

# Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/136570/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

James, David ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7921-6485> 2020. Is lifelong learning still useful? Disappointments and prospects for rediscovery. *Journal of Education and Work* 33 (7-8) , pp. 522-532.  
10.1080/13639080.2020.1852509 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2020.1852509>  
< <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2020.1852509> >

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Paper for Journal of Education and Work special issue 2020

SI Title: *The Roles of Higher Education, Further Education and Lifelong Learning in the Future Economy*

### **Is lifelong learning still useful? Disappointments and prospects for rediscovery**

**David James, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University**

Email: [JamesDR2@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:JamesDR2@cardiff.ac.uk)

#### **Abstract**

This paper considers the potential significance of a concept of lifelong learning in the context of digital disruption. Having noted some contemporary contrasts in the visibility of lifelong learning policy, it revisits the earlier more widespread dominance of the concept, identifying not only variety but also tensions that are inherent and constituent. Drawing on examples from England and Singapore, difficulties arising from compass, scope and fluidity of goals are discussed, illustrating how lifelong learning can lose its meaning. The paper then turns to the prospects for a new concept of lifelong learning that may be more sustainable and meaningful in a context characterised by digital and other changes to the nature of work, suggesting that such a concept must be both life-facing and work-facing.

## Introduction

The current reforms to technical education in England were shaped by the ‘Sainsbury Review’ (UK GOV, 2016), the Executive Summary of which notes that by 2020, the UK will be placed 28<sup>th</sup> out of the 33 OECD countries in terms of developing intermediate skills. The Review stresses the need for reforms that are more far-reaching than the ‘tinkering’ of the past, so that productivity and competitiveness can be boosted and the large number of unemployed young people could be gainfully employed. The latter point is described as both an economic and a social goal<sup>i</sup>. For current purposes, what is interesting is that there is only one mention of the term ‘lifelong learning’ in the whole document, and this does not appear in the main text. It appears on page 99, as part of an Annex consisting of five tables, each summarising the approach of another country in respect of their routes-based technical education system. The specific table refers to Singapore.

Whilst it is currently hard to find any concept of lifelong learning in English policy discourse, it is prominent in some international arenas, for example contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations<sup>ii</sup>. Lifelong learning re-emerged powerfully in recent years in Wales. The Welsh Government commissioned a major review of all aspects of post-compulsory education and training, and this was published in 2016 (Hazelkorn, 2016). A series of planned consultations have followed. In stark contrast to this area of policy in England<sup>iii</sup>, the Review highlighted the importance of a range of *values* and includes a list of the desirable characteristics of a post-compulsory *system*. For example:

‘Education plays a vital role in the national eco-system underpinning and ensuring personal success, health and satisfaction, and contributing to economic and social

outcomes for countries as well as global benefits. Because there are direct correlations between societal value systems and policy choices, how Wales balances its objectives for a skilled labour force, greater social equity, balanced regional growth, active engaged citizens, strong competitive institutions, attracting and retaining talent, and global competitiveness, matters' (Hazelkorn, 2016, section 1).

Alongside and running a little ahead of this development, Wales is also engaged in fundamental revisions of the school curriculum, assessment, teacher education and professional standards. Lifelong learning as one of its touchstones, and soon after the foundational reports on the curriculum (Donaldson, 2015) and teacher education (Furlong, 2015), the Welsh Government's key document explaining the reform process was entitled *A curriculum for Wales – A curriculum for life* (Welsh Government 2015). Following further consultations and revisions, the new curriculum is now fully announced, and will go 'live' in 2022.

Some twenty years ago lifelong learning seemed to be almost everywhere. There had been a 'remarkable' rise to prominence of lifelong learning and commitment to it during the 1990s across western countries, with government after government making a concept of lifelong learning central to their education and training agendas Field (2000). It was also portrayed by many as a panacea: in the UK it was expected to 'improve educational standards, national competitiveness, wealth creation, personal well-being, social cohesion, citizenship and the quality of life' (Robertson, quoted in Coffield, 2000, p. 32). Several international structures and documents provided an international stimulus to national policies for lifelong learning, with two of the most commonly identified being UNESCO's *Learning to Be* (Faure et al, 1972) and the European Commission's *Learning: The Treasure*

*Within* (Delors, 1996), well-known for its four 'pillars' (learning to be, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to know). Yet, firm and coherent as such foundations and formulations have been, it would be a serious mistake to presume that lifelong learning usually meant (or means) the same thing from place to place or from time to time, or even in the same place and the same time. Coffield, who led a substantial UK research programme on the topic, identified ten different models of a learning society that were simultaneously in operation across the UK, centred on goals as different as skills growth, personal development, social learning to tackle social exclusion, educational reform or radical structural change. Coffield commented that as well as meaning many things at once, lifelong learning was an area '...awash with unsubstantiated generalities, armchair musings and banalities without bite' (Coffield, 2000, p. 7).

To the uninitiated, lifelong learning seems at first to be a positive, relatively simple and yet also a progressive and enlightened idea. Who could possibly disagree that the promotion of learning, appropriately available throughout life, is a good thing, for individuals, society and the economy? Yet if we look more closely, lifelong learning often seems more akin to a slogan or mantra, which then struggles to conceal serious tensions between different and even contradictory strands. I want to illustrate this point by looking briefly at two difficulties, which concern (a) the *compass and scope* of lifelong learning, and (b) *fluidity, tensions and shifts in goals* apparent in some key lifelong learning policy. In both cases, there are clashes of concepts and interests which in turn give rise to visible, practical effects of fundamental importance to individuals and to society. Following these, I offer some brief reflections on how the changing nature of work, and especially those changes linked to

digital technology, may give rise to a need for new concepts of lifelong learning which may need to be radically different to those seen so far.

### **Compass and scope**

It is easy to lose sight of some of the excitement that has accompanied the concept of lifelong learning, formulations of which can be bold, ambitious and full of radical possibility, offering a reconceptualisation of types of learning, purposes of learning and opportunities to learn. The most distinctive feature has been the implied conceptual (and perhaps ultimately, practical) break with 'front loading' in the world of education and training. Established views of learning, education and training are heavily shaped by the embedded institutional structures, and typically seen as schooling for the young, plus some specific further opportunities for those with particular needs, propensities or interests (mainly in the form of Further, Higher and Adult education, plus work-based learning). In contrast, lifelong learning 'jolts' such habitual views, appearing to offer the prospect of something quite different. For example, rather than schooling and the associated certification being ends in themselves, schooling becomes the place where young people develop their capacity to carry on learning, to be lifelong learners. Even if considered in isolation this idea has wide appeal: it is in keeping with longstanding values and practices with deep roots in adult education<sup>iv</sup>, whilst at the same time being music to the ears of those interested in improving productivity via the timely and efficient development of human capital across a more flexible, agile workforce. Rich, 'cradle to grave' concepts of lifelong learning embrace these and other ideas that might otherwise seem to be in tension, and hold out the promise of a new consensus in which hitherto diverse goals are accommodated. However, this breadth of scope and compass runs into difficulties at the level of implementation and practice, often

giving way to the more prosaic idea that 'lifelong learning' is just another name for anything that is post-school, especially if it is also vocationally-oriented. We now turn to two examples to illustrate how this apparently harmless semantic difference has negative practical consequences.

The first pertains to the UK, where at one time there was immense enthusiasm in central government for lifelong learning, perhaps best exemplified in *The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain* (DfEE, 1998). The preface, written by the Secretary of State, highlights the importance of investment in human capital, success in the knowledge-based global economy, encouraging people to acquire knowledge and skills, the nurturing of creativity and imagination, the need for a 'well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable labour force' and for people being able to return to learning throughout their lives.

Realising such things would not only secure the economic future:

'The Learning Age will be built on a renewed commitment to self-improvement and on a recognition of the enormous contribution learning makes to our society.

Learning helps shape the values which we pass on to each succeeding generation.

Learning supports active citizenship and democracy, giving men and women the capacity to provide leadership in their communities. As President John F. Kennedy once put it: "Liberty without learning is always in peril and learning without liberty is always in vain"' (David Blunkett, in DfEE, 1998, p. 8).

This was a powerful vision. However a raft of other policies and processes were already firmly in train. These were also in keeping with the Prime Minister's earlier declaration that New Labour's top three priorities were 'education, education, education'. Human capital

thinking and the idea of the knowledge economy had already produced a strong direction in school-directed policy, in which choice and diversity would drive up standards in schooling, raise achievement and thereby better fuel productivity. Moreover, this policy direction had continued and in some ways strengthened despite a change of government in 1997. A later review by Hargreaves pointed, if somewhat politely, to the outcome of the collision between these two different strands of policy: whilst the strong and established school-facing policies had not been ‘...shaped by concerns about lifelong learning...neither was any policy intended to damage lifelong learning’ (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 91). Nevertheless, ‘damage’ was the result, and processes that Hargreaves’ review argued were crucial to successful lifelong learning (e.g. *learning how to learn, generic skills, the project, mentors, and personalisation*) were all badly served by the schooling-centred policies. Five years later, a more thoroughgoing analysis came to a similar conclusion: an *Independent Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning* (Schuller and Watson, 2009, p. 49) identified the lack of correspondence between schooling and lifelong learning and the capacity of one to undermine the other:

‘...a system which achieves its immediate objectives of raising young people’s qualifications, yet leaves them without an appetite to carry on learning, has failed...Too many leave school without basic skills or any qualifications, and therefore without the foundation for subsequent learning, as well as for adult life...Having these fundamental competences is arguably more important than achieving a minimum number of subject certificates.’

It is clear that this is much more than a ‘technical’ matter of whether the objectives are ‘right’ or whether there is sufficient congruence between them. The problem is at a more



abstract level: the lifelong learning policy was conceived as all-encompassing and driven by a vision of a changing a culture, whilst the policies that were focused only on schools continued, unsurprisingly, to focus on schools as they were currently conceived (and, crucially, incentivised and measured), and in doing so, seriously hampered lifelong learning policy ambitions.

It is helpful to compare the above with a contemporary example from a different country.

Lifelong learning is very important in Singapore, where much of it rests within a policy programme called *SkillsFuture*. A recent paper from Tan argues that here, there are three conceptions that are particularly relevant, namely 'the skills growth model, the personal development model and the social learning model' (Tan, 2017, p. 280). The first of these '...is linked to the human capital thesis that sees a correlation between upskilling and economic prosperity' (ibid). The personal development model 'goes beyond material concerns and technical skills to include individual self-fulfilment in all spheres of life'; the social learning model 'underlines the role of institutions of trust and cooperation as the means to bring about not just economic progress but also social equity' (ibid). Thus, a 'triadic' notion of lifelong learning '...integrates the aims of economic progress and development, personal development and fulfilment, as well as social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity' (ibid).

Tan explains that although the major government investment in lifelong learning is 'primarily driven by economic considerations' (p. 281), it is at the same time a broad conceptualisation. The elements of the triad were framed colloquially by an Acting Minister for Education as 'mastery', 'meritocracy', and 'you': 'mastery' refers to expertise and the

confidence to innovate; 'meritocracy' to a whole diversity of achievements that are recognised and celebrated; 'you' to an exhortation to individuals to follow their interests and engage in further personal/professional growth and self discovery (Ong, 2016). What is critical however is what happens in practice, and Tan's research reveals some obstacles that are preventing the successful promotion of lifelong learning. Three of these are: a widespread public preference for academic rather than vocational education; the absence of a cultural valuing of the 'habits of mind' needed for lifelong learning; a dominant ideology of pragmatism.

In Tan's analysis, it is apparent that elements of the well- established schooling system, and beliefs and expectations surrounding it, work continuously and inexorably to undermine the vision of lifelong learning that is encapsulated in *SkillsFuture*. For example, the general preference for academic rather than vocational education is deeply rooted, bound up with widely-held beliefs about academic qualifications (and especially, university degrees) being the necessary and sufficient basis for a secure future for the individual. There is an historical basis for this perception in the narrowly selective access to elite schools and universities of the immediate post-independence period, which is likely to have cemented a view that academic qualifications are inherently superior whilst vocational qualifications are inherently inferior. Tan argues that such a history leads Singaporeans to think of 'mastery' as 'content mastery of exam subjects', and 'meritocracy' as 'the opportunity to excel academically and obtain a place in a prestigious educational institution' (p. 284), interpretations which are a far cry from the declared policy intentions of a particularly well-articulated lifelong learning policy<sup>v</sup>.

There is a clear parallel between the two cases, in that the more strident goals of lifelong learning are blocked by existing expectations and practices, and indeed by the effects of policies which are already occupying some of the 'space' that lifelong learning policies seek to reshape. Field offers further subtlety here, arguing that generally, the rise to prominence of lifelong learning policy declarations led to very little by way of concrete measures and actual implementation. It is possible that this is a product of the nature of lifelong learning as a *type of policy* and the unusual character of the challenges to which such policy seeks to respond, which is an 'inherently difficult area for government' in a post-welfare policy era (Field, 2000 :257):

'lifelong learning is typical of the new policy objectives in requiring action by civil society rather than by agencies of the state. Developing in response to the perceived problems of globalisation and technological change, as well as the accompanying social changes of the past three or four decades, these new policy objectives often deal with "soft", intangible and complex issues – notably learning rather than education, for example. Further, they involve a broad and diverse range of actors, including large numbers of individual citizens and a variety of policy agencies rather than a single department' (Field, 2000 :249-50).

'Soft' objectives involve trying to change culture and values through creating a vision and then trying to 'win people over', and Field points out that in the UK, key government policy documents and commissioned reports sought to do exactly this (e.g. DfEE, 1999; Fryer, 1999). The usual machinery of government would find it very difficult to turn these sorts of policies into objectives and plans for action. Field also argues that the difficulties seem to have a further effect, where there is disproportionate focus on those areas that *can be*

translated more easily into classic policy implementation. Vocational training is the main case in point, being an area widely seen as legitimate, politically 'safe' and having strong associations with both economic and social objectives. It is relatively easy to incentivise, implement, and measure. 'Vocational training is...one area where governments feel impelled to act; and even here they choose relatively familiar and uncontroversial measures' (:258)<sup>vi</sup>. For Nicoll, 'soft' objectives are symptomatic of the changing nature of policy discourse in modern (or post-modern) times, and lifelong learning policies that I have termed broad in compass and scope are a particular form of rhetoric, which in the UK case presented itself as both the means and ends of a 'Renaissance', demanding a kind of collective belief (Nicoll, 2000).

### **Fluidity, tensions and shifts in goals**

The international formulations and declarations about lifelong learning mentioned earlier are also very important. Whilst of course the policies of international bodies do not *determine* national policies, they nevertheless have a strong influence upon them via agenda-setting, benchmarking and international comparison, and also because supra-national statements do seek to address problems and challenges that many nations face. Biesta's work, based on a critical reading of supra-national policy documents from UNESCO, OECD and the European Union, examines shifts in policy discourses over time. Biesta argues that these shifts contributed to the rise of a now-prevalent 'learning economy' discourse:

'Whereas in the past lifelong learning was seen as a personal good and as an inherent aspect of democratic life, today lifelong learning is increasingly understood in terms of the formation of human capital and as an investment in economic development. This transformation is not only visible at the level of policy; it also has

had a strong impact on the learning opportunities made available to adults, partly through a redefinition of what counts as legitimate or 'useful' learning and partly as a result of the reduction of funding for those forms of learning that are considered not to be of any economic value' (Biesta, 2006 :169)

Biesta is by no means alone in describing this shift in discourse from 'learning to be' to 'learning to be productive and employable'. His work suggests that the European Council's Lisbon Strategy of 2000 and the associated goal to make Europe 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (Van der Pas<sup>vii</sup>, 2001, cited in Biesta 2006: 171) were pivotal. Biesta reminds us that lifelong learning is an inherently unstable term, a fluid and composite thing. He follows Aspin & Chapman (2000; 2001) in pointing to three dimensions which are the more persistent elements. These are lifelong learning for: (a) economic progress and development; (b) personal development; and (c) social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity (Aspin & Chapman, 2001: 39-40). All three can be seen in the examples introduced earlier. Biesta demonstrates that whilst these 'economic', 'personal' and 'democratic' dimensions all feature in major supra-national declarations, the more recent of these declarations give increasing primacy to the economic dimension. Economic growth has become *intrinsically valued* in the way that earlier documents positioned the intrinsic valuing of democracy (e.g. Faure et al, 1972) or social inclusion and social cohesion (e.g. OECD, 1997).

How are we to best account for this? Drawing on and confirming Boshier's work, Holford offers the following chilling overview:

‘A “neoliberal” tide, premised on a “global imaginary” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) and the political economy of free markets, has swept the democratic, humanist and liberal dimensions of lifelong learning aside. With them have been lost professional discourse and expertise, institutional practices, beliefs, principles and memories – sacrificed on the altar of market efficiency, victims of narratives of “creative destruction” originating in Schumpeter (1942), but developed and popularised in more recent US strategic management theory (Christensen, Johnson & Rigby, 2002). If vocationalism is now common sense, it is partly because so many of the social bases for alternatives, and for critique, have been razed’ (Holford, 2016, p. 180).

Holford points to how this direction of travel in European policy turns its back on a very rich European heritage of educational thinking. On a more positive note, he suggests that the history of liberal adult education in Britain offers, at least, a repository on which to draw if we wish to challenge such narrow vocationalism in European lifelong learning policy and find ways in which to revitalise other, equally important purposes.

As early as 2001, Boshier noted that lifelong learning was increasingly about the ‘savvy consumer surfing the Internet selecting from a smorgasbord of educational offerings’ and that learning had become more and more ‘an individual activity’ (2001: 368): Biesta takes this a step further, focusing on the *individualisation of responsibility* for learning, such that opportunities are available in a market, and individuals must make wise choices from a range of possibilities rather than the state offering or orchestrating opportunities and resources. Biesta describes this as a ‘reversal of rights and duties’:

Whereas in the past lifelong learning was an individual's right which corresponded to the state's duty to provide resources and opportunities for lifelong learning, it seems that lifelong learning has increasingly become a duty for which individuals need to take responsibility, while it has become the right of the state to demand of all its citizens that they continuously engage in learning so as to keep up with the demands of the global economy. Not to be engaged in some form of 'useful' learning no longer seems to be an option...' (2006 :176)

Finally, Biesta voices concerns about motivation. Why would individuals want to engage in learning 'if decisions about the content, purpose and direction of one's learning are beyond one's own control' (: 176)? He asks whether anyone would really be individually motivated by the idea of contributing to making Europe 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world'. This point is surely fundamental to the prospects and outcomes of any lifelong learning policy. If the (albeit volatile) power and attraction of lifelong learning policies is that they promise a settlement between otherwise competing objectives, the rise to dominance of one of these objectives is actually the death of lifelong learning. The irony here is that the pre-eminence of economic growth as a driver of provision is likely to be *demotivating* for individuals in times of severe economic stress (such as the aftermath of the financial crash in 2008, or that following COVID-19). We are a very long way from the richer concepts of lifelong learning discussed earlier.

### **The potential rediscovery of lifelong learning**

What are the prospects for new concepts of lifelong learning that may be more sustainable and more meaningful? This is such a major question that there is only space here for one or two brief suggestions.

Whether part of a broadly-conceived lifelong learning policy, or part of a narrowly-focused labour market strategy, it has always been difficult for governments to manage or facilitate the supply of labour to realise ends such as attracting new investment, keeping existing industries happy, or achieving high employment. In the UK there is range of mediating structures, including the 38 Local Enterprise Partnerships in England, the Institute of Employment Studies, and more recently the Industrial Strategy Council. Other general mechanisms which have the goal of maximising congruence between education/training and the needs of industry include employer representation in the design of qualifications and assessments, and employer representation in the governance of arrangements of significant providers such as Further Education colleges. Yet whilst they can all be successful, there are so many variables in play that such mechanisms can only ever achieve rough, and temporary, approximations toward matching the supply of skills to the needs of a labour market.

The changing nature of work, especially through globalisation and digital transformation, means that even these rough and temporary approximations are rapidly receding from our grasp. It is helpful to illustrate this point with an example, in a field in which there are longstanding relationships between particular firms, bodies representing employers, providers and awarding bodies – after all, historically speaking, a close provider/industry relationship is a strongly positive feature in the world of vocational education and training,



and in many systems the 'dual professionalism' of those who teach is a related and important aspect.

An irony with digital transformation is that it can disrupt longstanding relationships and practices, and the closer our relationships to a sector of industry, the harder it may be to conceive of new provision that will serve emerging needs of either the industry or the individuals who work in it. Let us imagine a large college with strong and longstanding links to the hospitality industry, located in a large city that attracts many visitors. The college has many years of successful experience of responding to employer demands in shaping initial training and continuing workforce development. However, in recent years the demand for the general and specific vocational programmes followed by those who go to work for travel agents and hotels has dropped sharply. With regard to travel agents, the period has seen the reduction of retail outlets and the rise of new intermediaries who engage customers in new ways (mainly web-based platforms such as Expedia and Booking.com but also 'comparison sites' such as Trivago). None of these businesses are located in the city in question, and compared to the previous operations they actually employ relatively few people with expertise in travel and tourism: most of their employees are software engineers, web-site builders and maintainers, and people with experience of online marketing and sales. Hotels are also seeing a marked change. With each passing year, the demand for mid-range and budget-range hotel rooms in the city is going down, even whilst visitor numbers are increasing: the rise of AirBnB, a classic 'digital disintermediator' (Jordan 2020) enabled by a digital platform, means that more and more holidaymakers and visitors are by-passing hotels.

These changes to the hospitality industry have not yet been reflected in significant changes in course provision but have had a major impact on their perceived relevance and their viability. It matters less and less whether the college is providing the 'right' balance of level 2 or level 3 programmes, or whether it still wins quality-related awards. At the same time it continues to matter that the few remaining students can demonstrate their distinctiveness so that they can secure some of the diminishing number of jobs. Thus, like the hotels and travel retailers themselves, and indeed some of the regulatory apparatus, the college is increasingly being side-stepped. A further, unforeseen impact of the rise of AirBnB has been its apparent role in generating a shortage of affordable housing, though this has in fact been an area in which new forms of regulation have found a foothold. In Berlin for example, major concerns about the impact on the availability of housing led to a city Authority ban on AirBnB, and whilst not totally effective, this had a rapid effect. In March 2018 the ban was lifted at the same time as new and highly stringent regulations were introduced for would-be 'hosts' (requiring registration/approval and stricter conditions to be met). Crucially, the penalty for non-compliance is a fine of up to half a million Euros.

The point about these imaginary and actual examples of digital transformation is that they change the nature of economic activity – and therefore jobs – in quite unpredictable and unexpected ways. They also begin to question the longstanding logic of seeing the first task of governments, colleges or other providers as being to discern skills needs and then create or adjust supply 'pipelines'. With the nature of work changing so rapidly it may be most realistic and productive to divert some energy to new forms of support for learners, whether they are pre-employment or in jobs and engaging in ongoing learning. But what form would this support take? Perhaps the only reasonable answer here is also a familiar

one, which is to propose a different balance between specific job-facing capacities, and the range of knowledge, understanding and experience that is likely to equip individuals for adaptability, transition, creativity, problem-solving, decision-making and – most important of all – the capacity for further learning<sup>viii</sup>. The National Occupational Standards in the UK focus mainly on detailed lists of job-specific skills, continuing a process initiated by the invention of National Vocational Qualifications in the mid-1980s, the first behaviourist iterations of which excluded ‘knowledge’ and focused exclusively on ‘performance’. It is interesting that the ‘Sainsbury Review’ chose not to use the National Occupational Standards as a basis for technical education, on the grounds that these were ‘derived through functional analysis of job roles’ and that they often lead to ‘a tick box view of assessment’ (UK GOV 2016: 27). What is not so clear is the kind of ‘standards’ that the Institute for Apprenticeships and its panels of professionals (mainly industry representatives) are charged with devising in their place.

Vocationally-specific elements of learning programmes are important, but there is an argument that it is a serious mistake to let them dominate. A good example of this can be found in a major Australian research-based report nearly a decade ago, which presented the general diagnosis that current concepts of competence were detracting from the quality of vocational education and training (VET). The report argued that ‘VET must prepare students for a broad occupation within loosely defined vocational streams rather than workplace tasks and roles associated with particular jobs’, and that the associated qualifications ‘will need to face both ways to the knowledge base of practice and to the practice of work...At present, VET qualifications mostly focus one way, to the practice of work

and as a consequence diminish the complexity of that work' (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011, p. 2; and see Wheelahan, 2012<sup>ix</sup>).

In a context of increasingly rapid changes in the labour market, insights of this sort may assist in re-imagining lifelong learning as a sort of hybrid, combining elements of specific and general vocational education and liberal adult education. In place of an increasingly fruitless pursuit of tighter vocational specification, or indeed increasingly disappointing debates and analyses of whether or not 'industry' has clear needs that 'education' is (or is not) supplying (see e.g. Mills & James, 2019), there is scope here to provide both initial and further learning opportunities that build capacities that are as much life-facing as they are work-facing. If we are seeing a shift from labour scarcity to job scarcity, as argued by Brown et al (2020) and Brown & James, (2019), then predictions of job-specific skill needs are the wrong place to begin discussion of how to build lifelong learning opportunities. People will need new and different kinds of opportunities to build their capacities: opportunities to work out what it means to be a citizen, to know their rights in law, to know how to participate in democratic structures to protect or enhance those rights, to understand how the nature of work is changing, to develop resilience and adaptability, to build for themselves forms of security that (some) employers and (some) states once did more to provide. Countries where the state has retained a central role in planning for and responding to workforce development are in a much stronger position to formulate a new, 21<sup>st</sup> century concept of lifelong learning than those that have preferred to leave much vocationally-related provision and its specification to employers to the 'magic' of the market. By the same token, governments that have worked in partnership with commerce

and industry (and indeed trade unions) should have a much greater chance of constructive intervention in the interests of workers and citizens.

Finally, it is worth saying the hospitality industry scenario given earlier may be a rather 'tame' one if we consider the breadth and depth of likely and possible further changes to work. There is much commentary on 'the fourth industrial revolution', which most commonly refers to rapid change driven by four specific technological developments (high-speed mobile Internet; Artificial Intelligence and automation; the use of big data analytics; cloud technology). A very wide range of predictions can be heard about the pace, degree and volume of change to jobs and how different sectors may be affected. Some radical changes are already very apparent, such as the acceleration of digital Taylorism (Brown et al, 2011), the rise of the 'gig' economy and the facilitation of radically different forms of working<sup>x</sup>. The logic of outsourcing, taken further, seems likely in some cases see the demise of the job itself, as data visualisation improves, geographical distance presents fewer difficulties and corporations experiment with more 'agile' business practices such as the assembly of highly transient teams for specific work packages. Digitally facilitated HR systems and the increasing possibility of indexing individuals' areas of experience or skill with greater granularity may change the meaning of work for many people. New forms of lifelong learning may be needed, which may perhaps reflect such conditions with equally agile and personalised opportunities. These may look more like episodic mentorship than, say, a classroom and a qualification.

There are many such possibilities, and how societies respond to them will depend on political values as much as the actions of corporations. As a recent report from the World

Economic Forum put it, 'These transformations, if managed wisely, could lead to a new age of good work, good jobs and improved quality of life for all, but if managed poorly, pose the risk of widening skills gaps, greater inequality and broader polarization' (World Economic Forum, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Lifelong learning policies in their wide-compass, rich sense can fail to gain purchase where mainstream schooling simply continues to pursue its established goals with ever greater efficiency and resolve (and, sociologically speaking, continues to reproduce established patterns of advantage and disadvantage). We have also seen that wide-compass and rich concepts of lifelong learning can suffer erosion – perhaps corrosion – over time. If the classic 'triadic' concept is pictured as a three-legged stool, then in the example discussed, two of the legs have become very thin, and most of the weight is taken by one. In the current context the end result is similar, where lifelong learning comes to mean very little.

We've given some brief consideration to what might lead to the 'rediscovery' of lifelong learning and from the discussion it follows that a sustainable policy of lifelong learning, which could support the wellbeing as well as prosperity of both individuals and societies or economies, must somehow regain the conceptual pluralism of earlier models whilst avoiding the unravelling of the strands. Perhaps one way to achieve this is to start with a more integrated theoretical model, in which the strands are already integral. We might do well to pay fresh attention to ideas like *lifewide learning* (Jackson, 2012) which is grounded in the earlier work of educators such as Lindeman and Dewey, and the *capabilities approach* (e.g. McGrath et al, 2020; Powell & McGrath, 2019), grounded in the earlier work of Sen and

Nussbaum. In both cases, there are rich ontological views of the person, of human flourishing, of learning, and indeed the significance of social location. Such an approach may be an economic as well as a social and moral necessity.

### ***Acknowledgements***

I am grateful to Phil Brown, Arthur Chia and the other members of the *Futures of Work: Reimagining Jobs, Skills and Education for a Digital Age* research project team for our ongoing discussions in that project about lifelong learning.

### **References**

Aspin, D., & Chapman, J. (2000) 'Lifelong learning: concepts and conceptions'. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19(1), 2-19.

Aspin, D., & Chapman, J. (2001) 'Lifelong Learning: concepts, theories and values'. *Proceedings of the 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of SCUTREA* (Standing conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults) pp. 38-41. University of East London.

Biesta, G. (2006) 'What's the Point of Lifelong Learning if Lifelong Learning Has No Point? On the Democratic Deficit of Policies for Lifelong Learning' *European Educational Research Journal* 5 (3-4) 169-180.

Boshier, R. (2001) 'Lifelong Learning as Bungy Jumping: in New Zealand what goes down doesn't always come up', *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 20 (5) 361-377

Brown, P. & James, D. (2020) 'Educational Expansion, Poverty Reduction and Social Mobility: Reframing the Debate' *International Journal of Educational Research*

Brown, P., Lauder, H. and Ashton, D.N. (2011) *The Global Auction*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Brown, P., Lauder, H. and Cheung, S.Y. (2020) *The Death of Human Capital?* New York: Oxford University Press

Coffield, F. (2000) 'Introduction', in F. Coffield (ed) *Differing visions of a learning society: research findings Vol 1*. Bristol: Policy Press

Delors, J. (1996) *Learning: The Treasure Within*. Report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century

DES (1973) *Adult Education: A Plan for Development*. Department of Education and Science, London: HMSO

DfEE [Department of Education and Employment] (1998) *The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain*. London: The Stationery Office Cm.3790.

Donaldson, G. (2015) *Successful Futures: Independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales*. Welsh Government, WG23258



Faure, E., Herrera, F., Kaddoura, A. (1972) *Learning to Be: the world of education today and tomorrow* Paris: UNESCO.

Field, J. (2000) 'Governing the Ungovernable: why lifelong learning policies promise so much yet deliver so little', *Education Management and Administration* 28 (3), 249-261.

Fryer, R.H. (1999) *Creating Learning Cultures: Next steps in achieving the learning age*.  
Second report of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning, Sheffield: DfEE.

Furlong, J. (2015) *Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers: options for the future of initial teacher education in Wales*. Oxford: University of Oxford.

Hargreaves, D. (2004) *Learning for Life: the foundations of lifelong learning* Bristol: Policy Press, and the Lifelong Learning Foundation.

Hazelkorn, E. (2016) *Towards 2030: A Framework for Building A World-Class Post-Compulsory Education System for Wales*. Crown Copyright.

Holford, J. (2016) 'Losing the Plot, Plotting the Lost: Politics, Europe, and the Rediscovery of Lifelong Learning', in N. Romuald and J-L. Derouet (eds.) *A European Politics of Education: Perspectives from sociology, policy studies and politics* London: Routledge :176-193

Jackson, N. (2012) 'Lifewide Learning: history of an idea', in N. Jackson & B Cooper (eds) *Lifewide learning, education and personal development*. E-book published by Lifewide

Education Community Interest Company. Available at

<https://www.lifewideeducation.uk/lifewide-learning.html>

James, D. (2019) 'Learning in and learning from FE and skills policy in Wales: a relational approach', *Journal of Education and Work* 32 (3), 251-265.

Jordan, T. (2020) *The Digital Economy* Cambridge: Polity Press.

McGrath, S., Powell, L., Alla-Mensah, J., Hilal, R. & Suart, R. (2020) 'New VET theories for new times: the critical capabilities approach to vocational education and training and its potential for theorising and transformed and transformational VET', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13636820.2020.1786440>

Mills, D. & James, D. (2019) 'Reconceptualising organisational collaborations in social science doctoral education' *Higher Education*

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-019-00438-9>

Ministry of Reconstruction (1919) *Adult Education Committee: Final Report*. Cmd. 321.

London: HMSO.

Nicoll, K. (2000) *Flexibility and Lifelong Learning: policy, discourse, politics*. London:

Routledge.

OECD (1997) *Lifelong Learning for All* Paris, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

Ong, Y. K. (2016) 'What SkillsFuture is about', *The Straits Times*, April 21, p. A30.

Powell, L. & McGrath, S. (2019) *Skills for human development: transforming vocational education and training*. Milton Park, Oxon: Routledge

Schuller, T. & Watson, D. (2009) *Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning* Leicester: National Institute for Adult Continuing Education

Tan, C. (2017) 'Lifelong learning through the Skillsfuture movement in Singapore: challenges and prospects', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 36 (3), pp. 278-291.

UK GOV (2016) *The Independent panel on Technical Education* (Chaired by Lord Sainsbury) Crown Copyright. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education>

Webb, S., Holford, J., Hodge, S., Milana, M., & Waller, R. (2019). Conceptualising lifelong learning for sustainable development and education 2030. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 38(3), 237-240. doi:10.1080/02601370.2019.1635353

Welsh Government 2015 *Qualified for Life: A curriculum Wales, a curriculum for life.*

[https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/24680/1/151021-a-curriculum-for-wales-a-curriculum-for-life-en\\_Redacted.pdf](https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/24680/1/151021-a-curriculum-for-wales-a-curriculum-for-life-en_Redacted.pdf)

Wheelahan, L. (2012) 'The problem with competency-based training', in H. Lauder, M.

Young, H. Daniels, M. Balarin & J. Lowe (eds) *Educating for the Knowledge Economy? Critical Perspectives* London: Routledge.

Wheelahan, L. & Moodie, G. (2011) *Rethinking Skills in Vocational Education and Training:*

*From competences to capabilities.* Darlinghurst: New South Wales Board of Vocational

Education and Training. <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A48914>

World Economic Forum (2018) *The Future of Jobs Report.*

[http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Future\\_of\\_Jobs\\_2018.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2018.pdf)

---

<sup>i</sup> For example: 'Economic need alone is not driving the urgency to act. The social need is equally pressing: we need to offer everyone the chance of a lifetime of sustained employment and the opportunity to progress to the highest skills levels' (UK GOV 2016: 22)

<sup>ii</sup> Though there are concerns that within the sustainable development goal 4 ('Quality Education'), early indications are that the role of adult education is being interpreted rather narrowly (see Webb et al, 2019).

<sup>iii</sup> See James (2019) for an account of this contrast in regard to FE and skills policy.

<sup>iv</sup> Which in the UK includes a long history of provision starting with Workers Educational Association activities from the early 1900s and was sometimes prominent in government thinking, e.g. the Ministry of Reconstruction (1919) and the 'Russell report' (DES, 1973). Liberal adult education enjoyed political support from across the spectrum - notably, from Sir Winston Churchill (See Holford, 2016)

<sup>v</sup> It is important to acknowledge that whilst the relative cultural valuing of academic and vocational qualifications varies from place to place, the relative undervaluing of vocational qualifications is especially widespread.

<sup>vi</sup> The irony here is that acting only on vocational training in the name of a lifelong learning policy will itself suggest that lifelong learning policies are 'really' about educational activity that is post-school.

<sup>vii</sup> Van de Pas was Director-General, European Commission Directorate for Education and Culture.

<sup>viii</sup> We are all accustomed to making this point in relation to the decline in 'jobs for life'. Digital transformation gives the familiar point a new urgency.

<sup>ix</sup> Wheelahan's 2012 book chapter presents the argument that in Australian VET, the instrumentalism of a narrowly-conceived competency model has incorporated ideas from constructivism (perhaps to make it more palatable for the professionals concerned?) but the net result is to deny the significance of knowledge, thereby undermining vocational programmes *and* denying access to 'powerful knowledge' (a la Michael Young's work).

---

<sup>x</sup> For example, Uflexreward.com, linked to Unilever, which is developing new types of agile contract formation between workers and companies. 'Our mission is to help you inspire your employees by giving them the flexibility to personalise their reward package, and to provide you with an integrated global reward system to digitise, consolidate, and review your entire reward ecosystem'. See <https://www.uflexreward.com/> Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> June, 2020.