

Interrelationship between low socioeconomic background, low education and low skills, resistance to learning - the necessity to learn for labour market participation and the implication for policy debate

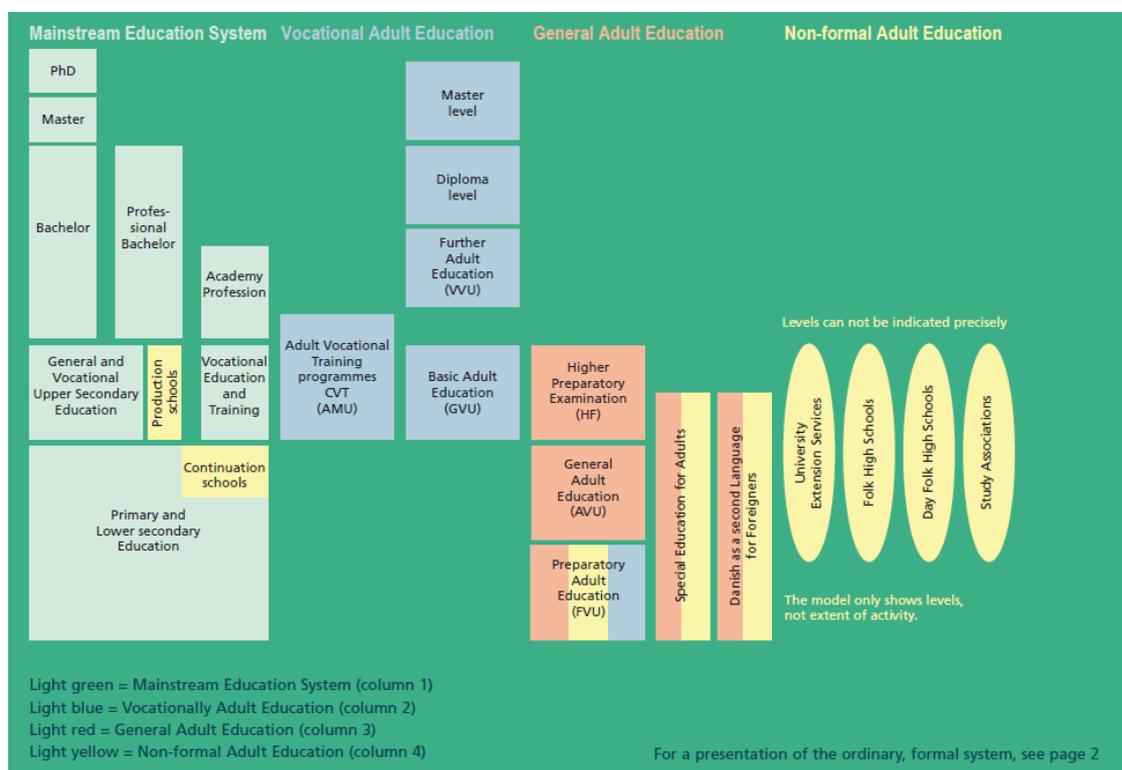
## *A review of Danish literature on findings, documentations and policy documents*

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### Background and aspirations for education

#### The Danish education system

The Danish education system can be divided into four main clusters as shown in the figure below. The possibilities related to lifelong learning range from non-formal adult education to qualifying general education and continuing vocational training. As illustrated in the figure below, the Danish adult education system exist in many ways as a parallel to the ordinary system.



The Danish adult education system (Danish Agency for Universities and Internationalization, 2011)

At the primary and lower secondary level there are two programmes within the adult education and continuing training system. Preparatory adult education (FVU) provides e.g. courses in basic literacy and mathematics. General adult education (AVU) provides lower secondary education for people who did not complete or need a supplement within particular subjects. Qualifications obtained in this program equvalate the ninth or tenth grade of the Danish primary school ("Folkeskole") (CEDEFOP, 2012, p. 15).

The adult education and continuing training system includes cf. the figure above three programmes at upper secondary level including higher preparatory examination (HF), basic (vocational) adult education (GVU) and adult vocational (continuing) training programmes (AMU). The adult education system provides three programmes at a tertiary education level. This includes short-cycle further (vocational) adult education (VVU), medium cycle diploma programmes and long-cycle master's programmes. These programmes are generally designed as part-time courses to incorporate individual experience and to allow participants to combine education and working life (CEDEFOP, 2012, p. 17). Besides the above mentioned programmes, the Danish adult education system includes a wide range of non-formal education programmes.

Figures from the central authority on Danish statistics (Danmarks Statistik) show, that the general level of education in Denmark (like in most other OECD-countries) has grown significantly the last 30 years. In 1981, 41 percent of the population aged 25-64, had basic school as their highest level of completed education. In 2012, this applies to 21 percent. During the same period, the percentage of the population with an education on upper secondary level as their highest level of education has increased from 33 to 43. Furthermore, the percentage of people with an education on tertiary level has increased from 15 to 32 from 1981 to 2012 (Danmarks Statistik, 2013, p. 11). Like in most other OECD-countries, the amount of young people who are neither in education nor in employment has risen in Denmark during the recent years. This development is primarily a result of a large raise in unemployment rates which has been extraordinary high in Denmark compared to the other Scandinavian countries and the OECD average (OECD, 2013, p. 1). The "unemployment crisis" is argued to have had an effect on school enrolment in Denmark. For example, the amount of 15-29 year-olds enrolled in education at the tertiary level rose by 12.1 percentage points during the crisis (OECD, 2013, p. 3).

### **Participation in post compulsory education and training among low skilled in Denmark**

The tradition for participation in post compulsory education and training is generally strong in the Nordic countries including Denmark. This includes the degree of participation in adult education among low skilled workers although the degree of participation for this group is lower than for other groups (Cedefop, 2013, Rosdahl, 2013). This tendency applies both to formal and informal learning activities (Dæhlen & Ure, 2009, p. 661). In the section below, relevant statistical data concerning low skilled workers' participation in post compulsory education and training is outlined.

In Cedefop's recently published indicator overview regarding data for vocational education and training policies (Cedefop, 2013) Denmark stands out with regard to a number of indicators related to "lifelong learning". Compared to 8.9 percent of the adults in EU, 32.3 percent of the Danish adult

population aged 25-64 participated in lifelong learning, defined as participation in education and training over the four weeks prior to the time when the survey was made (Cedefop, 2013, p. 25). Accordingly, Denmark stands out with the highest level of participation among low-educated adults in the EU (here defined as adults with a lower secondary qualification (ISCED 2)). Whereas 3.9 percent of the low educated adults in the EU participated in lifelong learning, the percentage of Danish low educated adults participating in lifelong learning in 2011 was 23.4, which is an increase from 18.4 percent in 2006 (Cedefop, 2013, p. 35). Correspondingly, register data retrieved from the Danish Ministry of Education shows an increase in the participation in publicly funded post compulsory education and training – also among the low skilled. In 2011, 24 percent of the 560.453 persons who participated in formal adult education had “primary school” as the highest level of education. In comparison 50 percent had finished upper secondary education (including IVET and high school) and 20 percent had finished higher education<sup>1</sup>.

A review of the registered participation in formal post compulsory education and training in Denmark made by The Economic Council of the Labour Movement (Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd) concludes that one fifth of the Danish population aged 18-59 participated in post compulsory education and training (VEU) in 2010. In general, Danes participate in 11 months of post compulsory education and training over a lifetime. In comparison non-skilled persons have 13 months of participation while skilled persons in average have 8.7 months of participation in post compulsory education and training over a lifetime (Pihl & Baadsgaard, 2012, p. 8). The primary reason for this is that non-skilled persons in average participate more in general education and courses. These general educational courses are often longer than e.g. continuing vocational courses (AMU), whose participants to a wider extent are skilled persons (Pihl & Baadsgaard, 2012, p. 8). Over a lifetime, skilled persons spend in average twice as much time on vocational education than non-skilled persons while persons with a higher education spend in average four times as much time on further education compared with both skilled and non-skilled persons (Pihl & Baadsgaard, 2012, p. 8).

In the Danish part of OECD’s “Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies” (PIAAC) (Rosdahl et al, 2013) a distinction between formal and informal post compulsory education and training is made. The results show, that non-vocational adult educational activities only make up a small part of the participation in post compulsory education and training courses among the population aged 16-64 (Rosdahl, 2013, p. 256). The study underlines that the probability for participation in post compulsory education declines the lower level of education and the higher the age of the population. These tendencies are also found regarding the extent of participation measured by how many hours the individuals spend on post compulsory education and training (Rosdahl, 2013, pp. 236 & 256). A large majority of those who state, that they participated in adult education indicate, that the course they attended was work-related, and happened with relation to the labour market and therefore only a minority of the participants is expected to have direct expenses connected to the activity (Rosdahl, 2013, p. 256). Regarding the connection between age

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<sup>1</sup> Data retrieved from the Ministry of Education’s “databank”. <http://www.uvm.dk/Service/Statistik/Databanken>

and participation in adult education, a study on barriers and levers for participation shows that older people do not feel the need for further education: *“We met a group of older low skilled employers heading for retirement. Their strategy was to ‘get safe ashore’ and regarded course activity and adult education as a disturbing element, something that would break the daily routine in a tedious way. They made an intentional deselection of training and education”* (Klindt & Sørensen, 2010, p. 56).

### Results from studies on motivation and barriers for participation among low skilled

The above mentioned characteristics regarding participation in post compulsory education and training among low skilled persons in Denmark and the Nordic countries illustrate that participation in post compulsory education and training is high compared to other countries. Research findings on barriers for low skilled persons' participation in adult education are described below.

Several Nordic studies have focused on low skilled workers aspirations regarding adult education and barriers for participation. The first study on this subject from 1976 emphasised elements that are especially related to (continued) personal educational development as dominant factors regarding participation (Rubenson et al, 1976, p 29). This is partially also the tendency in a study from 2004, where personal development is reported as the most dominant reason for participating in adult education (Trepartsudvalget, 2006b, p. 349). In this report however, lack of replacement for the employee attending a course or a study programme, time deficit and lack of financial compensation are also pointed out as dominant barriers in connection with low skilled workers qualification and course attendance (Trepartsudvalget, 2006b, p. 355f). However, the recent Nordic surveys on attitudes towards post-compulsory education and training show a tendency, that respondents attach higher importance to factors related to the working life with regard to participation. Development of competencies related to working life seems to be regarded as having great importance while factors such as resistance to learning and lack of confidence in own learning capabilities seems to be given lower priority. A Danish study on participation in vocational education and training among adults shows that especially the prospects of a job or better jobs and higher income are important factors for their participation. Inspiration from colleagues, managers and also friends and family are reported as prominent factors. Least factors related to a wish for personal development are also pointed out among the respondents (EVA, 2013, p. 11 & 67).

In the Danish part of the recently published PIAAC-survey, respondents are asked about their desire for further education. Approximately one third of the respondents indicate that they during the last twelve months have had a wish to attend to (additional) education or courses, what they did not do. The three most frequent reasons for not doing so are regarded as economic factors and they are in that sense related to the working life of the low skilled. 25,9 % of the respondents stated, that they were “too busy at work”, 14,1 % indicated “lack of support from employer” and 13,7 % stated that the programme was too expensive/could not afford the programme. The least frequently stated answer was “I did not have the prerequisites” (2,7 %) (Rosdahl, 2013: 248f).<sup>2</sup> Workload as the primary reason for not attending post compulsory education and training is also

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<sup>2</sup> 22,4 % of the respondents gave the answer “other reasons”.

found in both Danish and Norwegian surveys regarding this topic (Bekkevold et al, 2008; VOX 2007; Undervisningsministeriet, 2011, p. 22f).

Correspondingly, personal revenue-funding and also planning and support from employers are the most important conditions for participation in training among low skilled (Gravdahl & Ianke, 2010, p. 20). Other dominant reasons for why low skilled do not participate in post-compulsory education and training are e.g. perceived sufficient capabilities to master the work-tasks (VOX, 2007, p. 21), lack of relevant education programmes (Undervisningsministeriet, 2011, p. 23) and low knowledge about educational options (Bekkevold & Bergane, 2011: 15f). The results from the above referred surveys show, that extrinsic (structural) reasons for not participating in post compulsory education and training are more often given than e.g. private obligations and specific factors related to the learners' prerequisites.

Factors for participation in adult education related to the working life are more important among low skilled than among persons with a higher education (Bekkevold & Bergane, 2011, p. 10). Based on a Norwegian study on motivation among low skilled adults in formal continuing education Dæhlen & Ure (2009) show, that low skilled learners are more motivated by extrinsic incentives than other learners. However, the study does not show significant differences in different groups' average degrees of emphasis on intrinsic motivation. Based on their research findings they conclude that motivation among low skilled learners differs from the learners who participate in formal adult education and that low skilled adults more often than other learners feel obliged to participate (Dæhlen & Ure, 2009, p. 672f). Single parents with a low income seem more often inclined to engage in learning opportunities. The financial incentive in the transition an education might foster weighs more for this group (EVA, 2012, p. 27).

### **Factors affecting participating in adult education, motivation and barriers**

In connection with tripartite negotiations in 2006, an extensive investigation of strengths and weaknesses in the Danish post compulsory education and training system was made. In correspondence with the findings outlined above, economic factors are here stated as dominant barriers for participation in adult education. It is argued, that if salary is deducted from time spent on courses and education, job and financial stability is regarded more important than qualification through courses (Trepartsudvalget, 2006b, p. 356).

For low skilled there must be a direct link to their job situation in order for them to engage in qualifying course opportunities (Trepartsudvalget, 2006b, p.343). A wish to become better skilled at the job they already hold is a strong incentive to take responsibility for education or upgrading of skills. New tasks are an incentive for education and course participation among the low skilled (Trepartsudvalget, 2006b, p. 351).

Job security and/or the possibility of promotion are also stated as a reason for engaging in adult education (Trepartsudvalget, 2006b, p.351). Lack of literacy with the participants is a hindrance for attending learning opportunities in the first place. But when persons with low level of literacy participate, their benefits are just as high as other groups, assuming that they are motivated for

participation (Trepartsudvalget, 2006b, p. 292). Non skilled or low skilled employees are generally less motivated for participation in education and less initiating with regard to search for educational options. When low skilled workers engage, it is most often in relatively short and practice-oriented courses which give them further or updated qualifications for the position they already hold (Trepartsudvalget, 2006b, p. 345).

There is a U-shaped relation between age and participation among the low skilled. There is a weak tendency to the middle aged low skilled workers being more motivated to participate in courses than the younger due to interest in keeping their job or for transition purposes (Trepartsudvalget, 2006b, p. 351).

Illeris (2010) argues that motivation is a key factor to engage low skilled in education. A personal incentive is based on self-efficacy and the ability to motivate oneself or being motivated by people in a social or working life context. Motivations are rarely straightforwardly positive or negative but seem to be a mixture of encouragement and barriers (Illeris, 2010, p. 15). Starting an education is a challenge to the un-skilled and low skilled workers identity. They have to find new life orientations on top of some they have already established. Thus the development of a new identity simultaneously means discarding parts of the old (Illeris, 2010, p. 16).

Klindt & Sørensen (2010) underlines, that with regard to motivation for participation in adult education among the low skilled, it is important to note, that the low skilled are not necessarily *unmotivated* but rather they have their motivation linked to other doings, e.g. having a stable work life balance or doing their duty. Lack of motivation but also predisposition implies an intentional deselection of education. The difference is that lack of motivation implies an intentional deselection while lack of predisposition implies an unconscious deselection of up skilling or education (Klindt & Sørensen, 2010, p. 55). Also lack of success in early childhood education is a reason for not attending general adult education courses (EVA, 2005, p. 34). The study by Klindt & Sørensen indicates that there might also be a culture or identity as 'illiterate' to count for the lack of motivation or engagement in education. The study argues that many low skilled are not predisposed for choosing education. They do not value education as applicable or useful. In a way they regard education as a kind of betray against their own cultural background. Lack of success at primary school level has not left a positive memory with them either (Klindt & Sørensen, 2010, p. 11 and p. 56). Correspondingly, it is pointed out in the study report from the above mentioned tripartite negotiations, that education towards a different set of skills and transition to other employment seems to hold back the low skilled from participation in e.g. courses partly in fear of being socially excluded at the workplace (Trepartsudvalget, 2006b, p. 195).

The ambivalence in the situation, knowing that education is qualifying and on the other hand that engagement will leave the low skilled in a vulnerable situation, is challenging for the worker (Illeris, 2006, p. 20).

A study on vocational adult education and learners with a low level of literacy shows that among teachers at AMU Centres the impression is, that low skilled workers with lack of literacy avoid attending courses in order not to reveal their incompetence in literacy (EPOS, 2008, p. 8).

## Learning and identity formation

Danish experience with education of low skilled supported by government funds show that there is a positive effect as regards to the participants experience with education. Their participation in education motivates them to further education. Between 40 % and 50 % of the participants became more active in educational terms three years after participation. There is a positive connection between the length of educational training and the level of motivation (Larson, 1994, p.36f).

Through a narrative empirical study on working life narratives from low skilled, Kondrup (2012) shows that orientation towards participation in various learning activities is a result of working life experiences including e.g. participation in different kinds of learning activities, the experience of using knowledge and qualifications at work, and experiences on which types of knowledge and qualifications it is important to possess to have a meaningful work life, and to gain new work related knowledge, as well as employability in the future. These experiences are constitutive for the subject's self-understanding, for his working life and for his work options (Kondrup, 2012, p.286). The labour market situation, the actual conditions at the workplaces, and the unpredictability of the future mean that worries about staying employed turns to be counterproductive in relation to developing a proactive learning identity and to insist on the formal right to education (Kondrup, 2012, p.285). Based on the findings in the narrative study, Kondrup argues, that it is important to promote the perception among low skilled, that learning is useful in the sense that the knowledge and competencies can be used in the working life (Kondrup, 2012, p. 287).

## Learning outcomes

Research findings on outcomes and consequences of learning activities among low skilled relates to both personal development and economic factors. In the Danish results from the PIAAC-survey, a clear correlation is found between the level of education and basic skills in literacy, numeracy and problem solving meaning that lower educated show lower skills (Fridberg & Rosdahl, 2013a, p. 123f). At the same time, there is a clear correlation between the level of basic skills and income (Fridberg & Rosdahl, 2013a, p. 133f). Persons, who during the recent 12 months have participated in post-compulsory education and training, have in general higher basic skills (Fridberg & Rosdahl, 2013a, p. 140f), and this group have in average 4-5 percent higher wages than persons who did not participate in educational activities (Fridberg & Rosdahl, 2013a, p. 264). In addition to this, the results from the Danish PIAAC-survey supports an assumption that there is a positive correlation between the level of basic skills and social factors such as trust, perception of own political influence and participation in voluntary work (Fridberg & Rosdahl, 2013a, p. 277).

Results from the Danish labour market survey from 2007 concerning the experienced outcome among participants in post-compulsory education and training show, that these educational

activities promote competence development and mobility at the labour market. 47 % of the respondents indicate that their participation improved their opportunities for changing job, 29 % experienced improved productivity, 26 % experienced more responsibility and 23 % indicated that the participation implied that they obtained new work tasks (Undervisningsministeriet, 2011, p. 17).

### Implications for policy

The post-compulsory education and training system has an important role in the Danish flexicurity-system and in recent years, questions related to activity and participation among low skilled has gained significant political importance (Trepartsudvalget, 2006a, p. 18). Following the investigation on strengths and weaknesses in the Danish post-compulsory education and training system related to tripartite negotiations in 2006 (outlined above), political attention has been aimed at e.g. recognition of prior learning (Undervisningsministeriet, 2008) and focusing of the programs to relevant target groups (Undervisningsministeriet, 2009). The use of procedures to recognize prior learning have been growing in recent years (EVA, 2013). However the thus study shoes implies that there is still a potential for a wider use of such procedures and individually scheduled courses.

In a recent proposal from the Danish government a new vocational training programme for adults will be established. This vocational training for adults will be an educational possibility for adults without skilled training or experiences. At the same time low skilled with working life experience should have their prior learning considered. Adult educational focus will be prioritised. Underlying basis will be that their experience and their education must be structured according to their prior learning (Regeringen, 2013, p.57f).

In recent years, some structural changes have influenced the learning possibilities of the low skilled. In 2001 the general program "Preparatory adult education" (FVU) was introduced as a highly flexible option for the low skilled with regards to both the level and planning of the courses to improve their basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Although participation in this programme is growing, the activity has not yet met the political goals (EVA, 2012, p. 9).

As outlined above, economic factors are important for participation in adult education. In Denmark, there are different possibilities of government subsidized financial support for companies and their workers participating in adult learning. These arrangements include "jobrotation", where the company will get a government financed temporary worker (unemployed), while the (low skilled) worker participates in education. Furthermore learners can have governmental support while studying through e.g. "Voksenlærlingetilskud" while participating in VET, "SVU" when participating in general post-compulsory education, and "VEU-godtgørelse" while participating in vocational programmes (Arbejdsmarkedsstyrelsen, 2011).

The Danish Adult Education Centres (VUC) make up one of the core institutional arrangements with regard to providing general education programmes for low skilled persons. Participation in general adult education has changed in recent years. The traditional single subject structure is challenged

because more and more people use VUC as full-time education. The participants are in general younger than before, and the growth in the amount of full-time participants is particularly significant among the 16-29 year-olds. One of the reasons for this trend is, that regulation concerning young people receiving social security has been tightened up and social security is for young people now combined with an injunction to participate in education (so-called *uddannelsespålæg*) (Damvad, 2013, p. 5)

Personal and social barriers in connection with job and family seem to explain the lack of incentive towards upgrading of qualifications. In a Danish context outreach work with the purpose to engage the low skilled in education have been implemented in a great amount for the last ten years. The experiences tell that the way in which the participant is contacted is vital for engagement. A person closely associated with the low skilled is regarded as trustworthy in connection with building up motivation (EVA, 2012, p. 52).

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