

Challenging the ‘European Area of Lifelong Learning’: a critical response after a decade of ongoing adjustments¹

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Introduction: Lifelong learning - the Trojan horse of Europe’s prosperity?

Lifelong learning (LLL) as a concept but also as a European policy focus has not as yet proven as beneficial as the European Commission might have expected when it launched the “Memorandum for Lifelong Learning” in 2000. After a whole decade of ongoing adjustments EU LLL policies have neither responded to nor have they fulfilled any concrete social demand in terms of building a coherent attitude towards learning (as a mode of development) among Europeans. Policy analysis so far explains very well the genuine drive behind the construction of dubious terminology and the problematic application of a series of quasi political decisions that were supposed to bring forward the semantics of the (not so) newly coined or revived terms and ideas like ‘citizenship’, ‘employability’, ‘social cohesion’ and ‘flexibility’ through a new lens; that of learning as a lifelong and lifewide process. Problematic as the interpretation of the term ‘Lifelong Learning’ might be the ‘Memorandum’ has tried to respond (probably very convincingly) to the ongoing debate among policy makers, social partners and scholars and the reasons why the time is right to take action towards this direction. As such the Memorandum still remains the most central but also the most dissimulated policy document that the European Commission has produced and as such it consist the basis of any debate on LLL policies in Europe.

In this paper we are looking at two interlocked issues with direct reference to the Memorandum: the first is the contribution of LLL policy research in Europe² and how it affects (or not) the current LLL perspective and the second is the degree of autonomy of policy researchers from a misleading yet commanding linguistic manifestation of Europe’s demand to become the world’s leading knowledge economy! For most policy researchers it may not come as a surprise that the way lifelong learning is defined by the European Commission (2001: 33) –as an all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective³– is obfuscating rather than elucidating how learning contributes to promoting both employability and active citizenship and combating social exclusion. It is in this respect that LLL has become the Trojan horse of

¹ This is a working paper that will serve as an introduction to a book publication with the same title, to be released in late 2012.

² Policy research on LLL is leveled from the purely conceptual (see...) to the purely contextual (see...).

³ That is (...) not limited to a purely economic outlook or just to learning for adults. In addition to the emphasis it places on learning from pre-school to postretirement, lifelong learning should encompass the whole spectrum of formal, nonformal and informal learning. The objectives of learning, includ(e) active citizenship, personal fulfilment and social inclusion, as well as employment-related aspects. The principles which underpin lifelong learning and guide its effective implementation emphasise the centrality of the learner, the importance of equal opportunities and the quality and relevance of learning opportunities (European Commission, 2001: 3-4).

Europe's own vision for prosperity. In describing the background to the Memorandum, the Commission referred to the rapid change being experienced by Europeans, including technological and digital developments, intercultural relations, the ageing population and the global market. The driving force however behind most member states' policies on lifelong learning so far, has been employability and adaptability to economic drifts and demands. Especially today there is a growing recognition of the inevitable relationship between education and the economic and social well-being of individuals as something undisputable. This monosemantic⁴ approach has largely misguided both policy makers and politicians who lost focus while orbiting their decisions around conservative practices and old-school explanations of newfangled social anomalies that are directly related to, and occasionally explained based on, an equally monosemantic interpretation of economic figures.

It is exactly this undisputed persistence on the relation between something so profound as learning and something so mundane as economic figures that asks for a closer look to policy research, and for the formation of an on-going critical debate on the benefits of lifelong learning to Europe's citizens, as well as for a critical examination of the structural and social changes that lifelong learning both as a policy concept and as a principle has or hasn't brought forward the last ten years.

The contribution of LLL policy research: how far have we gone since the Memorandum?

Much of what we read about lifelong learning in Europe –as it is used in a variety of social and economic contexts and has a wide currency within the EU– is yet unclear despite the elaborate policy papers that are widely published operating as advocates of a social state that is almost unthinkable without making reference to the term. The Memorandum is definitely the most significant of these policy papers with strong reference to the application of the concept in practice, but with little reference to the means by which its application will be succeeded. It might be seen as a contradiction, but over a decade the EU policy on education and training has been revolving around a term that is poorly defined and even more poorly implemented. Its implementation in practice has not been successfully achieved in Europe or where it was achieved it is primarily on a fragmentary basis according to some evidence from EU funded projects. Today it is becoming more apparent that policy-makers in EU countries, agencies and institutions across are devoting increasing attention to the notion that lifelong learning not that much as a humanistic principle, but as a conceptual vehicle, needs to be promoted in education policies for the next century, as a means for providing a necessary and strong foundation to underpin primarily training provision. This concern has, however, left many officials, professionals and academics involved and active in the education service, grappling with the concept of lifelong learning and trying to prepare the ground for its realization. It is clear that there is a dearth of information as to the meanings and values implied by policy-makers use of and commitment to this idea. At

⁴ By monosemantic, we mean the "single-mindedness", or "unambiguous" meaning of particular traits that are attributed to learning as a lifelong process in European policy documents.

this point, then, it might be of some use to examine, from the discourse already available, some examples of the different forms and focuses of thinking on this topic, to offer some tentative suggestions as to a clear way forward.

In terms of conceptualizing lifelong learning in the policy context two dominant approaches prevail; the 'pragmatic approach', and the 'economic capital approach'. The 'pragmatic approach' is what Abukari (2005: 145) argues boils down to a common problem of handling the issue at only the philosophical level, ignoring the wide gap between 'theories' and practice (cf. Kokosalakis & Kogan: 2001). He further submits that we need to recognise the current state of lifelong learning which suggests a departure from a mere 'policy of education' (cf. Lawson, 1982: 97) to a situation where pragmatism is a pivotal element. In times as decisive (in social and in economic terms) as the ones we are going through today, a critical viewpoint of the practices and policies adopted by Member States –in an effort to culminate the European area for Lifelong Learning– a holistic approach to LLL in Europe could be helpful. Abukari (2005) however notices that 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' (cf. Tuijnman & Bostrom, 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 (cf. Bagnall, 1990). Focusing on the debate Abukari (2005) further claims that although it is widely acknowledged that lifelong learning is a continuous process throughout the lifespan many scholars maintain that aimless and unplanned learning cannot be lifelong learning, and that 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.

The other dominant conceptual classification is based on 'economic capital'. The adherents of the economic capital orientation have stressed its economic benefits, indicating a shift from considering education as a public good to considering it as a private or self-oriented good. Defenders of this view argue that if individuals in the public are economically empowered they will directly benefit as individuals as well as contribute to societal development, through their productive work, and through their generosity of spirit towards others. Such an individualistic focus however 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 lifelong learning should be, especially if arguments advanced for or against particular perspectives fail to acknowledge the different backgrounds and circumstances in which the concept operates.

The Memorandum has brought forward some of these elements for debating the concept of lifelong learning by particularly stressing the economic aspect of it and also by pointing to the role of the individual as the most important agent for its implementation. 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 (Abukari, 2005: 152). 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 collaboration 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.

Working as an EU-driven policy researcher: is there a way out of the “lifelong learning bubble”?

The acknowledgement of learning beyond compulsory schooling is to be welcomed in the current policy discourse but we need to take care: ‘when governments become interested in lifelong learning, it is as well to be cautious; when they add active citizenship and social inclusion to the list, it may be time to be positively sceptical—not to say suspicious’ (Martin 2001: 4). Separating lifelong learning from lifelong education is a useful starting point to help clarify why government’s now seem to embrace the type of concerns adult educators have long espoused. During the 1960s and 1970s progressive educational debate in Europe was dominated by discussion of *lifelong education*, promoted specifically by United Nations Educational Science Cultural Organization (see Borg and Mayo 2002), and inspired by the failure of post-World War II school reform to create a more socially just and cohesive society. Lifelong education brought together an eclectic range of interests and ideas concerned with moral and political issues about the nature of society and the contribution of education to it in economic, political, social and cultural terms. The student movement, educational de-schoolers, ‘future-gazers’ and the communications revolution contributed to this trend (see Field 2000). The debate fostered about lifelong education was tied to the idea of the ‘good society’ and how the structure and curriculum of education could be part of its making. Its proponents stressed the importance of education arising from and contributing to people’s lives in rounded terms. This was contested terrain but one primarily influenced by a humanist ideology concerned with personal growth in an increasingly consumer culture that emphasized having—one of the key reports by Faure (1972) was titled *Learning to Be!* These concerns and interests are now marginal to the current policy discourse of *lifelong learning*. Lifelong learning benefited from the progressive agenda of lifelong education by making it more acceptable to a wide range of conflicting ideological interests. At times the two are used interchangeably despite important conceptual differences and the difference of context in which they emerged. However, the cuckoo of lifelong learning has well and truly kicked out of the policy discourse its adopted sibling. As Griffin suggests, the movement from lifelong education

to lifelong learning indicates ‘a major shift in national and international policies for the development of education and learning systems’ (1999a: 392). It is a mistake, therefore, to assume lifelong learning is simply a recasting of the same ideas and values in a new context—the mistake, as Martin (2003) points out, is to think of lifelong learning in educational rather than political terms. It is more accurate to see it as a mode of power wielded through the ‘discontinuous reinventing of institutions’ and aimed at reproducing wider inequalities.

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 university 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. 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. 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 concept of lifelong learning refers to the activities people perform throughout their life to improve their knowledge, skills and competence in a particular field, given some personal, societal or employment related motives (Aspin & Chapman, 2000). The need for better provision for lifelong learning in society is broadly recognised and is expressed in national and international policy documents. For example, the Commission of the European Communities (2000) states in its memorandum on lifelong learning: ‘Lifelong Learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts’.

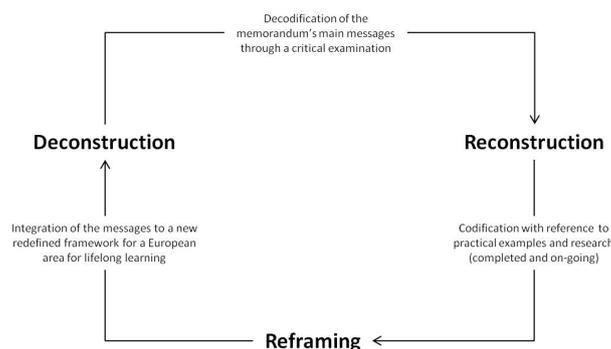
The need for a critical approach to LLL: current challenges and steps forward

In recent years, lifelong learning has become a subject of discussion within the European Union. This ambitious but sometimes controversial prospect must nonetheless take into account the present situation in each country and in fact, the comparison of company practices in the area of continuing training of employees brings out a great diversity among the Member States (They at al. 2002). Lifelong learning has indeed social and economic aims and purposes. To fulfill both social and economic objectives, lifelong learning has to extend over a huge territory, a wide variety of learning grounds: basic

foundation, vocational education and training, democratic and civic values, specific training and retraining in enterprises or on the job, and non-formal learning for professional and personal development. Most of these learning experiences already exist and actually take place every day (Livingstone, 1999). Sometimes they take the form of courses, training, and education with or without certification. Sometimes they occur in everyday life outside any learning setting or environment. If all of these experiences have to be taken into account to enable our societies to become progressively knowledge societies, then they have to be related to one another and be well defined. 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” or *éducation permanente*) as well as any form of learning taking place at work or in daily situations.

It is more than ever appropriate to redefine the context in which lifelong learning policies and practices are organized with the contribution of people working in the field both as researchers and as practitioners. We need to critically reassess the content of the main points of the Memorandum for lifelong learning, as well as the framework and the levels on which the European area for lifelong learning has culminated so far (practical level, political level, institutional level, program level, different levels of activity, citizenship level, personal level). To achieve this we must attempt a “de-codification” of the memorandum’s six messages (from a critical perspective), in order to reframe them within a practical and a research context with reference to certain examples or academic investigation from 2000 until today.

The objective must be to reinterpret each message through a critical lens, with references to thoughts, ideas, actions and applications that have an added value for Europeans, but either they do not appear to correspond directly to what is stipulated by the European Commission, or they are completely ignored as part of the whole idea of making a European area of Lifelong Learning.



The need for a critical approach

Ten years after EC’s ‘Memorandum for Lifelong Learning’ and the call for ‘Making a European Area for Lifelong Learning’, we must enlighten the extent to which the six key messages of the Memorandum have been implemented, in order to assess what is happening in this area in Europe today. The aim is to redefine through a critical lens, the context in which Lifelong Learning in Europe is taking place.

The term “lifelong learning” has come to dominate discussions on the education and learning of adults. Despite talk of ‘cradle-to-grave’ learning, which often accompanies the lifelong learning discourse, what ‘lifelong’ generally refers to is the age range between the end of formal schooling (e.g. around 18 or 21) and death. As with globalization, there are competing discourses of lifelong learning. However, there is a dominant discourse of what counts as ‘valuable’ lifelong learning and also surrounding the reasons for and aims of lifelong learning. Moreover, the nature, rationale and purposes all link to globalization in some sense. Since the Memorandum, lifelong learning has arguably been further intertwined with the economic sphere. The ‘knowledge economy’, which can also be seen as a dominant discourse accompanying globalization, has become the main imperative for promoting lifelong learning at present. Innovation, creativity and flexibility drive the knowledge economy so the discourse maintains, in OECD countries at least. Jobs are said to have moved towards post-Fordist models of production and education is promoted as a way to ease workers’ transition into this model—through institutional flexibility and productivity; flexible workers; flexible spaces and places; and flexible knowledge (see Fenwick, 2003). In short, due to the increasingly global nature of capitalism (and ensuing competition this brings), as well as technological advances—which arise from and contribute to globalization— there is an alleged need for workers to ‘upskill’. In other words, with the growing complexity of technologies, as well as the growing pool of global mobile qualified workers, lifelong learning is assumed an imperative. ‘Training for the new economy’ and ‘adapting to the changing society’, thus have become the dual central purposes of lifelong learning (Reich, 1992; Martin, 2003). In short, society can be seen as having shifted primarily due to advances associated with global neo-liberal capitalism: e.g., the growth and development of ICTs; migration from ‘poor’ to ‘rich’ countries (enabled by technologies and driven by increasing wealth disparity resulting from the intensification of global capitalism); and waning welfare protection for a country’s most vulnerable citizens etc. There is ample evidence that the focus on ‘lifelong learning as saviour to globalization’ has been most pronounced after neoliberalism’s most exaggerated phase (from the 1980s-2000), and under centre-left governments in Western democracies in particular. Lifelong learning is fundamentally promoted as a remedy against our obsolescence and exclusion from economic and social life. The reactive reforms these policies propose, therefore, can be seen as unimaginative and short-sighted measures rather than fundamental challenges to a globalization consisting of a global neoliberal capitalism. In the current frame, lifelong learning becomes a way to help citizens adapt to an already-existent world; it has been given no real role in reimagining an entirely different world order where the free market or corporate profits no longer remain an unexamined ‘good’.

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