

Chapter 4: Lifelong Learning and Tertiary Education: The Learning University Revisited

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LIFELONG AND LEARNING – A CONCEPTUAL MORASS

The idea of lifelong learning is not new. Initially it entered the international literature from more esoteric origins some thirty years before the end of the twentieth century, mainly via the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Unesco (Faure 1972, OECD 1973, Lengrand 1975). It enjoyed a brief period of sustained attention in these circles. A modest volume of secondary and national-level policy studies and other analyses followed during the seventies, mainly around the concept of recurrent education.

The term itself and related conceptual analysis went out of general use for a generation. Deliberation was largely confined to sociological, philosophical and often exhortatory writings among adult and continuing educators, with books such as Knapper and Cropley (1985) and the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, launched in 1982. The Unesco Institute for Education in Hamburg published a series of studies on lifelong learning, mainly to do with the school curriculum, but this line of inquiry dwindled away in the late seventies. The failure to engage the concept of lifelong learning within the institutional imperatives of school and schooling remains a problem.

From the outset the literature and its concepts have proved problematic. They are often confused, and remain so today, as the 1998 OECD biennial Conference on Lifelong Learning and the Universities showed. Thus Paul Lengrand's 1975 volume was called *An Introduction to Lifelong Education* rather than *learning*. The OECD's view of recurrent education was however explicitly conceived as a *strategy for lifelong learning*, as the subtitle of the key 1973 OECD monograph reveals. The term favoured by the Council of Europe at the beginning of the seventies was *education permanente*, often translated into English, unfortunately and misleadingly, as 'permanent education'. This resonated with suspicion of educational imperialism expressed for example in Illich and Verne *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom* (1976). We return later to the confusion between 'education' and 'learning', since it persists in current discourse about lifelong learning and the role of, for example, tertiary education.

From another perspective however 'lifelong learning' has made giant strides since the sixties. This is not an unmixed blessing. Many forms of study, such as professional continuing education, and off-peak radio and television broadcast of study materials, as well as earlier forms of diploma and degree study, are publicised simply as lifelong learning. Often this is virtually a synonym for study by adults, usually post-full-time

and post-experience. Lifelong learning is thus equated with adult or continuing education.

If the usage confuses meaning and allows educational providers to colonise the wider terrain of learning, at least it does accept that adults can and do go on learning, a new phenomenon within my own professional lifetime. When as a graduate I trained at Cambridge (UK) to qualify as a teacher, the received psychology, especially Piagetian, would have one assume that the learning cycle peaked with early adulthood. There was a plateau and it was all downhill from there, with diminishing powers towards senility. Later I encountered the work of the Belbins and the Hutchinsons who campaigned for the recognition that adults do learn, albeit with different strategies and styles, throughout life. Adult learning was a contested site; adult education a marginal activity unconnected to the real business of education, schools and colleges.

Simply to recall this earlier mindset brings home the magnitude of the lifelong learning revolution, and gives a context for the persisting confusion of education with learning, and for the trivialisation of 'lifelong learning' in the service of marketing courses. There is no longer anything remarkable about universities catering for older clients as well as school-leaver students; for people who combine diverse life-roles rather than occupy a discrete student identity in a phase of pre-mature socialisation and transition to full adult participation in society. In this sense acceptance of the term lifelong learning is a precondition for the idea that tertiary education can be for all, across society and throughout life.

The reappearance and increased volume of a literature of lifelong learning is evident. There is the 1996 Unesco Delors report, following the 1972 Unesco Faure report, which shifted priorities for education in support of lifelong learning, rather than questioning the premise. OECD has also returned to the subject with a series of publications (see in particular OECD 1996). 1996 was the European Year of Lifelong Learning. In Britain following the change of Government in 1997 (the previous Administration having vigorously espoused what it chose to call 'lifetime learning') lifelong learning became a central policy preoccupation of the Department for Employment and Education, its ministers and advisers. Taiwan nominated 1998 as its year of lifelong learning and opened its education system to scrutiny through an international conference early that year. In Malcolm Skilbeck's words from the perspective of a senior OECD administrator "after a bold, but in the event faltering, start several decades ago, the movement of lifelong learning for all is once again gathering momentum". In the same book it is stated that "today education and training, and the notion, values and ideals of lifelong learning, have come to be conceptualized and appraised in a very wide-ranging and sophisticated manner' (Chapman & Aspin 1997, pp.11, 9).

My perception differs. In practice I consider this still to be a conceptual morass, in which learning and education remain hopelessly confused. Lifelong learning as a grand idea is under threat: first from *trivialisation* (referred to above); secondly from *reductionism*, more obviously manifest in the notion of the learning society to which we turn in a moment. Thirdly there is the threat that it may fall out of favour or be dismembered since it has become a new 'contested space' – the site where old yet vital battles are now conducted over the core values and purposes of education. These are recognisable in general educational discourse across the generations, but more starkly perhaps in the

literature of adult education and training. Finally there is the scepticism which persists, in vigorously healthy form, in a 'deschooling' tradition about the colonisation of life and learning by the professions and agents of the State. All of this provides a not unproblematic context for universities and tertiary education in coming to grips with 'lifelong learning'.

Old and new ideological battles contest the values, mission and functions of education, the purposes of higher education, and the education of adults. Artificially dichotomous alternatives are common: liberal or general versus vocational; intrinsic versus extrinsic; education versus training; accredited or non-award-bearing. The economic is polarised against 'access and equity'. Personal development, occupationally related and civic or citizenship agendas and outcomes represent a broad typology of intent. At its most provocative, the forces of good and evil are ranged along the lines of education (training or indoctrination) for domesticity and learning for liberation. Age-old value propositions translate into child- or student-centred teaching (learning) methods versus more instructional or 'authoritarian' back-to-basics modes, especially at school. They cascade into a host of questions about the curriculum (in its obvious and more subtle or 'hidden' senses) at all levels and in most institutional settings.

The very term lifelong learning has encountered stringent critical opposition on just such grounds as these, notably in Canada and the UK. Boshier's paper to Taiwan's national lifelong learning conference characterised lifelong learning as Goliath and democratising lifelong (especially adult) education as David. Boshier sees lifelong learning as "nested in a notion of the autonomous free-floating individual learner as consumer" whereas lifelong education is committed to active citizenship and democracy. It has "lofty aspirations and a commitment to fellow citizens" whereas lifelong learning he experiences as "smarmy, self-assured, well staffed with handlers and analysts, an office in a smart city, and dressed in sharp business suits" (Boshier 1998).

In this sense nothing has changed. The same struggles about the good society, and about the part education plays in advancing or obstructing its coming, continue. Yet, without question, 'lifelong learning' has come of age as a popular, populist and commercially viable proposition; not just in the United States where it entered into common parlance maybe a decade earlier than in other English-speaking societies, but now globally. It would be difficult to find a nation in which educational policy is not committed rhetorically to enabling lifelong learning even though, and most obviously for the 'new Labour' UK Government, its practical attainment is a central policy dilemma. What has changed to bring this about?

THE CHANGING CONTEXT

The Cold War notwithstanding, the late sixties, when lifelong learning and related concepts of recurrent education, 'education permanente' and the learning society were developed, were a time of relative optimism. There was reliable economic growth, low unemployment, an apparently stable welfare state, a sense of social amelioration, and inexorably rising prosperity. The gulf between rich and poor within and between nations was narrowing rather than widening. Belief in managed progress seemed

reasonable. From about that time of student activism in higher education, much of this became and has remained perturbed, including the place and standing of higher education which was moving into what then seemed like rapid expansion. In 1973 Martin Trow predicted a transition from 'elite' towards 'mass' and eventually 'universal' higher education, led by the United States.

At this time of the flowering of high modernity and faith in the essentially liberal 'enlightenment project', there was also awareness of the rapidity of technological change and the shrinking of the world to a global village (Toffler 1970, McLuhan 1967). Harold Wilson had celebrated 'the white heat of technological change'. Students were protesting about the links between industry, the military, and university research. In the quarter century since the 1973 oil crisis the sense of instability, of runaway technological innovation, and of the forces of globalisation have transformed the environment within which higher or tertiary education takes place. As the century ends there are attempts to redress the balance and regain a sense of purpose in civic and social progress (see for example Giddens 1998).

At least six significant changes provide the context of the 'second generation life-long learning' of the late nineties. In the words of one enthusiast "our global cultures have undergone a transformation... This transformation is our headlong race through an information revolution to a knowledge based society" (Jones 1996). Technological change, apparently ever-accelerating and with ever wider ramifications, especially through electronic innovations, is held to demand a continuous process of learning and adaptation so that people have the knowledge, skills and adaptability to keep up in a knowledge based society. It seems obvious that universities must be central to the development of such a society. Issues of wider participation and more purposeful updating must be on the university agenda if society is not to divide more between those who can and those who cannot cope and benefit.

A second significant change concerns a new preoccupation, in the European Union and beyond, with 'social exclusion' – the impact and cost to individuals, communities, and ultimately to national economies of exclusion from mainstream society and its benefits. In this context the idea of social capital has won attention. Again, higher education cannot but be affected by such issues, given the established policy agenda of equity, access and opportunity and the role of (higher) education as a means to achieving participation and prosperity. One consequence is that citizenship, 'the civic agenda', is reappearing in considerations of higher education, along with individual general education and development, and vocational skills acquisition. The social is thus added to the individual and economic HE agenda. The University of Ulster, reflecting the needs of its society and region, has appointed a Professor of Social Inclusion.

A third major factor in putting lifelong learning on the agenda of higher education relates to the information technology that is applied to learning. Whereas technological change generally implies rapid obsolescence of the curriculum in most occupational areas, the IT revolution in relation to teaching and learning suggests new means of accessing and 'delivering' information. Flexible and self-directed learning, mixed and multi-mode delivery, appear to offer new kinds of lifelong learning, with implications for higher education, possibly as the 'virtual university'.

A fourth significant factor is the emergence and continuing influence of economic rationalism, the fuel of globalisation. It may be that the tide has turned with the end of the twentieth century and some loss of confidence in the free market occasioned by the Asian economic crisis of 1998. European governments at this time were generally turning away from the drier forms of rationalism, which had already been modified by the Clinton Democratic Administration through much of the decade. The broadsheet press was alerting its readership to the wealth of the global corporations and the threat they represented to national sovereignty. *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 9 January 1999 pointed out that 71 of the world's largest economic entities were not nations but corporations, with Microsoft in 11th position overall. In Australia too, Mark Latham was following Blair in the UK in seeking a 'third way' between rationalism and the older welfare state (Latham 1998). Operating locally in this 'global village economy' is a new aspect of lifelong learning for the university.

Fifth, and underlying several other changes, among them rolling back the welfare state, the new demography of the late twentieth century includes fewer young people. Some societies are experiencing population decline. Populations are ageing significantly. Long years of life after retirement have put 'third age' education on the map and on the agenda of some universities. This represents a large growth in the proportion of the economically inactive in the total population. Rising participation among the young in upper secondary and tertiary education amplifies the shifting ratios. As the need rises, in economic and technological terms, and the demand increases and is manifest in rising aspiration and demand for education throughout life, the pressure on public revenue and the economy increases. Demographic change seems virtually to dictate a rolling back of the welfare state, reconfiguring the economics of higher education in user-pay directions.

Finally the sixties, an age of relative optimism and confidence in the future and in enlightenment, have given way to post-modernism with its permeating relativism. Rationality, the nature of knowledge, science itself have been cast into doubt. Peter Scott, writing about meaning and mass higher education, cites a favoured metaphor for post-modernism: "a shopping mall, an infrastructure that services unrelated enterprises devoid of authoritative contexts.. The results are not all bad... For example, oral tradition and popular memory are just as worthy of the historian's attention as the products of archival research. But the general effect is of incoherence on the grand scale" (Scott 1995, p.135).

What had been assumed to be the heart and essence of the modern university has thus been destabilised. The nature of knowledge, the processes of research and inquiry, as well as the utility and contribution of science, are all under scrutiny. *Context* has become more significant to scholarly inquiry. The nature, creation and application of knowledge is less confidently and self-evidently universal. Hence a paradox. With doubt cast on 'the scientific method' by the work of Kuhn (1970) and others, in an age of globalisation, research and the knowledge it yields have become more contingent, grounded, anchored and specific. The university of 2000 is more prone than the university of 1970 to anchor in its local region, context and culture, as a way of engaging with the overwhelming pace and ambiguity of the global.

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