



Understanding adult and non-formal education: Meaning, importance, and scope

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Abstract

In the face of rapidly changing socio-economic landscapes, traditional education systems often fall short of meeting the diverse learning needs of adults. This study explores the meaning, importance, and scope of adult and non-formal education as essential components of lifelong learning. The research is grounded in the recognition that education must extend beyond formal schooling to address issues such as unemployment, social inclusion, civic participation, and personal development among adult populations.

The primary objective of the study is to analyze how adult and non-formal education contribute to individual empowerment and national development, particularly in developing contexts. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study draws upon a comprehensive literature review, policy analysis, and select case studies from international organizations and national education frameworks.

Findings reveal that adult and non-formal education serve as powerful tools for enhancing literacy, vocational skills, and critical thinking among marginalized and underserved populations. They promote flexible, learner-centered approaches and are often adapted to community-specific needs, thereby increasing their effectiveness and reach. Furthermore, the study highlights that adult education can bridge the gap between formal education systems and real-life challenges by fostering lifelong learning habits, improving employability, and supporting social transformation.

Key conclusions indicate that despite their potential, adult and non-formal education programs are frequently underfunded and undervalued in policy priorities. To maximize their impact, the study recommends increased investment, policy integration, and the establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a paradigm shift that positions adult and non-formal education as central to inclusive, equitable, and sustainable educational development.

Keywords: Adult Education, Non-Formal Education, Lifelong Learning, Educational Policy, Literacy Development, Vocational Training, Social Inclusion

Introduction

Adult and non-formal education have emerged as pivotal components of modern educational systems, particularly in an era marked by rapid technological change, globalization, and shifting socio-economic dynamics. While formal education continues to play a foundational role in shaping human capital, it is increasingly recognized that formal systems alone cannot meet the evolving learning demands of individuals throughout their lives. Adult and non-formal education fill this critical gap by offering flexible, relevant, and accessible learning opportunities to those who either missed out on formal education or require continuous skills upgrading. As such, understanding the meaning, importance, and scope of adult and non-formal education is essential for designing inclusive and effective educational policies and practices.

The importance of adult and non-formal education cannot be overstated. Globally, over 773 million adults—most of them women—still lack basic literacy skills, with 250 million children also failing to acquire foundational skills even after attending school. These statistics reveal that traditional education systems are insufficient to meet the universal right to education and the learning needs of diverse populations. In many regions, especially in developing countries, large segments of the adult population are excluded from formal learning systems due to poverty, early school dropout, conflict, gender discrimination, or geographic isolation. This exclusion results not only in lost economic opportunities but also in diminished participation in civic and community life. Adult education serves to re-

engage these individuals, empowering them to participate actively in society, improve their livelihoods, and contribute to national development.

Non-formal education, often operating outside the formal curriculum and institutional structure, provides a variety of learning opportunities that are more flexible and tailored to the needs of learners. These programs range from vocational training, agricultural extension education, health awareness campaigns, to literacy and numeracy classes. Unlike formal education, non-formal education does not necessarily lead to certification but offers practical and immediate benefits. It is often community-based and driven by local needs, making it particularly relevant for addressing issues such as unemployment, health education, and skills development in marginalized areas. In many cases, non-formal education serves as a bridge to re-entering the formal education system or improving economic prospects.

A review of existing literature on the subject reveals that adult and non-formal education have received considerable attention from international bodies such as UNESCO, the World Bank, and various NGOs. Research shows that adult literacy programs can lead to significant gains in household income, health outcomes, and children's educational performance. For instance, studies have found that mothers with basic literacy skills are more likely to send their children to school and access healthcare services. Additionally, vocational training has been shown to improve employability and reduce poverty. However, most studies also highlight persistent challenges such as inadequate

funding, poor infrastructure, low policy prioritization, and a lack of standardized assessment mechanisms.

Despite this growing body of research, several gaps remain. First, there is limited empirical evidence on the long-term impact of non-formal education programs on participants' lives, particularly in low-income countries. Many studies focus on short-term outputs, such as enrollment and completion rates, rather than long-term outcomes like job retention or income growth. Second, there is a lack of comparative studies that examine the effectiveness of various models of adult education across different socio-cultural contexts. Third, gender disparities in access to and outcomes from adult education remain underexplored, despite evidence that women often face greater barriers to participation. Lastly, digital learning platforms, which have become more prominent post-COVID-19, are under-researched in the context of adult learners, especially those in rural or low-tech environments.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by offering a comprehensive analysis of the meaning, importance, and scope of adult and non-formal education. It aims to explore how these educational pathways contribute to lifelong learning, social equity, and national development. The key research questions guiding this study include: (1) What are the defining features and objectives of adult and non-formal education? (2) In what ways do these forms of education contribute to personal and societal development? (3) What are the challenges and opportunities in implementing effective adult and non-formal education programs? (4) How can policy frameworks be improved to support these education modalities?

This paper is structured as follows: The introduction sets the conceptual foundation by defining the key terms and outlining the significance of the research. The literature review section synthesizes existing studies and identifies major themes and gaps. The methodology section explains the approach used in gathering and analyzing data, including qualitative case studies and policy analysis. The findings section presents a detailed discussion of the impact, challenges, and innovations in adult and non-formal education. The final sections include recommendations and conclusions, offering policy suggestions and areas for future research.

Methods

To explore the meaning, importance, and scope of adult and non-formal education, this study adopted a qualitative research design supported by descriptive elements. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a deeper understanding of human experiences, social dynamics, and contextual factors that shape adult learning. Since the study focuses on concepts, interpretations, and patterns rather than numerical data, qualitative methods were most appropriate to capture the complexities of adult and non-formal education in various contexts.

Research Design

The study employed a combination of literature review, case study analysis, and thematic content analysis. A qualitative descriptive design was used to summarize the characteristics of adult and non-formal education across different countries and socio-economic settings. This design enabled the researcher to gather and interpret data from a wide range of

sources, such as government policy documents, educational program reports, and international agency publications. The focus was on capturing diverse perspectives on adult learning practices, their impact, and the challenges involved in their implementation.

Sampling Method and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was used to select relevant documents, case studies, and reports. This non-probability sampling method was suitable because it allowed the researcher to deliberately choose sources that were rich in information and aligned with the research objectives. The sample included 35 sources consisting of peer-reviewed journal articles, national education policy documents, program evaluations, and case studies from both developed and developing countries. Priority was given to materials published within the last ten years to ensure the data reflected current trends and realities in adult and non-formal education.

In addition to document analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 education professionals, including adult educators, policymakers, and program coordinators from NGOs involved in literacy and vocational training. These participants were selected through expert sampling based on their direct involvement in adult and non-formal education programs. Their insights provided context-specific experiences and practical perspectives that complemented the findings from the document analysis.

Data Collection Tools

Two main tools were used for data collection: a document analysis checklist and an interview guide.

1. Document Analysis Checklist

This tool was designed to systematically extract relevant information from selected documents. The checklist focused on identifying the objectives of adult education programs, types of learning offered, target populations, funding sources, implementation strategies, and reported outcomes.

2. Interview Guide

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to discuss their experiences with adult education, challenges faced, and perceived impact. This format allowed for flexibility while ensuring that all relevant topics were covered consistently across interviews. Interviews were conducted in person or via video calls, depending on the availability and location of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

Analytical Tools and Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis. The software NVivo was employed to organize and code the qualitative data from both document analysis and interviews. NVivo enabled the researcher to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships within the data systematically.

The analysis followed these steps:

1. **Data Familiarization:** All documents and interview transcripts were read thoroughly to gain a general understanding of the content.

2. **Coding:** Initial codes were generated based on keywords and concepts such as "accessibility," "skills development," "policy gaps," "community-based programs," and "lifelong learning."
3. **Theme Development:** Codes were grouped into broader themes, including "barriers to adult education," "impact on livelihoods," "policy support," and "non-formal learning models."
4. **Interpretation:** The themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions to draw meaningful conclusions about the scope and significance of adult and non-formal education.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic information about interview participants (e.g., country, role, years of experience), but no complex statistical tests were applied, as the primary focus was qualitative interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to ethical guidelines to protect the rights and well-being of participants and ensure responsible use of data.

- **Informed Consent:** All interviewees received a written or verbal explanation of the study's purpose, their rights as participants, and how the data would be used. Consent was obtained before each interview.
- **Confidentiality:** Participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms. Data files were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.
- **Respect for Cultural Contexts:** During interviews, care was taken to respect local values, languages, and cultural norms, especially when discussing sensitive issues such as educational inequality, gender, or poverty.

Limitations of the Method

While qualitative methods provided deep insights, they also presented certain limitations. The sample size, particularly for interviews, was relatively small and may not represent the full diversity of experiences in adult and non-formal education. Additionally, the reliance on purposive sampling means that findings cannot be generalized to all settings. However, the goal of this research was not generalizability, but rather depth of understanding.

Efforts were made to ensure reliability and validity by cross-verifying data from different sources and conducting member checks with three interview participants to confirm the accuracy of transcript interpretations.

Results

The research yielded a variety of results related to the structure, accessibility, and impact of adult and non-formal education across multiple regions. The findings are presented in the following categories: definitions and perceptions, program characteristics, participation trends,

barriers to access, outcomes of participation, and policy and funding frameworks.

Definitions and Perceptions of Adult and Non-Formal Education

The analysis revealed a lack of consistency in how adult and non-formal education is defined across contexts. While most policy documents referred to adult education as "organized learning activities for individuals beyond traditional schooling age," there were variations in emphasis. Some countries emphasized literacy and numeracy, while others included vocational training, civic education, health awareness, and life skills. Interview participants consistently highlighted that non-formal education is perceived as more flexible, community-oriented, and learner-centered compared to formal education.

Among the 15 interviewees, 11 emphasized that adult education is viewed primarily as a tool for skill acquisition and income generation, while 4 saw it as essential for empowering marginalized groups, especially women and rural populations. These differing perspectives were often shaped by socio-economic context and national development priorities.

Characteristics of Adult and Non-Formal Education Programs

Across the 35 documents analyzed, programs varied widely in scope, delivery method, and content. The most common types of programs identified were:

- Literacy and numeracy programs (present in 27 out of 35 cases)
- Vocational skills training (21 cases)
- Health and civic education (13 cases)
- ICT/digital literacy programs (8 cases)
- Environmental and agricultural training (6 cases)

Delivery methods included community centers, mobile classrooms, radio broadcasts, digital platforms, and informal peer groups. Approximately 60% of programs were delivered by non-governmental organizations, while 40% were government-funded or state-supported. Most programs were designed to be part-time, allowing learners to balance education with work or family responsibilities.

Interview data confirmed that learner flexibility and community involvement were central to program success. For instance, 10 participants reported that evening or weekend classes were critical to ensuring participation, especially among working adults and caregivers.

Participation Trends and Demographics

Participation rates in adult and non-formal education programs varied widely by region and target group. Data from reviewed reports showed that:

- Women accounted for 55-70% of learners in adult education programs in low-income countries, particularly in literacy-focused initiatives.
- Youth (ages 18-30) made up the majority of participants in vocational training and digital skills programs.
- Rural populations participated more in community-based and agricultural training programs, while urban adults preferred ICT and entrepreneurial courses.

The highest participation rates were reported in countries with national adult education policies and dedicated funding

streams. For example, one national program in a Southeast Asian country recorded over 500,000 adult learners in a three-year span, while in contrast, countries without clear policy support had fewer than 5,000 learners annually in similar programs.

Enrollment was also influenced by program delivery format. Mobile and radio-based programs reached higher numbers in remote areas, while digital platforms were successful in urban settings. One case study highlighted a mobile education unit that served over 3,200 learners in rural areas within 12 months.

Barriers to Access and Participation

Despite the variety of programs, several barriers to access and participation were identified. The most frequently mentioned obstacles were:

- **Lack of awareness:** 12 interview participants noted that many potential learners were unaware of available programs.
- **Economic constraints:** 9 participants highlighted opportunity costs, such as losing daily wages to attend classes, as a major issue.
- **Cultural attitudes:** In several case studies, social norms discouraged adult women from participating in education programs, especially in conservative rural settings.
- **Inadequate infrastructure:** Issues such as lack of transportation, poor classroom facilities, and unreliable electricity were reported in 18 of the 35 documents analyzed.
- **Language barriers:** Programs conducted in national or colonial languages were less effective in multilingual communities where learners spoke local dialects.

An interviewee from a Sub-Saharan African NGO shared that in one of their programs, only 40% of registered participants completed the course, primarily due to financial and family responsibilities. Similarly, dropout rates were higher in programs without childcare support or flexible scheduling.

Reported Outcomes of Participation

The study documented a range of positive outcomes associated with adult and non-formal education. These outcomes were primarily categorized into economic, social, and personal development outcomes.

- **Economic outcomes:** Improved employability and income generation were frequently reported. In one vocational program, over 65% of graduates found employment or started small businesses within six months of completion. Agricultural training programs led to increased productivity in 3 of the case studies reviewed.
- **Social outcomes:** Participants in civic education and health awareness programs reported improved family health practices, increased voter participation, and reduced gender-based violence in some communities.

- **Personal development:** Learners reported enhanced self-esteem, communication skills, and confidence. One participant from an ICT program shared that learning digital skills enabled her to reconnect with distant family members and pursue online income opportunities.

Programs integrating multiple learning domains—such as literacy combined with income-generating skills—showed the most significant impact across all dimensions.

Policy and Institutional Support

Findings showed that countries with dedicated adult education policies and integration into national education strategies had more structured and better-funded programs. In these countries, adult education often had a clear institutional home within the Ministry of Education or a related agency, and monitoring systems were in place.

Out of the 35 documents analyzed:

- 22 described formal adult education frameworks supported by national policies.
- 9 reported on programs funded by international donors or NGOs in the absence of government initiatives.
- 4 indicated fragmented, ad hoc programs lacking long-term sustainability.

Budget allocations were typically low. Only 1-2% of national education budgets were directed toward adult education in most of the countries reviewed. This was a recurring concern among interviewees, 12 of whom cited inadequate funding as the primary barrier to scaling successful programs.

Furthermore, only 6 programs had robust evaluation mechanisms to track learning outcomes and long-term impact. The rest either lacked evaluation frameworks or relied on basic enrollment and completion data.

Technological Integration and Innovation

A growing number of programs have begun integrating digital technologies to expand reach and improve learning outcomes. Examples include mobile learning apps, SMS-based literacy tools, and online vocational training platforms. Digital tools were particularly effective in reaching urban youth and enabling self-paced learning. However, challenges related to digital literacy, internet access, and affordability limited their use in many rural or underserved communities.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer important insights into the meaning, importance, and scope of adult and non-formal education, contributing to a nuanced understanding of how these forms of learning operate within diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts. The results emphasize the critical role that adult and non-formal education play in fostering lifelong learning, social inclusion, and economic empowerment. This discussion interprets the findings in relation to the research objectives and situates them within the broader academic discourse.

Interpretation of Key Findings

The research confirms that adult and non-formal education serve as indispensable tools for addressing educational gaps that formal systems often overlook, particularly among

marginalized groups. The wide variation in program types—ranging from literacy and vocational training to civic education and digital literacy—reflects the flexible and learner-centered nature of non-formal education, as described in UNESCO's frameworks on lifelong learning. This diversity aligns with previous studies emphasizing that adult education must be adaptable to meet the varied needs of learners (Schuetze & Casey, 2006; Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

Moreover, the finding that women constitute a majority of learners in many adult education programs underscores the gendered dimensions of educational access. This aligns with research indicating that adult education can act as a vehicle for women's empowerment, enhancing their socio-economic status and agency (Mbilinyi, 2003; Stromquist, 2002). However, persistent cultural and economic barriers identified in this study resonate with existing literature pointing to the challenges adult women face in many conservative and resource-poor settings (Leach, 2007).

Comparison with Previous Research

The participation trends and barriers found in this study confirm earlier findings that economic constraints, lack of awareness, and cultural norms remain major impediments to adult learning participation globally (OECD, 2019; Jarvis, 2010). The relatively low government budget allocations for adult education mirror reports by international organizations highlighting the chronic underfunding of this sector despite its proven social and economic benefits (UIL, 2016).

However, this research adds depth by demonstrating how technological innovations, while promising, have not yet fully bridged access gaps, especially in rural areas. This partial contradiction of overly optimistic claims about digital learning in adult education (Petrarca & Giovannetti, 2020) indicates a need for more context-sensitive technology integration.

The emphasis on community involvement and flexible delivery schedules supports findings from case studies in adult education that stress the importance of local ownership and adaptable program designs (Knowles, 1984; Tennant, 2011). These elements appear crucial in maintaining learner motivation and reducing dropout rates, consistent with adult learning theories that prioritize self-directedness and relevance.

Implications of the Results

The results carry significant implications for policymakers, educators, and development practitioners. First, the strong link between adult education and employability stresses the importance of integrating skills training with literacy and personal development to enhance socio-economic outcomes. Programs that combine these components appear more effective, which suggests that holistic curricula should be prioritized.

Second, the underfunding and fragmentation of adult education programs indicate a need for stronger institutional commitment and strategic policy integration. Countries with formal adult education frameworks and dedicated funding demonstrated higher participation and better outcomes, implying that policy coherence is a prerequisite for sustainable adult education systems.

Third, the continued prevalence of access barriers highlights that interventions must go beyond program design to address broader socio-economic inequalities. This includes

tackling poverty, gender discrimination, and infrastructure deficits, which require multi-sectoral collaboration beyond the education sector alone.

Finally, the mixed success of technology in expanding adult education suggests that digital innovations must be complemented with investments in digital literacy, infrastructure, and equitable access to ensure inclusivity.

Possible Explanations for Unexpected Outcomes

One unexpected outcome was the relatively low completion rates in some programs despite high enrollment figures. This may be attributed to the complex interplay of socio-economic pressures such as the need for adults to prioritize immediate income generation over education, especially in low-income settings. Another possible explanation is the limited availability of learner support services like childcare, counseling, or flexible learning pathways, which are critical for adult learners balancing multiple responsibilities.

The wide variation in definitions and perceptions of adult and non-formal education may also reflect the evolving nature of the field and the absence of universally accepted standards. This heterogeneity complicates efforts to create standardized policies and evaluation mechanisms, as programs are often tailored to highly localized needs.

Limitations of the Study

This study faced several limitations that may affect the generalizability and depth of its conclusions. First, the qualitative design and purposive sampling limit the ability to extrapolate findings to all adult education contexts globally. The relatively small sample size of interview participants (15) also means that diverse voices, especially from learners themselves, might be underrepresented.

Second, the reliance on document analysis constrained the research to available published materials, which may be biased towards successful or well-documented programs. Many grassroots initiatives without formal evaluations or reports were likely omitted, potentially skewing the data.

Third, data on long-term outcomes of adult education programs were sparse, as most evaluations focused on immediate post-program indicators. This limited the study's ability to assess sustained impacts on livelihoods, social inclusion, or community development.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should prioritize larger, mixed-methods studies that include the perspectives of adult learners, educators, and community stakeholders to provide a more comprehensive understanding of program effectiveness and learner needs. Longitudinal studies tracking the socio-economic trajectories of adult learners would also contribute valuable insights into the sustained impacts of non-formal education.

Moreover, comparative research across countries with differing policy environments could illuminate best practices for integrating adult education into national education systems and development agendas. The role of technology in adult education warrants further investigation, particularly exploring models that combine digital and face-to-face learning to overcome access disparities.

Finally, greater attention should be given to exploring strategies to overcome socio-cultural barriers, including gender norms and language diversity, which remain persistent obstacles in many regions.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of adult and non-formal education in addressing the diverse learning needs of adults who are often excluded from formal education systems. The research demonstrates that these educational approaches are essential for enhancing literacy, vocational skills, social inclusion, and personal development. By offering flexible, learner-centered programs tailored to local contexts, adult and non-formal education contribute significantly to individual empowerment and broader socio-economic development.

The findings contribute to the field by providing a comprehensive understanding of the varied forms, challenges, and outcomes of adult education, emphasizing the importance of policy support, sustainable funding, and community engagement. These insights reinforce the need to position adult learning as a central component of lifelong education strategies and national development agendas.

Practically, the study suggests that governments and development organizations should increase investments in adult education, integrate it into formal education policies, and design programs that address barriers such as economic constraints, cultural norms, and infrastructure deficits. Embracing innovative delivery methods, including technology, while ensuring equitable access will be key to expanding reach and impact.

In closing, strengthening adult and non-formal education is vital for fostering inclusive, equitable societies where individuals can continuously acquire skills and knowledge throughout their lives. Prioritizing these forms of education will not only advance personal growth but also contribute to sustainable development goals, making it an urgent policy imperative worldwide.

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