



Adult education and life satisfaction



Do groups who are at greater risk of inequalities or marginalisation benefit from adult learning?

Olga Tregaskis, University of East Anglia

Alita Nandi, University of Essex

In partnership with:



HM Government



University of East Anglia



University of Essex



University of Reading



The University of Sheffield.

Work, Learning and Programme
What Works Centre for Wellbeing
www.whatworkswellbeing.org
[@whatworksWB](https://twitter.com/whatworksWB)

About the What Works Centre for Wellbeing

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.

whatworkswellbeing.org

info@whatworkswellbeing.org

[@whatworksWB](https://twitter.com/whatworksWB)

Life satisfaction gains from adult learning

Do groups who are at greater risk of inequalities or marginalisation benefit from adult learning? Can the positive impact of learning on life satisfaction be replicated nationally?

Headline findings

Adult learning has particular benefits to life satisfaction for some groups over others. In this report we take a closer look at how life satisfaction of specific groups changes as a result of their participation in two forms of adult learning i.e. hobbies & leisure training and job-related training, within the same year of partaking in the activity.

- **Hobbies and leisure training** increased life satisfaction across more groups than did job-related training.
- **The intensity** of job-related training made a difference to life satisfaction for young people and those living in highly deprived areas: low intensity training decreased life satisfaction while high intensity training increased it.
- **Specific groups**
 - **The unemployed:** low-intensity job training decreased their life satisfaction by 4%, however, high intensity hobbies and leisure training increased it by 8%.
 - **Those with no educational qualifications** particularly benefitted from hobbies and leisure training, more so than many other groups.
 - **Older adults (50+ years) experienced** an increase in their life satisfaction after taking up low intensity hobbies and leisure training
 - **Those living in more deprived areas benefitted from all types of hobbies & leisure training and high intensity job related training**

Definition of hobbies and leisure training and job-related training

The type of training was assessed by self-reported answers to a question asking about the purpose of the training. No further clarification was sought and so the definition is quite broad: it includes both of formal and informal training, online, and in person, and is quite variable in terms of topic. For example, one interviewee could have reported the purpose of a mindfulness training course he had taken in his community centre to be “hobbies and leisure”, while another person could have reported “hobbies and leisure” to be the purpose of an online photography course she had undertaken.

Definition of high/low intensity

High and low intensity was assessed by compiling the number of hours of the specific type of training (job-related, hobbies and leisure, health and safety training) and comparing it to the median number of training hours for that type of training.

More detail is present in the Methods section.

Secondary Data analysis

In this briefing the analysis was conducted on Understanding Society data. We found that 20% of adults engage with job-related training and 3% with hobbies & leisure related training. The models estimated, report the changes in life satisfaction within the year of training.

Bigger picture

Lifelong learning is good for our wellbeing as individuals and to society. Despite this, in the UK engagement in learning beyond compulsory education, and outside of the workplace, remains weak. For example, only around 20% of adults engage with job-related training; and 3% with hobbies and leisure related training (source: Understanding Society).

Recent evidence from systematic reviews of [workplace learning](#) and [adult learning interventions](#) have demonstrated that participation in these modes of learning can lead to increases in learners' wellbeing and personal resources (resilience) alongside mastery of new skills and knowledge. This in turn can support wider societal goals on building good work, healthy lives and community wellbeing. As such, these learning capabilities are argued to be some of the key building blocks to reducing inequalities (UNESCO, 2016; Learning and Work Institute, 2018; Social Mobility Commission, 2017).

As commissioning and delivery of adult learning devolves further in the UK, it becomes increasingly valuable to understand which groups or localities may benefit most from adult learning participation.

This analysis:

- evaluates whether the positive impact from learning on life satisfaction (as one recognised measure of wellbeing) evidenced in intervention work can be replicated nationally
- questions whether some groups who are at greater risk of inequalities or marginalisation from economic or social inclusion may benefit, in terms of life satisfaction terms, from adult learning participation. This would include groups such as the unemployed, those with lower qualification, those living in more deprived areas, ethnic groups, younger or older people.

The analysis shows that learning can be a powerful means of increasing life satisfaction for some groups.

Using Understanding Society data, we track the same individuals over a four-year period, 2010 to 2014, to establish if their participation in adult learning had any impact on their life satisfaction. Those in full-time education were not included as their characteristics and their status of full time learners might confound the results.

We looked at two forms of adult learning:

- hobbies- and leisure-related training courses
- job-related training courses

We also considered the duration of the training as this can reflect important differences in the function, formality and resources involved.

Evidence so far

We know that learning participation can yield significant benefits to individuals, and brings beneficial spill overs to communities, families and society through both economic and social drivers.

Prior Evidence

Dolan Fujiwara, and Metcalfe (2012):

- found consistent effects of participation in adult learning on a range of health and wellbeing outcomes including increased satisfaction with social life, leisure time, self-confidence, perceptions of self-worth and reductions in self-reported depression.
- Formal job related training can deliver greater improvements to self-confidence than non-formal learning.

Jenkins and Mostafa (2012):

- Older people (50+ years) can gain increases in life satisfaction and quality of life from informal learning such as participation in evening classes.

Feinstein, Hammond, Woods, Preston and Bynner (2003):

- 33-42 year olds participating in leisure training can yield increased health benefits and may offset life stage decline in life satisfaction to a small degree.

Tregaskis and Nandi (2017):

- Workplace learning can deliver increased life satisfaction to those living in the most deprived areas of England.

Watson, Tregaskis, Gedikli, Juwe, and Semkina (2017):

- Learning can deliver a range of wellbeing benefits including social contact, developing purpose, enabling progression.
- Hard outcomes such as qualification, and soft outcomes such as improved self-confidence or social relations, are both important learning outcomes for achieving wellbeing impacts.

How do we add to the evidence base?

The analysis here adds to the evidence base on the benefits of learning participation in three ways:

1. It provides causal links of the impact of learning on life satisfaction
2. It is broad in scope, going beyond specific sub-groups of the UK population
3. It captures new evidence about the impact of hobbies & leisure training

The following questions are addressed:

- What are the life satisfaction gains from different types of training, specifically, hobbies & leisure training and job-related training?
- Do some groups gain more life satisfaction from learning than others? Here our comparisons focus on the impact of learning participation on life satisfaction by age, gender, ethnicity & migration status, and employment status.
- Do some people living in some types of areas of the UK gain more life satisfaction from learning than others? Here we focus on one area level characteristic, deprivation.
- Does qualification level make a difference to the learning pathway to increased life satisfaction?

Methodology

Data and Sample

The analysis uses data from Understanding Society, a longitudinal survey of a nationally representative sample of UK residents with an ethnic minority boost sample that started in 2009. As the training questions were asked every year from onwards 2010, we use data collected from 2010 to 2014. We excluded those who were in full-time education. A total of 45,924 people were included in the analysis. We examined their responses over four years to examine how their participation in training influenced their self-reported life satisfaction scores. As these individuals were interviewed multiple times the analysis consists of 139,622 person-year observations. When we compared the role of training participation on life satisfaction for people living in areas with different levels of deprivation we focussed only on those living in England due to data limitations and so, the sample size for this analysis was 35,146 individuals and 107,146 person-year observations.



Measures

We considered life satisfaction as a measure of wellbeing. Life satisfaction was measured on a 7 point scale ranging from completely dissatisfied (1) to completely satisfied (7). Every year, training was measured by asking respondents about their training experiences in the past year. In this analysis we compare the life satisfaction levels of individuals who indicate they received any form of training last year with those who received no training. However, the training they received could be on-going at the time of data collection, or, it could have ended anytime in the last year. This means the gap between the experience of training and completing questions on life satisfaction would have been variable across the sample.

For three of those main training experiences they were asked further details such as purpose and length.

Purpose of the training was used to identify the type of training as:

- a) Job related
 - To help you get started in your job
 - To improve your skills in your current job
 - To maintain professional status and/or meet occupational standards
 - To prepare you for a job you might do in the future
 - To help you get a promotion
- b) Hobbies and leisure
- c) Health and Safety

Length

Respondents were also asked about the length of their training in days and hours for the three main training periods. Those were converted into total hours for each type of training received and categorised into “low intensity training” if less than or equal to the median for that type of training and “high intensity training” if more than the median: this is 24 hours for job-related training, 32 hours for hobbies & leisure training and 14 hours for health and safety training.

These data was used to examine four training forms:

Long hobbies & leisure training	Long job-related training
Short hobbies & leisure training	Short job-related training

Note, one person could have had more than one type of training, i.e, they could have received both job related and hobbies & leisure training within the same period. Alternatively, they could have indicated that the training they received was for both purposes.

Analysis

We estimated these models using fixed effects models¹. Other models were considered, for example, OLS. However, had we used OLS estimation method, then the presence individual factors associated with a person’s life satisfaction as well as their propensity to get training might’ve been reflected in the estimated associations. If these factors are observed or measured in the survey, such as gender, then we can avoid this by controlling for gender in the model. However, many of these factors may not be observed or measured: These may include cultural, or social drivers, as well as personality and individual factors such as levels of motivation, personality traits and, preferences – many of which can be hard to accurately measure. Without accounting for these variables, it would be difficult to say whether the resulting associations from our model would be down to the causal effect between training and life satisfaction, or a result of these unobserved factors. For example, individuals who are inherently more motivated may be more likely to take up training due to their high levels of motivation. But such individuals may also be more likely to perform well in their jobs and may have higher levels of job satisfaction too. As a result, if we cannot measure motivation, we cannot say conclusively the extent to which higher job satisfaction has been down to training, or inherent motivation.

Longitudinal data can help to overcome such a problem. The same set of people are interviewed repeatedly and asked the same questions about training and life satisfaction. So, if we focus on those who take up training, we can measure changes in their life satisfaction after they take up training. As a result differences across individuals in their specific traits and abilities such as motivation does not matter. This is the fixed effects estimation method. It leaves us with a cleaner model, in terms of causality – and provides a better estimate of the causal relationship between training and life-satisfaction.

¹ In all models we also control for: gender, age, economic activity status (in paid employment, unemployed, retired, taking care of family, long term ill or disabled, other), region of residence, marital status, number of own children in the household, living in an urban area, health, educational qualification and income.

What did we find?

The impact and percentage change in life satisfaction from training are outlined below². We indicate the percentage change in life satisfaction arising from individual's experience of the training event. This percentage show a decrease or increase from the average life satisfaction score for that group.

Hobbies & leisure training had a greater impact on increases in life satisfaction than job-related training for some groups.

- The groups that benefited most from high intensity hobbies & leisure training were: the unemployed (8% life satisfaction increase), those with no qualification (9% life satisfaction increase), white British (2%).
- The groups that benefited most from low intensity hobbies & leisure training were: those with vocational qualification (5% increase in life satisfaction), those living in medium and high deprived areas (3% increase in life satisfaction), older people i.e. 50+ (2% increase in life satisfaction), first generation ethnic minority groups (7% increase in life satisfaction).

The intensity of job-related training made a difference to life satisfaction, but only for some groups.

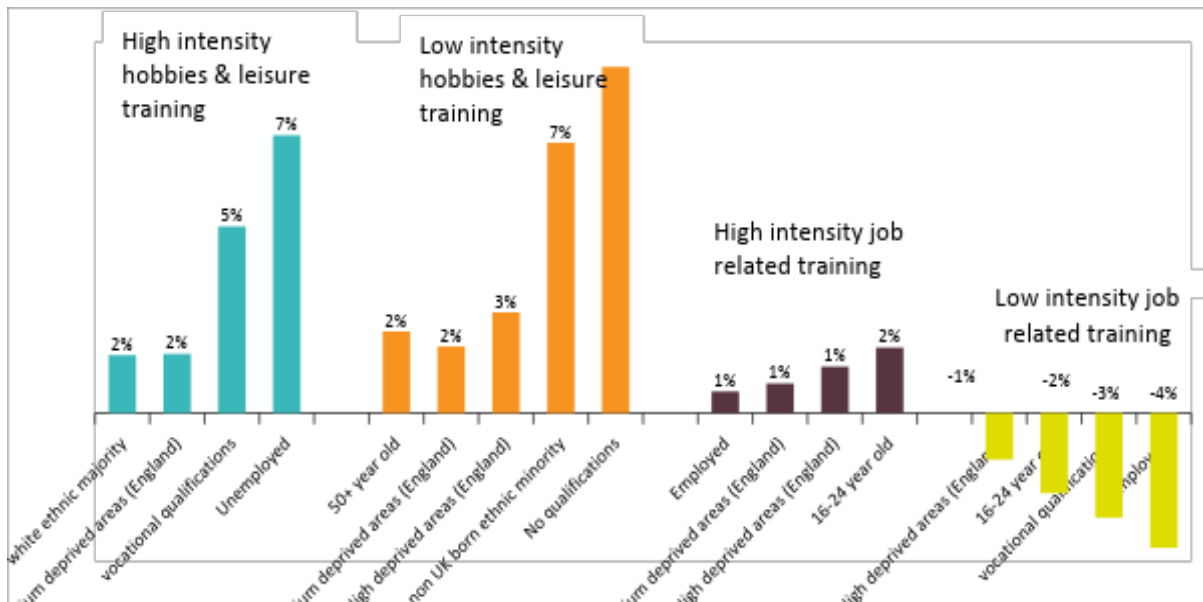
Wellbeing Gains (see Figure 1):

- High intensity job-related training had positive effects on life satisfaction for those who were employed (1% life satisfaction increase), for young people (16-24 year olds, a 2% life satisfaction increase), and for those living in medium and high deprived areas of England (1% increase in life satisfaction).

Wellbeing loses (see Figure 1):

- Low intensity job-related training decreased life satisfaction for 16-24 year olds (2% decrease in life satisfaction), for those with vocational qualification (3% decrease in life satisfaction) and for those living in high deprived areas of England (3% decrease in life satisfaction).

² To aid translation or meaningfulness of the results we convert the Average Marginal Effects (AME) result into a percentage reflecting the change in life satisfaction arising from the specific group characteristic. This percentage is calculated by dividing the AME for a specific group by the average satisfaction score for that group.



Discussion and Recommendations

- Participation in learning can be particularly beneficial for some groups. But that the type of training and the duration of the training is also important.
- Hobbies & leisure training had the most widespread positive impact on life satisfaction for participants.
- Hobbies & leisure training did not have to be lengthy in order to deliver an impact for some groups. It may well be that this form of training could operate as a preventive wellbeing strategy for individuals. But equally, organisations could look to the benefits of incorporating access to adult learning for employees.

The results for hobbies & leisure training also stand in stark contrast to the impact on life satisfaction from job-related training.

- Job-related training had no impact on life satisfaction for many of the groups and when they did the size of the effects was smaller.
- High intensity job-related training was beneficial to the life satisfaction of young adults. But short training - only a quarter of which tends to lead to a qualification - was more likely to reduce life satisfaction for younger adults, those with vocational qualification, those living in the most deprived areas or those who were unemployed. We know little about the motivation of those undertaking such training, but it may be that short training is mandatory or a necessary step in progression to further training. And for these reasons the content of the training may be perceived by the participants as not matching their needs or expectations. Understanding the limitations of short duration job-related training warrants further investigation.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

The results show that there are wellbeing benefits related to training (both job-related and hobbies & leisure) but that they differ across groups and that intensity matters. We would suggest that these findings have the following policy and practice implications.

- Access to hobbies & leisure training may well be of particular benefit to the life satisfaction of people who did not get formal qualifications earlier in life or those who have gained qualification through vocational learning modes.

- Intensity of job-related training has quite an important effect on young people and those living in deprived areas. Careful attention should be put into the design of these specific activities as the most meaningful changes are likely to happen through high commitment learning provision as it provides a greater opportunity for better quality learning.
- A counterintuitive result for the unemployed - who are adversely affected by job training (low intensity), but positively affected by high intensity hobbies and leisure training - leads us to rethink typical strategies and solutions that can be set up to help them throughout the employability process. If the objective is to ultimately help them with transitioning into employment, a more indirect form of training might be more appropriate.

Future Research

Future work would benefit from examining the motivation of those undertaking training and how best to tailor training provisions for specific groups of learners. This will help us further maximise the returns on investment for the learner and the social and economic communities in which individuals contribute.

The evidence here also demonstrates the wellbeing value of highly active or practice based forms of learning associated with leisure and hobby training, for some groups in particular. However, leisure and hobby training may also reflect a strong social element. It is unclear why leisure and hobby training has an influence on the wellbeing of some groups over others. The explanation may have something to do with the type of training event in terms of it being more motivationally relevant to the individual. Alternatively it may be that the event promotes learning through a dominant route such as 'doing' rather than 'thinking or conceptualising' which plays to the individuals strengths or confidence in learning, i.e., their learning to learn skills. However, most likely it is a combination of these factors. Going forward it would therefore be valuable to examine how the process of experiential learning which involves a continuous cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation (Kolb, 1984), interacts with the type of training event and the learner's readiness to learn. This would enable a more detailed analysis about the impact of learning design on learner outcomes. It would also allow us to consider how best to achieve and transfer the wellbeing gains from different types of training events such as leisure and hobby activities to other training contexts e.g. job-related training. Further work could also examine how long-term the beneficial effects from training are and whether these vary across the life course of individuals or by the type of training undertaken.

References

Dolan, P., Fujiwara, D., and Metcalfe, R. (2012) Review and Update of Research into the Wider Benefits of Adult Learning, BIS Research Paper Number 90.

Feinstein, L., Hammond, C., Woods, L., Preston, J., and Bynner, J. (2003) The contribution of adult learning to health and social capital. The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning: Institute of Education.

Inquiry for lifelong learning (IFLL). (2009). Lifelong Learning and Wellbeing : An Analysis of the Relationship between Adult Learning and Subjective Wellbeing. National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE),

Jenkins, A. & Mostafa, T., (2012). Learning and Wellbeing Trajectories among Older Adults in England, BIS Research Paper (92) Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), London UK.

Kolb, D. A. (1984) Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Learning & Work Institute (2018) Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: The Impact of Adult Learning Across the UK 2015-2017.

Social Mobility Commission (2017). Time for Change: an assessment of Government Policies on Social Mobility 1997-2017.

Tregaskis, O. and Nandi, A. (2017) *Wellbeing Benefits of Job-related training*. London: What Works Wellbeing, Briefing. <https://www.whatworkswellbeing.org/product/wellbeing-benefits-of-job-related-learning/>

Watson, D., Tregaskis, O., Gedikli, C., Juwe, S., and Semkina, A. (2017) *Adult Learning and Wellbeing: A systematic review*. London: What Works Wellbeing, Briefing. <https://www.whatworkswellbeing.org/product/adult-learning-briefing/>

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2016). Global Report on Adult Learning and Education. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. Feldbrunnenstrasse 58, 20148 Hamburg, Germany.

University of Essex. Institute for Social and Economic Research, NatCen Social Research and Kantar Public, [producers]: Understanding Society: Wave 1-6, 2009-2015 [computer file]. 8th Edition. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Service [distributor], March 2017. SN: 6614, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-8>.