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Faculty of Education  
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P. O. Box MP 167  
Mount Pleasant  
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**Tel:** (263-4) 303271 Ext. 1601

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# FACTORS INFLUENCING PARTICIPATION IN ADULT EDUCATION AT THREE COLLEGES IN ZIMBABWE

Patricia Tsitsi Zinyama

*Department of Adult Education, University of Zimbabwe*

## **Abstract**

*The sudden upsurge in student numbers seeking skilled related further education courses at Zimbabwe polytechnics and technical colleges prompted this study to search for the factors driving adults from all walks of life to participate in education. The study employed the survey method and data was collected through the use of mailed questionnaires, analysis of student enrolment records and informal interviews. The study looked at the whole population of 474 adult learners registered at the time of the investigation. 41% of the respondents were from Harare polytechnic, 36% from Bulawayo polytechnic and 23% from Mutare technical college. The results revealed that students participate in adult learning mainly to fulfill their personal goals related to their lifestyles and aspirations and to increase knowledge as well as to fill in idle time.*

## **Background to the study**

With the introduction of the 1990-1991 Economic Structural Adjustment Programme, Zimbabwe Polytechnics and Technical Colleges have witnessed an increasing number of students from all walks of life enrolling for non-formal adult education courses. Harare and Bulawayo Polytechnics were selected for the study because they are the premier tertiary colleges of higher learning in Zimbabwe. Mutare technical college was included to incorporate the views of students at a relatively smaller institution to increase the extent to which the results of the study could be generalized. The three colleges are strategically located to geographically cover the eastern, central and western regions of Zimbabwe which divide the country into three indigenous ethnic groups i.e. the Manyika of Mutare, the Zezuru of Harare and the Ndebele of Bulawayo.

The adult non-formal education courses that attracted the population included the following disciplines:

— pattern cutting and design, motor mechanics, dressmaking, hair dressing, computer literacy, auto-electrics, cake-icing and bookkeeping. These courses are run either on a full-time or part-time basis at three levels of competency i.e. elementary, intermediate and advanced stages. No formal research has been carried out so far to explore reasons for participation in these courses.

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What goal oriented factors influence participation in adult education?
2. What activity oriented factors drive students to enroll for further education?
3. What learning oriented factors influence learners to learn?
4. To what extent do responsibilities held by adult learners, sources of information about the course and frequency of attendance per week influence participation?

## **Literature review**

### *The aims and motivations of adult learning*

According to Townsend (1978) the aim of adult education is to help individual man, woman and youth make the best of life i.e. to help each individual develop his/her potentialities to the fullest extent possible. Education develops in an individual, an enquiring mind and provides him/her with opportunities to learn from what others do. Growford (1994) asserts that many professions require continuing education for licensing or certification at a time when the business community is facing a virtual explosion of new technology, equipment and machinery. Employees must train and retrain, in order to maintain a base level of competency to operate new generations of technology. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) further argue that many adults engage in education that is work related and many other courses and self-study geared to various aspects of family life, for two major motives i.e. to improve occupational performance or job prospects and to enhance competency or satisfaction in the roles of parent spouse. Army (1994), basing her views on American adult education experiences recognized education as a cure for all society's problems such as poverty, racism,

and even in some cases illness could be eradicated with the help of education. Information breaks down barriers, changes behaviours and offers alternatives to those in distress, whatever cause. Army (1994) further argues that as older industrial systems crumble, jobs require greater skill levels than ever before resulting in the need for continuous, lifelong learning so that new skills can be continuously introduced and thus new jobs created. Acquisition of new skills also enables individuals to change careers several times during the course of their lives thus enhancing their sense of self-fulfillment or self-actualization.

In the studies carried out by the National Opinion Research Centre in America, Henry and Basile (1994) identified the most significant motive for participation in adult education as to secure a new job or to advance in a job. Some of the reasons for participation were tied to major changes in life, social influences and environmental as well as individual characteristics and attitudes. In line with these views, Tenmant (1990), Cross (1981) and Knowles (1980) acknowledge that adult education's role is to help people grow, promote movement beyond the familiar and unquestioned and to help institutions enhance the lives of employees, clients and individuals in society.

The social roles of adults present themselves within the context of a multiplicity of societal, civic and household chores that adults must fulfill throughout their lives forcing them to seek opportunities for further education as a coping strategy. According to Duke (1994) the dominant shared purpose of adult education has always been to enhance individuals' life opportunities, widen their horizons, empower participation and alter the nature of the society of which they are or become an active part. Thus education, generally, is not seen as an end in itself but as a means to an end. In a study by Beder (1990), which focused directly on motivation in Adult Basic Education among IOWA students in America, ten basic factors influencing participation in Adult Education included: self-improvement, family responsibility, church involvement, job advancement, economic need, educational advancement and urging by other (Beder, 1990, p.208).

Summarizing the reasons for continued learning by adults, Rogers (1996, p 11-12) stated:

- a) "many adults learn because the occupation they pursue requires learning whether this occupation is in the home or in the fields or in a place of work and whether it is paid or not, changes in the work or general involvement or changes in the individual's functions or status will call for new knowledge, new skills and new understandings for new attitudes and new patterns of behaviour"

- b) "secondly, as people grow older, they enter into new social roles, new relationships which may have little to do with their 'occupations'. They marry, become parents, come to accept responsibility for elderly parents instead of being dependents of those parents. They adopt new positions in society as householders, tax payers or voters, political members of a district, region or state. Moreover changes in social customs frequently call for a redefinition of these roles e.g. one generation of parents is not always the model for the next so that learning is required as each generation defines and executes these roles for themselves."
- c) "Thirdly, as adults grow older, their interests and their attitudes towards the world around them change and their focus shifts and their sense of and desire for meaning alters. These changed perspectives and concerns will again lead to learning changes. New interests emerge as earlier ones decline and beliefs which once seemed adequate may no longer appeal while others come to hold their place with greater or less intensity."

Commenting on the social context of adult learning, Lovell (1980) says that adult learning is of the incidental kind and it happens as a consequence of the individual engaging in his/her day to day activities without any deliberate or conscious decision on his/her part to learn something new.

Since this paper seeks to analyze the factors influencing participation in adult non-formal courses at 3 selected institutions in Zimbabwe i.e. Harare Polytechnic, Bulawayo Polytechnic and Mutare Technical College, it is pertinent at this point to establish a common understanding of non-formal education as a branch of adult education. Borrowing from Rogers' (1996) contributions, non-formal education can be viewed as purposeful and designed to meet the needs of individuals as they arise when facing new challenges or coping with new situations. A desire to learn directs the actions of adults to seek out what they need to learn at any convenient adult education providing agency. The adult non formal education courses that attracted the population under study included the following: pattern cutting and design, motor mechanics, dress making, hair dressing, computers, auto electronics, cake icing, welding and bookkeeping.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

The survey research design was used to collect data. This was supplemented with informal interviews carried out with the principals and the heads of relevant departments of the three institutions studied. Records containing information on adult non-formal courses in which the target population was enrolled at the time of the study were also reviewed.

*Sample*

The 474 respondents in this study were composed of the students who had enrolled for non-formal adult education courses at the Harare, Bulawayo and Mutare technical colleges at the time of the study. These respondents constituted 70% males and 30% females at either elementary, intermediate or advanced levels of study in their special areas of interest. The table below shows respondents involved in the study by type of course.

**Table 1 Composition of Respondents by Field of Study**

Type of course	Number of students	Percentage
Pattern Cutting and Design	59	33.5
Motor Mechanics	87	18.4
Dress Making	71	15.0
Hair Dressing	59	12.4
Computers	39	8.2
Auto-electronics	14	2.9
Cake-icing	32	6.7
Welding	9	1.9
Bookkeeping	5	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>474</b>	<b>100</b>

*Instruments*

Structured questionnaires were used to investigate goal, activity and learning oriented factors influencing adult learners to participate in learning. Other personal factors that have a bearing on participation like family responsibilities, age, education and occupational status were also explored using the same instrument. Besides, enrolment records were reviewed to retrieve information on types of non-formal adult education courses and enrolment figures for each course. This instrument was supplemented by informal interviews held with the heads of adult education departments at Harare, Bulawayo and Mutare technical colleges.

## Results

The results of this study are presented and discussed using Houles (1982) typology of adult orientation to learning under the following variables:

- a) learning oriented factors
- b) Goal oriented factors
- c) Activity oriented factors

**Table 2 Reasons for participation in Adult Education.**

n = 474

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<b>LEARNING ORIENTED</b>		
Increase knowledge	200	42.2
<b>GOAL ORIENTED</b>		
Cope with high cost of living	61	12.9
Find a job	38	8.0
Self sufficiency at retirement	20	4.2
Start a business	20	4.2
Acquire a practical skill	6	1.3
Design exclusive cloths		
<b>ACTIVITY ORIENTED</b>		
These include a myriads of aspects:		
occupy myself, find something challenging,		
teach others, self actualization,		
and forced by life	10	2.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>474</b>	<b>100</b>

## Discussion

According to Houles (1982) learning oriented individuals seek knowledge for its own sake, goal oriented learners use education as a means of accomplishing fairly clear-cut objectives, and activity oriented people participate because they

find in the circumstances of leaving a meaning which has no necessary connection with the content or announced purposes of a course. This study observed a close relationship and interplay among learning and goal oriented factors in influencing participation hence the discussion does not attempt to separate the two.

The main reasons for participation cited in Table 2 by the majority of the adult learners were to increase knowledge (42.2%), cope with high of living (25.1%) and find a job (12.9%). When learning is viewed as an empowering process Friere (1972), it can be safely assumed that the participants who said that their reason for enrollment was to increase knowledge had also intentions to find a job or advance in the present job in order to get a salary or better pay respectively so as to be able to cope with high cost of living. Other related coping strategies would obviously be acquiring a practical skill cited by 4.2% of the respondents, possibility to facilitate in running of a business venture cited by 4.2% or designing exclusive clothes cited by 1.3% of the respondents.

These findings are not surprising considering that this study was carried out during the period when Zimbabwe was going through the Economic Reform Programmes that started 1990-1991 to date. The reform policies intended to improve efficiency and effectiveness in both the public and private sectors have resulted in the need to rationalize operations and consequently downsizing of staff through retrenchments or forced early retirements. Thus both the employed and unemployed have been forced by situations to seek alternatives for sustaining or earning a living.

These findings are in line with the results of studies carried out by the American National Centre for Education Statistics in Henry and Basile (1994) which identified one significant factor for participation or enrollment in adult education as to secure a job or advance in a job cited by 64% of the participants. However studies by Aslanina and Brickwell (1980) in Henry and Basile (1994) shows that reasons for participation are not consistent since they cannot be divorced from the environment within which the participants live. Aslanina and Brickwell (1994) in their study discovered that the reasons cited by 83% of the respondents were tied to major social changes in the life of respondents such as getting old, having been divorced or getting married. In another study by Morstain and Smart (1978) the results indicated no specific goal or purpose for enrollment in adult education among some participants. Others were attending for reasons directly connected with their current or further interests and some were mainly concerned with creating or improving their social interactions and personal relationships. Some attended courses in order to escape the routine and monotony of everyday

life and to change their lives in some way while the other group attended courses to expand their intellectual horizons.

The other question raised in this study was the extent to which other factors such as responsibilities held by participants, sources of information about the course, frequency of attendance per week influenced individuals to enroll for the courses as reflected in Table 3 below:

**Table 3 Other factors influencing decisions to participate in adult learning (n = 474)**

The table below presents answers raised by research question 4 which sought to find out the extent to which other factors such as responsibilities held by participants, sources of information about the course, frequency of attendance per week influenced learners to enroll for adult education courses.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<b>MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES AT HOME</b>		
Housekeeping	310	65.5
Supervising homework	21	4.4
Gardening	19	4.1
Knitting/sewing	16	3.4
Car repairs	4	0.8
Studying	4	0.8
Unspecified	100	21.1
<b>FREQUENCY OF COURSE ATTENDANCE</b>		
One day per week	246	51.9
Two days per week	147	30.0
Three days per week	1	0.2
Four days per week	30	6.3
Five days per week	43	9.1
Six days per week	1	0.2
Unspecified	11	2.3
<b>SOURCES OF INFORMATION</b>		
Press advertisements	362	76.4
Friends/Colleagues	83	17.5
Parent/Guardian	29	6.1

The results reveal that the majority of the participants (65.5%) spent their time at home involved with housekeeping. Lovell (1980) observes that between the

age of 20 to 40 years, many women will be at home learning how best to cope with bringing up children and some will be pursuing a career as well. This is the time individuals have plenty of energy for all their interests and responsibilities and they undertake formal and non formal educational and training activities.

In terms of frequency of course attendance, one and two day course attendance per week were most popular compared to courses demanding three days or more per week. (51.9%) of the respondents were enrolled in one day course per week and 30% in two day classes per week. Time of attendance is influential to enrollment once an individual has developed an interest to learn. According to Henry and Basile (1994) an individual might be interested in a type and content of a certain course but if the time the course is held interferes with another responsibility such as a job, supervising children or siblings, gardening or car repairs as reflected in Table 3, the individual would not be able to enroll at certain times

In terms of sources of information about the courses, it is evident from the findings that the majority (76.4%) of the respondents found out about the course from press advertisements and 17.5% knew about the course from friends and colleagues at work while 6.1% were advised to attend by a parent or guardian. According to Henry and Basile (1994), sources of information available to potential students influence motivations and decisions to participate. Brochures, newspapers, radio, television etc. foster course participation more than friends, colleagues, parents or guardians as indicated in Table 3 of this study. This suggests that the process of acquiring supplementary information about course options through written materials has the potential to transform an initially weak motivation to enroll into a stronger one by eliminating the necessity to seek out additional information.

## **Conclusion**

The main reasons for participation in adult non formal education courses at Harare, Bulawayo and Mutare colleges cited by the majority of the participants were to increase knowledge (42.2%) cope with high cost of living (25.1%) and find a job (12.9%). Using Houles Typology in Darkenwald and Merrians' (1982) typology of motivational orientations to learn, the most influential factors were learning and goal oriented suggesting that the major 'push' factors to learn were economic rather than leisure.

The array of reasons portrayed in Table 2 reveal that there is lack of consistency in the pattern of factors that motivate and influence individual decisions to participate in non-formal adult education suggesting that studies on participation by adults in learning cannot be divorced from the socio-economic and cultural or environment forces within which individuals find themselves.

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