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## **Understanding adult lifelong learning participation as a layered problem**

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the layered nature of lifelong learning participation, bringing together fragmented insights in why adults do or do not participate in lifelong learning activities. The paper will discuss the roles and responsibilities of individual adults, education and training providers and countries' social education policies, often labelled as the micro, meso and macro level. The aim of this work is to add a new model to the knowledge base that attempts to integrate separate insights at the three different levels. Apart from discussing the relevance of the micro, meso and macro level, together with a comprehensive model, the paper provides some recommendations for future research in the area of adult lifelong learning participation, such as the adoption of multilevel models, the need for more data linkage and the desire for more diversification of research in terms of geographical spread and types of educational activities adults can undertake.

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## **Introduction**

This paper starts from the observation that participation studies in the field of lifelong learning have evolved in previous years. Courtney's 1992 publication 'Why adults learn' started from a strong social psychological tradition, putting the main focus on the individual's motivation to learn and attitudes to participate, although influenced by significant others (Courtney, 1992). A range of models presented in Courtney's book, including the Chain of Response Model (Cross, 1981), the Expectancy-Valence Model (Rubenson, 1977) and The Theory of Planned and Intended Behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1980), demonstrated the use of attitudinal and motivational models used in lifelong learning participation research, mainly in the 1970s and 1980s. Nowadays, participation is much more understood as the result of an interaction between different players, not solely as a decision made by the individual him/herself. This paper presents an integrated overview of elements discussed in the international literature that helps in understanding why adults do or do not participate in lifelong learning activities and will focus on the role of different players, namely the individual (potential) learner, the role of available learning opportunities and the characteristics of the state in which learning opportunities and (potential) learners are situated. Given the 'nested' structure of these three main players – individuals in learning provisions in specific countries – arguments are then being made for studying participation issues through a layered lens, moving beyond the fragmented focus on individuals or countries only. This paper is theoretical/conceptual contribution to the international literature on lifelong learning participation, which has been the main focus of my work during the past 10 years (see e.g. Boeren et al., 2010; Boeren, 2016). In explaining the different 'layers' of my conceptual thinking, I will refer to empirical papers to back up my arguments, including to my own published work. Throughout the paper, it will become clear that the lack of integration of micro, meso and macro perspectives prevents us from generating full insight in the complexity of lifelong learning participation.

Before going deeper into the idea of 'layered' thinking in adult lifelong learning participation research, an overview is provided on why participation studies in the field of lifelong learning are important.

### **The importance of studying lifelong learning participation**

Leading international organisations concerned with education pay attention to the issue of adult lifelong learning participation, which is in fact referring to participation in both formal and non-formal education for adults (for a more detailed discussion on these terms and the importance of participation studies, see Boeren, 2016). While a range of definitions of what counts as 'formal' and 'non-formal' are available in the literature, formal education is generally defined as credential-based, leading to an officially recognised award, diploma or degree and in relation to adult education, it often represents a similar 'qualification ladder' structure as to learning opportunities offered in compulsory education (see UNESCO, 1979; Colley et al., 2003). The non-formal segment refers to organised forms of education and training too, but there are no officially recognised awards attached to it. The focus on informal learning is rather absent from these discussions.

The European Commission wants 15 percent of all adults between 25 and 64 to participate in at least one formal and/or non-formal learning activity on a four weeks' basis and participation is being monitored based on the Labour Force Survey (European Commission, 2010). The OECD reflects on adult lifelong learning participation as part of the annual Education at a Glance publications and participation has also been one of the key variables in the Survey of Adult Skills, developed as part of PIAAC (see e.g. Desjardins, 2015). UNESCO and the World Bank are also active in discussing the importance of adult lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2013). Most of the debates on lifelong learning have

been shaped in the Western developed world (Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand), but especially UNESCO has also paid attention to lifelong learning in developing countries, strongly focussing on the need for increasing the literacy skills among the population, and women in specific (see e.g. Aitchison & Alidou, 2009; Yousif, 2009; UNESCO, 2013). Looking at the similarities between aims of these leading international organisations, the overall ideas seem clear. Policy makers start from the assumption that participation in lifelong learning activities can provide adults with opportunities to increase and maintain their levels of knowledge and skills, needed in the knowledge based 21st Century global economy (see e.g. Griffin, in Jarvis, 2010; Holford & Mohorcic-Spolar, 2012). It is important to note that the dominant focus on adult lifelong learning, however, has changed over the years, as discussed by e.g. Rubenson (2006), Schuetze (2006), Barros (2012), ... . During the previous Century, the humanistic perspective of adult lifelong learning was much more central, with a stronger emphasis on learning for community development, cohesion and sense of citizenship, strongly shaped by input from UNESCO. Nearer the turn of the Century, learning became labelled as 'Human Resource Development in drag ...' (see Boshier, 1998) and it is believed that the focus on individual responsibilities and economically profitable activities has since increased. The reason why adult lifelong learning participation is nowadays high on the policy agenda has thus a strong economic rationale, with strong involvement in lifelong learning debates of international bodies, including the European Commission and the OECD (see e.g. Holford & Mohorcic-Spolar, 2012)

Despite the policy attention given to the topic, the field of adult lifelong learning remains characterised by large inequalities. At the level of countries, it is clear that participation rates in the traditional Nordic countries like Sweden and Denmark are much higher than in Southern European countries like Greece and Italy (see e.g. Groenez et al.; Desjardins, 2017). However, at the level of individual countries, there is an additional level of inequalities. Statistics are demonstrating that in all countries, e.g. those with the highest levels of qualifications and those from the strongest socio-economic backgrounds participate significantly more than those in weaker and more vulnerable positions in society (Boeren, 2016). Furthermore, learning opportunities differ to people as a result of differences in workplace cultures and countries' and/or regions' priorities for establishing educational provisions as will be explained below.

Given the policy attention of lifelong learning and the huge inequalities that exist, it is important to keep on researching the field of participation. The aim of this paper is thus to demonstrate that understanding participation in adult lifelong learning needs to go beyond the fragmented nature of evidence available in the literature, as is often the case. It is important to recognise that individuals' choices to (not) participate are also influenced by the education and training opportunities available to them, influenced by the dominant policies of the country they live in, e.g. as set out in education and other social policies. In order to demonstrate the relevance of this 'layered' structure, I will draw on three levels mentioned above: (1) the individual adult, (2) the availability of education and training providers and (3) the role of countries' policies. I will briefly discuss the relevance of each level separately, backed up by references to the literature. Afterwards, I will integrate these levels with the aim to present a new comprehensive model, based on my knowledge of reading and analysing the adult lifelong learning literature during the past ten years. This integrative way of thinking is the core aspect of my work discussed in this paper.

### **The three layers of adult lifelong learning participation: micro – meso – macro**

Multilevel analysis is a term that is likely to remind people of a specific statistical technique which incorporates different levels of analysis, e.g. pupils in schools in the education context (see e.g. Field, 2013). In this paper, however, I want to draw attention to the different layers and nested structure of lifelong learning we need to recognise before we can reach a deep and sound understanding of why adults do or do not participate in lifelong learning activities. Therefore, I see this discussion as theoretical with potential to be used in both quantitative and qualitative empirical research. My argument is that international and comparative research is a valid way forward to understanding this participation question, inspired by e.g. the work of Bray and Thomas (1995) whose tool for comparative and international work, in the form of a cube, outlines seven geographical and locational levels which can be compared within educational research, ranging from world regions to individuals. The 'higher up' levels, often thought about as countries can be taken into the mix and they are useful as a broad range of actors – scholars, policy makers, practitioners – are interested to learn from each other's positive experiences. However, in the context of education and adult learning, it is also important to explore existing learning opportunities available to the inhabitants of these countries. This new layer or level of learning providers can be labelled as the meso-level. Finally, it is still the individual learner who is the central agent in the participation process, as s/he is in the end the one who counts as the participant and who will appear in official statistics monitoring lifelong learning participation. The individual adult can be seen as the micro-level part of the layered participation issue.

Later in this paper, I will demonstrate how these different layers need to work together in order to realise participation, but before doing that, it is important to provide an overview of the major types of discussion that have taken place in the adult lifelong learning literature at the different levels. In doing so, I will mention a range of research outputs that have been produced in the past, both by myself and colleagues and others, relying on their contributions in generating higher levels of insight in the complex nature of lifelong learning participation.

#### *The micro-level: differences between adults*

From an individual perspective, there are many reasons why adults would or would not participate in adult lifelong learning activities. Going back into time, much attention in the scholarly field has been devoted to the role of motivation. This type of work has largely been described and discussed in Courtney's above-mentioned contribution 'Why adults learn', from the well-cited work of Houle and his typology of activity-, goal- and learning-oriented learners to statistical empirical testing led by Boshier who developed the Education Participation Scale, largely confirming Houle's typology, although adding some additional dimensions (see Houle, 1961; Boshier, 1971, 1985; Boeren, 2011). Other motivational psychologists such as Vroom (1964) and Deci and Ryan (2013) have been cited by scholars in the field of lifelong learning, recognising the importance of motivation in the decision-making process to participate in adult lifelong learning activities (or not). Motivation is also strongly linked with other individual attributes such as confidence, self-efficacy and attitudes towards learning. Scholars like Bandura (1977) have been cited in the scholarly literature and Fishbein and Ajzen's (1980) model of Planned and Intended Behaviour has also been discussed by Courtney, demonstrating the need for adults to develop a positive attitude towards learning before an intention to participate will be formed. Blunt and Yang (2002) have also worked on a specific statistical scale intended to measure adults' attitudes towards continuing education. Further understanding of participation from an individual perspective has also been offered in Tennant (1997), an award winning work that discusses the work of a range of developmental psychologists such as Vaillant (1977) and Levinson (1986). As an individual's needs and intentions change over

time, their work offers an answer to why participation in learning activities changes when getting older. Much of this work in relation to motivation has influenced scholars working on lifelong learning participation and examples of newer research drawing upon research tools such as statistical scales developed and disseminated within these core works can e.g. be found in Riddell et al. (2012) and Saar et al. (2013).

At the individual level, based on available statistics, it is not difficult to recognise that participation in adult lifelong learning activities is characterised by huge social inequalities (Boeren, 2016). As a clear example of a Matthew effect, participation is highest among groups of those who did already successfully participate in learning activities in the past and who did already succeed in having – mostly – white collar jobs. This notion of success can be explained from a sociological perspective as it is clear there is a correlation between one's own educational attainment and that of our parents (see e.g. Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Milburn, 2012; Brown, 2013). But also in relation to the issues described above, adults who failed in the compulsory education system might end up with a lack of motivation, low levels of self-belief and anxieties. Women are known to participate less in vocationally oriented non-formal learning activities, as are those born in another country than where they currently live (see e.g. Leathwood, 2006; Macleod, 2007; Wainwright, 2011). Understanding the individual level of lifelong learning participation thus also needs to pay attention to the dominant class representations in society and how this affects one's chances to be participant or not. While adult lifelong learning can be seen as a means to climb the social ladder and to advance one's life chances (see e.g. social mobility discussions by Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Milburn, 2012; Brown, 2013), reality demonstrates this idea has failed. Lifelong learning participation mainly serves those who can use it to stack up cumulative advantaged and not the ones who can use it to compensate for earlier missed life chances. These observations have also been discussed in relation to cost-benefit models and Rational Choice Theory (see Allingham, 2002). For those who have little to start with (e.g. educational level or money), the costs might be too high and the benefits too unclear to positively decide on taking part.

In short, there are thus a range of elements that can help in explaining why adults do or do not participate in lifelong learning activities and this individual level has received much attention in the literature during the 1970s and 1980s. However, it is important to recognise this is only one layer in a much more complex 'multilevel' layered model.

### *The meso-level: the role of education and training providers*

The above section has discussed the important role of individuals in understanding why adults do or do not participate in lifelong learning activities. However, it would be too easy to conclude that every example of non-participation is the result of a lack of motivation or because the person did not come from a strong socio-economic background. In fact, participation can only take place if both the individual and a suitable education or training offer successfully match. Providers who offer learning activities without exploring the 'market' for it or without undertaking a needs detection of the population they want to serve, might fail to attract learners. The OECD (2010) has also focussed on the need for education and training provisions for everyone in order to achieve more equity and equality in relation to lifelong learning. The structural components of learning providers and their courses might influence participation decisions, well explained by Schuetze and Slowey (2002) in the context of higher education. Institutions tended to offer courses using a 'traditional' mode, but have nowadays more shifted towards a 'lifelong learning' mode. The traditional mode reflects on campus learning, during fixed hours, in which learners have to follow a highly structured curriculum. They have little autonomy in how they want to organise their own learning process. A lifelong learning mode offers more flexible entrance routes, flexible study hours, e.g. supported by opportunities for

online or blended learning. Cross (1981) described that barriers preventing adults to participate are often situational and dispositional in nature, but also stressed the role of institutional barriers. Providers asking for very high enrolment fees or offering their courses at locations which are hard to reach are in fact creating their own barriers.

Focussing on education providers, it needs to be mentioned that a majority of lifelong learning activities in fact takes places within the workplace, representing non-formal training. Here as well, it can be argued that the meso-level is a vital component in the entire multilevel participation model. Some workplaces are more restrictive than others, e.g. those who adopt a much more expansive view (see work of Fuller & Unwin, 2011; Hefler & Markowitsch, 2012; Kyndt & Baert, 2013; Dammrich et al., 2014). For those being occupied in restrictive workplaces, their aim is to stick to their core task as much as possible and learning opportunities will only be provided if they are strictly task-focussed. In expansive working environments, more attention is being paid by employers to the overall development of the employee. Working in larger firms will also increase adults' chances to participate in training as these workplaces are more likely to have specific training units or human resource development units with specific training know-how. Again, these examples demonstrate that whether an adult will participate in lifelong learning participation or not is also determined by the environment in which s/he lives and the employer s/he works for. Later on, when bringing the three (micro-meso-macro) levels together, I will further elaborate on the strong links between these levels (e.g. highly educated adults who are more likely to end up in workplaces that are knowledge-intensive and therefore providing more opportunities to learn).

### *The macro-level: the situation of country variation*

Education policy nowadays is heavily linked with putting peer pressure on countries through a range of benchmarks and indicators individual countries need to try to match, which has been labelled as governance by numbers (Grek, 2009; Lawn & Grek, 2012). In relation to lifelong learning, as pointed out above, the European Commission wants 15 percent of the population to participate in at least one lifelong learning activity measured on a four weeks basis and the OECD strongly monitors lifelong learning participation in the annual Education at a Glance reports (European Commission, 2010; Desjardins, 2015). Statistical evidence is clear. Participation rates widely vary across countries and the highest participation rates are visible in the Nordic countries, followed by Anglo-Saxon countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Southern European countries score lowest, the West-European continental countries can be found somewhere in the middle (see Boeren, 2016). Data for developing countries are not available to the same extent as these countries do not participate in e.g. PIAACs Survey of Adult Skills. Understanding these differences is what can be labelled as the macro-level layer of lifelong learning participation and the term 'system level characteristics' has been used as well, e.g. by Groenez et al. (2007) although a range of other authors have explored the relationships between participation and country level characteristics as well (e.g. Dieckhoff et al., 2007; Roosmaa & Saar, 2012; Vogtenhuber, 2015). Governments have different regulations on how they organise their education system and the social policies they perceive as important (for an overview see Dammrich et al., 2014). Furthermore, levels of inequality in participation differ among countries as well (Roosmaa & Saar, 2010). The Nordic countries are characterised by a strong welfare system and pay attention to offering training to those in unemployment. The strengths of the economy, the level of innovation and investment in Research and Development are all known to correlate with lifelong learning participation rates. The huge variation in lifelong learning participation rates among countries also strengthen the argument that participation nowadays needs to be explored beyond the level of individual decision-making, as consistent higher participation rates in e.g. Sweden compared to e.g. Greece cannot be attributed

towards 'coincidence'. System characteristics cannot be ignored and even in research concentrating on one single country, it is recommended to put its' situation in perspective in relation to other lifelong learning systems.

### **Integrating three levels into a layered structure**

Generating insight in why adults do or do not participate in lifelong learning activities is an attempt that has been undertaken by a range of scholars and, as stated above, Courtney's book 'Why adults learn', published in 1992 has become an influential core work in the area (Courtney, 1992).

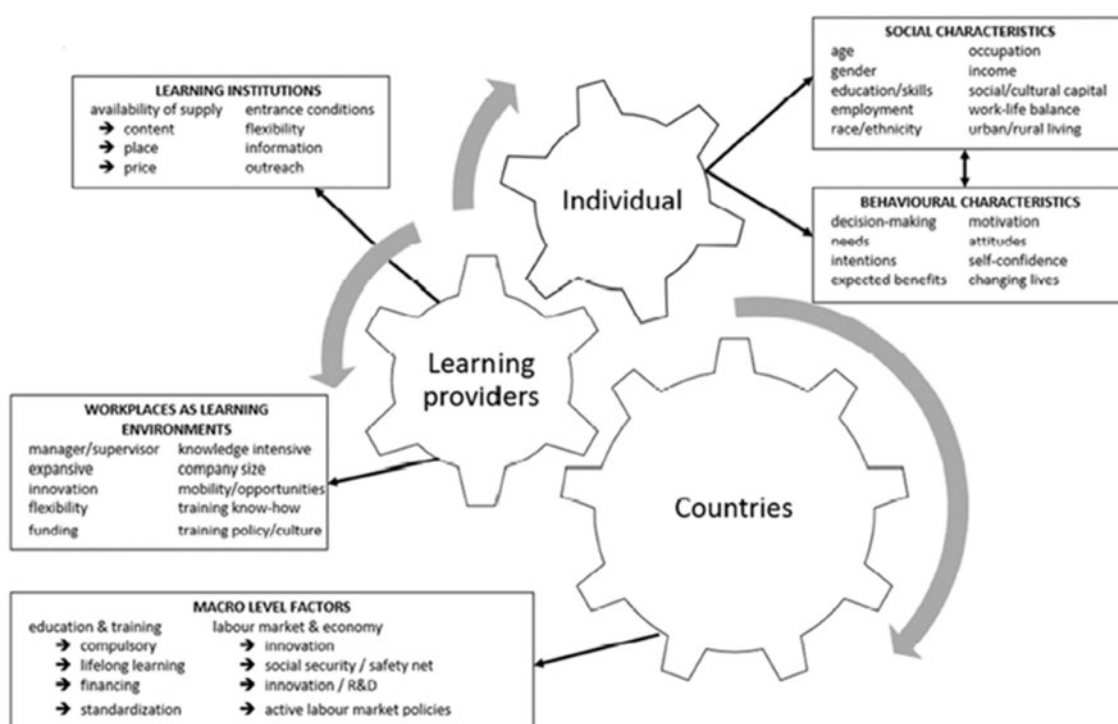
However, the field has now moved on and it has been one of the core aims of my own work during the past 10 years to make sure participation is now being understood as something which is much more complex than focussing mostly on adults' motivations. Research mentioned above explaining the different layers (micro – meso – macro) of lifelong learning participation have partly explored interactions between different levels: e.g. work

The overview of a new model that incorporates the different layers of the participation puzzle which I am about to present in this paper has been informed by reading about participation studies at the three separate levels in the first instance, but also through engagement with literature on structure and agency approaches, e.g. inspired by the work of Giddens (1984; 1998) and the ecological system of Bronfenbrenner (1979), a theoretical model following the layered structure of individuals surrounded by others and the wider environment, visually presented by nested circles, although not developed specifically in relation to lifelong learning. Within the lifelong learning literature on the theoretical understanding of lifelong learning participation, the more recent focus on the concept of 'Bounded Agency' as discussed by Evans (2007) and Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) have been important references as well. All these theories focus on the strong interactions between the individual agent and the structural elements in which these individuals have been surrounded. However, thinking about the role of educational institutions, characteristics of education and training providers as a separate layer has received fewer attention in these publications. Work by Baert et al. (2006) does have a stronger focus on the level of educational institutions, but remains vague at the macro-level, paying less attention to the role of system characteristics. In bringing together the three levels, I want to argue that one way forward of better understanding why adults do or do not participate might be to undertake more research that treats the subject as a multi-layered model.

The model, as can be found in Figure 1, consists of three cogs. The idea behind this model is that all cogs need to be turning around. If one cog blocks, participation will be much more difficult to achieve. Countries, I argue, have their important policies, including a range of education and social policies. In relation to education and training, they have a big say in how they want to configure the education and lifelong learning systems in their countries, how they want to finance it and how much standardisation and quality control they want to include, or whether they want to provide their education and training providers with a stronger level autonomy. As the lifelong learning system is strongly connected to the labour market, decisions made by governments at the level of labour market and economy are important as well (see e.g. Groenez et al, 2007). Countries with stronger active labour market policies and social security systems are known to be more sensitive to including adults into education and training as a means to increase their life chances. Also a strong investment in innovation and research and development is known to relate to higher participation rates, also found by Groenez et al. (2007)



FIGURE 1: Comprehensive Lifelong Learning Participation Model – author’s own work



Source: author’s own work

The decisions made at this macro-level are affecting the way in which education and training providers in these countries are being shaped. They might receive funding to reach a certain population or they are being bound by a range of rules and regulations limiting their autonomy in what they can achieve. However, providers might also be encouraged to take ownership and design their own structures and plans. This applies to both educational institutions and providers of workplace learning. Learning institutions need to be clear about the type of courses they offer, where it will take place, how much it will cost, what the entrance conditions are and how much flexibility learners will get in finishing the learning activity successfully. It is also a task of the institutions to inform adults well on the opportunities they have available for them and to actively reach out to them, especially important for the most vulnerable groups. Similar mechanisms are present at the level of the workplace. Some places are more knowledge-intensive than others, have more opportunities for employees to grow into their role and have a stronger training culture and training know-how. Furthermore, whether adults will take place in workplace learning is also going to be related to funding available for training activities. Unsurprisingly, this is likely related to the extent countries or governments are willing to subsidize companies in their country, e.g. in order to remain competitive in the global knowledge economy.

Shifting the focus to the learners, they are either nested in these learning providers, or they might not be participating at all. Whether these adults reach the status of participation is affected by their psychological characteristics such as motivation and attitudes, where they are in the life course, their needs and intentions, as well as their socio-economic and socio-demographic positions in life, taking into account participation in adult lifelong learning activities is a classed and gendered issue.

Furthermore, the psychological and social characteristics are unsurprisingly related to each other, e.g. through decrease of confidence in one's own abilities for those who are low-educated or who are employed in elementary jobs.

Overall, this Figure 1 has tried to integrate the fragmented knowledge available in the field of adult lifelong learning participation, making a contribution to the conceptual theoretical understanding of the field. It has attempted to bring together a range of elements at three different levels, which could be labelled as micro, meso and macro factors of lifelong learning. The overall aim of doing this work is to contribute to the discussion on how we can better understand why adults do or do not participate in lifelong learning activities. In order to be able to do this, I had to read work of various authors who have generated insight in parts of this puzzle and one of the difficulties has of course been to come to a fuller understanding of how all these different layers and pieces could possibly fit together. Overall, my wish for the future will be that people keep on working on fragmented elements of this model in order to come to an in-depth and detailed understanding of these issues, but to also have some scholars around who keep on exploring the broader picture and how elements can be integrated with each other. My own involvement in the European funded Horizon 2020 project 'ENLIVEN' (Encouraging Lifelong Learning for a Vibrant & Inclusive Europe) aims to dig deeper into the understanding of the meso level, but will also try to bring individual aspects, structural elements in relation to workplaces and learning providers and system characteristics of countries together (see <http://www.h2020enliven.org>).

Before concluding this paper, I will now turn my attention to some more concrete recommendations for future research in this area, taking into account the layered nature of lifelong learning participation.

### **Recommendations for future research**

The layered structure of adult lifelong learning participation is interesting from a theoretical point of view, but the question remains how we can operationalise this way of thinking into concrete research projects and scholarly activity. Especially in data driven projects, it will be key to make sure data are collected at all levels of the different layers and to make sure sound methodologies are being used to come to an integrative analysis. Below are a few examples of how research in the next few years in this area might evolve.

#### *Undertake more multilevel research*

My first recommendation is probably the most straightforward one, as the layered structure of the model presented in Figure 1 can be interpreted as a 'multilevel' model in which individual adults or adult learners might be nested in a range of education and training provisions, available in specific countries (see Kreft, 1996). Currently, existing large databases in the field of lifelong learning are generally weak in relation to the identification of specific education and training institutions, therefore lacking adequate information on the meso-level (see Boeren, 2016). While detailed information is available about individuals as well as some information about the learning activities they are involved in, we get to know little about these characteristics. E.g. in the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) and the Eurostat Adult Education Survey in the European context, specific information about formal learning activities does not go much further than the collection of the ISCED level and the subject of the course. While some work has been undertaken exploring the interactions between

micro and meso levels in the workplace (e.g. sHefler & Markowitsch, 2012; Dammrich et al., 2014). Other work, such as the papers by Groenez et al. (2007) and Roosmaa & Saar (2010; 2012) are excellent in terms of exploring macro level characteristics and exploring these in relation to individual participation, but do have little detailed information on meso level variables. In addition, qualitative research integrating these different levels is difficult to find.

### *Bring data of the different levels together*

Nowadays, in a society which is highly focussed on collecting data about everything, one can imagine a lot of information about both individuals, education and training provisions as well as education and social policy characteristics of countries are available. The major problem is that these data are available in a highly fragmented way. Data from PIAAC, AES, the Labour Force Survey and others cannot be linked together although people might have participated in more than one of them. Furthermore, it is impossible to link these data to people's employment and earning records at the longer term to see whether participation in lifelong learning activities is related to any differences in their life course. Clearly, there might be an ethical problem at play here as well, as adults might object to their idea that all detailed information about their lives would get linked into one big database (see Harron et al., 2016). So far, good examples of data linkages are thus not common, although the task would be extremely useful to better contextualise the situation of available education and training providers to individual adults. A plausible alternative might be for Eurostat or the OECD to set up a longitudinal version of the Adult Education Survey or the Survey of Adult skills. When Roosmaa and Saar (2010) write about inequalities in participation or when Vogtenhuber (2015) writes about the positive relation between quality of education in a country and the returns on training, there is an interesting reflex on underlying policies in countries. But would a change in policies lead to a change in participation? Longitudinal data would help us in answering this question.

### *Work towards a better understanding of geographical and regional components of participation*

In integrating the different layers needed to further increase our understanding of lifelong learning participation, the aim has been to point out that we cannot expect adults to participate in a learning activity if education and training offers are not available to them. Related to this problem, it might be useful to further understand how far adults are willing to travel to attend learning activities. Research mentioned above (e.g. Groenez, 2007; Roosmaa & Saar, 2010; Dammrich et al, 2014; Vogtenhuber, 2015) focus on the country level (or sometimes on bigger regions in countries like Flanders in Belgium or England in the United Kingdom) although it is expected that regional variation is present. Big cities will often have a quite broad offer in terms of lifelong learning, but does it matter where exactly the activity takes place and how do we account for people living in rural areas who want to participate but have fewer choices? What will be the role of online and distance learning in offering opportunities to adults living in remote areas? Again, existing large datasets that gather information about lifelong learning participation do not capture this information as scholars do not get detailed insight into e.g. postcodes to locate where adults are in location to the nearest education and training providers. Without a more structural insight in this issue, it will remain difficult to fully understand why adults do or do not participate in lifelong learning activities.

### *Undertake more research in developing countries*

One of the issues to take into account when attempting to integrate the fragmented evidence available at different levels is that most of the research available in the international literature has been undertaken in the Western developed world, as evidenced by the research evidence used in

this paper, all coming from the Western developed world. It would be interesting to see more participation research being conducted in the developing regions of the world, and to find out whether the findings of such scholarly activities would shift the focus of the current integrative participation model. Within this area, it will be important to keep an eye on work undertaken by UNESCO and other organisations that pay attention to the situation in the developing world. A wider range of countries and contexts would increase the chances of finding out more about the underlying hard-to-measure cultural aspects of learning. It would also include a more diverse range of political, economic, labour market and education variables in the mix.

### *Refine participation research in relation to different types of learning provisions*

As mentioned before, participation in adult lifelong learning activities is currently defined by international agencies as the sum of participation in formal and/or non-formal learning activities and it is also these categories that have been used by authors mentioned above (e.g. Roosmaa & Saar, 2010; Boeren, 2016). However, we do know that the most vulnerable adults in society do not participate often, but if they do participate, they tend to be more likely to be included in formal learning. On the contrary, people with high levels of education do have a much higher chance to receive opportunities for workplace learning (see e.g. Hefler & Markowitsch, 2012; Kyndt & Baert, 2013). It is therefore questionable whether it is a good idea to keep on merging all these categories and whether a further sound understanding of participation should involve reaching a much more detailed insight into the education and training architecture, providing an overview of existing structures. Although attempts have been undertaken to map structures, e.g. in Europe through the Eurydice overview of opportunity structures, it would be good to see how this available information could be integrated with other components of participation research.

## **Conclusions**

Through undertaking work in the field of adult lifelong learning participation, I aim to increase the understanding on why adults do or do not participate in adult lifelong learning activities, making a conceptual theoretical contribution. This paper has demonstrated that although the initial question of 'why adults participate' seems rather easy and straightforward, the answer is much more complex. I therefore hope in bringing together and integration my knowledge of participation studies as read and analysed over the past ten years will have been a valuable exercise, helpful for other scholars and prospective postgraduate students. The aim of drawing elements together in the model was to increase the level of visual representation in the field, available to a wide international audience.

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