

Quality Learning For Adults; What Makes It Desirable? Perceptions and Views of UNISWA Students.

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate why adults who had at one time attended a formal school and left, decide to go back to engage in formal education. Our second thrust was what they felt about the courses offered and how these impacted on their felt needs as well as what hurdles and obstacles stood on their way in this quest. We used a descriptive survey in which a questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in the Certificate and Diploma courses in the University of Swaziland's Department of Adult Education. Just over 50% of the respondents had been out of the formal system for over 10 years, while 48% gave no reasons why they had left school in the first place. Reasons for delaying going back to school ranged from not having made up one's mind to fear of failure in the event of one making an attempt. Reasons for going back to school were given as; to be better informed, get a degree and a better paying job and to join the elite group as well as dissatisfaction with their current statuses and hence the need for change and improvement in their lives. They perceived adult education as an escape from a life that they were dissatisfied with and a gateway to an improved life characterised by better pay. 99% were happy with both the courses offered as they were immediately applicable and impacted positively on their job performances and the instructional methods used by their lectures, citing the fact that contact hours were characterised by lots of discussions and participation by students.

Introduction

The importance of educating adults has been underscored by many. Nyerere (cited in Tindall 1978) saw the education of adults not only as vital for the survival of his country but also as very urgent. He had this to say about it:

First we must educate adults. Our children will not have an impact on our development for the next five to ten or even twenty years. The attitudes of the adults on the other hand have an impact now. (Nyerere, cited in Tindall, 1976:25.)

In the same year the Director of UNESCO echoed a similar view when he said:

In any case it is not the children of today who hold the present destiny of Africa, it is the adult population. By helping them to adjust to a rapidly changing world, an immediate impact can be

made on the urgent problems of society and essential progress be brought. Africa cannot wait a generation to mobilise its human resources for tasks of national development. (Hall, 1978:1)

Both views convey a message of urgency in terms of the need for adults to be afforded a chance to go back to school.

Mollel, N. M. (2002) writing about the outreach programmes of the University of the North in South Africa says the taxpayers have a right to expect the university to provide for their own continuing education and development. Also, writing in China, Guodong, (2003) sees the role of adult education as broader and inclusive; not just to provide for the tax payer. In his view, all citizens are entitled to the right to go back to school if they so wish.

The fundamental aim of adult education is to enable all citizens with the ability to live, work and labour to realise all round development through developing their personal resources, improving their personality in accordance with different needs in life, work and learning. (Guodong, 2003:13).

The above quotation portrays the aim of adult education as much more complex than the acquisition of skills that will enable one to earn a better living; it also involves the overall development of the individual including one's personality.

The remaining part of this paper is divided into the following sections; background to the study, objectives of the study, conceptual background, method of the study, findings as well as conclusions and recommendations.

Background to the study

Swaziland is a developing country and like all developing countries of the world has to grapple with the fact that a significant proportion of her population will not be able to make meaningful contribution to the development of the country during their lifetime because of inadequate education. Literacy level figures from the 1987 and 1997 censuses show a nation whose literacy levels are on the increase. According to the 1987 census, 71.9% of the males aged between the ages of 10 – 65 years were literate compared to 68.7% females in the same group. The gap between the sexes was about 3%. Although the picture had changed by the time the 1997 census was taken showing that 82.6% of the males had become literate compared to 80.2% of females; the gap between the sexes was still evident although having narrowed slightly. Of significance is the fact that the proportion of people with no education increases by age, with the older generation having higher proportions of persons with no education. For example, from the 1997 census data, on average 88.4% of those whose ages range between 10 - 34 years were literate compared to 65% of those aged between 35 and 64 years and 34% among those aged above 65 years. High school education attainment is highest among those aged between 20 – 24 years at 30.5% and there after declines progressively with age. The 1997 census report (page 6.14) further reveals that 33.5 % of the nation's children had gone through secondary school (Forms 1 – 3); 22.5% through high school (Forms 1 – 5); and 1.7% through university.

From these statistics it is clear that the bottleneck results in the loss of 20.8 % of potential university graduates. This is a huge wastage which has implications for the development of the nation.

In the academic year 1970 -1971, the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland instituted the Department of Extra Mural Activities (DEMS) which introduced programmes to cater for the needs of adult learners not enrolled in any formal educational institution. Initially, this was a joint programme mounted by the joint institution but when each country decided to establish its own institution of higher learning, the University of Swaziland continued with the programme. The objectives of the Five Year Programme Plan, for adult education, (August 1984 – July 1989, page 5) were outlined as follows. To promote continuing education through part-time studies, research, publications and related life long activities. To provide efficiency and productivity in job situations through in-service training, upgrading courses and professional training in adult education. To promote a healthy working relationship between the university and the community through co-ordination of joint programmes and relevant public relation activities.

To meet some of these objectives and to provide a chance for the drop outs to return to the educational system in order to develop their full potential, and at the same time salvage the waste brought about by the formal school system, DEMS introduced a very viable country wide 'O' Level programme which provided evening classes for those who had failed the course. DEMS undertook this task because the Ministry of Education was not offering this service. Enrolment for this programme was as follows 1981–1982, 1121; 1982-1983, 1113; and 1983-1984, 1004; at a cost of 20 Emalangeni per student per year. The subjects offered were English Language, English Literature, Siswati, History, Geography, Human and Social Biology, Mathematics, Principles of Accounts, Commerce, Economics and Bible Knowledge. DEMS discontinued this programme so that more focus could be given to university programmes. DEMS programmes were also detailed to increase the pool of trained and skilled manpower with focus on the skills required to develop rural areas such as simple accounting for self employed rural business people like butchery and retail shop owners. These were people who missed out on formal education and yet could make meaningful contributions to their communities if given a chance to acquire the all important relevant skills. Initially, the university programmes included certificate courses in statistics and in accounting and business education. Diploma courses were in Adult education, Accounting and Business Management and in Management. According to data on enrolment from DEMS annual reports, of 1984 to 1997 approximately 133 students enrolled in DEMS certificate and diploma courses. These courses were taught in centres located all over the country, making it difficult for the university to supervise teaching and keep accurate records of attendance.

In 2000, the University established the department of Adult Education which took over the adult training programmes of DEMS as the DEMS ceased to exist. Some of the functions of DEMS were taken over by the Centre for Community Services. Currently the Adult education department offers two year part- time certificate and diploma courses. Students who do well in the diploma courses have an option to proceed to degree courses. The entry qualifications for the certificate courses are a minimum of Junior Certificate and two year working experience in work related to adult education. A letter of recommendation

from the employer is required. Entry to the diploma course is for those candidates who pass the certificate course with a credit or distinction. They must also have at least one year working experience in a related area.

Entry into adult education courses is flexible. The university allows students with other qualifications to enrol for the courses as long as it finds the qualifications acceptable. The picture of adult education in the developing countries emerging so far is that it was an urgent matter in the 70s and that it was vital to the development of any nation. The situation does not seem to have changed much today. Recognizing the role adults play in the economy, the University of Swaziland has since the seventies made available courses for adult learners. This study aims to find out some of the factors that motivated and the problems that have made it difficult for adult learners to take advantage of this facility. It will also look at the impact the courses have on the adult learner's felt needs.

Objectives of the study

This study was carried to find out the reasons why adults want to go back to school, gain insight into the nature of the problems they encounter when they want to go back to school; and establish the relevance of the courses to the learners' felt needs. The responses to these objectives were considered important because they had the potential to alert the providers of the adult education programmes to the problems encountered by the consumers of these programmes with the hope that a re-look at the programmes might be found necessary. Secondly, if the students realised that some of the problems they encountered were also shared by other students, they might realise that the problems are surmountable. Thirdly, the study encouraged some participants to make suggestions about areas of their study that needed improvement and additional courses that would be of benefit to the adult learner, thus empowering them by making them realise that what they think matters enough to be documented. Fourthly, addressing the issue of relevance of the courses to the learners' needs, the study brings to focus the issue of quality learning. Finally, the study might be relevant to other universities in Africa and perhaps in other developing countries that offer adult education courses.

Conceptual Background

Cross, (1978:24) presents the chain of response (COR) model to explain learner participation in adult learning programmes. The model explains adult learner's ultimate decision to participate in any learning programme as being arrived at after evaluating one's overall situation. The decision arrived at comes from an interaction of events such as life transitions (like divorce or death of a bread winner, or loss of a job), the information that one has about courses being offered, attitude towards education, opportunities and barriers, the individual's goals and expectations that participation in the programme will meet. With all the factors mentioned above interacting and counter influencing one another, the individual then embarks on a process of self evaluation and comes up with a decision about going back to school. Factors like the 'significant others' that one interacts with, may also influence the individual in arriving at a decision.

Other factors may include the level of self confidence that one has. Persons who lack confidence in their own abilities are likely to be afraid to put themselves in a learning situation which could result in failure and thus present a threat to the individual's self

esteem. Of importance also is one's attitude towards education and the experiences that one might have had during one's previous schooling. Adults who hated school when they were children are not likely to return to a competitive environment in which they experienced failure and embarrassment and yet, if that is the only way out of a difficult situation, they might do it. It seems, therefore, that the deciding factor in whether an adult goes back to school or not is evaluation of the self and one's present circumstances. Cross (1981:127) further argues that these are the circumstances that trigger a desire for further education providing what she calls optimum 'teachable moments'. Thus, the individual is ready to learn when he/she feels the greatest need to do so.

Writing about what motivates adults to join literacy classes, Rogers (2004) has identified four main types of reasons, symbolic, instrumental, opportunity and access to further learning. In the case of literacy classes, by acquiring the ability to read, the illiterate masses want to join the literate set and thus acquire a new higher status. According to Rogers (2004: 61) "the world is divided into two classes, the dominant literate group (sometimes in the minority but dominant) and the ignorant and inferior race, ignorant and powerless." Rogers feels that some adults who join literacy classes want to transfer from one class to another to gain power ascribed to the literate class. Thus, for this group of people, literacy is a symbolic badge which identifies them as belonging to a special class of the literate. The question is whether symbolic motivation applies even to university level entrants.

On the other hand some people join literacy classes because they want to perform tasks that require them to be literate. These tasks could be reading the Bible or a manual or handbook or keeping accounts, applying for a job or a loan. These people want to use the skill to accomplish a particular task. According to Rogers, this group of learners is motivated by the fact that their learning contributes directly to their functioning in their jobs. Thus, even if they started the course with little motivation, they can see and experience a direct result of their new learning as it impacts positively on their self appointed tasks. As the skills learnt in school become more useful in the performance of one's tasks and the individual becomes more self confident, the whole learning process becomes self sustaining as it increases the desire to stay in the programme. Perhaps this principle could be explored in the light of adult education programmes offered by the University of Swaziland. Do students who are enrolled in courses that have a direct input to their work situations find the courses more worthwhile than those who joined the programmes for symbolic reasons, that is, to be identified with those who attend university – the elite class.

Thirdly, Rogers, (2004) talks about adults who attend literacy classes because they hope that being literate will open other doors such as getting a drivers licence, or getting promotion at work. Although participants in these programmes hope that some of these benefits will follow, there is no guarantee that the expected benefits will come. They may or may not. The point here is that the participants are not using the knowledge gained straight away but the goal is far away at the end of the programme. Modern human beings belong to a culture of instant products and instant results and it will be interesting to find out if any adults with economic and family pressures will endure all these for the hope of an uncertain reward at the end of the course.

Fourthly, some adults enrol in adult literacy classes because they feel this is a chance to get

back to the main stream formal education programmes. Thus, access to further learning becomes the main reason for participation. As far as this group of adults is concerned, both concepts of skills acquisition as an opportunity and an instrument to further learning are intertwined. Underlying this type of motivation is the desire to cross over from the informal programmes to the more prestigious formal ones; a great need in younger adults who may feel that they missed out on education at a certain point in their lives and would now like to rejoin the system.

So far it appears that participants join adult education programmes after considering many diverse factors and that these are so interwoven that it is not possible to come up with any linear relationship between them. The deciding factor seems to be the individual weighing all these factors and evaluating his /her circumstances in the light of all the interacting forces and then coming up with a decision to act. Rogers (1989:29) is of the view that almost all adult learners unlike children who attend school, come freely to classes; they are 100% volunteers. The implication is also that they are free to leave.

Method of the study

A descriptive research method was used to gather data. A questionnaire was constructed and piloted on the second year intake certificate students to identify any ambiguities that might arise. The instrument was then distributed to fifty (50) students attending adult education classes, eighteen males and thirty two females. Twenty four (24) were in the first year certificate course while twenty six (26) were in the diploma course. The questionnaire was distributed during teaching time and collected after about 30 minutes.

The questionnaire sought information on the personal circumstances of the course participants such as age, marital status, employment of self or spouse, time lapse between last formal schooling and enrolment in the present course. Another section of the instrument concentrated on identifying factors that made it difficult for the participants to enrol in adult education classes. These included availability of information about courses offered by the institution, information about entry requirements for each programme as well as environmental and personal circumstances of the participants such as the funding for the course. The questionnaire also addressed the issue of goals and expectations of what each participant wanted to achieve or to fulfil. Finally, each participant was required to make comments on the relevance of the courses offered and to make suggestions about other courses they wanted included. Data collected is presented below.

Findings

The ages of the respondents ranged from 21 to 50 years. 28% of the participant's ages were between 21 and 30 years; 58% fell between ages 31 and 40 years while 14% were between the ages of 41 and 50 years. Of note is the fact that the highest number of respondents (58%) fall in the group identified as 'the upward career mobility' group, identified by Cross (1981:174-175)

Table 1: Marital Status of the respondents

Marital status	Percentages
Married - civil (western type marriage)	24
Traditionally married	34
Single	34
Divorced	8
Total	100

Source: Survey questionnaire.

About 58% of the participants are married and 8% are divorced. 82% of the respondents had children which means that even some of the participants who are not married are parents. Between them they had about 3 children each. Thus, the majority of these course participants have to combine study with family responsibilities. All the participants were gainfully employed mainly as lower skilled workers such as health educators, police officers, firemen, adult educators, secretaries, machine operators, soldiers, technicians, teachers, shop assistants, mechanics, postal supervisors, a shop managers and dress makers. This was, therefore, no ordinary group of programme participants, but a somewhat skilled group which would probably have a significant influence on our findings.

Table 2: Length of time spent before going back to school

Length of time	Respondents	Percentages
Less than 5years	5	10
6-10 years	17	34
More than 10 years	26	52
No response	2	4
Total	50	100

Source: Survey questionnaire

About 54% of the respondents would not give any reasons why they discontinued school, (leaving us guessing that they probably either failed or had not done well enough to qualify for further studies and that admitting this was perhaps too painful to put down in writing) while 4% said they fell pregnant, 18 % had financial problems 16% had secured employment and 8% had failed the courses they were doing. 82% delayed university entry because they had not made up their minds to go back to school or were just not interested, while 18% said they were happy with the jobs that they had and so saw no need for further education. Listed below are some of the elaborations given by the respondents to further explain their responses.

I thought I was okay
 I was quite happy with my qualifications
 I was not aware that there were courses that did not need many credits
 I spent too much time worrying about personal problems
 I was not aware that education is important
 I did not meet the qualification requirements
 My employer would not release me.

One major difficulty encountered when trying to enrol in the programme cited by this group (88%) was lack of information about courses being offered. The second one (cited by 66%) was stringent government and university requirements including the need to work for a stipulated time before one could be considered for the course. Negative feelings about embarking on a university course, included fear of failure 64%, feeling too old to learn 28%, fear of not enjoying learning 22%, scared of having to read books 8%, and no response 14%. We noted that respondents had real fears about failing the courses they had enrolled in. Some of them had failed in high school and this had eroded their self confidence. The threat of failure was something that they had to master enough courage to handle.

Reasons why respondents went back to school

Possible reasons why people go back to school were grouped into 5 sub categories, desire for more knowledge, personal advancement, social needs, escape and obligation motives. (Morstain and Smart 1974, cited in Cross, 1978, page 85.) The respondents were required to rate the most important motive as 1; the 2nd most important as 2; the third as 3; etc

Table 3: Reasons why respondents went back to school

Type of motive	Responses according to ratings.	Respondents
1. Desire for knowledge	1. Better informed	37
	2. Satisfy curiosity	15
2. Professional advancement	1. Get a degree/certificate	47
	2. Get a better paying job	29
	3. Advance in the present job	19
3. Social /Belonging needs	1. Join the elite group	23
	2. Feel a sense of belonging	18
	3. Meet new people	17
4. Escape	1. Not liking the present life	49
	2. Get away from boring routine	11
5. Obligations to other people	1. Set a good example for the family	33
	2. Achieve like a family member	15
	3. Satisfy employer	12
	4. Fulfil parent's wishes	10

Source: Survey questionnaire

According to Table 3, virtually all the respondents went back to school because they did not like their lives at that point in time, thus they saw enrolling in an adult course as a way of escape from a life that they were unhappy about, a life full of routine and boredom and leading to a dead end. The concept of escaping from isolation as articulated by western researchers does not apply in Swaziland. Individualism as envisaged in the West is an alien concept. The family in its broadest sense still supports the individual and the individual supports it. There is also a genuine desire for knowledge, which makes one better informed and improves ones self worth. Bearing in mind that 86% of the participants were between the ages of 21 – 40 years, and that they were all in full time employment, it is no surprise that personal advancement comes uppermost in their minds. Most of these people were not able to further their education at the time because they either did not qualify for entry into the relevant institution, or the importance of educational qualifications in the world of employment had not dawned on them. So, the instrumental aspect of education as identified by Rogers is confirmed even beyond the simple desire for literacy. Perhaps it is important to note that in a developing country like Swaziland there are limited educational institutions and that adult education courses also play the role of giving a chance to those who missed out, a fact explained by the observation that 28% of the respondents are below the age of 30 years.

Man is a social animal, the desire to belong to an elite group has also emerged as important. This is what Rogers (2004) calls the ‘symbolic badge’ of acceptance as one is now seen as having crossed the bridge between those who have been to university and those who have not. Also of note in the findings was the emphasis put on setting a good example for the family, perhaps underscoring the importance of the family and the part played by a member who is a role model in its well being and survival. Employer requirements and parental wishes were also seen as having a significant role to play in the whole process of decision making about going back to school.

Sources of income for each respondent were one’s job 75%, while 10% lived on income from their businesses; 15% were supported financially by a family member, that is, a parent, sibling or spouse. Payment for the course was in the form of a scholarship or government loan. In some cases, the employer paid for the course. Only 8% of the respondents were paying for themselves. On what they would do when they complete the course, 88% said they would like to continue with further education, 8% were not sure, while 4% said they definitely would not embark on any further studies.

Commenting on the relevance of the courses, 94% of the respondents said the courses were directly relevant to what they were doing. Below are some of the direct quotes from the course participants.

- So far the course is good.
- The knowledge and skills have helped to improve my work. Helpful, related to my day to day work.
- Very relevant, you can see change in our work places.
- The courses are relevant in a way that you are able to put into practice the acquired knowledge. There is no waiting for tomorrow or graduation to get a job.
- Useful to me because I work with adults

Other comments included the need to market the course to employers as it was felt that the programme was so good that there was need for more people to enrol in it. There were also those who felt that there were certain things that they were unhappy about. These included slowing down on the pace of the teaching that some felt was too fast. Other similar comments were as follows:-

The name of the course should be changed because people who do not know what adult education is laugh at us and say it is a Sebenta thing! (*adult literacy classes**) Change the name of the course.

The above comment underscores the whole idea of the participants wanting to be perceived as belonging to the right group- wearing the 'right badge' – university students and not adult literacy classes.

Courses that were perceived as needed in addition to those already offered were Counselling, Tourism, HIV Management, Human Resources Management, Business Studies, Environmental Management, Law, Logistics, Industrial Psychology and Post graduate Courses (not specified) but the one that topped the list was computers (67%). "The course (programme) is good but without computer knowledge, I feel illiterate and useless" commented one respondent. Other respondents took this study as an opportunity to air their grievances which included wanting to have access to the library, wanting the course to be full time so that they can have access to the government scholarships like the regular fulltime students.

Discussion and Recommendations

The study has shown that adults are motivated to go back to school by a combination of factors such as to be better informed, to get a degree or certificate, to set a good example for the family and that central to all this is the individual's personal realisation that change in one's life is imperative because of dissatisfaction with one's life at that particular point in time. The individual must also have come to a realisation that improving one's education would lead to the desired change. It is at this point of arriving at a decision by the individual that transforms the decision into an activity. It is also a point at which what has been so far an internal process becomes an open activity for all to see. With openness comes vulnerability in the form of negative criticism but there is also positive reinforcement in the form of approval and support from friends and family.

Of note was the fact that "getting a better paying job" was not rated as high as "getting a certificate or a degree", probably implying that the opportunity to belong to an elite group is worthwhile in itself, perhaps even without the monetary benefits. Although "not liking the present situation" was the most significant motivator, it was also noted that "not liking one's life" and the desire to be better informed and to get a degree or certificate are all interconnected in that central to all of them is the desire for change. With the desire to be better informed being rated very high, there is need for the University of Swaziland to offer a broader spectrum of formal courses. There may also be those people who simply want to learn something new to improve the quality of their lives. Informal short courses would not only cater for such needs, but would also assure the general public that they too matter and that the university is their institution as well.

Lack of financial support was cited as one problem militating against the desire to go back to school. Although all the participants in this study were employed, they needed sponsorship in the form of a loan or scholarship as most of them had family responsibilities. At times sponsorship was not forthcoming, thus delaying one's participation in the programme, and when it did come it had strings attached. There were other factors such as university requirements that an individual entrant to the course be employed in a job that has a component of adult education for at least 2 years and that one should be recommended by the employer. This seems to imply that adult education is not readily accessible to everyone, especially those without resources. On the other hand, there is room for direct entry so that those able to sponsor themselves can be enrolled in the programme. The introduction of short informal courses may provide a chance for those with limited resources to enrol in some of the courses offered.

There was also evidence that those enrolled in the programme were happy with the instructional modes used by their tutors and found the learning directly relevant to their workplace requirements. They liked the participatory approach used during contact time and felt that it made learning of new concepts much easier for them. However, some felt that the teaching was too fast. A slowing down of the pace of teaching would allow programme participants time to internalise some of the difficult concepts.

Courses that are relevant to the ever changing work environment such as computer and internet skills should be made a basic requirement for every programme since most jobs nowadays require one to be computer literate. Thus, computer literacy should be viewed not as a preserve for the fulltime student only, but a basic necessity for all adult education programme participants

There is need for a follow up study to investigate the validity of these claims by participants that the adult education courses had immediate positive impact on their 'on the job performances'. A verification of the nature and extent of this impact would be useful for both the programme providers and the employers since it would provide data on specific skills acquired by the adult learners taking the courses..

Finally, the research sample was a highly selected group and so their problems cannot be seen as typifying the problems that ordinary Swazi citizens would encounter in their attempt to go back to school. A study using a bigger and more diverse sample would be required to shed more light on the issue of adult learners deciding to go back to school in the context of Swaziland.

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