8 Conclusion and discussion

In this study, we have assumed that the experiments with ILA will have a positive effect on the intention of employees with a low level of education to participate in (non)formal lifelong learning activities in the future. We also expected ILA to have a positive influence on the underlying behavioural determinants of educational intention, such as educational attitude, perceived self-efficacy and perceived dialogical learning culture. This chapter will critically examine these hypotheses. The first section briefly discusses the outcomes of both experiments. These outcomes evoke discussion about the strategic and political utility of the ILA instrument. Therefore, the second section of this chapter discusses the extent to which ILA can be considered an appropriate instrument for stimulating the individual demand for lifelong learning. We will also expound to what extent ILA could be used as a strategy for lifelong learning by government and labour organisations. In the last section of this chapter, we will look back at the model used for this study, paying special attention to the meaning and utility of the concept of dialogical learning culture.

8.1 The impact on educational intention

For this study we employed two distinct labour contexts in which mainly lower educated workers are employed: organisations for elderly care and SMEs in the technical installation sector. In both sectors of industry, experiments were running with Individual Learning Accounts. In the elderly care experiment, ILA did not have effect on the long or short-term intention of employees to engage in learning activities. The experiment with ILA itself probably did not provide these workers with significant educational experiences. In this sector of employment, educational intention and attitude is likely to relate to certain aspects in biographical narratives of workers. A considerable number of workers decided to engage in training later on in life within the framework of trajectories that help them to re-enter labour market. This affected their perspective on learning and training. The choice for career development activities later on in life most likely had a positive effect on motivation towards learning and education. Therefore, the experiment with ILA itself did not have much effect on educational motivation.

The biographical narratives of elderly care workers are quite different from those of the employees in the installation technology sector. This sector consists mainly of male employees who entered labour market at a young age (18 or 19 years of age) and most of them have remained working, if not in the same company, at least in the same sector. An important difference with the elderly care sector is that older workers took part in post-initial schooling activities to a considerably less extent than their younger colleagues. In some cases, they worked their way up to a more responsible position mainly by experience. Older employees especially in this sector have a low
attitude towards learning activities in training settings. Individual learning vouchers, however, seem to have had a modest positive effect, especially on the educational intention of older workers. Their affective attitude seemed to relate to positive experiences with coaching and guidance provided by the employer regarding positive experiences with schooling followed with ILA. The Individual Learning Account gave older workers in particular the opportunity to think about learning and development in their work.

For elderly care workers, the perception that they had more freedom to make their own educational choices positively related to their attitude towards engaging in training activities. In both experiments, the participants had significantly more control over the decision making process than the control group. Nonetheless, controllability did not influence the intention to engage in educational activities. Most likely this lack of predictability is due to the construct of controllability we employed in this study. We operationalised controllability as the role of the employer/immediate supervisor in the decision making process. This construct rather relates to the rate to which the behaviour (participation in education) is actually volitional. Therefore, this construct instead gives an indication of actual controllability rather than perceived controllability (see: Ajzen, 2002).

A worker can, for instance, have a very positive attitude towards following courses and even express the intention to engage in learning activities, but ultimately does not follow a course, because the employer is not willing to meet the costs or grant educational leave. In this case, the employer decides what courses should be followed, and when. This actual controllability does not necessarily directly affect intention.

Furthermore, positive experiences with following courses gained by employees in more autonomous functions in technical installation companies, related significantly with their intention to engage in schooling activities. ILA gave these employees the opportunity to gain positive experiences with participation in courses. The question is whether an individual financial stimulus is essential. It is very likely that aspects of the intervention that are not necessarily related to the ILA instrument, such as the opportunity to gain positive schooling experiences and personal coaching and guidance, have a decisive (or at least a catalytic) effect on educational intention.

8.2 ILA as a strategy for Lifelong Learning

In this section, we will critically examine the utility of an individual finance mechanism such as ILA as a strategy to stimulate participation in lifelong learning. Over the past five years, the Dutch government has shown particular interest in stimulating individual educational demand. According to the Policy Agenda on Lifelong Learning of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture; participation in lifelong learning will increase if the learner has influence over his own educational decisions (Ministry of Education, 2002). This suggests that potential learners are willing and able
to formulate their educational demand, but lack proper financial resources to actually sign up for a course. According to Payne (2000), ILA is located in politics that portray the individual citizen as goal-orientated and reward-expecting. These politics depict the VET sector as a market and consequently learners as consumers who base their educational demand on rational choice. Individuals are viewed as self-entrepreneurs who “run their own life as a small business” (Wagner, 1994, p. 164). Hodkinson & Sparkes (1995) pointed out that the idea of technically rational choices does not have value when analysing decision making processes of employees in the framework of instruments such as ILA. This study confirmed that the decision making process of employees with low levels of education is not so much determined by a rational needs assessment, but influenced by a complexity of subjective factors, such as subjective norm, educational attitude, perceived self-efficacy, and situational factors such as prior learning experiences and the influence of others. These underlying factors are difficult to influence directly through a (temporal) social intervention.

However, in the Lifespan Saving Scheme, proposed by the current conservative-liberal coalition, investment in lifelong learning is even more up to individual responsibility. Within the framework of this scheme, workers are offered the opportunity to not only save time and money for educational leave, but also for early retirement. What is more, in the political debate the function of the lifespan saving scheme to stimulate lifelong learning is gradually shifted to the background. According to Hake (in press), the discourse of financing arrangement for lifelong learning was scattered, on the one hand by the government’s emphasis on individual options, and on the other by opponents of these schemes (left-wing parties and trade unions) who wished to use life-course savings for collective early retirement arrangements. Although the government aims to centralise the individual learner, it is unlikely that such a scheme will encourage the intention of individuals to engage into (non-) formal lifelong learning activities.

Up to the year 2000, educational policy with the intention of stimulating lifelong learning was mainly aimed at stimulating labour organisations and social partners to invest in human resources. As discussed in chapter 2 and 3, the focus of attention of both government policy and strategic policy of some labour organisations shifted to more individual regulation of lifelong learning decisions. Recently the president of the Dutch Council for Higher Professional Education (HBO-raad) expressed his worry about lifelong learning policy in the Netherlands in the Dutch morning paper Trouw. He argued that this policy is hardly effective and proposed that employees should be obliged to participate in employability training (Feenstra, 2006). This obligation should be linked to the right of dismissal, so that employers are interested in financially supporting training during the career. Although we do not bear the opinion that mandatory learning will be a sinecure, we do subscribe the importance of employers to (financially) stimulate lifelong learning. First and foremost, labour organisations can play a role in enabling the individual to engage into learning. Along with Payne (2000), we conclude that, in order to stimulate individual learning demand, personal guidance and coaching is important. However, the rate to which the individual worker has his own say in training...

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8 This arrangement could be regarded as a substitute of the Career-Break-Funding Law, introduced in 1998. This law was aimed intended to stimulate and facilitate people in the combination of work and private life through a collective funding arrangement (Nederlands Economisch Instituut, 2000; Renkema, 2002). In contrast to the Career-Break-Fund, the individual saving scheme would be an individual opt-in arrangement.
and development is likely to be influenced by the type of organisation in which the worker is employed. This study revealed different outcomes relating to the two different labour contexts. The elderly care organisations in this study resemble the typology of a professional bureaucracy, insofar as these organisations distribute tasks and processes according to standard professional profiles. The qualifications pertaining to these profiles are determined outside the organisation, by ROCs and National Organisations for Vocational Training. Labour in these organisations is strictly divided in function groups according to specific qualifications. These structural features could have two implications for the viability and effectiveness of ILA. In the first place, the functional organisational structure of elderly care organisations would lack the necessary flexibility to allow innovations in their training policy. Because training and development policy is professionalised in these organisations, most learning activities offered on the job are mandatory activities inside the framework of corporate training policy. Although there is in principal latitude for the individual’s own initiative with respect to training, most likely these initiatives are often frustrated by bureaucracy. The question is whether the individual desire for skill development is compatible with the function profile in which the worker is employed. Individual development or employability needs might not be in line with the organisational training and development strategy. In other words, it is questionable that organisations with bureaucratic features are supportive environments in which self-regulated learning is stimulated. In the second place, there is often a considerable physical and psychological distance between the HRD professional and the employee. In practice, employees are not inclined to consult HRD professionals with individual questions and issues concerning learning and training, but rather address to support sources closer at hand.

On the other hand, SMEs in the technical installation sector have a simple organisational structure and often a short-term perspective on company or employee development is predominant. These companies lack a professionalised training and development policy. It is more likely that this type of companies inhibits the flexibility to implement HRD innovations such as ILA. Interaction among colleagues and between worker and immediate supervisor are often less formal in small labour organisations. Although there are few possibilities for mobility, individual employees have more latitude to express the need to broaden their skills, or to learn more about a particular aspect of their job. Company development plans can be considered as an instrument to give training and development policy a more strategic character. These plans can serve as point of departure for the implementation of PDPs.

The role of the employer in SMEs within the framework of ILA confronts us with a dilemma. On the one hand, employers are often not willing to invest in formal training trajectories for their employees that lead to civil effects (see also: Van den Berg, Meijers, & Sprengers, 2005). This raises the question of whether the idea of ILA as a corporate HRD instrument is viable. Whenever ILA is implemented as such, it can easily be employed for the benefit of the employer. This study showed that some employers conceal important information from employees about the individual aspect of the instrument. On the other hand, this study confirms that more distant impartial coaching is not
Individual Learning Accounts: a strategy for lifelong learning?

Effective; employees with a lower level of education experience this distance as a barrier to make use of the guidance available. What is more, Bosley et al. (2001) argue that in the framework of ILA, the pro-activeness of such a coach (or ‘case manager’) is more important than impartiality. Perhaps a Sector Training Fund can play a decisive role in overcoming this dilemma. Van den Berg, Meijers and Sprengers (2005) argued that a strategic focus on the individual worker as a target group in the activities and instruments of the training funds could lead to a more long-term and efficient allocation of financial resources. They argue that at the moment the interests of the Sector Training Funds coincide with the interests of employers, given the fact that most employees prefer to do overtime than follow schooling. Along with more emphasis on the individual employee as a target group, social partners should nonetheless invest in coaching and guidance facilities. Apart from Sector Training Funds, ROIs can play a role in promoting investment in training focused on individual employees. These companies can be regarded as sector-specific networks. Walton (1999) argues that these networks provide mutual support systems for developing structured HRD initiatives in SMEs.

Furthermore, training centres (both ROCs and official providers of training in the technical installation sector) are often unable to organise flexible enrolment procedures for individual learners. Especially in SMEs, last minute developments can complicate participation in a course and, as a consequence, the enrolment procedure. Right before the start of the course, the company might secure an important contract so that the employee cannot be missed. Furthermore, training providers often respond to collective training demands of companies and therefore are unable to enrol individual employees. Evaluation of the experiments with ILA shows that individual financing mechanisms do not necessarily stimulate the development of training offer more tailor made courses to meet individual demands and individual circumstances (Doets, Schilder & Westerhuis, 2002). In the majority of cases, SMEs themselves cannot mediate between individual worker and training supplier. HRD professionals in large organisations, such as elderly care institutions, can play a mediating role. They can arrange collective training facilities for a group of employees who have individually expressed similar training needs. SMEs often do not have such professional mediators to their disposal.

In the near future, however, training providers themselves will be forced to offer more enrolment possibilities and training trajectories to individual learners. Changes with respect to financing adult education urge formal training providers to compete with other providers. In order to maintain a competitive position, in the near future the ability to respond to the individual demand will be indispensable. In chapter 2, we showed that this transition to demand-led principles requires professional, and organisational changes on the part of providers (Bosselaar, 2002; De Vijlder, 2002). These changes cannot be brought about simply by introducing a demand-led financing mechanism. Putting through changes that affect every aspect of the organisation of educational suppliers requires willpower, audacity and vision from within.

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9 This refers to the amendments proposed with respect to the Law Integration of Newcomers (WIN) and the initiation of the Law Employment and Social Benefits (WWB).
Although this study only focused on two kinds of labour settings, there is ample reason to question whether individual demand-led mechanisms for learning, such as ILA, could serve as a strategy for lifelong learning. In order to stimulate participation in lifelong learning and employability possibilities, it is important to invest in individual workers by offering them individual educational possibilities and personal guidance. In order to do this, the responsibility of labour organisations, social partners and educational suppliers cannot be ruled out. A financial arrangement alone is unlikely to stimulate self-regulatory decisions on lifelong learning, more employee focused HRD interventions in labour organisations and the capacity of training suppliers to offer tailormade trajectories for lifelong learning.

8.3 Perceived dialogical learning culture

The studies of both experiments with ILA revealed that dialogical learning culture neither relates to intention nor to any other behavioural determinant expounded in this study. In this section, we elaborate on two possible reasons for this. In the first place, we must critically reconsider the fitness of the concept in the research model used in this study. Courneya et al. (2000) argue that supportive elements in the social environment classify influence on not completely volitional behaviour. It is very likely that individual workers in the labour contexts analysed in this study do not perceive training as volitional behaviour. Apart from the fact that they might not be aware of the possibility to express their development needs, they might experience a number of non-motivational constraints. As already mentioned, individual training needs of elderly care workers might be frustrated by a lack of compatibility between individual needs and organisational strategy. Individual training needs of technical installation workers might be frustrated by a lack of mobility opportunities, or the incapacity of the company to organise or finance training. The fact that skills development is talked about in the organisation and that the workers feels recognised as professionals and as a person, does not necessarily support participation to formal training activities. In other words, this study does not critically question the relation between learning culture and perceived social support.

What is more, we should critically evaluate the relevance of the concept of learning culture within the framework of individual intention to participate in educational activities. Supportive actions and feedback of experienced colleagues and direct supervisors are salient features which predict whether or not learning occurs on the work floor (Onstenk, 1997). The social context of learning plays a role in situational learning processes and, perhaps to a lesser extent, to individual educational decisions. In the framework of the ILA experiments, educational decisions are personal and separate from the workplace. In this study we evaluated the effects of ILA on intention to participate in (non)formal educational activities and not the effects on learning in the context of the workplace. Situational learning does not refer to individual learning as a result of intentional educational activities, but rather to the job itself as learning activity. Wenger (1998) focuses on learning as social participation. According to his social theory of learning, participation does not refer to separate activities. Participation rather refers to practices of social communities in relation to which active members construct their identities. Wenger puts emphasis on socialising processes
on the work place. The social environment not only supports learning of skills on the workplace, but also internalises occupational norms and values. Therefore, in this study we included a concept that might not be relevant for individual decision making processes. On the back of demand-driven policy strategies, the emphasis of the instrument ILA is on the individual learner and on participation in more formal education. In this respect, ILA is in line with the Human Capital approach, which focused on the individual agent. Schuller & Field (1998) compare this approach with the social capital theory, which emphasises that learning is embedded in social networks and culture. The European Commission (2001) emphasised the importance of the recognition of competences acquired outside of (formal) educational institutions. The fact that SMEs do not participate in formal post-initial training activities does not necessarily mean that there is no learning going on in the workplace. Waterreus (2001) points out that informal learning activities are commonly undertaken in small companies. In addition, the respondents in this study recognise that they continuously learn in their job. In SMEs workers will be more stimulated to acquire broad skills in order to enhance their employability within the organisation than in larger organisations. Workplace learning occurs when workers dispose of a considerable ‘latitude of action’ (Onstenk, 1997; Baitsch & Frei, 1980). Latitude of action not only refers to task variation, but also includes the possibility to make decisions and to control the labour process, to establish and maintain work-related social contacts and influence on the work situation.

We can conclude that the decision to follow courses for competence or employability development is principally an individual one, especially when it concerns formal or non-formal training. Personal support sources are important to facilitate this decision making process and can take place during formal meetings, such as PDP meetings. The question is whether the concept of dialogical learning culture actually supports this individual decision to participate in formal or non-formal training activities. An individual worker can have the feeling that he can develop himself on the work floor, that he is recognised as a professional, and that training and competence development is a regular issue of conversation on the work floor, but that does not necessarily affect his educational intention. The rate to which there is room for dialogue on the work floor, however, might be an important premise for the establishment of social commitment to learning. Theoretically there is a relationship between learning in the context of a community of practice and actual participation in adult education. In order to stimulate the latter form of participation, it will be important to depart from existing competencies acquired in the context of practice and non-formal education. An individual learning account can be employed to finance training needs that emerge from the assessment of informally acquired skills and tacit knowledge. This way ILA can be implemented efficiently and purposively. ILA is likely to pull its weight to wider participation in lifelong learning once it is embedded in a more extensive trajectory of coaching and assessment of prior learning.