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Abstract

Lifelong Learning has in recent years become a fundamental element of many educational policy strategies aimed at achieving the goal of socio-economic development. The role of universities in this is viewed by some as crucial and requires some attention. This article examines the concept of lifelong learning and suggests another way in which it could be conceptualised. It further reflects on how two European universities understand and implement lifelong learning and the implications for European regional educational policies in view of the knowledge society.

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Conceptualising Lifelong Learning: a reflection on lifelong learning at Middlesex University (UK) and Lund University (Sweden)

ABDULAI ABUKARI

Introduction

This article discusses the concept of lifelong learning and the approach to it in Lund University's Office for Continuing and Distance Education (OCDE), Sweden, and Middlesex University's School for Lifelong Learning and Education (SLLE), UK. It illustrates how a 'traditional/old' and a 'new/modern' university understand and deliver lifelong learning and its implication for Europe. Interviews were also conducted with key informants concerned with policy development and programme delivery at SLLE and OCDE to authenticate the documentary sources.

Literature suggests that the notion of lifelong learning has existed since the creation of humanity and has only recently appeared in its institutional form (Kallen, 2002), or that it has existed since the era of great thinkers such as Plato and Comenius (Withnall, 2000), and that the notion will continue (Cropley, 1980).

In a UNESCO report chaired by Edgar Faure, lifelong learning was viewed as a life-span endeavour, whether in the formal, non-formal or informal mode, to enrich the quality of life of the learner as an individual and of the general community as a whole (Tuijnmann, 2002). According to the European Commission, lifelong learning is:

All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective (Thomas, 2003, p. 4).

Here, it is divided into two broad categories based on its organisation (dimension) and purpose:

- Learning occurring 'from cradle to grave', covering all activities at all stages of life; planned or unplanned learning activities and experiences, or in a restricted sense; all organised learning experiences, formal or informal, from preschool through compulsory schooling to post compulsory stages, including work experiences.
- Learning directed towards achieving (any/all of) economic competitiveness, personal development, leisure and/or social inclusiveness for democratic understanding and for public good.

Lifelong learning may be conceived in terms of time and space, its organisation, and/or its purpose. The conceptualisation to cover the whole of human life (cradle to grave) raises important concerns about the future of the conventional schooling system. It is argued that lifelong learning should cover the total human endeavour, including the social, economic and personal needs of the individual. This conception assumes a holistic form that breaks the boundaries of age, place and scope. The proponents of this view argue that this type of lifelong learning will reject the school and post school division to encompass the whole lifespan of the individual, enhance community development, increase economic competitiveness and move towards the idea of a learning society (Aspin & Chapman, 2001; Field & Leicester, 2003). This view is also based on the idea that education is a public good, hence its aim and objectives should be based on enhancing the wherewithal of the general public.

The holistic outlook of the concept can be problematic because of 'the risk of dispersion, a loss of focus and the difficulty of assigning and evaluating priorities' (Tuijnmann, 2002, p.105). If 'learning' is seen as a product of living, then it brings to question the need to engage in more careful planning, implementation and evaluation of educational policies and programmes (Bagnall, 1990). Smith & Spurling (1999, p. 9) in their two-faceted conceptualisation of lifelong learning stressed that at the *empirical level*¹, 'lifelong learning is intended and planned learning'. While acknowledging that it is a continuous process throughout the lifespan, they maintained that aimless and unplanned learning cannot be lifelong learning, terming it as 'trivial'. Recent debates have noticed a departure from its unintentional and unplanned notion to one that is aimed at achieving specific goals such as the creation of the knowledge society (Field & Leicester, 2003; Knapper & Cropley, 1991).

Yet another conceptual classification is based on economic capital. The adherents of economic capital orientation have stressed its economic benefits, indicating a shift from considering education as a public good to a private good. Apologists of this view argue that if individuals in the public are economically empowered they will directly benefit as individuals as well as contribute to the 'betterment of society, both directly through their productive work, and through their beneficence and generosity of spirit towards others' (Ball, 1995, cited in Bagnall, 2000, p. 23). It is suggested that the current post-modern society may be the cause of this economic deterministic nature of education (Bagnall, 2000). Bagnall continues, however, to elaborate on the negative implication by pointing out that such an individualistic focus tends to exclude and marginalise the more disadvantaged members of the public, while strengthening the already wealthy and powerful. The supporters of the social capital perspective underscore the public value of lifelong learning. Following the different arguments, it seems we might still be a long way from arriving at a broad consensus on what it should be, especially if arguments advanced for or against particular perspectives fail to acknowledge the different backgrounds and circumstances in which this concept operates.

In view of current discussions, this article puts forward another analytical perspective, based on the perspective of Aspin and Chapman (2001), who, after a revision of the different versions of lifelong learning, cautiously rejected the view that an 'essential' definition can be reached. They identified three elements that are characteristic of most policy statements across the globe. They are framed around the purpose of lifelong education which are: to bring about economic

progress and development; bring about personal development and fulfilment; and social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity. They stress the interdependency of these elements that culminate in an education 'for a more highly-skilled work-force *at the same time* an education for better democracy *and* a more rewarding life' (Aspin & Chapman, 2001, p. 29) for the individual.

Aspin and Chapman suggested a 'pragmatic approach to conceptualising lifelong learning' as a way forward and a more applicable option to achieving lifelong learning for all. They maintained that 'Neither logical empiricism, positivism, nor ordinary language analysis will serve as single "will be" comprehensive theories to account for all the phenomenon constituting the bases . . . of lifelong learning' (Ibid, p. 15). This pragmatic approach requires philosophers, policy makers, researchers and educators to find a common ground, a point referred to as 'enmeshment' or 'touchstone'. This stand seems to bring to the fore the complexity involved in trying to frame an acceptable conceptual definition.

From the Operational Level to Conceptualisation?

It seems that the 'pragmatic approach' still boils down to a common problem of handling the issue at *only* the philosophical level, ignoring the wide gap between 'theories' and practice (Kokosalakis & Kogan, 2001). We need to recognise the current state of lifelong learning which suggests a departure from a mere 'policy of education' (Lawson, 1982, p. 97) to a situation where pragmatism is a pivotal element. This view is emphasised by Millinson (Osborne, 2003, p. 22): 'researchers should 'seek to understand society not by examining the stated ideas of a small elite, but by participating with ordinary members of it in the construction of their social world'. Being at the very centre with a broader view of the scenario, the university² can then be described as the 'touchstone' or 'enmeshment' where the different perspectives can be expressed and as a reliable reference point to start any conceptual foundation. In other words, the delivery stage is the best place to understand and conceptualise lifelong learning, whether in a formal, informal or non-formal setting.

Against this backdrop, I argue that philosophers and researchers should turn their attention to the implementation or delivery level. Lifelong education should therefore be a *process* of conscious continuous learning that caters for both the individual needs and those of the *relevant* community(ies) across the socio-cultural, economic and democratic constituents that will not only help individuals to become responsible to themselves and their communities, but to understand and become involved in the democratic dispensation at all levels. Hence, lifelong learning refers to the distribution of learning opportunities for all throughout their lifespan (Green, 2000).

The Lund University initiative

Sweden is acknowledged to have been ahead in policy deliberations (Tuijnmann & Schuller, 1999), despite the fact that lifelong education has appeared in different forms since 1800 (Askling & Foss-Fridlitzius, 2000). At present, there are official policies to promote it across the educational sector. Features of these include:

- ‘deepening the democratic societal goals as well as the continuing upgrading of the labour force’ (Badersten & Wigforss, 2001).
- a combination of adult education, continuing education and all forms of recurrent education (Ibid).
- Resource allocation by government should favour universities which have long programmes and courses for regular students.
- The development of a Swedish Virtual University (SVU).

The Office for Continuing and Distance Education

Lund University opened the OCDE in 1996 to implement its lifelong education policy which is geared towards the provision of comprehensive services and support to meet the rising demand for continuing and market-driven education (Ossiannilsson, 2002). The OCDE mission statement, which was accepted by the board of governors of the university on 9th June 2000, stated that:

[E]ducation should be a life-long process in a society like ours . . . due to the swift changes in today’s working life, everybody needs continuous updating of competence to cope with the job . . . for the university it is an important task to respond to the increasing demands for university-level training for professionals (OCDE, 2000).

The university’s understanding of lifelong education is to organise it like a business enterprise in which the non-regular students are seen as its customers. According to Ossiannilsson (2002, p. 2) ‘So as to consistently meet organisations’ and business’s requirements of competence development and reflect the individual’s requirements for lifelong learning, a particular structure has been developed at Lund University. A special policy group under the leadership of the chancellor has been established, as well as a group of professional project leaders, with the various faculties all present’.

The relationship between what is continuing education, distance education and lifelong education is uncertain, since these terms are used interchangeably.

Access to courses and programmes is as flexible as its delivery, ranging from persons with no formal qualifications to those with specific qualifications. Courses are modelled for professionals. There are also strategic alliances with organisations that contract the office to draw up courses geared towards upgrading the skills of their staff; here, the mode of access is more or less determined by the organisation in question.

Planning and delivery of courses are carried out by the faculties and range from free modules to postgraduate ones. University lecturers go through training to enhance their skills. The curriculum is very flexible and pays more attention to customer needs (OCDE, 2000); hence the courses are termed *non-regular courses*. There are over 250 web-based distance courses, which are generally designed to help professionals who cannot attend regular courses and programmes in the university (Ossiannilsson, 2002). These courses are available in many of the seven faculties but more especially in medicine, natural sciences, law, humanities, social science, and engineering. Learning activities are also carried out at local centres across *Skane* to help participants use computers and follow courses delivered through video presentations. Learning outcomes are measured through the generic

skills the learners are expected to possess and the ability of learning outcomes to meet the needs of the learner. An innovative form of teaching and learning known as 'Learning Lund' has been introduced. The strategy 'merges pedagogy, pedagogic ICT and networking for learners. It emphasises insight through individual, collaborative and teacher coached learning' (Ibid, p. 3). Teaching and learning take the form of both campus and distance activities. The Learning Lund strategy involves a relatively large number of specialists and interested persons who collaborate to develop advanced learning tools.

The OCDE has identified two categories of lifelong learning: continuing education that is in line with the state policy of free education, and commissioned education that involves payments of fees or costs of delivery by learners. However, OCDE's financial policy is clear: 'In the long run, lifelong learning courses should generate a surplus and always cover their own cost' (OCDE, 2000, p. 1). The quality of courses are determined by the level of student satisfaction.

The University is also involved in some European collaborative research projects.

Middlesex University's Version

Lifelong learning in the UK has assumed different dimensions in the last four decades; it has existed as adult education, distance education, continuous education, and vocational education. The UK is said to be the first country to have opened a lifelong learning university — the Open University (Henkel, 2001). Lifelong learning has appeared in several government educational policy documents. However, according to Withnall (2000: 2) 'a detailed analysis of three major policy reports relevant to the development of lifelong learning in the UK reveals a strong priority accorded to vocational education and training in spite of some general rhetoric about the non-economic, personal and social benefits of lifelong learning'. Government policy can be summarised as follows:

- 'the continuous development of skills, knowledge and understanding that are essential for employability and fulfilment . . .' (DfEE, 1998: 1)
- Policy has been non-direct and tends to encourage institutions to involve in LL programmes rather than strict policy prescription.
- Lifelong learning is not directly funded from state coffers in many cases; however its quality delivery by an institution stands to have a positive financial impact through quality assurance assessment.

The following statement from the Department for Education and Employment shows the central understanding of lifelong learning in the UK:

For the nation, learning will be the key to strong economy and an inclusive society. It will offer a way out of dependency and low expectation towards self-reliance and self-confidence. In doing so, it will be at the heart of the government's welfare reform programme. We must bridge the 'learning divide' which blights so many communities and the widening gap, in terms of employment expectations and income, between those who have benefited from education and training and those who have not (DfEE, 1998, p. 6)

The SLLE

The SLLE runs various programmes/schemes: Education (teacher training), National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships (NCWBLP), and Product Design and Engineering (PDE). Its mission is to provide 'opportunities of the highest quality for lifelong learners to initiate, develop and enhance their capability for life and work' (SLLE, 2004). It runs courses which are akin to work-based learning, and also education studies, and Product Design and Engineering. The three main units (Education, NCWBLP and PDE) can be put into two categories for the purpose of discussion. The first category covers Education and PDE and is tied more to the conventional/regular type of university education. The other covers work-based courses run by the NCWBLP which are non-regular/unconventional and have flexible entry requirements based on an individual's or organisation's needs.

Work-based learning is seen as a 'means of recognising and developing the learning which takes place outside the classroom, learning which could be at higher education level but does not conveniently map on to conventional higher education' (Osborne *et al.*, 1998). Initially, all work-based learning courses in the other schools of the university were linked to the NCWBLP, but some schools have developed their own work-based learning programmes which are closely related to their traditional discipline areas, even though with some occasional consultation with the NCWBLP. Work-based learning courses in the other schools form a negligible part of their academic courses.

All courses range from certificate to PhD or DProf (Doctor of Professional Studies in the case of WBL). WBL courses are non-disciplined and open to people above the age of 16 years who are in paid or unpaid work. The NCWBLP has developed partnerships with organisations and enterprises that may also influence patterns of access. For example, *Marks and Spencer* has some control in deciding which of its employees should join a module and when. According to Osborne (1998), the initial aim of the WBL was return-to-learning for mature students intending to access the traditional university programmes. Later, developments led to a tilt towards continuing professional development.

The WBL curriculum is learner-centred and 'does not assume a deficit model of student knowledge and skill but takes as a starting point the learning that an individual has *already* developed' (Osborne, 1998, p. 87). In most cases, the curriculum is based on an understanding between the partners and the university (NCWBLP) for the purposes of accreditation of programmes of partnership organisations by the university. Costley (2000, p. 24) points out that work-based learning at Middlesex University 'does not attempt to too narrowly define itself by restricting the boundaries of its knowledge based to paid work only' since it is worth acknowledging that 'people bring their experiential knowledge from both paid and unpaid work activity to whatever new work they undertake' (Ibid). The mode of delivery is distance learning through email communication supported by the University's learning support webs. There are also optional tutorial options which learners use as a platform to address the challenges they face with lecturers and colleagues. The work-based programme consists of a sequence of core modules, with a work-based project forming an important part of it (Doncaster & Garnett, 2000).

Students are expected to take the Accreditation of Prior and Work-Based Learning module (APWBL) which involves building up a portfolio that encapsulates their experience or knowledge. Assessment of students work involves generic criteria of 10 or 11 level descriptions. However, in all cases, outcome of learning is demonstrated in a project that reflects an innovation.

In principle, Middlesex University is not a profit making institution. However, the NCWBLP is under an obligation to generate enough funds to cover its activities and if possible create a surplus for the university. Amongst its sources of funds are organisations and individual students. It also attracts some funding from the research councils. International students and its international centres (e.g. Cyprus, Hong Kong, Greece) are also important sources of funds. Strategies at SLLE are geared towards increasing the number of students with the aim of increasing its income. Funds are sent to the central management for reimbursement according to need. Student feedback questionnaires, staff review activities, and the reflective handbook are used as means to improve quality in the NCWBLP.

Discussion

The overviews of lifelong learning at LU and MU have shown some marked similarities and differences, which can be discussed from different standpoints. However, discussions will be limited to the complexities in their *understandings* and *practices*.

What Understanding?

Firstly, efforts exist in both universities to promote the practice of lifelong learning. This is seen in their policy deliberations and practice. Despite their engagements, there seems to be no clarity in their conceptual underpinnings, yet there is close resemblance when considered from the delivery or practical point of view. From the interviews conducted and the literature consulted in the two institutions, no one source has proven so clear as to state what is the official definition.

In both cases there is a feeling of limited links between national lifelong learning policy and the institutional understanding and practice, despite the rhetoric of citing national policy statements to stress its importance. This can be seen in the pattern of delivery that pays greater importance to 'customer' needs than to the national policy requirements.

Practice based on the understanding and principles of widening access to more participation in higher education and the desire to respond to the needs of their communities are aims of both institutions. The result is a practical division between the traditional form of university education and lifelong learning provisions in terms of purpose, curriculum and pedagogy, leading to segmented systems within the institutions. Several issues have been raised concerning some components of the practice of LL, especially the efficacy of the pedagogy used.

Some factors that may be singly or jointly attributed to this lack of a clear definition of the concept are: firstly, the conflict between state commitment to diverse purposes and the focus on learning for economic competitiveness (Ecclestone, 2003); secondly, dealing with diverse communities with different needs due to the knowledge revolution (Castell, 2001) and globalisation in the sense of

advancement of communication technology that ignores national borders and respect for space and time (Giddens, 1994); and, thirdly, the current debate that is witnessing strong and air tight arguments for and against different versions (Field & Leicester, 2003). Perhaps an interesting issue worth investigating could be the implications of the unclear conceptual underpinning of LL on the learners, institutions, and national and regional policies.

The similarity in practice in the two institution emphasises the importance of considering the delivery stage when discussing lifelong learning as a concept.

Lifelong Learning Practices, a Mode 2 Knowledge Production

Perhaps the strongest point of contention between the traditional/conventional form of delivery and the current LL provisions in universities is the way in which knowledge is produced. In the former, knowledge and knowledge production mainly belong to academia and the main interest of knowledge is to seek truth (Boud, 2001). The latter shows a divergence of view and practice. Knowledge is produced in a wide range of places rather than just at the university and is applied in collaborations or in project settings. The basis of knowledge production springs from the context of application. This form of knowledge production has been termed 'mode 2 knowledge production' (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994).

Lifelong learning practices in the two institutions resemble the mode 2 model when analysed from three standpoints. Firstly, knowledge production is based on practical problems. It is not limited to the university environment. Furthermore, unlike in the conventional form where the quality of knowledge is determined by peer review judgements, in the case of the OCDE and NCWBLP the quality of knowledge is determined through accountability, in the sense of judging based on applicability and adversity.

But does this trend in the two institutions symbolise lifelong learning or a movement towards customisation of education delivery? If lifelong learning in higher education seeks to create opportunities for more people to have access to higher education, then the tilt of the two institutions towards a more 'entrepreneurial' form of operations where the monetary rewards take the centre stage in their strategic plans raises concern about the ability to achieve lifelong learning for all. According to research, the desire of people to further their education in educational institutions is influenced by many factors, including the ability to afford the financial cost of the studies. Many may be forced to upgrade their skills for the sake of job security.

Lifelong learning in both institutions seems to be a response to a call by industry and/or the desire to keep up with the growing competition among institutions rather than to the objective of making it available to all with the aim of enhancing the overall capability of learners to become 'functionally independent, culturally informed and publicly aware' (Bagnall, 2000, p. 25). This is seen in their emphasis on serving the needs of the 'customers' not the entire 'communities'. The NCWBLP programmes seem directing towards achieving this fist, but the issue of what amount of money is generated is paramount for decisions and innovations. Similarly, lifelong education as continuing education in the context of Lund University is free, in line with state policy.

But it is important to acknowledge that the programmes in both units reflect some of the practical needs of the communities. Although it may be argued that

this caters for the needs of only those who can afford to support themselves financially, thus raising concerns of exclusion, there is no doubt that provisions in both institutions have opened the opportunity for people who may not have had the opportunity to further their knowledge in higher education to do so.

Implication for a United Europe

Policy documents and discussions of intergovernmental organisations in Europe indicate strong support for lifelong learning, e.g. the proclamation of 1996 as the European year for lifelong learning and the 2000 Memorandum where it is stated that:

Lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it **must become the guiding principle** for provision and participating across the full continuum of learning context. **The coming decade must see the implementation of this vision.** All those living in Europe, without exception, should have equal opportunities to adjust to the demands of social and economic change . . . (EC, 2000, p. 3).

If this analysis of lifelong learning at Lund and Middlesex universities is accepted, then this could have some implications for the objective of the European Community to make it a guiding principle of education in Europe. Firstly, the differences that exist in the understanding of the concept due to its elastic nature could create a very big challenge for Europe to formulate a feasible agenda, especially considering the existing faint link (in some cases) between state policy and institutional practice of. Perhaps one way to deal with this is to adopt a more flexible approach to its conceptualisation and practice that will help individual countries (in collaboration with their institutions) to organise and practicalise the concept according to their national needs and educational systems. The on-going communication between heads of higher education institutions in Europe and the various national forums to reflect on creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) could be a platform to deliberate more on these issues.

Conversely, the tilt of institutions towards making lifelong learning an economic issue or a profit making enterprise could lead to the exclusion of a large share of the population who is unable to afford to pay, especially when state support is limited. To ensure effectiveness, there should be more financial resources to subsidise the cost by states and the regional organisation towards achievable and measurable targets.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is how institutions in Europe can translate, manage and strike a workable balance between their institutional, national and regional policies in a globalised context. This means that institutions will be confronted with different local, national, regional and international interests. The ability of institutions to handle this challenge in a balanced way will largely depend on how much resources they will have at their disposal and how their involvement will affect the quality of delivery and competitiveness at all levels. Identifying and understanding the practical needs of the relevant communities and collaboration³ between institutions in the region through combined research and exchange expertise that are overseen by the European Community could be another way of supporting the success of the objective.

The push towards a greater acceptance of mode 2 of knowledge production might lead to the ignoring other areas which are very important for safeguarding cultural continuity and the future development of society. This requires close deliberations between the regional organisation, states and institutions to work together towards an understanding of these concerns. For lifelong learning to become the driving force of the creation of a knowledge society in Europe, perceptions should move beyond the mere understanding as a supplement to the conventional systems of learning to a more central role in the learning and teaching process of the university, where more research is conducted to establish correlations between lifelong learning provisions and their outcomes. Against this background, uniformity in the level of engagement of the entire components of the lifelong learning movement across Europe could be an illusion unless the need and rule of interpretation and flexibility are acknowledged. This may not go without strong conflict between academia, national interests and the regional bodies. Notwithstanding this, the dynamics in understanding lifelong learning could well be a source of strength to achieve the objectives if all players take a proactive stand.

NOTES

1. The other is the moral level.
2. Lifelong learning provisions are carried out at different levels and forms, concern here is higher education.
3. Many collaborative programmes such as THENUCE (Thematic Network Project in European Universities Continuing Education) and NIACE geared towards understanding lifelong learning across universities in Europe.

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