Individual learning accounts

Renkema, Albert Geert

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2006

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):
For years educational policy makers have attempted to explore means to stimulate participation in lifelong learning of adults; and particularly in certain groups in society who are traditionally not inclined to take up learning activities after their initial education. Today’s society creates a dilemma for policy makers. On the one hand, they are confronted with the demands of a competitive knowledge economy, and on the other with an ageing population. In the near future, a smaller labour population will have to keep up with the requirements of the knowledge economy. Therefore, older working adults should be encouraged to stay employable for longer. This, however, is not sufficient. In order to create a sustainable knowledge economy, policy makers are facing the challenge to motivate the adult labour population to ‘keep up-to-date’ with technological developments and changes in the work environment, also after initial education.

Educational policy makers recognise that changes in the work environment and the development of the choice lifespan mean that learning is not confined only to initial education. Adults, either active or inactive on the labour market, should be encouraged to engage in lifelong learning and should be facilitated in order to combine working and care responsibilities with learning activities. Following experiences in the United Kingdom, in the beginning of this century, the Dutch government facilitated a number of organisations in society to explore modalities to implement an instrument that provides individual workers with an amount of money, to which employee, employer and third parties can pay a contribution in either time or money. This instrument, called the Individual Learning Account (ILA), aimed to provide the individual worker with a certain extent of power to make decisions about competence development and employability. Furthermore, the ILA was intended to stimulate labour organisations to implement employee-centred methods to connect company needs to individual development needs. What is more, ILA was intended to provide financial encouragement to traditional non-participants in lifelong learning in order to gain positive schooling experiences.

Even so, the question can be raised whether ILA will indeed succeed in motivating workers to take responsibility for their competence development and to formulate learning needs. If so, the question is whether in practice ILA can overcome tensions between developmental needs of individual workers and corporate strategic plans of labour organisations. An additional question is whether the individual worker, provided with such an individual financial arrangement, will actually find the proper educational provision that meet these learning needs.

In order to explore if ILA is indeed a ‘magic potion’, in this study we have tried to bundle these issues in one overall research question. This study concentrates on the effect of ILA on voluntary plans of employees with few qualifications to engage in formal or non-formal educational activities.
We will refer to these voluntary plans as **educational intention**. In this study we will take the theory of Planned Behaviour of Ajzen (1991) as the point of departure. The effects of Individual Learning Accounts on the intention to engage in formal or non-formal educational activities and behavioural predictors, such as attitude, perceived behavioural control and perceived learning culture, will be examined. To this model we have also added an indicator of perceived social support of the direct work environment. In order to stimulate workers to think about their professional development and to engage in learning activities, some authors have suggested the construction of a ‘dialogue’ on the work floor. The central question of this study is: *“What effects does the ILA instrument have on educational intention of workers with few qualifications?”*

In this study we focus on workers with an initial qualification level of secondary vocational education or lower. Initial education refers to the education followed before entering the labour market. Before we construct the conceptual model and explain the methodology, we will elaborate on the origin of the idea of ILA. In the next chapter (chapter 2) the policy background will be discussed, from which the idea of ILA emerged. In chapter 2, we will also expound on issues regarding educational policy, raised by the European Union and other supranational organisations. We will subsequently discuss the development of Dutch educational policy from 1998 up to the initiation of the experiments with ILA. Finally, we will compare the experiences gained by Dutch experiments with the earlier ILA project in the United Kingdom (Payne, 2000; Geertsma, Westerhuis, Doets, Groenenberg & Jansen, 2004).

Chapter 3 discusses the position of individual co-finance mechanisms, such as ILA in corporate training policies of labour organisations. This chapter will elaborate on changing work environments and changing job requirements, and the necessity some employers feel to engage employees in corporate training and learning decisions as a consequence. These changing job environments require competencies such as self-management and adequate learning and thinking strategies. Furthermore, we will discuss a number of critical comments on employee-focussed competence and career interventions in organisations. In this chapter we will explore how individual intention or willingness to learn can be optimally facilitated in labour organisations.

Chapter 4 will critically reflect on the portrayal of employees as self-directive and intrinsically motivated to learn. This chapter discusses a number of research and theories on influences outside of and within the individual that encourage or impede participation in learning activities, especially in the case of employees with low qualifications. We will also elaborate on the concept of educational intention, which is central to this study. Finally, this chapter will introduce a number of behavioural determinants that predict intention based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour. This chapter will present the research model of this study and the basic assumptions of the impact theory behind ILA.

Chapter 5 will outline how the conceptual model will be employed in order to answer the central research question of this study. This chapter outlines the research design, constructed on the basis of this impact assessment study. This study includes two sub-studies in two different sectors of labour: the ILA experiment in elderly care organisations, and the voucher experiment in technical installation companies. The programme objectives and the backgrounds of the experiments in these two different sectors of industry will be elaborated. The main part of this impact study is formed by a quantitative survey with two measurements. In addition, participants in the experiments and
persons in charge of the projects with ILA in their organisations are interviewed. This chapter outlines how these two methods of data collection and processing relate. Furthermore, this chapter discusses how the conceptual model outlined in chapter 4 will be put into operation in a research instrument.

Chapters 6 and 7 respectively will elaborate on the outcomes of the experiment with learning vouchers in technical installation companies and the ILA experiment in elderly care organisations. In these chapters we will expound on the outcomes regarding the effects of both experiments on the intentions of workers to engage in training activities, and on their perception of the dialogical learning culture.

The final chapter (chapter 8) will tackle some issues that rise from the results and conclusions of this study. In this chapter we will critically reflect on policy intentions that lie at the basis of the experiments with ILA. Furthermore, this chapter will discuss whether ILA can be considered a strategy for lifelong learning in further policy-making. We will critically discuss the development of a nationwide arrangement, as well as the development of HRD interventions with individual financing aspects in labour organisations. This chapter will also examine the research model used in this study and how this study contributes to the discourse on participation in lifelong learning.
1. Lifelong learning in a changing society