



what works  
wellbeing

# adult learning



What makes adult learning good for wellbeing? Who benefits most? What does this mean for policy and practice?



## the big picture

Existing evidence shows us that learning is good for wellbeing.

However, to inform learning programmes and policies, we need to know more. We need to know what it is about learning that is important for improving wellbeing and how this is different for different groups. Does it matter if there is a recognised qualification at the end? Whether the learning takes place in a classroom or elsewhere? This underlying understanding is not well developed.

The review this briefing is based on aims to address this gap. We reviewed the state of the evidence of the impact of adult learning on wellbeing for different groups, and looked at some of the causal mechanisms at play. The review looked at a broad range of adult learning: we included any learning activities which resulted in gaining knowledge or skills but excluded work-based learning and formal education at schools and universities.

“  
I can't  
imagine not  
learning, life  
would be  
boring.  
”

Public dialogue  
participant, Cardiff

We sifted  
through  
3,643  
studies

and 25  
were  
included

In partnership with:



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.



HM Government

Work and Learning Evidence Programme  
What Works for Wellbeing  
[www.whatworkswellbeing.org](http://www.whatworkswellbeing.org)  
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## what evidence did we find?

### is learning good for wellbeing of adults?



These studies supported the existing evidence that shows **learning is positive for wellbeing**.



**Learning can have a range of wellbeing benefits**, including, facilitating social contact, developing purpose, and enabling progression. *See sections below for breakdown for different groups*



**It matters what and how you learn.** Hard outcomes, such as a formal qualification, and soft learning outcomes, like improved self confidence or social relations, are both important for achieving wellbeing impacts. *See sections below for breakdown for different groups*



**The learning environment is key**, both in terms of learners achieving learning outcomes, but also as a source of support and to foster the social benefits of learning which contribute to wellbeing. *See sections below for breakdown for different groups*



**For some, unstructured or informal learning may be more beneficial** for wellbeing than formal structures. This was demonstrated by some initial evidence for retired men.

This evidence comes from a mixture of quantitative and qualitative studies (unless explicitly stated that it is only from qualitative studies). Where a certain statement scores higher on confidence in qualitative evidence (CerQUAL) than it scores in quality on quantitative (GRADE), the lowest of both gradings is presented.

### There are three types of evidence



#### strong

We can be confident that the evidence can be used to inform decisions.



#### promising

We have moderate confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.



#### initial

We have low confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.



#### poor quality

We have low or no confidence in this evidence. It may be low quality or not relevant to the UK.

Strong, promising and initial evidence refer to high, moderate and low quality evidence / confidence as per GRADE and CERQual guidance. For further information on these classifications, please see the Centre's [Methods Guide](#).

All evidence should be considered alongside questions of possible benefits and risks, affordability, acceptability, feasibility and wider impacts, including equity issues, in the user setting. Where the evidence is less strong, these other considerations become even more important.



Wellbeing through learning can happen via a number of pathways. It's important to remember that learning can also happen as part of everyday life and social interaction, as well as structured as part of a formal or informal learning activity. For example, community activities like walking groups, reading groups or tea clubs all create opportunities for learning through social contact with others, and can build confidence in seeking support or progressing personal goals.

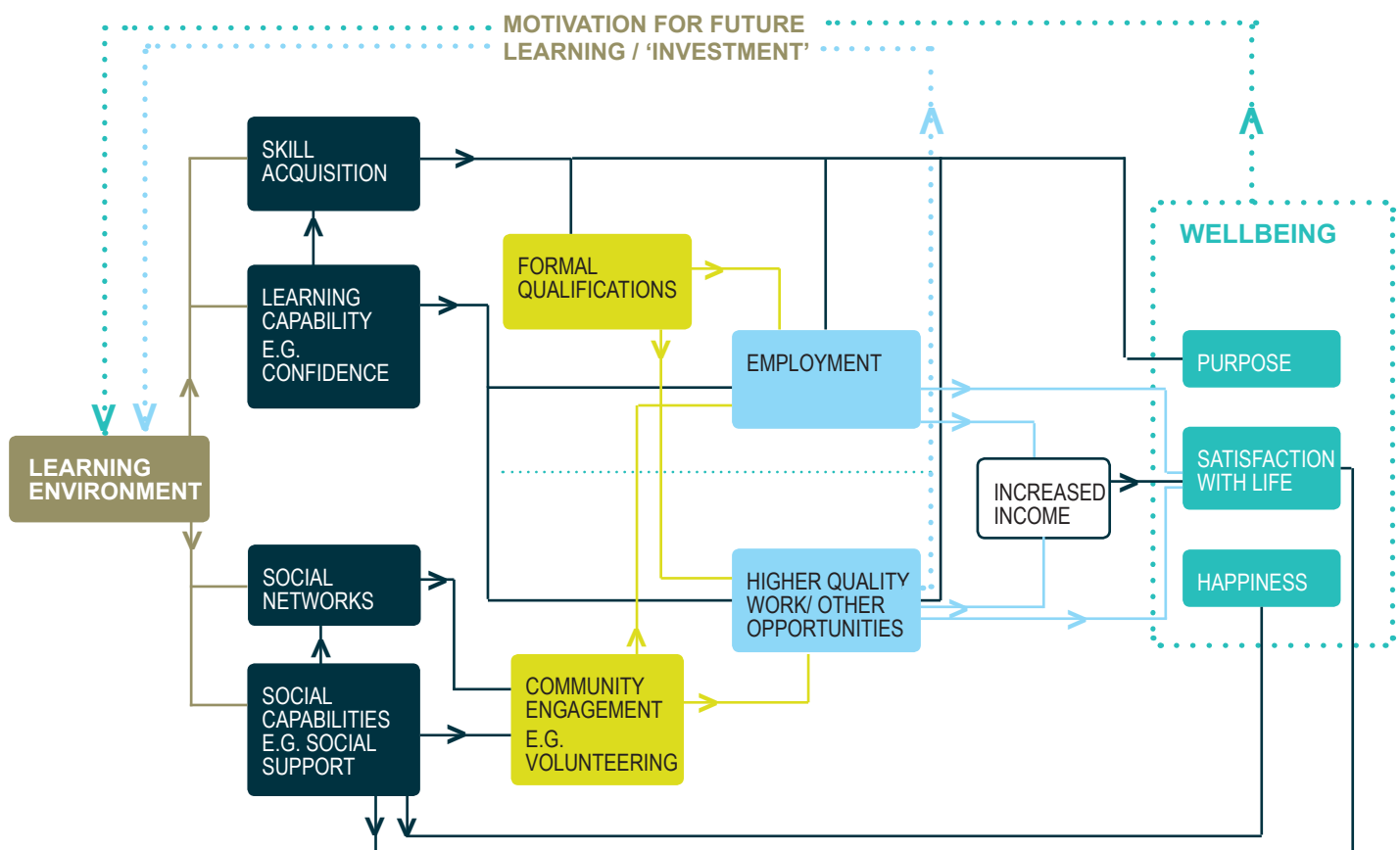
Structured learning environments often build in stronger social relationships and increased confidence as intended outcomes, such as skills development. Structured learning may also include a formal qualification.

The review here focuses on structured learning environments that take place in community settings. *Figure 1* illustrates a conceptual model of the pathways to wellbeing from learning revealed from the systematic evidence review. However, the model is not designed to be definitive and there are clearly a wide range of health, economic and civic engagement outcomes that are associated with both learning and wellbeing.

**Figure 1: Pathways from learning to wellbeing**

**Key**

■ 'soft' outcomes   ■ 'hard' outcomes   ■ economic and social gains



## what evidence did we find?

(continued)

### How can literacy and numeracy improve wellbeing?

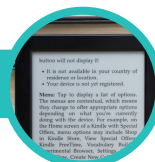
This kind of education has a positive impact on learners' wellbeing when it leads to the creation of either formal or informal learning outcomes. Formal outcomes, such as formal recognition of skills and competencies, are often important to learners for a number of reasons. However, in terms of wellbeing it is the informal outcomes such as personal, or 'soft', skills - confidence, self-esteem, self-fulfilment - that are likely to be equally important.

In particular, informal learning outcomes provide individuals with the capabilities to build supportive social relationships and create social capital.

However, these capabilities are also closely linked to progression in skills and linked to outcomes such as employment. For example, one study reported how learners increased their employment and educational goals as a result of participating in literacy education, but equally important was enhanced self-esteem and interpersonal awareness (Terry, 2006).

This evidence is based on four studies. [View all sources.](#)

### literacy and numeracy learning



Literacy learning has a positive impact on wellbeing [4.19.24.25](#), likely enabled through self-confidence and self-esteem. [4.24](#)



Literacy learning has a positive impact on social capital. [4.19.24](#)



Literacy learning can help individuals' personal development through improved employment prospects and academic skills [19.24.25](#). This is likely to have positive cumulative effects on wellbeing and educational progression.



### Case study: literacy training and depression

**In a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) combining depression treatment with literacy training, there was a marked improvement in depression scores, which was larger and more sustained in the intervention group receiving literacy training.**

**The median scores for depression were similar for both the control and intervention group at baseline. Both groups received treatment for depression, and the intervention group also undertook self-paced literacy education with some support.**

**Depression scores measured by a nine question Public Health Questionnaire (PQ-9) decreased in both groups, but the intervention group showed a greater drop in depression score and sustained this at a later follow up.**

**Although literacy increased in the intervention group by an average of seven points between baseline and follow-up, the sample is too small to understand how increases in literacy level (as a result of the intervention) impacted on reduced depression.**

**The reduction in depression scores is consistent with qualitative data in the other studies supporting important wellbeing outcomes as a result of literary education.**

Source: Weiss, B. D., Francis, L., Senf, J. H., Heist, K., & Hargreaves, R. (2006). Literacy Education as Treatment for Depression in Patients with Limited Literacy and Depression: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *JGIM: Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 21(8), 823-828.

## what evidence did we find?

(continued)

### How does learning affect older people's wellbeing?

Adult learning is likely to provide important wellbeing outcomes for older people. Learning for pleasure and social reasons are likely to be key motivations and mechanisms for realising wellbeing, whereas personal development for economic or labour market progression reasons is likely to be less important.

The review found that learning undertaken by older people in different settings was a medium for social exchange that was beneficial for wellbeing. For example, a creative writing class was appreciated because it brought older people together in learning, and “the act of writing creatively was of value because of its ability to connect them to others”.

Formal learning outcomes are also less likely to be important, but they can support participation in community organisations and the informal forms of learning and mentoring within such organisations. In one study surveying 219 men undertaking learning in community organisations, 98% of those surveyed agreed that they felt better about themselves as a result of participation.

Most of the evidence in this area comes from qualitative studies, with two quantitative studies (of which one was a Randomised Control Trial).



### Related resources

Learning at work (April, 2017)

Wellbeing benefits of job-related learning (September 2017)

Drivers of wellbeing inequality (September 2017)

This evidence is based on eight studies. [View all sources](#).

## learning for older people



Learning for older people has a positive impact on their wellbeing. [6.7.8.12.14.18.21.22](#)



#### Findings from qualitative studies:

Learning can facilitate social contact and relationships which are key mechanisms that have a positive impact on older people's wellbeing [7.8.12.18.21.22](#)



Learning for personal interest enables older people to realise hedonic wellbeing through the ‘joy of learning’. [18.21.22](#)



A sense of belonging and purpose, at both community and group level are key ways in which learning opportunities impact on wellbeing. [7.12.18.21](#)



For retired older men, learning which is unstructured or informal may be more beneficial for their wellbeing. [7.12](#)



The opportunity to share skills and knowledge or mentor others may also be important for realising wellbeing in older learners. [7.12.18.21](#)



## what evidence did we find?

(continued)

How can learning that aims to empower, or address issues facing, marginalised people improve wellbeing?

Learning that targets marginalised groups, which are defined as those who are more prone to being socially or economically disadvantaged, is likely to be beneficial to their wellbeing.











This might be particularly important in the context of **wellbeing inequalities**. Tailoring the learning to particular needs and ensuring that individuals are well supported throughout the learning process and beyond may deliver longer term, sustained wellbeing benefits.

Both 'hard' and 'soft' learning outcomes are important for self-development and eventual wellbeing benefits. For example, educational qualifications and improved confidence both increase employment prospects.

This evidence is based on ten studies. [View all sources.](#)

### marginalised groups and learning for empowerment



- 


 The development of self-esteem or self-worth are key outcomes of the learning process that benefit the wellbeing of a range of groups. [11.13.15.16.23](#)
- 


 Learning in order to build confidence [11.13.16.20.23](#) is a key wellbeing benefit and can help individuals to progress in education and personal development.
- 

 Learning has direct and positive effects on reducing depression and stress [1.15.16.25](#)
- 
 Learning for marginalised groups can help people to develop a sense of purpose in life. [11.13.23](#)
- 
 Learning is beneficial for wellbeing through the mechanisms listed above and can also help individuals progress in employment. [13.20.23](#)



Case study:  
education/  
support  
groups  
for single  
mothers

**Single mothers attended 10 weekly sessions lasting 1.5 hours that focussed on providing maternal support and education on child behaviour and development.**

**After the education programme mothers reported decreased levels of stress and greater confidence and knowledge in managing children's behaviour.**

*"After the group [and] the education, the way I felt about myself was better so I was able to try and find some parenting skills. I was able to dig deep and they were all there."*

**Mood, measured by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Scale (CES-D) showed an improvement in the short term. Longer term follow-ups showed no difference between those participating in the programme and the control group in quantitative measures of mood, self-esteem and parenting.**

**However, the qualitative data suggested that it was effective and appreciated by the single mothers participating.**

*"I [feel] more calm and relaxed and better at parenting now than I was [before the group]. Before it was me being all stressed out and now I've gotten over that and everything is calmer."*

Source: Lipman, E. L., Kenny, M., Jack, S., Cameron, R., Secord, M., & Byrne, C. (2010). Understanding how education/support groups help lone mothers. BMC Public Health, 10, 1-9.



## what evidence did we find?

(continued)

### How can learning in the community improve wellbeing?

We also looked at learning which engages individuals in their local community and can improve wellbeing at community and individual level.

The wellbeing benefits are likely to be influenced by the characteristics of the learners in the community.

For example, younger learners may be more likely to be motivated and benefit more from learning that facilitates some personal development and formal outcomes to support further educational and/or career progression translating into enhanced wellbeing. For older learners, wellbeing benefits are more likely to be experienced through enhanced social contact and a connection to the community.

This evidence is based on seven studies. [View all sources.](#)

### learning in the community



Learning in the community has a positive impact on wellbeing. [2.3.5.7.8.9.12](#)



Learning in the community has a positive impact on wellbeing through facilitating social contact [3.5.7.8.9](#)



Learning can lead to an increased sense of purpose and confidence, [2.3.8](#) which is beneficial for wellbeing and can support further learning and personal progression.



Learning can have positive wellbeing impacts beyond the individual, facilitating a connection to community [2.3.7.8.12](#) and enhancing family [5.9](#) relationships.



### Case study: benefits of learning gained through volunteering

**Learning through community organisations can provide important wellbeing benefits for both individuals and their communities.**

**This study explored the benefits of learning for older volunteers (aged 60-93), demonstrating that engagement in learning can be transformative in later life.**

*"I was introverted and not smart. As a volunteer, I had many opportunities to practice facing different people. Some people complained about their situations, so I needed to learn how to comfort them and deal with their conditions."*

**The continued engagement in learning experienced through volunteering was perceived as a way in which older people could maintain their physical and mental health.**

*"It's easy for older adults to feel lazy if they just stay home. However, because you are a volunteer, you have to learn a lot. I volunteer for four organisations in a week, and the training lectures and information exchanged among fellow volunteers often give me health knowledge and tips."*

Source: Chen, L. K. (2016). Benefits and dynamics of learning gained through volunteering: A qualitative exploration guided by seniors' self-defined successful aging. *Educational Gerontology*, 42(3), 220-230



# how can we turn this evidence into action?

## 1

**Policy-makers and commissioners** need to be aware that:

- ‘Soft’ outcomes, like confidence, self-esteem, interpersonal awareness, can be as important as ‘hard’ outcomes, such as skills or formal qualifications
- Although not the focus for enquiry, this report highlighted that a number of barriers to learning still exist, especially for marginalised groups.

## 2

**Learning/training providers** should realise that:

- Both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ outcomes matter for wellbeing. We need to consider how these outcomes are captured and how effectively learning is delivering both types of outcome.
- A range of different learning opportunities is important. This report highlights that the motivations and needs of different groups vary.

## 3

**Researchers** could consider exploring:

- What do different learners need? What is the most cost effective choice for different groups? Existing studies did not allow us to explore this in detail.
- The review brought together a range of evidence both qualitative and quantitative, but there were relatively few studies which combined them in a robust and detailed evaluation of learning interventions. More high quality quantitative studies that combine this with more in depth analysis of learning processes, individual and



[www.whatworkswellbeing.org](http://www.whatworkswellbeing.org)

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We are an independent organisation set up to produce robust, relevant and accessible evidence on wellbeing. We work with individuals, communities, businesses and government, to enable them to use this evidence make decisions and take action to improve wellbeing.

The Centre is supported by the ESRC and partners to produce evidence on wellbeing in four areas: work and learning; culture and sport; community; and cross-cutting capabilities in definitions, evaluation, determinants and effects.



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