

Arguments for and against lifelong learning

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Abstract

In many discussions and debates about lifelong learning, there is an unfortunate tendency to confuse 'learning' with 'schooling,' with the result that advocates and apologists on both sides of the argument have a tendency to think that learning occurs best (or only) in the context of formal education. Even where this is not the case, we sometimes suffer from the peculiar debilitating tendency to wish to 'cut people down to size', the so-called 'tall poppy syndrome'. In this case, people who voluntarily seek to better themselves through education, training or self-directed learning are often undermined by colleagues, friends and family - the very people whose support and encouragement they most need. Secondly, there is some evidence to suggest that continued learning is regarded as a gendered activity. In other words, it is imagined, whether it is real or not, that women predominate in formal education and training contexts both at work and in the community. The response to the consultation on the **Memorandum on Lifelong Learning** called for a broad definition of lifelong learning that is not limited to a purely economic outlook or just to learning for adults people. In addition to the emphasis it places on learning from pre-school education to post-retirement, lifelong learning should encompass the whole **spectrum of formal, non-formal learning and informal learning**.

Introduction

The original UNESCO concept of lifelong education, as expressed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was based in the humanistic tradition. That tradition saw increased education as a means of equalising individual earnings, linked education reform with social demands for greater opportunity, and emphasised personal fulfilment. Greater equity in educational opportunity was seen as a major levelling force in society. It was democratisation through education. The current version of lifelong learning is different. The key 1990s reports on lifelong learning are influenced by a broader mix of economic, employment, social, cultural and educational objectives reflecting the uncertain and rapidly changing contemporary times. This breadth of objectives further highlights the interdependencies between the economic, technological, community, equity and organisational contexts. However the early reports concentrate their focus on the economic benefits of education reform. Finding the right mix between education and these varying contexts is seen as centrally important at three levels. Education (and learning flexibility) is proclaimed as central for the individual, business and the nation - it unifies all three, so that:

- ¼ for the individual it increases income and employment security;
- ¼ for business it increases competitiveness in the international or global market;
- ¼ for the nation it determines each country's position in global competition.

The First Global Conference on Lifelong Learning was held in Rome in late 1994 (see the report *World Initiative on Lifelong Learning*, 1995). In 1994 the European Commission produced a White Paper, *Growth, Economic Competitiveness and Employment*, proclaiming that, 'Education and training are the key means of ensuring the transformation of our society'. Another white paper of the European Commission - *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* (1996) - reiterates the idea that lifelong learning is inextricably linked to economic security.

"The countries of Europe today have no other option. If they are to hold their own and continue to be a reference point in the world they have to build on the progress made along the road to European Union by more substantial investment in their knowledge base." In a similar vein, the Education Ministers of the OECD member countries identified **lifelong learning** as "key to the continued development of OECD countries as they move towards the twenty first century". (OECD 1996: 13) The OECD Ministers argued in their paper that three interrelated sets of issues had to be addressed to make lifelong learning a reality for all. The first is to improve the foundations for lifelong learning so that all learners, young and old, obtain the academic and vocational qualifications they need for work and further learning. The second is to facilitate pathways and progressions through lifelong learning and work, especially the transition from school to work. The third is to rethink the roles and responsibilities of all partners - including governments - in implementing and financing the organisation of lifelong learning for all. By 1996 the need for 'learning', according to UNESCO's *Learning: The Treasure Within* could be spelt out through the image of four pillars that support all human endeavours. The four pillars were: learning to know; to do; to be; and to live together. The broader view of lifelong learning - incorporating economic as well as social, cultural considerations - has come to dominate education policy-making in the later 1990s, culminating in a series of declarations about the importance of education and lifelong learning such as those of UNESCO's **international conference on adult education in Hamburg in Lifelong Learning**.

Many questions about Lifelong Learning were born in the last 40 years:

1. We need legislation for lifelong learning?
2. We need a lifelong learning policy framework at various levels?
3. What is the role of government in this process?
4. What are the roles of the education providers?
5. How can learning and educational structures be organised under the overarching concept of lifelong learning?
6. How can we widen the scope of work-based learning and foster reflection in on-the-job training?
7. Is it possible to operate learning accounts for the whole population? For segments of the population?
8. How can we motivate a wider section of the population to participate in lifelong learning, and provide the support and opportunities to assist take-up?

The positives answer's to these questions is relevant for Lifelong Learning.

Who is lifelong learning for?

In many discussions and debates about lifelong learning, there is an unfortunate tendency to confuse “learning” with “schooling”, with the result that advocates and apologists on both sides of the argument have a tendency to think that learning occurs best (or only) in the context of formal education. Even where this is not the case, we sometimes suffer from the peculiar debilitating tendency to wish to ‘cut people down to size’, the so-called ‘tall poppy syndrome’. In this case, people who voluntarily seek to better themselves through education, training or self-directed learning are often undermined by colleagues, friends and family – the very people whose support and encouragement they most need. Secondly, there is some evidence to suggest that continued learning is regarded as a gendered activity. In other words, it is imagined, whether it is real or not, that women predominate in formal education and training contexts both at work and in the community.

The response to the consultation on the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning called for a broad definition of lifelong learning that is not limited to a purely economic outlook or just to learning for adults people. In addition to the emphasis it places on learning from pre-school education to post- retirement, lifelong learning should encompass the whole **spectrum of formal, non-formal learning and informal learning**.

Lifelong learning is define a continuum of learning throughout life. All the knowledge, skills and understanding we learn as children and as young people together in the family, at school, during training and at the college or University will not last a lifetime.

Is very important integrating learning into adult life, because is a very important part of putting lifelong into practice, but it is, nevertheless, just one part of the whole. In the process of learning is necessary to motivated people to learn. Why? Because people will only plan for consistent learning activities through their lives if they want to learn. They will not want to carry on if appropriate learning opportunities are not practically accesible as ar as timin, pace, location and affordability are concerned. They will not feel motivated to take part in learning whose content and methods do not take proper account of their cultural perspectives and life experiences.

Another problems is they Adult people will not want to invest time, effort and money in further learning if the knowledge, skills and expertise they have already acquired are not recognised in tangible ways.

The individual motivation to learn and a variety of learning opportunities are the ultimate keys to implementing lifelong learning successfully. This the essential to **raise the demand for learning as well as its supply**. Everyone should be able to follow open learning pathways of their own choice, rather than being obliged to follow predetermined routes to specific destination.

But, in the process of lifelong learning, we can find many barriers. In my opinion, we can consider these barriers, like arguments against Lifelong Learning.

Barriers to lifelong learning

What are the barriers to engaging adult learners?

There can be many different barriers to Adult learn, largely relating to the and personality.

Physical barriers These might include:

- Lack of time due to work, family, and childcare responsibilities;
- Difficulties in paying course fees and fear of losing benefits;
- Disabilities, particularly lack of mobility;
- Ill health;
- Difficulties with regarding and writing and numeracy.

Attitudinal barriers. These are often the hardest to overcome. They might include:

- Being nervous about going back to the classroom and concern about not being to keep up;
- Negative perceptions of schooling and scepticism about the value of learning
- Low self-esteem and lack of confidence both generally and in relation to learning;
- Low aspirations and lack of role models;
- Lack of trust in officialdom and formal institutions or organisations;
- Age. One in five non-learners think they are too old to learn.

Structural barriers. These may relate to both supply (provider) and demand (learner), and include:

- Lack of transport;
- Limited learning opportunities locally;
- Lack facilities and equipment;
- Lack of necessary qualifications
- Lack of knowledge about local learning opportunities and learning advice sources.

So what does this mean to a provider who is trying to engage adult learners and what can providers do to overcome these barriers?

What are challenges for providers in engaging adult learners?

Research has shown that providers who are likely to be successful are those for whom widening participation is a genuine, long-term commitment which includes a strategic approach, sustained investment and a properly resourced

development plan. The strategy is likely to include:

- Purposeful engagement with communities
- Changes to the curriculum portfolio, curriculum design and delivery
- Seeing support for learners as an entitlement not an optional extra
- A willingness and ability to work
- In addition to a strategic view, learning provision has to be:
Attractive to adults and relevant to their experience
- Flexible, to suit adults' circumstances and schedules
- Supported by outreach programmes to attract adults who otherwise might not consider learning
- Backed by pertinent, up-to-date information and sound advice.

What are the practical actions for providers?

Research has shown that where providers have been successful they undertake the following types of actions:

- Try different methods of making information available, such as open days and taster sessions, not just written materials that assume a level of literacy
- Make enablers such as free childcare or travel expenses part of the marketing process
- Employ staff whose background reflects the experience of target groups of learners, and who understand the specific issues facing them
- Provide learning in accessible and familiar venues to help people who wouldn't normally think of entering a formal learning environment. Use alternative locations imaginatively to provide quality surroundings that make new learners feel valued
- Don't define outcomes too narrowly or prescriptively. Help potential learners decide what they personally want to get out of the experience
- Don't dismiss 'useless' activities, especially if they are unconnected with people's previous experiences of education. They can provide an effective 'hook' to learning if they are relevant and interesting.
- Bite-size courses can generate an interest in acquiring new skills or knowledge, and give access to more substantial learning opportunities
- Don't make assumptions about learner's needs. The most successful projects are developed through sharing ideas and aspirations
- Form partnerships with groups and organisations potential learners may be involved in, such as tenants and residents associations and trade unions
- Give recognition to prior learning, including skills acquired in work, home or community settings.

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