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How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

Barnes, S.-A., Thomsen, R., Weber, P. C., & Barabasch, A. (2016). Learning and career transitions of low-qualified adults in Europe. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 44(2), 141-144.
doi:10.1080/03069885.2016.1150588

Publication metadata

Title:	Learning and career transitions of low-qualified adults in Europe
Author(s):	Sally-Anne Barnes, Rie Thomsen, Peter C. Weber & Antje Barabasch
Journal:	British Journal of Guidance & Counselling
DOI/Link:	http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2016.1150588
Document version:	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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Editorial: Learning and career transitions of low qualified adults in Europe

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This work was supported by Cedefop under the contract AO/RPA/GRUSSO-ABARA/Narrative of learning from the low skilled/022/12.

Editorial: Learning and career transitions of low qualified adults in Europe

This special issue comprises articles based on a pan-European research project (CEDEFOP, 2016) on career transitions of low qualified and low skilled adults, their approaches to learning and experiences with career guidance and counselling. Narrative interviews with 105 people from the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy and Poland were undertaken, half of which were repeated after a 12 month period. The research provides new perspectives drawing upon individual narratives to illustrate the variety of career trajectories, as well as the unique challenges and opportunities experienced by low qualified adults.

European surveys show that post-compulsory education qualification of adults is not equally distributed and that many adults in industrial societies lack basic skills and relevant labour market related competences (OECD, 2013). The question of how to support low qualified adults to re-engage in learning in order to improve their educational attainment, mobility and employability has long been on the policy agenda (Council of the European Union, 2008). The European Commission continues to focus on improving labour market mobility of low qualified adults through engagement with educational programs and career guidance services (CEDEFOP, 2008, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). These programmes and services are viewed as having a positive impact on low qualified adults (Moreno da Fonseca, 2015). However, institutional frameworks shape the ways in which adults engage in learning in order to prepare themselves for learning and work transitions. Their considerations depend on the nature of the education and training system, access to welfare supply for career reorientation and retraining and access to career guidance (CEDEFOP, 2014; Brown et al., 2010; Bimrose & Brown, 2014). This special issue provides perspectives on individual life circumstances that further explain participation in lifelong learning, whilst deepening our understanding of the relationship between policy contexts and institutional constraints. Findings confirm the need to differentiate policy support for various target groups.

Across this special issue, there is a clear argument for context sensitive career guidance and counselling that takes account of the multiple systemic and structural forces that impact and influence individual career trajectories. The need to move to theories and frameworks that meet the demands of a changing labour market has long been accepted by the careers profession. From an analysis of the narratives, it is evident, however, that individual and wider societal contexts are still neglected in the design of services. From the articles presented, we can gain knowledge about structural forces and trajectories to inform policy, practice and theory development. It becomes evident that interconnectedness of different aspects of individual lives is important, so context sensitive guidance comes to the fore.

In their article, Bimrose, Mulvey and Brown focus on the experience of career guidance for low qualified adults facing mid-career changes in England and France. They argue this particular group need high quality career support and ask why appropriate approaches appear not to have been deployed. The analyses includes an examination of the positive aspects of learning, career support for young people and employment support for adults; the latter revealing interesting differences across the two countries. It concludes that context sensitive career guidance frameworks include approaches and methodologies that allow for the integration, knowledge and understanding of the broad social and economic factors that impact individuals career trajectories. Career adaptability and perseverance are advocated as important skills. The challenge, however, is supporting the development of these skills throughout life especially in cases where they were not developed early on.

Weber, Kochem and Weber-Hauser frame their analysis around 'career enactment', a concept driven by the boundaryless career theory approach. Based on analyses of the German sample, they develop a typology of different approaches to enact a career. Further topics, such as the role of perceptions about influential factors within career development and the interrelationship of individual experiences and institutional constraints are addressed. These include negative experiences in school either with poor performance, negative educational results or negative feedback. It concludes that low qualified adults face numerous struggles throughout their lives and

that public employment services are rarely consulted for support. This raises questions about how provision could be designed and delivered to address the particular needs of this group.

Mariager-Anderson, Cort and Thomsen focus on motivational aspects regarding the educational and career attainment of low skilled adults in Denmark. The way people perceive and shape their motivation for educational participation and career is routed back to public policies, regulations and labour market regimes. The authors illustrate how individual freedom for shaping education and work has changed. They show how individual motivation varies over time, ranging from internal, self-determined motivation to impersonal, not self-determined motivation. By linking such motivational aspects to policy discourses, the article avoids a simplified individualistic view and opens up insights into more policy driven problems.

The concept of low-learning scar is used by Tomassini in his analyses of the narratives from low qualified Italians. The low-learning scar is considered to be both a large-scale structural problem, as well as an individual problem. Tomassini introduces the concept of reflexive resilience as a broad-scope pragmatic meta-competence that allows individuals to reflect on their own lives. This, he argues, is highly important especially when individuals face challenging conditions. The narratives are analysed in terms of small clusters; marginality, excellence, opportunity, difficult transition, geographical marginality and disregard for formal learning. The article focuses on individual engagement with learning and a discussion on how reflexive resilience can be considered as a fundamental meta-competence. It concludes by promoting career guidance and counselling aimed at individual concerns, projects and *modus vivendi*.

Sprlak explores how low qualified adults have engaged with the lifelong learning system and careers guidance and counselling in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic in his article. Data show that these two countries have a unique context where low proportions of the population have attained lower secondary education qualifications compared to other EU countries. In this context, a shortfall in policy support to motivate people to engage in learning and development activities becomes evident. Career guidance and counselling for adults in these countries is relatively new and figures depict a poor picture in terms of those using and being able to access the services. The narrative analysis reveals how individuals exploit career opportunities, while only a few reflect on their careers. It concludes that there is a need to provide career guidance and counselling in order to address attitudinal and situational barriers to learning, recognise informal learning and focus on longer-term career planning.

In their article, Minta and Kargul explore the different experiences and perceptions of career guidance services by low qualified adults from Poland. Their narrative analysis focuses how low qualified individuals reflect on their experiences of career counselling and other kinds of support. They point out that despite growing career counselling services, this group does not feel that their needs have been met. There is a lack of trust in public institutions due to the way this group feels treated as helpless and not as agents of their life. Low qualified adults have poor experiences of services and believe that they are not contributing to the redemption of their pragmatic problems. It concludes that low qualified adults have more difficulties to design and follow complex and long lasting life plans.

Using career construction theory, Brown analyses the narratives of low skilled workers in terms of four dimensions of career adaptability (concern, control, curiosity and confidence). He focuses on the narratives of three groups of individuals; those who remain in low skilled employment, those moving into more highly skilled employment and those who believe their career has stagnated. He argues individuals, who have a low level of qualifications, envisage and explore their future and possible future selves very differently. The extent to which they also take responsibility for and control their development vary, as well as their confidence to solve problems and succeed. Brown concludes that career guidance has a key role in encouraging the development of skillsets amongst the low skilled by supporting reflection and changes in work context. He argues for career adaptability as a means to secure progression.

Barnes and Brown focus on the pathways, future orientations and aspirations of low skilled adults in England. Analyses of the narratives reveal that many struggle in school and with gaining work experience and lack confidence in their abilities. Significant others in the form of parents, tutors and managers, are identified as supporting career exploration and the development of self-efficacy as a resource for progress. By examining the role of significant others in the narratives, career and learning support personalised to the individual is not only evidenced, but also found to play a key role in creating successful pathways through learning and work, and re-engagement with learning. It concludes that careers guidance is key to combatting negative experiences and raising aspirations for further learning.

This issue highlights how initial education is crucial in shaping further learning and development. In many cases, personal problems are related to a social situation that does not enable individuals to build up self-efficacy and resilience to carry through a complex and demanding life. Whilst, peers, parents/carers and other supporters can play an important role, the need for context sensitive guidance and personalised services is evident. These services should mediate between individual situations and institutional demands. This includes the personalisation and adjustment of support to the specificities of individuals as well as to their social and economic resources. While some low qualified adults need institutional support, practical information or advocacy approaches, many need guidance that allows them to balance their biography, their competence, interest and motivation. Such specialised services can help individuals to raise aspiration, combat negative experience from initial education and realise a change in their life. Overall, there needs to be more flexibility in the labour market and educational and vocational systems. Training, re-training and career guidance policies should cover different social needs and be based on different capacities in terms of learning ability, resilience, reflexivity, motivation and resources.

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