

Lifelong learning: debates and discourses

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The purpose of this paper is to survey the emergent terms, themes or discourses that seem to possess sustained or recent resonance with those responsible for conceptualising lifelong learning. It attempts to summarise the work of some of those who have dedicated their work, thinking and energy to conceptualising lifelong learning. Their views on recent developments and of what could be signs of stable trends for the coming years are presented in the paper.

The ubiquity in the contemporary literature of lifelong learning notions indicates the extent of the contest to secure meaning, rather than the existence of common ground. Lifelong Learning is therefore in the making, with an important question mark over the actors and interest groups that are most influential in making it. Some experts see lifelong learning as a rallying cry, rather than a specific policy. It has the power to unite various stakeholders around the need for change, because it has emerged as a response to today's challenges. Economic, technical and social shifts demand continuous learning to equip people to deal with uncertainty - for example, by maintaining their employability in a changing labour market. A key strand of the lifelong learning discourse looks at economic globalisation. From this point of view, lifelong learning is a key instrument in developing a competitive, multi-skilled workforce. Some strands of the discourse address the ways in which globalisation affects our social, political and cultural lives, and our educational responses to these issues. Recent ideas about lifelong learning emphasise the individual.

Employees increasingly have the responsibility for managing their own learning and skill development. There are questions about how well an individual-centred approach will meet national education and economic needs. Much of the discourse points to flaws in a market-based approach to learning. It is argued that the market, left to itself, leads to unequal access. A learning society, it is asserted, must be concerned with widening participation and not only with a well-functioning learning market. The role of new technologies in lifelong learning is a key and contested area.

Lifelong learning as discourse

- International concept
- Used in many different contexts
- Buzz-word
- Seems rather self-evident on the surface
- Built up by well known “everyday words”
- Different interpretations and meanings
- There is no absolute definition of “lifelong learning”
- Lifelong learning is what it means to the users within a certain discourse

Discourse, Culture and Context

- Different layers of discourses
- Meta discourse
- International discourses
- North-south and east-west divide
- National (UK policy) discourses
- Discourses within sectors, organizations, communities and other specific groups

Document sources

- Critical articles and debates
- Policy documents representing governmental, educational and labour market discourses
- Web-based documents

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SECTION 1

Introduction. Lifelong learning: a new concept?

Lifelong learning has become a significant topic of policy and academic debate in the last ten years. 1996 was the Year for Lifelong Learning. Ever since, public authorities, public and private education institutions, secondary and higher education, the social partners, enterprises, non-profit organisations or various associations and, of course, individuals have reflected about its meanings and the changes necessary to build its future.

In 1996, most of the large international organisations presented their own analysis: the European Commission published the White Paper on *Teaching and Learning: towards the learning society*, UNESCO made a contribution with *L'éducation: un trésor est caché dedans*, and the OECD held a ministerial meeting on "Lifelong Learning for All". But the first proposals on recurrent education (OECD, 1977), second chance education or *éducation permanente* were published already a quarter of a century ago.

In 1996, the UNESCO-sponsored Delors Report (*The Treasure Within*) identified four pillars enabling individual development:

1. Learning to do
2. Learning to be
3. Learning to understand
4. Learning to live together

Since 1996, programmes have promoted new partnerships, new curricula and new assessment methods. Enterprises have had to face the challenges of globalisation and the increasing speed of technological change. Public authorities are now looking at ways of modernising their education systems; questions are raised about learning outside educational settings; more and more individuals reach higher levels of education than previous generations ever hoped for; but at the same time, our learning societies have discovered widespread illiteracy.

What have all the debates led to since 1996? The purpose of this paper is not to give a comprehensive overview of lifelong learning, even over the recent years. It is to survey the emergent terms, themes or discourses that seem to possess sustained or recent resonance with those responsible for conceptualising lifelong learning. (For example, those responsible for attempting to craft working definitions of lifelong learning work in universities, ministries, independent institutes, and international organisations). Many commentators and actors have dedicated their work, thinking and energy to lifelong learning, before and since 1996. Their views on recent developments and of what could be signs of stable trends for the coming years are presented here.

This paper examines particular aspects that have emerged forcefully since 1996. This does not mean that the issues did not exist before. In the 1970s notions of lifelong education and similar notions were promoted: "recurrent education", "retraining", "continuing education", "second chance" – and were the subject of a considerable amount of analyses and reports. However, while these notions were promulgated internationally, they had little impact on most national policy making. It is only since the 1990s that lifelong learning has become a significant part of policy

development – and the consequent shift in discourse is significant. Nevertheless, there is something new in the lifelong learning concept. Is it the term “learning” that makes it differ from its predecessors? Perhaps also “lifelong” implies a longer span than “retraining” or even a “second chance to return to high school”?

Key strands

- Some experts see lifelong learning as a rallying cry, rather than a specific policy. It has the power to unite various stakeholders around the need for change, because it has emerged as a response to today’s challenges. Economic, technical and social shifts demand continuous learning to equip people to deal with uncertainty – for example, by maintaining their employability in a changing labour market.
- One key strand of the discourse looks at economic globalisation. From this point of view, lifelong learning is a key instrument in developing a competitive, multi-skilled workforce. Other authors address the ways in which globalisation affects our social, political and cultural lives, and our educational responses to these issues. From this standpoint, lifelong learning can be a tool for combating social exclusion.
- Ideas about lifelong learning emphasise the individual and this can empower learners, providing more choice and flexibility of opportunity. Employees increasingly have the responsibility for managing their own learning and skill development. However, there are questions about how well an individual-centred approach will meet national education and training needs. Further, some writers stress the importance of group/collective loyalties and social networks in facilitating learning.
- Much of the discourse points to flaws in a market-based approach to learning. It is argued that the market, left to itself, leads to unequal access. A learning society must be concerned with widening participation and not only with a well-functioning learning market.
- Notions of lifelong learning and the learning society are not static, neither are they open to simple definition. Their ubiquity in the contemporary literature indicates the extent of the contest to secure meaning, rather than the existence of common ground. Lifelong learning is therefore in the making, with an important question mark over the actors and interest groups that are most influential in making it.
- Some contributors have asked us to question who controls lifelong learning as we think about the ethics of lifelong learning practices.

The magnitude of lifelong learning

Several contributions to the lifelong learning discourse emphasise the order of magnitude of lifelong learning, mainly because it is aimed at such a potentially huge and diverse population. Of course, not every single individual will be engaging in all the different parts of a lifelong learning system.

Nevertheless, the order of magnitude is way above what is the normal intake of formal education and training provided usually under the responsibility of ministries of education and/or employment. The chart below, showing types of outcomes from lifelong learning, gives some indication of the sheer scope of the enterprise.

| Personal Domain | Public Domain | Social & Community | Economic |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|
| Emotional and physical wellbeing | Cross-cultural knowledge | Social connections | Productive enterprises |
| Spiritual peace | Organisational capacity | Community building | Increased small business capacity |
| Maturity | Community service | Active citizenship | Employment advocacy |
| Sense of belonging | Employability skills | Activism | Micro-economic development |
| Cognitive development | Self-sufficiency | Cultural expression | Creation of goods and services |
| Communication skills | Expanded pathways | Sharing resources | Savings in personal and organisational costs due to greater efficiency |
| Enhanced personal relationships | Income generation | New community Groups | |
| Creative ability | Professional development | Community identity | |
| Literacy and language | | Empowerment | |
| Personal choices | | Appreciation and respect for diversity | |
| Recreation | | | |

So far, many aspects seem not fully conceived as part of lifelong learning policies. When all the aspects of learning and their recognition are integrated, can it still be argued that both a framework and flexibility in formal education will bring the answer to the challenges? Education has become more than education, as some have noted:

“...adult learning is not just a matter for Ministries of Education but also the means by which agendas of Ministries of Health, Culture, Environment and Economic Development can be achieved” (Meyer, 2006).

Governments and policy-makers (at least publicly) want answers to a range of ‘big’ questions within the domain of education, and are asking lifelong learning to provide some of these answers. Keynote speakers at recent lifelong learning conferences discussed parameters and possibilities for lifelong learning in the face of:

- Globalisation
- Civil insecurity and unrest
- A burgeoning knowledge economy
- The demands for information literacy

SECTION 2

Lifelong learning: Formal and non-formal

One of the approaches to lifelong learning has been to look at the distinction between formal or less formal dimensions of learning. Three general sorts of adult learning practice are commonly distinguished in terms of the context in which they occur: formal education or schooling; informal learning and non-formal, continuing or further education. Formal education is often defined as full-time study within state systems. Informal learning refers to all those individual and collective learning activities that we do beyond the requirements of any educational institution. Non-formal/continuing education is all other organised educational activities or programmes offered by any social institution. But these learning contexts overlap and interact.

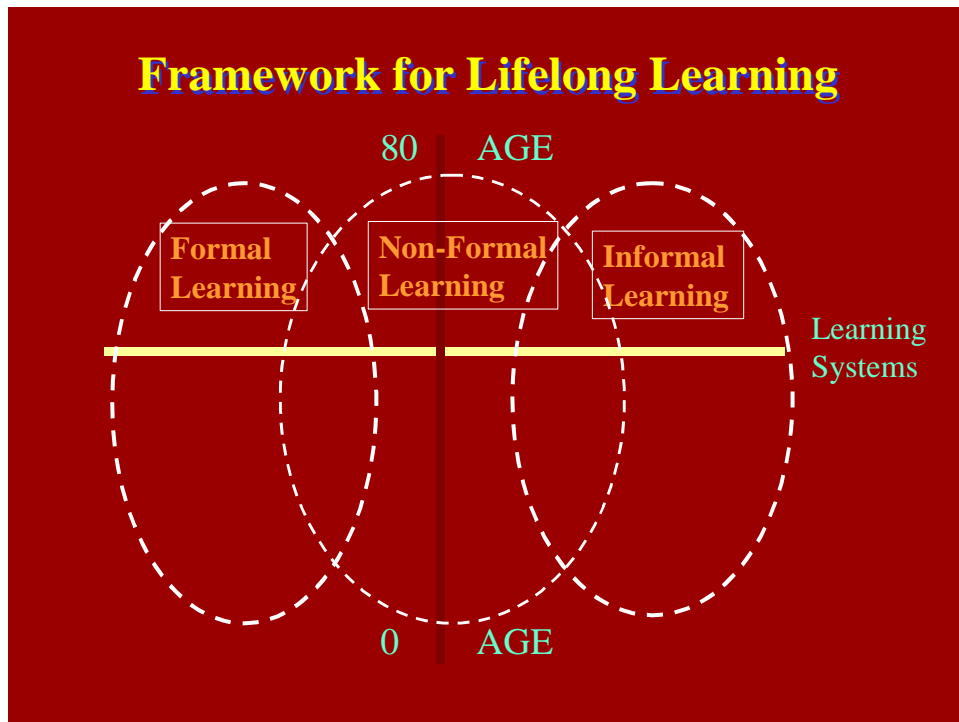
Could the understanding of relationships and links between the dimensions help to conceive and implement lifelong learning policies? Is it a valuable track to explore or is it a dead-end street that can but lead to sterile debates?

In a European context, the following definitions of the terms 'formal' and 'non-formal' are used:

Formal learning is learning that occurs within an organised and structured context (formal education, in-company training) and that is explicitly designated as learning. Formal learning may lead to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate).

Non-formal learning is learning which is embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning but that contain an important learning element. As opposed to formal learning, non-formal learning encompasses what is sometimes described as semistructured learning, that is, learning in environments containing a learning element (e.g. quality management); and accidental learning resulting from daily life situations (including at ¹the workplace) and defined as informal learning.

The terms non-formal learning and informal learning are often used as synonyms. The difficulty is that they are both 'negative' concepts in the sense that they are the negation of something else: they include what is not covered in formal education and training. What the present definitions really translate is the still limited knowledge and understanding of what exactly one is dealing with, how complex it is, how vast a territory one is moving in.



Elements of Lifelong learning: settings and frameworks

Many conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues arise in an attempt to reorient educational policy or research in a lifelong learning perspective. A major problem is encountered because there is no agreed common understanding of what lifelong learning means. Definitions vary not only over time but also between regions, countries, professional contexts and fields of study. Addressing these problems requires an interdisciplinary and multilevel framework.

However, it is possible to bring together some elements that recur in the discourses. The central elements in what have been described as the triadic nature of lifelong learning are:

- For economic progress and development
- For personal development and fulfilment
- For social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity; fundamental to building a more democratic polity and set of social institutions

It is frequently asserted that none of these aims and undertakings for lifelong learning can be separated from the other: all three elements interact and cross-fertilise each other. There is a complex inter-play between all three that makes education for a more highly skilled workforce at the same time an education for better democracy and a more rewarding life. The notion and value of 'lifelong learning for all' must be seen as a complex and multi-faceted process. It begins pre-school, is carried on through compulsory and post-compulsory periods of formal education and training, and is continued throughout life. This triadic emphasis requires a more coherent and consistent, better co-ordinated and integrated, more multi-faceted approach to learning and to realising a 'lifelong learning' approach for all than hitherto.

To bring this about a substantial re-appraisal of the provision, resourcing and goals of education and training, and a major re-orientation of its direction towards the concept and value of the idea of 'the learning society', is required. This is a major challenge

for governments, policy-makers and educators as they seek to conceptualise lifelong learning and articulate policies to realise the aim of 'lifelong learning for all'.

In order to meet this challenge, debates often focus on exploring the settings for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning encompasses general education and vocational education and training. These sectors provide the basis and the foundation (writing, reading, arithmetic, citizenship) as well as the preparation for working life. As part of lifelong learning, one can also find general education for adults, personal and career development, liberal adult education, as well as any form of learning taking place at work or in daily situations.

Four 'settings' (contexts) have been distinguished as a frame for lifelong learning:

- **General initial education**
- **Vocational education and training**
- **Professional development**
- **Personal development (liberal adult education)**

These four learning settings exist to different extents in all countries and they are all needed to fulfil the social and economic aims of lifelong learning. They are frequently interrogated under the following:

- **Their funding**
- **What they do best**
- **The focus of learning**
- **The extent/effectiveness of certification**

Some clarification emerges when the four settings are grouped under formal and nonformal learning as shown in Figure 1:

Source: Colardyn, D.

Fig. 1. Lifelong learning for economic and social inclusion

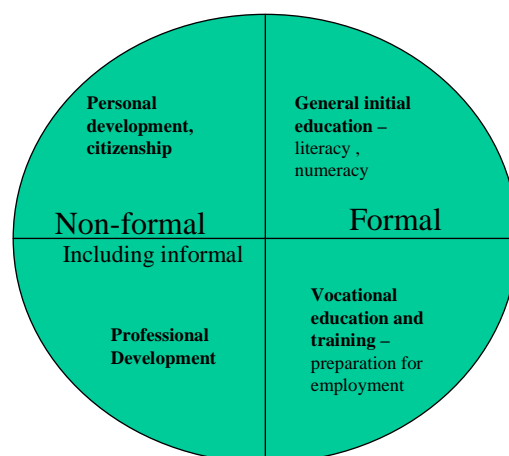


Table 1 summarises this characterisation:

| | Personal development | General Initial Education | Vocational Education and Training | Professional Development |
|----------------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| Funding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-profit-based (learners and public funding) | Public | Public and private | Private |
| Objectives What is done best? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of democracy • Equality • Respect of plurality of values | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic and foundation education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocational education and training • Transition to work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work-specific training • Management • Corporate universities • Recognition of competences • HR management |
| Focus of learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democracy • Illiteracy (adults) • Enlightenment (young and adults) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic Skills for young | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young adults • Training and retraining for unemployed • Retraining of under-qualified employed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration in enterprise (young) • Retraining of adults |
| Certification | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often non-existent • Moves towards validation/recognition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal general qualifications • Credit towards a formal qualification | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal vocational qualifications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance certificate • Certificate of competences |
| | Non-formal | Formal | Formal | Non-formal |

Source: Colardyn, D.

Key questions: one key issue this table raises is which settings public authorities will give priority to and consequently, which ones might be suppressed. It raises issues around the management and development of the four settings in order to better define how they can contribute to the various aspects of lifelong learning policy.

The global context

Much lifelong learning discourse is still tied to predominantly national, regional and local conditions, and is sometimes accused of being provincial in its orientation. Countries have differing policy agendas reflecting their particular concerns. But in an increasingly interdependent world, the knowledge base for lifelong learning can no longer be informed solely by information gathered at a national or provincial level. Insights derived from international and comparative studies are increasingly needed. The lack of comparative information about the incidence and duration of participation

in various countries is often raised as a concern.

Fundamental shifts in the global political economy provide much of the context within which to consider developments in lifelong learning. The market-driven nature of current globalisation raises questions as to the role and responsibilities of the state in what is fast becoming a global learning market.

Some conceptualisations of lifelong learning focus on the growing debate between the northern focus on 'global competitiveness' and the southern focus on 'development'. In these, the declared focus in the north is seen as being on lifelong *education* emanating from an increasing awareness that we are situated in a rapidly changing world, where knowledge and skills need constant updating. The impetus for nations to embrace lifelong, rather than initial, education is a recognition of the need to ensure economic competitiveness in an increasingly complex and globalised world. The argument is based on an assumed link between educational attainment and economic growth.

In contrast, in 'southern' areas such as Africa, South Asia and Latin America there are arguments for a broader and more holistic view of lifelong learning than the human capital model. These stem from the social and cultural values embedded in societies where collective learning is valued more than individual learning. Whilst all societies have their own specific contexts, several commentators have that indigenous populations (in Africa for instance) have always had a well-established tradition for lifelong learning. This system privileges the collective, community and spiritual over the economic, with a focus on social, rather than human, capital. It is embedded in tribal norms, knowledge, skills and values that are passed on from generation to generation at designated stages in the life course.

Whilst there is general agreement that processes of globalisation and modernisation have profound implications for educational theory and practice, the ways in which the problems are defined and the potential solutions are framed varies widely. At one end of the spectrum primary emphasis is placed upon global competitiveness with lifelong learning viewed as a critical ingredient in economic success. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who highlight global patterns of inequality, uneven development and ecological destruction, who view new forms of social learning as a critical ingredient in a movement towards realising patterns of sustainable and participatory development.

As with all debates around globalisation, the global/local relationship is key. Some contributors to this discourse for example have challenged us to think about the local context as they propose holistic lifelong learning models in learning cities.

Studies into the content analysis of lifelong learning research and scholarship to investigate representation have tended to find that author representation was more local than global and the lifelong learning discourse is predominantly Anglo-American. Commentators have called for greater emphasis on work with an international or comparative focus and a more inclusive approach to the lifelong learning discourse.

The centrality of the economy

The relationship between education, training and the performance of the economy is central to the literature on lifelong learning. The issues that are often put forward as a

basis for lifelong learning in policy texts are lack of productivity and competitiveness in the economy and social exclusion. The development of individual skills and qualifications are seen as avenues through which these can be addressed. However, many contributors to the debate assert there is little evidence for a simple linear connection between education and training and improved economic performance.

A number of European studies have argued that economic success depends on having a competitive 'high tech' industry, and that previous under-investment in vocational education and training have undermined European efforts to respond to changing economic conditions. The pace and scale of technological developments, particularly in information and communication technologies (ICT), have produced strong concerns about how new technologies will impact on employment patterns and the working environment.

The changing employment context is seen to require new working methods, and the key features of the ideal 1990s workforce are flexibility, adaptability and multiple skills. The learning requirements of the workforce revolve around the need for continuous training in a wider range of skills that serves to increase the adaptability of the employee to changing production methods.

In response to this changing context, the European Union's concerns in relation to the economy and employment dominate its educational policy. However, this concern with the vocational aspect of learning has not been exclusive. The Council of Education Ministers has also stressed the role of learning in the context of significant demographic changes, the confrontation of cultures, environmental issues, threats to the ways in which we live together in democracy, and social marginalisation.

Many commentators stress the need for global perspectives in learning and the need to promote, through the education system and a range of other institutions, the notion that the global economy operates within a moral framework based on democratic values and a respect for global interdependence.

Whether we look at European Union policy or that of individual national governments, it is the debate about the economic benefits of lifelong learning that is at the fore. Since the development of European Union policy in relation to lifelong learning in the early 1990s, the importance of continuing investment in education and training has been associated with benefits to the individual, companies and the economy in general.

The familiar policy focus is that for Europe to remain competitive in a global economy, in which there is rapid scientific and technological change mediated by new information and communications technologies, investment in human capital is vital:

Skill and competence enhancement in the new economy in Europe requires that the policy emphasis is shifted towards increasing investment in human capital and in raising participation in education and training throughout working life. To keep pace with developments in technology, globalisation, population ageing and new business practices, particular attention should be given to workplace training, an important dimension of our strategy for lifelong learning.

A Diamantopoulou, Member of EU Commission, launching the European Area of Lifelong Learning.

So do we have the evidence to support investment in lifelong learning from an economic perspective? Certainly at an individual level it is the benefits associated with employability, whether this entails obtaining a job or career promotion, that are seen as prime motivators for participation in post-compulsory education and training. Research within the UK on mature students returning to higher education provides ample evidence that individuals' decision-making is mediated by economic considerations and there is plenty of evidence that at a personal level there are economic benefits from continuing education. However, a number of commentators such as Keep question the relationship between qualification levels and national economic performance and productivity.

The Learning Society

In his 1972 report *Learning to Be*, Edgar Fauré linked lifelong education to building a learning society.

As can be inferred from the large number of policy statements and advisory reports in the mid to late 1990s produced by and for governments, there is no dearth of ideas about what policies should be pursued to make lifelong learning a reality. But there remain many unanswered questions about the goals, shapes, means and ends of a 'learning society'.

The learning society is broadly conceptualised in policy literature as a response to the challenges posed by contemporary conditions. Major economic, technological, social, demographic and cultural shifts demand new forms of learning to equip people with the knowledge and skills to deal with change and uncertainty. However, the learning society is not a uniform phenomenon, and lifelong learning is experienced differentially. Local conditions and the opportunity structures within them impact significantly on the learning trajectories of different groups, suggesting a need for the regionalisation and localisation of policies to support lifelong learning. There are concerns that a learning society that primarily sustains a learning market will have the effect of marginalising issues of non-participation and social exclusion.

Many commentators suggest an ideal learning society would be one in which all citizens acquire a high quality general education, appropriate vocational training and a job (or series of jobs) worthy of a human being while continuing to participate in education and training throughout their lives. A learning society would combine excellence with equity and would equip all its citizens with the knowledge, understanding and skills to ensure national economic prosperity and much more besides. The attraction of the term 'learning society' lies in the implicit promise not only of economic development but also the regeneration of our whole public sphere. Citizens of a learning society would, by means of their continuing education and training, be able to engage in critical dialogue and action to improve the quality of life for the whole community and to ensure social integration as well as economic success.

Alternatively, rather than treating the learning society as a future destination, the idea can be used reflexively in order to monitor change – for example, by asking what different types of learning society exist in the United Kingdom at present, who participates, who does not and what are the determinants of participation and non-participation.

Key questions: what would a learning society look like? How would it differ from

today's society? How useful is a lifelong learning approach, and what criteria should assess progress, or possibly failure? Will more education really be beneficial in shaping people's life courses, in reinforcing rational action, or in fostering culture and human values? Do strategies for lifelong learning contain the ingredients of a 'cure' for economies in transition, or are such strategies currently being over-sold to policy makers/the electorate? If so, can one expect a backlash any time soon?

The Knowledge Economy / Revolution / Knowledge Society

Economic growth is increasingly driven by knowledge, and no country can remain competitive without applying knowledge. Advances in science and technology provide potential for countries to accelerate and strengthen their economic and social development. The knowledge economy provides efficient ways to produce goods and services and deliver them more effectively, and at lower costs, to greater numbers of people.

Ruth Kagia, Human Development Network

A variety of writers have argued from the 1970s onwards that a 'new age of capitalism' is sweeping the globe. This development, which is increasingly referred to as the emergence of a 'knowledge economy', has usually been attributed to the complex interrelationships and interdependencies that exist between the following four key factors:

1. The quickening pace of global scientific and technological innovation which has resulted in knowledge becoming more important to global economic development than such traditional factors of production as land, capital and labour.
2. The emergence of a new techno-economic paradigm – the 'informational mode of development' – whose main features are: (i) the application of three new principles – *value-making*, *relation-making* and *decision-making* – to work organisation, work design and business-to business interaction; and (ii) the deployment of information and communication technology to monitor and provide feedback on work flow, product and process performance and sales.
3. The scale and impact of global multinational activity, which has resulted in the emergence of more customer-focused organisations, less hierarchical divisions of labour and new occupational profiles and new skill requirements
4. The global process of industrial convergence that is helping to blur the lines that separated traditional industries, for example, telecommunications, from newer ones, such as media and computing, and create new growth opportunities as technologies and markets converge.

Although it is widely accepted that knowledge and innovation are most important to economic development and wealth creation, there appear to be two slightly different, albeit complementary, views about which form of knowledge and innovation is most important. Some writers view innovation in highly traditional terms, as a process driven by the application of highly abstract and codified forms of scientific knowledge developed through formal research, that is, 'off-line', and sheltered from the regular production of goods and services in the workplace. Other writers view this as a gross simplification of the innovation process because firms are now under increased pressure to use their intangible assets (i.e. the knowledge and skills of their workforce) to innovate within the day-to-day context of the production of goods and services. Thus, they argue that innovation must also be viewed as a process spurred

through the exploitation of knowledge or information that is available inside firms and that enables them to offer superior value in their traditional businesses and markets.

Those who promote the concept of the knowledge revolution assert that our ability to create, access and use knowledge is becoming a fundamental determinant of global competitiveness. The 'bottom line' of their argument is that constant change and competition implies need for constant restructuring and upgrading.

We can identify seven key elements of 'Knowledge Revolution':

1. Increased codification of knowledge and development of new technologies
2. Closer links with science base/increased rate of innovation/shorter product life cycles
3. Increased importance of education and up-skilling of labour force, and lifelong learning
4. Investment in Intangibles (R&D, education, software) greater than Investments in Fixed Capital in OECD
5. Greater value added now comes from investment in intangibles such as branding, marketing, distribution, information management
6. Innovation and productivity increase more important in competitiveness and GDP growth
7. Increased Globalization and Competition

Frequently, critiques of lifelong learning policy in western countries – including the UK – argue that lifelong learning policy relies on human capital approaches seeking to provide skills for the knowledge economy at the expense of more 'holistic' or social capital approaches (Field 2002, Riddell 2005).

Some commentators assert the need for a critical social pedagogy of lifelong learning is to teach both educators and learner-workers how to insert themselves into the world as historical and ethical subjects who resist, critique, and transgress. This is necessary, they argue, in order to create possibilities for changing objectifying conditions associated with a knowledge-based economy.

The individual as learner

In the individualised society the individual must therefore learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the centre of action. ...under these conditions of a reflexive biography 'society' must be individually manipulated as a 'variable'

Ulrich Beck, Risk Society, 1992

Adults are subject to an explosion of information and knowledge, thereby placing greater emphasis on the process of learning which is ongoing rather than the content of learning, which is likely to go out of date. As individuals take increasing responsibility for their own decisions about lifestyle and identity, life planning and guidance also become increasingly important.

In recent debates, there has been much discussion of the significance of postmodernism and postmodernity for the study and practice of adult education, at the same time as the emergence of lifelong learning as a policy strand around the globe. A significant strand of the lifelong learning discourse examines the co-implication of lifelong learning with some of the changes associated with the

postmodern condition, in particular, 'performativity', 'unruliness' of knowledge, loss of mastery. Some contributors argue that lifelong learning can be construed as a postmodern condition of education.

The role of education and training in developing learner autonomy is justified by reference to the uncertain economic, technological and social environment that learners will encounter. The demise of traditional bureaucratic career tracks and uncertainties around what people will need to know in ten years time means that simply loading up the 'front end' of education is not an adequate response. For instance, we can anticipate a higher proportion of students studying intermittently, with more short programmes (Certificates and Diplomas) and more people returning repeatedly to update skills and knowledge, or to change career direction. Learners will be following increasingly individual learning pathways, requiring greater flexibility and diversity from institutional providers, particularly in relation to guidance services.

Lifelong learning and networks

However, if learning is seen as a function of social relationships rather than an essentially individual activity, then the concept of lifelong learning is extended beyond the acquisition by individuals of formal qualifications. Learning then ties in with a set of other relationships within organisations, families, communities and the economy.

A number of recent research studies have highlighted the significant role which learning networks can play in support of lifelong learning. Learning networks can include family and peers, community groups, voluntary organisations, social movements, and youth organisations. They can connect individuals to the wider community and facilitate learning in many different ways.

Some writers have claimed that social partnerships are a 'space for learning' with the potential to enhance capacity for action and responsibility and build collective, even democratic, understanding by enhancing the individual's cognitive and affective competences (Fennesy, 2006).

Some research (Field and Lynch 2007) raises questions about the nature and purpose of provider partnerships. In these studies, partnerships are seen as policy-led set by policy makers, where community consultation has not always been either extensive or effective. Some critics of lifelong learning partnerships claim that they tend to be inspired by broad public policy goals that have little or no connection to the worlds in which learners are living their learning lives. The challenge for partnerships and network approaches is to find common ground on which to meet people and engage with their learning aspirations.

Lifecycle, Lifecourse or Lifewide approaches

As I see it, what is needed is critical social lifelong and lifewide learning that can cut across barriers such as those associated with class, ethnocultural difference, illiteracy, age, gender, the lack of education, the lack of quality work, and geographic isolation.

André Grace, University of Alberta, Canada *Intersecting instrumental, social, and cultural education to build and sustain inclusive lifelong-learning communities* 2002

A recent focus of lifelong learning discourse has been on the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in the lifecourse. On the one hand, this exploration seeks to understand how identity (including one's identity as a learner) and agency (the ability to exert control over one's life) impact upon learning dispositions, practices and achievements. On the other hand, it seeks to understand how different forms and practices of learning and different learning achievements impact upon individual identities (including learner identities), on individuals' senses of agency, and on their actual capacity to exert control over their lives.

In order to do so, the meaning, significance and impact of a range of formal, informal, tacit and incidental learning experiences are examined from the perspectives of adult learners. This is done against the background of their unfolding lives, aiming to understand, in other words, the *transformations* in learning dispositions, practices and achievements that have been triggered by *changes* in the lifecourse.

Some commentators are particularly interested in the ways in which adults respond to events in their lives and in the processes of learning involved in such responses. Such events may be *structured transitions* or they may be changes of a more *incidental* nature, including critical incidents, such as redeployment or illness. Many such events stimulate encounters with new formal and informal learning opportunities. They can also result in forms of tacit learning of which individuals sometimes only become aware (long) after the event. Learning also occurs, it is often claimed, in relation to the routines of everyday life, where 'turning points' are not immediately discernible.

Some recent debates have focused on whether it is possible or worthwhile to isolate types of learner against demographic trends. A Birkbeck study (Jamieson & Adshead 2007) for example identified four types of learner pathway:

1. The 'ongoing' students
2. The 'intermittent' students
3. The 'resumers'
4. The 'one-off' students

Key Questions:

- What does education bring to people's social competences?
- What skills and knowledge do people develop through their social and civic engagement?
- Are these transferable to, and valued in, other life spheres – especially working life?
- Are transformations of learning dispositions triggered by changes in the life course?

Participation and equity

...neglect may be the major contribution of the new lifelong learning movement.

Canadian academic and adult educator Alan Thomas

Studies of participation reveal a complex picture that does not lend itself to simple solutions, and initiatives aimed at widening participation have not always had their intended effect. Debates about participation and non-participation have been framed

largely within an instrumental and technical form of rationality focusing on institutional and systemic issues, rather than positioning them in the wider socio-economic and political context. The literature reveals that neither public welfare nor market-based models of provision have been entirely successful in countering established patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

A number of studies show that those with minimum initial education, manual workers, adults from lower socio-economic groups and older people are consistently under-represented in the take-up of learning opportunities. Valuable though these studies are, they do not reveal the extent to which factors may be mutually reinforcing, nor do they offer any evidence as to whether there are circles of causality. We do know that there are variations of take-up relating to gender and ethnicity, although here too there are variations within groups and by regions. The message is that i) aggregated figures can mislead and there is a need to unpack many figures purporting to depict the condition of adult learning, and ii) it is essential for initiatives to be responsive to local variations.

Estimates of participation levels depend heavily on the definition of 'learning' that is used. Formal episodes of learning such as degree courses, attendance at training colleges, formal training courses organised by the employer at work and so on tend to be immediately identified by survey respondents as learning activities, but they are less clear about including informal, unstructured types of learning. This is particularly true of some learning at work that is seen as 'just part of the job'. It is also true of some types of non-vocational learning because the purpose of the activity is seen as fun rather than learning. This raises the fundamental question of what constitutes learning and whether it can be clearly differentiated from such things as experience and leisure.

Many of the contributions to academic and policy debate challenge us to remember those disenfranchised when lifelong learning is often cast as more education for the already educated. Some commentators emphasise the centrality of access and equity in policy work and practice of lifelong learning. They demand that we grapple with issues of access, accommodation, and equity as we engage questions of purpose, content, process, and audience in our interactions with lifelong learners. Two multi-focused questions guided such analysis:

- Who says what lifelong learning is, what it is for, and for whom?
- What are the key ideas behind access and how do they interact – with each other, and with provision?

Learning and working

In many workplaces learning is used as a key strategy for managing the change and uncertainty faced by individual workers and their employing organisations. The workplace itself becomes a powerful learning environment informed by the concept of the 'learning organisation', in which employers, workers, educators and trainers engage in new forms of relationships, with important implications for industrial relations.

Within the literature on lifelong learning there is an emphasis on developing people's skills and competencies, and their capacity for further learning. In the economic sphere, the notion of employability has moved to the fore, placing emphasis on individual skill development and preparedness for employment, with less concern for

the availability of employment and appropriate opportunity structures. Thus, a notion of a learning society that sees inclusion mediated through participation in employment – although valuable to many – can itself produce other exclusions.

Informal learning in the workplace constitutes a large and increasing part of provision for lifelong learning. Factors impinging on this development are the increase in job turnover rates and the insecurity associated with flexible work contracts and new forms of organising employment. The building of knowledge networks and the changing nature of work in learning organisations are additional factors.

Some contributors to workplace learning discourse have explored how worker identities are shaped and reshaped through the interconnected experiences of assessment, work and learning. Others, such as Fuller and Unwin, have attempted to develop notions of situated learning first advanced by Lave and Wenger. Another key aspect of the discourse in this area is the exploration of the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP), which examines how groups of people in organisations can – through joint enterprises, mutual engagement and shared repertoire – share knowledge to learn from one another regarding some aspects of their work and to provide a social context for that practice. Some writers argue that there is a clear move from simple disciplined Fordist approaches to more flexible forms, others that there is no single trajectory for workplace learning and that pedagogic practices are embedded in the specific networks of workplaces.

Key questions: how do work-time patterns relate to different learning pathways? What settings of work organisation raise barriers and obstacles to adult education in the workplace, and what practices can be used to overcome such inhibiting factors? Does informal learning at work improve the adjustment capacity of economic factors and if so, how and to what extent? What is the role of lifelong learning in relation to flexible labour markets?

Learning technologies

The emergence of new learning technologies can be examined from a number of different perspectives and on a number of different levels. These technologies are commonly thought to offer the possibility of ‘anywhere, anytime’ learning. Commentators argue therefore that they offer the potential to increase access to learning opportunities, extend the variety of ways learners can learn, improve access to knowledge resources and support a continuously updated curriculum.

A number of challenges and problems in this field have also been explored. Two of the main challenges are the ever-shifting nature of the e-landscape and the difficulty of helping teachers to exploit the capacities offered by these ‘disrupting technologies’ as they continue to bring about change.

Issues in current discourses include:

- Digital divide
- Development of database and networking
- Development of skills to utilise the new information infrastructure
- Development of software and applications
- Enhancing quality through technology
- Learning by doing
- Self-directed learning
- Networks of good practice

Recent discourses around information literacy have raised the issue of bringing aspects of professional, civic, and personal life into the curriculum as part of a holistic engagement with information literacy and lifelong learning. Some commentators have reminded us to remember the importance of information literacy in personal, civic, communal, and economic domains.

Key questions: what can be the role of new information and communication technologies in creating positive learning environments that enable all students to acquire a selected knowledge base? Does an increase in computer-based activity imply a reduction of time spent learning in other ways? What is the role of new technologies in improving validity and reliability of assessment of cross-curricular competencies? To what extent can teachers be replaced by technologies?

Delivering learning

Lifelong learning, as is evident from what has been said above, implies a very large agenda. It raises many issues about the institutional relationships between the formal education sector and the more diffuse, heterogeneous provisions of continuing education.

Key shifts in learning provision include increased organisational flexibility in the delivery of learning opportunities, the opening up of new sites of learning, the development of credit frameworks, the development of open and distance learning methods, and the application of information and communication technology. Underpinning these developments has been the marketisation of education and training. Publically-funded providers operate in a competitive environment, with important implications for their relationship with other providers, and with learners. With developments in modularisation, credit frameworks and individual learning pathways, guidance assumes a more central role, even as the nature of that role becomes more problematic.

Acceptance of a coherent strategy of lifelong learning immediately begs difficult questions about the investment risks and costs, and implications for financing strategies. As the strategic roles of governments and their partners are reviewed, traditional roles of financing education are also being called into question.

It is often asserted in policy texts that it is through guidance and counselling that individuals construct themselves and their decisions as lifelong learners. As the structures that govern the front-end model of education and training become part of the wider resources for lifelong learning, so decisions about learning opportunities become more individualised. Guidance is frequently seen as playing a more central role for the individual in negotiating their situations and there is a need for innovation concerning both the forms of guidance on offer and the contexts in which they are available.

Some claim that the creation of new exploitable knowledge has become the domain of corporations, weakening the ability of public lifelong learning agencies to influence what knowledge has most worth. Others make the case for the value of lifelong learning that intersects academic knowledge with workplace learning and experiences.

Some commentators are alarmed by what they see as the uncritical way in which lifelong learning is praised as a contemporary panacea that values the benefits of continuous training and development. They portray the position of today's learning institutions as vulnerable, appearing to have little choice.

Key questions: what are the 'typical characteristics' of adult education institutions? Are they adaptive, flexible and responding to the needs of various adult learners? What are the impacts of institutional styles and conditions of the educational provisions on offer upon access and the motivation of potential adult learners? Are there specific patterns of social exclusion that might be endemic to a system of lifelong learning? Can the principles of lifelong learning assist governments in playing a more strategic role in the governance and management of education and training systems? What balance is to be struck between central legislation and directives and local discretion or choice? What are the cost implications of reorienting systems to a lifelong learning approach?

Issues for lifelong learning

The issues for lifelong learning covered by current debates include the following:

How to agree on strategies' relative size. The size of each part may vary (depending on countries). In a lifelong learning perspective, stakeholders could first decide on the links between the four settings (contexts) and then on their size. In addition, size may vary with demand and needs according, for example, to the weight and relevance of initial education.

The financial dimension: budget share between the various learning settings. How do we set up priorities?

How/whether to weave strong links between sectors: what is learned in one should not have to be learned again in the other. This means that different certifications will have to be developed for the non-formal learning experience (personal and professional) at least for those individuals who want their learning to be recognised as such or in a formal qualification.

Could links between the different existing learning settings enable lifelong learning to make its perspective clearer? Of course, it would be a lifetime perspective since the premise is that individuals learn all the time, regardless of where they are. The main priority for individuals and society is thus to make the 'best use' of this learning capital.

The 'best use' may well be to recognise learning as it is and where it takes place. Forms of certification might differ but links and transfers should always be defined. Lifelong learning would not be dominated by training providers (public and private) but by the learners themselves.

More diversified certification procedures might be needed but without multiplying formal credentials or without 'forcing' individuals into formal qualifications. As diversity of learning activities is crucial, lifelong learning will also call for diversity in certification.

A concern with 'what works?' permeates modern education, and lifelong learning and continuing education are not immune from that tendency. This functionalist

perspective, focusing on solving educational problems using methods akin to those used in the natural sciences, is in the ascendancy in many societies.

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