

# Towards a Quality Framework for Adult Learners in Recovery: Ensuring Quality with Equity

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## **Abstract**

*The RECOVEU project is an effort to conceive of a quality-learning programme with equity for adult learners in recovery. It emerged in the context of European recommendations that member states support recovering users to access education in order to improve their chances of achieving social integration. However, by privileging the voices of those directly impacted by addiction/recovery and by applying the framework of recovery capital it has created a forum for adult learning that has at its core personal, social and cultural transformation.*

**Keywords:** Global capitalism/addiction, quality, equity, recovery capital, personal, social, cultural transformation

## **Introduction**

This paper is based on the findings of RECOVEU: a participative approach to curriculum development for adults in addiction recovery across the European Union. This is an initiative that brings together partners from the United Kingdom (UK), Cyprus (CYP), Romania (RO), Italy (ITA) and Ireland (IRL). The research project ran from January 2014 to December 2016 and was designed to support the aims of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme by improving the learning opportunities of a group, which is particularly at risk of social exclusion and marginalisation.

## **Context**

UNESCO's 3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 111) promotes the concepts of participation, inclusion and equity and clearly states that 'no individual should be excluded from quality learning opportunities on the basis of their social, cultural, linguistic, economic, educational and other

backgrounds' (2016, p. 151). Despite the commitment made by many countries at the sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) to implement the recommendations of the GRALE *11* Report (2009) it remains the case that in most countries, participation rates in adult education are very low. Moreover, in terms of inclusion and equity, the low skills trap highlighted in UNESCO's (2009) report is still very much in evidence, and consistently shows that those adults that are most in need of education and training are the least likely to participate in learning.

RECOVEU was conceived in the context of European recommendations that member states support recovering drug users to access education in order to improve their chances of social integration. While initially one of the key aims of the project was to assess the impact of participation on self-efficacy and sustained participation in learning, their continuous prioritisation of *recovery* as pre-requisite, resulted in research participants changing the research focus. This shifted to include the contributions that these learning activities might make to sustained participation in both *recovery* and *learning*. Crucially, by reconceptualising the concept of human capital and by incorporating other forms of interlinking capital, collectively referred to as Recovery Capital (Burns and Marks, 2013) in the learning programme, RECOVEU acknowledges that a quality access to learning programme with equity for people in recovery, cannot simply focus on the individual learner but will of necessity, have as its goal personal, social, cultural and political transformation. Anything less would be, to use the colloquial phrasing that is part and parcel of the folk wisdom of recovery groups, the definition of insanity that is, repeating the same failures over and over expecting a different result (McAleenan, 2016).

### **The 'Quality' of the Market Model**

RECOVEU emerged in the immediate aftermath of the most severe economic crisis the world has seen since the Great Depression. In the name of recovery, banks, financial institutions and bondholders were saved from the repercussions of their addictive forms of excess, an enabling process that has left a great deal of the world suffering post traumatic stress. In human terms, this has had a devastating effect on the conditions in which people are forced to live and has had a further debilitating effect on historically disempowered communities across the globe. These are the same communities that White claims are in urgent need of cultural revitalization, meaning to describe the damage that is inflicted on them by the abuse of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) (2009).

A Focus Group research phase underpinned the project as partners gathered qualitative data with two target populations: *service users* and *service providers* (Table 1). Cross-cultural data in the form of Focus Group Partner Summaries were then analysed. This paper is based on the findings of this research.

**Table 1. Groups delivered and numbers of participants**

Partner	Groups with service users	Groups with service providers	Pilot groups	Total service users	Total service providers	Total participants per partner
P1 – Staffordshire University – UK	1	2		5	10	15
P2 – CARDET – Cyprus	2	1		6	6	12
P3 – SDP – Romania	2	2	1	9	14	23
P4 – SASNSAT – Italy	2	2		8	10	18
P5 – Soirse – Ireland	2	2	1	16	8	24
Total project	9	9	2	44	48	92

*Focus Group Overview. Full version available at [www.recoveu.org](http://www.recoveu.org)*

### **Quality Education – Looking at the Bigger Picture**

The focus of the current United Nations Human Development Report (2016) is on universal development. While an earlier report highlighted the negative impact of globalisation indicating that at that time, ‘the gap between rich and poor had reached grotesque proportions’ (1992, p. 2) the current report acknowledges that the process of globalisation cannot be rolled back, therefore the future challenge is to ensure that no one gets left behind in the process (2016). Furthermore, the World Bank’s Education Strategy 2020 (2011) does not illuminate the way for the implementation of education as a human right nor does it set out the mechanisms whereby quality education for all can be

achieved in places where it is most needed (Klees *et al.*, 2012). Rather, this key global player in the field of education continues to operate on the limiting assumption that people are poor because they lack education rather than that they lack education because they are kept in poverty (Hickley-Hudson, 2002).

On the other hand, the negative effects of globalisation have been well documented. For example, it has been argued that the most recent global economic crisis has led to an increased economization of education, creating a value for money approach to the notion of quality, while focusing on the outputs of education rather than on the learning process and its conditions (European Youth Forum, 2013). Furthermore, the argument is made that education has been ‘incorporated into an agenda of wealth production at nation state level via discourses related to the knowledge economy, the knowledge society and more recently the enterprise society’ (Patrick, 2013, p. 2) and that employability is the primary goal of educational policies and reforms the impact of which is that the person comes to view him/herself as a commodity, to be bought and sold in the marketplace. In addition, the pervasive influence of human capital theory has been felt globally. As Hurley points out, in the Irish case:

There is little critique in the public policy area of the extent to which it has come to colonise the entire spectrum of lifelong learning – including adult education – so much of what passes as best practice can be seen to spring from human capital theory (2015, p. 25).

The RECOVEU project offers one such critique.

#### **RECOVEU – Adult Learning for Recovery and Social Change**

Despite its repeated failure, Watkins notes that ‘the application of the neo-liberal economic model to all spheres of life including education has not been seriously re-examined’ (2010, p. 31). However, when applied to the globalised phenomenon of drug abuse we see that it has come under increased scrutiny. Indeed, the field of addiction/recovery has undergone a transformative change that involves a shift in focus from the pathology of addiction towards an exploration of the internal and external resources that can be drawn on to initiate and sustain recovery from severe alcohol and other drugs (AOD) problems (White and Cloud, 2008). The aim of this now global movement is to organise and mobilise people to promote the rights *of* and resources *for* recovery while simultaneously highlighting the barriers *to* and supports *for* participation in an educational programme designed *by* and *for* people in recovery.

Working with partners across five countries, the RECOVEU Project developed open access resources to reflect these values and approaches, including five e-learning modules on the themes of: Digital Literacy; Recovery and Resilience; Learning to Learn; Recovery and Community; Recovery and Employability.

### **Women and Quality Learning with Equity**

The RECOVEU project does not exclusively target women. However, the findings indicate that just as in recovery, women often need additional supports to access adult learning programmes. A review of the international literature on quality in education notes that any framework used to conceptualise educational quality is necessarily value-based (Barrett *et al.*, 2006). The RECOVEU project is an approach to adult learning that is fundamentally learner centred, in that the beneficiaries of a programme of learning that they themselves have created set the learning aims. It is democratic, and in terms of access, promotes equality in the sense that just as addiction does not discriminate, this programme of learning for people in recovery does not discriminate on the basis of age, class and socio-economic circumstances, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion or any form of social prejudice. However, it is also an equitable programme and in the interest of fairness, recognises that people who participated in this research are not all on a level playing field either in terms of the additional resources and supports that are required for recovery, or that are required for participation in a programme of adult learning. We can see both these processes at work in the data.

For example, when the RECOVEU data calls for society to minimise stigma and to remove discrimination, we are cognisant of the fact that ‘the socio-cultural taboos against women having problems with alcohol and other drugs produce more shame and guilt for them than for their male counterparts and can create barriers for seeking help’ (Cloud and Granfield, 2008, p. 1978). Moreover, women in recovery often have to face practical barriers to participation, in recovery (meetings, aftercare) educational programmes and work opportunities that do not always apply to men. Childcare is one obvious example.

The Irish data is unique in the sense that Ireland is the only partner to have conducted a women’s focus group.

In terms of participation in education, some of the women express a deep unease when invading the world of education, a sphere that they view as not belonging to them. As one woman points out:

Em, ingrained beliefs...because I was over in the TAP programme in Trinity College I yesterday...it's like...I wouldn't fit in here (IRL).

Another woman puts it this way:

Yeah like built in...it's a kind of thing that happens so quick...I mean in a couple of seconds it can be like...you don't belong here...this is not going to work...and it will stop you dead in your tracks (IRL).

On another level and in relation to addiction/recovery, many of the women express feelings of deep hurt and anger as a result of having been confined to methadone maintenance programmes for years on end. As one woman explained:

My GP kept writing scripts...you know...and he said I would be too sick to come off it...I can't believe it...I could have been getting well (IRL).

Another woman who is now successfully pursuing a university degree points out:

I had to drop out of college the first time...yeah...cos...I couldn't concentrate...and I knew...I knew I wasn't you know well...at the end of day I needed the stuff to function (IRL).

These women highlight some of the structural barriers faced by people in recovery in Ireland at the present time. Moreover, when one of the Irish research participants makes the following claim:

I think it was Mark Twain who said I never let my education interfere with my learning (IRL).

In this statement, she privileges the learning that is required for long term recovery over that which is currently on offer in the education system. While there is some disquiet regarding the harm reduction response to addiction treatment in Ireland, there is a preference for a quality system of lifelong learning – including adult education – in order to maximise the chances of women initiating and sustaining personal and social change in their own and in the lives of others in their community.

### **Education – a Lived Experience**

Despite the advances made by Education For All (EFA), a movement that adopts a humanist stance to its interpretation of quality in education, which is based on promoting human development and human rights, it would appear that these aspirations have not been realised for many of the research participants. For example, in relation to the breach of human rights, Irish service providers claim that those in recovery have been consistently:

Physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally brutalised by the educational system (IRL).

Furthermore the current practice of the Department of Social Protection to ‘force participation’ in accredited educational programmes is having a particularly debilitating effect on those in recovery. As one single parent explains:

I was on a Community Employment (CE) that did FETAC levels 2...I was doing alright. I got suspended for a week...me Ma died. I relapsed...well I didn't go in...and they gave me chances... I got sacked...but I have no course now...and I am in and out (IRL).

As a result of Irish governmental policy and practice, this woman has been doubly disempowered on the basis of lost educational as well as recovery opportunities. Moreover, having internalised the personal deficit model of failure implicit in an education system that is underpinned by human capital theory in addition to personal deficit models of addiction, she is guaranteed to assume exclusive responsibility for her potential failure in either area in the future. Crucially, RECOVEU recognises that these involve structural and socio-cultural factors and are not exclusively personal deficit issues.

### **Conclusion: Take back your labour power (structural and cultural change)**

People in recovery and women in particular would appear to fulfil the criteria set out by Friere when he referred to those in need of liberation (1979). Indeed, ‘in its earliest usage the concept *addiction* was held to refer indiscriminately to a person's enslavement by someone or something’ (Weinberg, 2002, p. 2). In human terms, there is no doubt that the people who participated in this research feel let down or in psychological terms, feel abandoned by an education system that has groomed them to become ‘low knowledge-skilled learners’ (Grummel,

2007, p. 4) in order to sell them in a market place where they are finding it increasingly difficult to find buyers. Affecting personal transformation by constructing new systems of meaning that are compatible with recovery does not mean that those in recovery adopt an unquestioning acceptance of the dominant culture. On the contrary, the values that underpin the recovery culture include unity, recovery and service and the educational programme privileges cooperative, experiential, collaborative and participatory learning. In short, this is a value system that is the very antithesis of a neoliberal culture that corrupts the field of education, commodifies the learner/worker, breeds addictive type behaviour and has the capacity to threaten our very humanity. Moreover, this new *recovery culture* has the capacity to transform the communities across the globe that are under siege and are battling the twin threats of addiction and the ravages inflicted by global capitalism.

#### *Notes*

- 1 TAP (Trinity Access Programme) This is an access course that prepares mature students, both personally and academically, to go on and study for a degree. The course was set up in 1997 to tackle educational disadvantage. It offers another way to third-level education for mature students whose social, economic and cultural experiences have prevented them from going to college [www.tcd.ie](http://www.tcd.ie)
- 2 The Community Employment (CE) programme is designed to help the long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged people get back to work by offering temporary placements in community jobs with a view to using acquired skills to find permanent jobs.

FETAC is a former statutory awarding body for further education in Ireland established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. It was dissolved and its functions passed to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in 2012.



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