kids and we have to organise the medals and we will do tea and coffee you know, we want the parents to come you know. That's the point. We are trying to get the parents into the school rather than keeping them at the gate. We want them to come in. We are always

advertising over there for new members to join the parents association its very open you know. I never heard of a parents association when I was going to school you know that kind of way and if you did it was in what we would have been calling it the posh schools you know ... it's not like that, we are very open, everyone is welcome. I mean even in our own city now it's very multi cultural we have all different types of people we welcome them" (Adult Learner Southside)

Increasing the use of community facilities

".....obviously the community is built around that [community centre]. You got to have something in the heart of the community and if you don't have anything as a focus in the heart of the community you can't actually provide a community" (Participant Past Learners Focus Group)

One of the most striking factors to emerge during discussions with learners about their knowledge and use of community facilities was how participation in classes was generally their first encounter with such facilities. This should be seen as an extremely important development in terms of building capacity within a community. Many of the learners spoke of how they had walked by buildings such as community centres, family resource centres and community development projects and had never known what they were. One man, for example, told of how he walked by his local community development centre every day for years on his way to and from work and never even noticed it was there until he began classes. This was echoed in every focus group.

Participant: "I didn't even know the centre was even there and its three minutes from my house and a lot of people in the community still don't know it exists, you know I get a lift sometimes and I say 'the resource centre' and they say 'where is that' and I tell them and they would say 'oh I never knew that was there" (Adult Learner Southside).

Interviewer: "Would you have known about the Family Resource Centre prior to starting"?

Participant: "No, I wouldn't have really... I knew something was going on there like, there would be people coming in and out quite a lot but I wouldn't have known that there was courses on there that I could have done myself". (Adult Learner Northside)

Once learners became familiar with the community centres / buildings where their own classes were held, there is a general consensus that they now tend to have greater knowledge of other facilities within the community such as libraries, meeting rooms, advice clinics and so forth. Most of this information is gleaned from notice boards and social events associated with adult education classes. Some learners mentioned that they now use such facilities to run their own informal classes or to hold meetings, for example one woman who attended positive parenting classes was teaching what she learned to other mothers after a yoga class, by staying on for ten minutes when her class ended. Community-based adult education then not only works to benefit the individual but also the community in which it is made available, improving and strengthening facilities and resources in the community, acting as a source of pride in the community and a desire to recognise and acknowledge the accomplishments of all involved in the service.

"You never know what amazing things are happening on your doorstep until you join classes". (Adult Learner Northside)

To summarise, the most cited social benefit of participation in community-based adult education classes was the connection that has been created between the individual learner and their local community. This link has many components, such as an increased awareness of local social issues, access to and use of community facilities, the integration of learners into the community and the resultant community engagement that occurs. The majority of learners participating in this research indicated that such connections were both instigated and facilitated by the physical location of classes within their local communities, and were evidenced by factors such as the development of informal networks and a greater awareness of locally available resources and facilities.

Impact on wider society

Heavily dependent on the interplay of personal, familial and community social benefits are those that extend to, and impact on, wider society. Earlier in this report, we discussed how participating in community-based adult education has transformed participants understanding of and association with their local community in a variety of ways. Our data also demonstrated that the social benefits of community-based adult learning conferred social benefits to the wider society. These wider social benefits included:

- Opportunities for cross-community communication and understanding
- Active citizenship
- The development of positive/empowered relationships with social institutions
- Participation in national associations and networks
- Intergenerational awareness

Cross-community communication and understanding

Limerick City, like Irish society, is a multicultural city with many linguistic and culturally diverse communities. Community-based adult education classes are therefore a good opportunity, not

only to meet with these international newcomers but also to explore, through class discussions, the meaning of culture and to learn about the cultural beliefs, values and practices of both Irish and international adult learners. From such interactions, the opportunity has been created for increased tolerance and understanding of culture diversity.

"...it [a class] was more about interlinking with other nationalities and stuff like that you know and teaching you about their religions and stuff and to be honest half of them are no different than ourselves but before when you went in you would hear the Polish have all the jobs taken but sure we have half their jobs taken as well when you look at it so what can you do?" (Adult Learner Northside - Literacy)

Active citizenship

Previous research findings have alluded to the increased politicisation of adult learners as a consequence of attending community-based adult education classes, which had changed peoples understanding of and relationship with their local community. The social benefits of community-based adult education also extend into the local and national political arena. In this research study learners referred to voting in the recent election, empowered by the fact that they could read party manifestos and fill out the ballot sheet for the first time ever. Lobbying to safeguard community education was also cited on numerous occasions, arising from awareness among learners of the link between funding cutbacks and a reduction in the number of classes available. Participating in community-based adult education, is thus directly and indirectly, fostering a desire for social change which has culminated in political action by some adult learners.

The development of positive / empowered relationships with social institutions

The development of an informed social awareness among participants not only inspired forms of political activism, it also contributed to the development of empowered relationships with social institutions. One clear indicator of this change was how the increased personal confidence of learners extended into their relationship with institutions and their interaction with professionals and statutory agencies. Adult learners spoke of being able to offer opinions (to individuals and agencies) where they never previously would have, in turn feeling rewarded on a personal level, and as a consequence being empowered to continue learning.

Two institutions which featured prominently in the interview data were the health service and the education system. Our adult learner participants were keenly aware of the power differential that typically defines the doctor-patient, child-teacher, parent-principal interactions. Our findings suggest that attending community-based adult education classes has offered adult learners practical skills which have helped them to successfully negotiate these interactions. For example, it was remarked that some of our participants now had much more effective communication with doctors and surgeons because they "don't have them on a pedestal anymore" (Adult Learner Southside).

In a related matter, our data clearly shows that some participants experienced an increased capacity to confront unfair and unjust behaviour to which they or others were subjected. The ability

to recognise injustice and speak out against it was seen as a product of the increased self-confidence and communication skills gained through participation in community based adult education. It should also be interpreted as a further indication of a growing identification with the group or collective identity of the community.

Finally, the research finds that some adult learners began to comply with certain legislation which they may not have done previously, for example, one participant had literacy difficulties which prevented them from obtaining a fishing licence. However, having attended adult literacy classes they applied for a fishing licence. Moreover, it is noteworthy that learners also developed a more informed understanding of the role of the police. This was particularly outlined in one of the learner focus groups and a one-to-one interview: in the former reference was made to the difficult job of the Gardaí in dealing with children and young people who are “afraid of nothing or no-one”, while the latter spoke about the senselessness of expecting police to discipline young people when their parents never had.

Participation in national networks and organisations

The research data offers us several examples of how participating in community-based adult education classes has afforded learners the opportunity to become involved in national organisations or associations such as AONTAS, and collegial national networks such as the Mens Shed project⁸. Through these activities learners have developed key networking and lobbying skills. The learners had recognised the many benefits which attending adult education classes have offered them -personal, social and educational skills and benefits- and this had sparked in them a desire to ensure that as many people as possible could share in their positive experience of adult education. In this way, these adult learners have become representatives of their local community on the national stage.

Intergenerational awareness

Adult education has also created opportunities for people of different age groups to interact and socialise with one another. The variety of ages among our research participants is seen as adding an interesting dynamic for both tutors and learners alike in the classroom. The co-operation between mixed age groups who may traditionally have had no previous interactions with one another should be seen as a highly beneficial outcome of community-based adult education. It helps create social capital and may reduce ageism and age discrimination as a consequence.

It is clear from the findings presented in this section that the social benefits of community-based adult education are being extended to wider society. These educational opportunities are offering participants an important personal and social foundation for the development of civic skills (from improved cross-community communication and understanding to active citizenship skills), empowered political relationships, networking and lobbying skills and intergenerational awareness. In their sum these outcomes further strengthen the social capital which is created by community-based adult education in Limerick City.

⁸ Men's shed projects are community-based initiatives (based on the Australian model) that provide a safe and busy environment where men can meet, engage in discussions that they may not otherwise have the opportunity to explore (e.g. health) and share skills.

Barriers to participation

In the previous sections of this chapter we have outlined the many positive impacts that participation in community-based adult education in Limerick City offers to its participants, their families and their communities. However, it is important to note that amidst these benefits we were informed of two barriers which either prevent or delay people from accessing community-based adult education. These barriers are:

- previous educational experiences, and
- financial considerations.

Previous educational experiences

The primary barrier identified from the data is the learners' previous educational experiences. As noted earlier, many learners commented on how difficult their formal education experience was. This in turn has directly coloured many people's perception of all forms of education, and accordingly they had a degree of fear and hesitancy about returning to education.

"I've met people lately who were carrying this burden around for years and felt desperate about education" (Participant LCAES Focus Group).

"Terrified. They're terrified of it. You know, students have told me that they've walked up to the door and they've walked away. They've come back to the door. They've walked away" (Participant Tutors Focus Group).

However it is very encouraging to note that the adult education tutors are extremely aware of this and have made a conscious effort to address this fear, particularly in the first few weeks of the class, in order to reassure learners and keep them attending the classes.

"There is a huge emotional element to going back to adult education for the learners, so you have to be kind of aware of being positive... and continue to encourage the student so that their emotional experience of the learning changes" (Participant Tutors Focus Group).

Financial barriers

All forms of education, even community-based adult education incurs some financial cost on the adult learner. This obstacle was identified as early as 1983 by the Commission for Adult Learning (Report of the Kenny Commission on Adult Education 1984). These financial barriers are attributed more to costs associated with attending classes (such as the cost of childcare, cost of transport, and cost of materials e.g. craft material, cooking materials etc) than class fees⁹ per se, which typically are nominal in nature. It is fair to assume that the financial burden that Irish families are experiencing at present during our current economic recession may make it harder for some individuals to decide to return to adult education.

⁹ The 'fees' referred to by learners do not constitute course/class fees but are minimal contributions sought towards the cost of tea and coffee provided during class breaks.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

Previous research such as the Fitzgerald Report (2007, p.6) has detailed significant levels of educational disadvantage in Limerick City, specifically within certain local authority estates. This study documents the impact that community-based adult education is having on such disadvantage in Limerick City, by mapping the social benefits of this type of education. The research findings explicate community-based adult education as a process where individual people are supported to increase their human, social and identity capital, in addition to creating a positive orientation towards further learning. The social benefits of this enhanced capacity as it extends beyond the individual learner to their families, local communities and the wider society is summarised below.

Figure 10: Overview of social benefits

Recipient	Social benefit
Individual learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal development• Educational progression• Improved social and identity capital• Improved mental health• Recognition of lifelong learning
Learner's family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive influences on children's education• A new view of education as lifelong learning• Improved family communication• Affirmative changes in family dynamics
Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater awareness of social issues within the community• Integration of learners into community• Community engagement• Access to / use of community facilities
Wider society	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased tolerance and understanding of cultural diversity• Active citizenship• Involvement in national networks• Increased capacity to address injustice

Examining the social benefits of participation in community-based adult learning for individuals and their families

Human capital theory proposes that increased investment in education brings automatic economic benefits for society as a whole and also for the individuals concerned (see Drudy and Lynch 1993, p.31; Allen 2000, p.91). In addition, and in the context of this research, we would argue that investment in adult education brings a vast array of social benefits to the individuals concerned, to their families and communities, and ultimately to wider society. These social benefits include increased levels of human and social capital, which actively contribute to social inclusion.

While the social aspect of learning is often overlooked, this research clearly demonstrates that social contact is proving to be extremely important, particularly for those adult learners who are living alone. Increased opportunities to socialise and the new friendships that are emerging as a result of participating in classes are expanding people's social networks. Of major importance is the fact that many learners perceive of the class as also being a 'social outlet', which enables them to discuss personal issues with other learners (who have become friends), and in this context it is apparent that learners are offering tangible support to one another. There is evidence of a link between the increased social contact as a result of participating in the classes and improved mental health on the part of learners. This mutually supportive environment has also enhanced the learning potential for many of the learners, who no longer fear that there is a right or wrong answer (a throwback to their days of formal education) or being laughed at. Aspirations of self-betterment were apparent among learners and very much typified an emancipatory approach to education (O Suilleabháin, 1986). This is hugely significant given that Beem (1999) argues that it is only when interaction between and across groups begins that people are enabled to build communities. We would argue that all of these developments are very significant positive social outcomes.

In contemporary societies education is seen as playing a pivotal role in conditioning people, and indeed, in orienting their future expectations (Greaves et al. 2007). Previous research (Reay 2001) shows that remaining in education is influenced to a great extent by a person's social class background, with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds often not receiving the requisite information to convince them that education will broaden their life chances (Watt and Paterson 2000, p.116). In that context, this research suggests that adult education appears to be having a very positive impact on learners in overcoming the very obvious negative experiences of previous formal education that these individuals have. The most overwhelming evidence of this is rooted in the personal development of each individual learner, which has increased their self-esteem and confidence levels. Participation in community-based adult education classes is also allowing people to develop communication skills, which extend to people's relationships with institutions. These skills (human capital) that learners are acquiring from participation in adult education appear to be having a direct impact by altering their future expectations for both themselves and their families.

Reflective of international trends, women's participation was primarily in response to changing family needs, the need for an identity beyond the household and the opportunity for further education. Male learners tended to identify the attainment of practical skills as the primary objective of their participation. The research, therefore, is in line with Golding's (2009) belief that men are practical learners and have different educational preferences to women. The higher rates

of participation in adult education among men in recent years could in itself be considered to yield social benefits, namely more gender balanced exposure and interaction within and across communities.

The relationship between participation in community-based adult education and secondary benefits for learners' children is very apparent in the data. In terms of social benefits this relationship extends beyond mere parent-child interactions, it has contributed to effective communication with school teachers and principals and formal learning being supported in the home environment. The majority of parents participating in this research identified being able to help children with their homework and being positive role models for them as being hugely significant. In 1997, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy report stated that in contemporary societies underachievement at school is a route into "social difficulties which lead to a life of uncertainty, marginalisation and dependency on structures of social welfare assistance". This message has obviously been internalised by our adult learners as the need to ensure that their children had better opportunities than they themselves had was a common theme among learners. There was recognition among a significant number of learners that times have changed and there is a subsequent need for greater educational attainment. Parents described drawing on their own biographies to act as an incentive for their children to do well at school. This changing role in family dynamics is particularly pronounced among literacy learners where people adopt new roles thanks to their literacy tuition.

Parents report being more confident in their dealings with their children, not only in terms of helping with their homework but in other areas such as improved communication with their children. There were repeated references made to the role model aspect of engagement in adult education classes. In this respect, community education would appear to be playing a part in not only normalising learning in the family, but in turn beginning the steps needed to address the generational disadvantage experienced in some families. The fact that the majority of the parents (that we spoke to) participating in adult education were women is of huge importance given that Kelleghan et al. (1995) have shown that *"the characteristics of the mother, including schooling experience seem particularly important in structuring the educational environment of the home, and research findings indicate that children of poorly educated mothers do not do as well at school and leave school earlier, than children of better educated mothers. Further a mother's level of education was found to be more closely related to children's achievement than fathers' levels. Women appear to play a key role in enhancing not just the life chances of individual women, but also their children, and therefore [women's education] complements and strengthens other initiatives such as 'Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage'"*¹⁰. In that context our findings should be seen as very strong evidence of the social value of community-based adult education in Limerick City.

¹⁰ A flagship initiative launched by the Department of Education, seeking to use education to combat poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

Examining the impact of participation in community-based adult learning on the learners' community and on the wider society

The White Paper on Adult Learning (2000, p.113) identifies a number of key characteristics of the Irish community education sector. It sees community education as being embedded in the community, respectful of participants and their lived experiences, concerned with communal values, active in the promotion of participative democracy, focused on providing the supports necessary for successful access and learning, and being dedicated to individual development and collective community advancement, particularly in marginalised communities. It is clear from the findings of this research that community based adult education in Limerick City is fulfilling all of those requirements. The influence, proximity, accessibility, familiarity and general sense of community is instrumental in the engagement process, mirroring some of the key characteristics of community education outlined in the White Paper on Adult Learning (2000).

Adult education represents “a movement for education to go out into the community, rather than the community coming to it” (Lunch 1997 cited in Share et al., 2007, p.208). Working class women in particular are seen to encounter added difficulties in accessing adult education because of their lack of money and difficulty with finding affordable childcare (O’Sullivan 1988 cited in Lynch and Drudy 1993, p.263). In that context, the situating of classes within walking distance of their home makes the classes more accessible to these individuals. This should be seen as another hugely positive aspect of community based adult education given the (previously discussed) role that working class women in particular play in breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage for their children.

Moreover, some of those who participated in adult education courses perceive that their participation has helped them to overcome social dislocation. This should be seen as a particularly important finding in the context of the on-going Regeneration of certain areas in Limerick. Previous research (see Hourigan 2011; Power & Barnes 2011) has identified that some residents of these estates experience high levels of social dislocation, in particular as a result of having low levels of social networks within their estate. The findings of this research suggest that community based adult education may be an effective way to establish such networks. In that context it is of additional significance that a number of the learners spoke of how attending classes helped them to integrate into the community, which they saw as being extremely important given that they had moved into the community from elsewhere. Having people “from outside” join their local classes, exposed learners to the fact that they have things in common with those in other locations around the city (e.g. similar biographies). This is also significant, particularly for those individuals who reside in neighbourhoods which have stigmatised identities. For such learners, this social contact may prevent them from internalising the stigmatised identity that their estate and its residents has been given, a process which has happened all too often in this city (See Devereux, Haynes and Power 2011 as an example). In all of these instances community-based adult education is expanding people’s social horizons / networks and developing stronger levels of social capital within their communities.

The fact that adult education is located within a local community, drawing from as well as strengthening existing community structures would appear to be augmenting people’s awareness of, involvement in and commitment to their local community. The report has documented numerous

examples of how participation in classes has led to increased community engagement. In addition, attending community-based adult education classes seems to be increasing people's likelihood of volunteering in their community. Moreover, there is a strong link between being an adult learner and becoming more active in local community centres. Participation in classes was generally the learners' first encounter with such facilities. Once learners became familiar with the centres / buildings where their own classes were held, there is a general consensus that they now tend to have greater knowledge of other facilities within the community such as libraries, meeting rooms, advice clinics etc. These should be seen as highly significant impacts in terms of strengthening capacity within a community.

Of major significance in the context of this research is the fact that some of the adult learners that we spoke to had become a part of the Learner Forum in the City. Additionally, it is very significant that a small number of learners went on to become voluntary tutors. While this is not a common occurrence, such roles are seen by the learners themselves as having a major benefit for other learners in the community. Such developments illustrate the high social impact that adult learners are having within their own communities and by extension within their city. This research has shown that community-based adult education works to benefit the community in which it is made available, improving and strengthening facilities and resources, and acting as a source of pride. In addition to this significant finding, it is apparent that there are a number of social benefits for society in general which have emerged including an increased tolerance and understanding of cultural diversity, increased active citizenship, an involvement in national networks, an increased capacity to confront unfair and unjust behaviour, and co-operation between mixed age groups who may, traditionally, have had no previous interactions.

We have provided evidence which reflects Schullers' (2004b) triangular model of the benefits of learning (see Figure 5), whereby learning is seen as a process where people build up human, social or identity capital, which results in "better (mental) health, stronger social networks, enhanced family life" (Schuller 2004b, p.12), decision making skills, problem solving skills, leadership skills, improved communication skills (McNair 2002, pp.240-241), self-esteem, and self-motivation (Emler and Frazer 1999 cited in Feinstein and Hammond 2004, p.201). The development of such a knowledge base also appears to be creating a positive orientation towards learning. Finally, this research has identified that there are numerous macro-social benefits (Descy 2006, p.165) being delivered by community-based adult education in Limerick City, with adult learners gaining higher levels of human and social capital, which has led to them expressing the belief that their communities are benefiting from higher levels of social cohesion. Moreover, taking part in a community-based adult education class is presenting its participants with opportunities to create and sustain social support networks for themselves. All of this has resulted in better understanding of the processes of change and increased social awareness (McNair 2002, p.241; Fleming 2004, p.5). In conclusion, this research study has found that community-based adult education in Limerick City is having positive impacts on individuals, their families, their community, and wider society.

Chapter 6

Recommendations

- 1 This research has revealed that community-based adult education is not just a means to an economic end. It also offers a number of positive social impacts for individuals, families, communities and Irish society as a whole, thereby creating social capital, community cohesion and social inclusion. Such findings reveal the significance of all forms of adult learning in the community and as a result it is vital that community-based adult education is actively supported at national, regional and local policy level.
- 2 There was a notable connection between a sense of defined territory and the familiarity attached to being part of it. This sense of being on familiar ground proved to alleviate much of the initial trepidation that learners felt before they began classes. The research finds that learners derived a great sense of comfort and confidence from the familiarity of the community. Accordingly it is a recommendation of this research that adult education classes are located within communities in so far as possible in order to address both logistical and emotional issues which learners may experience. To this end it is also recommended that the community-based organisations that are currently providing facilities, resources and co-ordination for community-based adult education continue to be supported and funded.
- 3 The ability of community-based adult education to create a sense of community among and for its participants needs greater acknowledgement. More specifically, in the context of the Limerick Regeneration programme, we would recommend that community-based adult educational opportunities should be recognised as playing an important part in the process of regeneration, offering a more sustainable approach to strengthening community bonds, community development and change than perhaps had originally been envisaged.
- 4 While the research explored the social benefits of learning in community-based adult education it must be stressed that we should not underestimate the personal difficulties that adult learners face when they consider returning to adult education. Even when this learning is not accredited, the research participants expressed a certain fear of the 'new' and the 'unknown' and had moments of self-doubt prior to participating, as well as in the first weeks of their course. It is a recommendation of this research that supports (for example peer support and the learner 'buddy' system) continue to be put in place to ensure that potential adult learners can overcome such difficulties and participate in their course of choice.
- 5 An issue which emerged during this research is the cost of attending education generally. In particular, the availability and prohibitive cost of childcare needs to be recognised. Moreover while there is a drive to include young unemployed adult males in particular in adult education classes, we need to be mindful of the fact that many of these may be expected to participate in adult courses despite the fact that as young adults they are on reduced social welfare payments. It is recommended that measures be put in place to properly resource community-based adult education in order to lessen the impact of these additional costs that adult learners may encounter.
- 6 The social impact that has been identified in this research must be seen as a valid mainstream element of education in Ireland. Accordingly it is a recommendation of this study that information (e.g. 'impact statements') on the social value of adult education should be included

in any reports that the LCAES returns to the Department of Education and Skills. If such details are not mainstreamed, named and reported on, then ultimately they will not be considered to be a valuable outcome of educational participation or indeed be funded accordingly.

- 7 At the time of writing, Ireland finds itself in difficult economic circumstances which are impacting strongly on communities. We believe therefore that there is a need for more joined-up government / public administration. This research clearly documents the wider social benefits of community-based adult education which impacts positively on areas that are under the remit of the HSE and the Department of Social Protection for example. As such it is a recommendation of this study that these organisations (and others) in addition to the Department of Education and Skills should combine efforts in order to adequately resource the provision of community-based adult education.
- 8 There are clearly beneficial mental health outcomes being experienced by participants in community-based adult education classes. In line with our call for more joined-up government / public administration it is recommended that organisations such as the HSE should continue to promote and support such programmes of learning. While the resources would come from the HSE budget, there are long-term savings to be made in terms of the impact on mental health which we believe at the very least may prove to be resource neutral.
- 9 LCAES should be commended for its piloting and continued support of the Adult Learners Forum as a representative voice of adult learners in Limerick City. The research presented here documents the personal, social and civic impact it has had on its voluntary members. AONTAS is currently working in conjunction with some members of this Learners Forum to help bring about Learner Forums nationwide. The findings presented here should be seen as further evidence for the expansion of this initiative.
- 10 It is a recommendation of this study that all tutors continue to consult with learners about how the classes will run. Given the previous negative experiences that many of our respondents had in the formal education system this engagement by the tutors was seen as giving the adult learners a sense of ownership over the classes that they were enrolling in.
- 11 The promotion of community-based adult education programmes including their social benefits should be undertaken in a more targeted capacity. Many learners in this study highlighted the fact that community notice boards are only effective once classes begin and people are using community centres. Consideration therefore should be given to having advertising materials (such as posters and leaflets) planned, designed and delivered by learners through their various classes in order to ensure that (a) potential learners hear directly from current learners about the benefits of classes thus increasing the possibility of traditionally hard to reach groups being targeted in a more effective manner and (b) learners have the opportunity to practically use and display their new-found skills.

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Appendix I

Community-based adult education centres in Limerick City

1. 17 John Street
2. Adapt House, Rosbrien
3. Attic Artists
4. CBS Secondary Sexton Street
5. CBS Primary Sexton Street
6. Ceim ar Ceim, Moyross
7. Childers Road Resource Room
8. CIE Club
9. Corpus Christi School Moyross
10. Doras Luimni
11. FAS LEDP Roxboro
12. Galvone NS
13. JFK School
14. Kileely School Project
15. Kings Island YDP
16. Kings Island Youth & Community Centre
17. LEDP Roxboro - UL Access Campus
18. Limerick BEST Project
19. Limerick resource Centre for Unemployed
20. Local Employment Service - Jobs Club
21. Moyross Community Enterprise Centre
22. Moyross Family Resource Centre
23. Moyross Library Watch House Cross
24. Moyross Probation Service
25. Northside Learning Hub
26. Northstar Family Support Project
27. Our Lady of Lourdes Community Centre
28. Limerick City CDP Our Lady of Lourdes
29. Our Lady of Lourdes NS
30. Our Lady Queen of Peace School
31. Parochial Hse, Athlunkard St.
32. Presentation Primary School
33. Presentation Secondary School
34. Prisoner Family Support Bedford Row
35. Salesian Secondary School
36. Social Services Centre
37. Southill Area Centre
38. Southill FRC
39. Southill Gaelscoil
40. Southill House

41. Southill Junior School/Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy
42. St Enda's Community School
43. St John's Girls School
44. St John's Boys School
45. St John's Day Care Centre
46. St Lelia's Hall, Ballynanty
47. St Mary's Action Centre
48. St Mary's Adult Ed. Centre
49. St Mary's Ard Scoil Mhuire
50. St Mary's Boys School
51. Limerick City CDP St Mary's St Mary's Girls School, Bishop St
52. St Mary's Townhouse
53. Limerick City CDP St Munchin's
54. St Munchin's Family Resource Centre
55. St Nessian's Community College
56. Temperance Hall
57. The Bays, Moyross
58. Unitas Hall

[Source: <http://limerickcityaes.ie/community/locations.aspx>]

Appendix II

Members of the L.C.E.N.

- Moyross Adult Education Network
- St Munchins Umbrella Group
- St Mary's Adult Education Group
- Our Lady of Lourdes (Care group)
- Our Lady Queen of Peace Community Group
- St Saviour's Parish
- Garryowen/St John's Parish
- Southill Adult Education Network
- Doras Luimni
- Bedford Row Family Project
- Adapt House
- Limerick Social Services (Older People)
- Limerick Women's Network
- Limerick Adult Learner Forum
- Limerick City AES (Upskill Solutions, Community Education, Basic Education Solutions, Adult Education Information and Guidance Service).
- Paul Partnership

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