

# Chapter 11

## Understanding Adult Education Through Learning Theory and Equity in Higher Education: Redefining Success

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Adult learners in higher education encounter unique barriers that can hinder their success. It is essential to examine adult education through the lenses of learning theory and equity. This chapter focuses on how frameworks like Transformative Learning Theory can assist educators and policymakers in identifying and overcoming obstacles faced by adult learners. Drawing on current Zimbabwean research and real-world examples, it discusses the impact of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion on adult learners' experiences. The chapter emphasizes how these learning theories can inform pedagogical strategies to promote equity and success, regardless of their*

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*backgrounds. Additionally, it explores emerging trends in adult education, including online learning, micro-credentialing, and workplace learning. By understanding these theories and trends, stakeholders can create a more inclusive educational environment that empowers adult learners to thrive, ultimately highlighting the need for a comprehensive approach to enhance learning outcomes for all students.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Adult education is in a state of transformation, marked by shifts in demographics, technology, and learning needs (Jung, 2024; Rose, et al. 2023; Thompson, et al. 2023). New challenges and opportunities emerge as nontraditional students, working professionals, and a more diverse population enter higher education. In this presentation, these changes are examined, exploring the theory behind adult learning, and proposing strategies for promoting equity and success in adult education. By doing so, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of this important field and how it can support lifelong learning and professional development for all individuals. Several trends and challenges characterize the current state of adult education:

- Higher education costs have been increasing for decades, presenting a significant barrier to entry for many adult learners.
- Nontraditional pathways: More and more adults are pursuing alternative paths to higher education, such as online learning, competency-based education, and micro-credentialing, to accommodate their busy schedules and diverse learning needs.
- Flexibility: Adult learners often have competing priorities, such as work and family obligations, that make traditional on-campus education less practical. This has increased emphasis on flexible and asynchronous learning options, such as online courses and hybrid programs.
- Prior learning assessment: Many adult learners have acquired valuable skills and knowledge outside of traditional educational settings. As a result, colleges and universities are increasingly offering prior learning assessment (PLA) options to recognize this learning and award credit for prior experience (Byrd & Scott, 2024; Kalenda & Kocvarova, 2024).

In addition to these trends, several opportunities and challenges exist in the current state of adult education:

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