Swimming with the (main) stream?

and the lifelong learning agenda in post-devolution UK

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The (main)Stream of Lifelong Learning

For a decade or so the policy debate on post-school education and training across OECD countries has been shaped to a considerable extent by the associated, although distinct, concepts of lifelong learning and the learning society. Developments in the UK have both reflected this trend and contributed to pushing forward these notions. For that part of the post-compulsory sector encompassed within the loosely defined arena of adult education this focus on lifelong learning might have been expected to have led to the - long heralded- shift in adult education from the margins to a more central role in relation to policy and educational provision. At a minimum, the idea of learning over the lifecycle surely lies at the heart of the concept of lifelong learning?

The plethora of policy documents at national and international levels published on the subject around ten years ago did indeed make explicit, albeit in a variety of different ways, the importance of continuing education and training for the adult population (EC: 1995; OECD: 1996; UNESCO: 1996). The arguments included: the changing nature of the globalised economy, the rapid pace of technological and associated social changes, the pressure of social movements for greater equity, demographic trends and patterns of migration.

A decade on, might it not therefore be reasonable to expect that the adult education community would find itself, perhaps unusually, swimming with, as opposed to against, the (main)stream?[1] This paper reviews developments in

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[1] As an aside it has to be noted that there is no single adult education community or tradition. For the purposes of this discussion, adult education is equated with that element which emphasises the interconnectedness of personal and social development.

the UK over the last decade through an analysis of five major issues. The list is not intended to be exhaustive but addresses several significant areas as evident in contemporary policy papers, the research literature and legislative changes. The situation of individual countries will of course vary. However, some of the experiences of the constituent parts of the UK are likely to find echoes in Ireland as they reflect the impact of common global economic and social forces, mediated by national and regional circumstances.

The thrust of the argument presented here is that in relation to the situation in the UK there are major tensions, if not contradictions, in terms of the contribution of recent lifelong learning policy priorities to the achievement of adult education objectives. It should come as no surprise that we encounter such tensions and contradictions. In a research programme commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) over this period on the nature of the learning society, Coffield and his colleagues identify no fewer than ten different, conceptual models of the learning society (Coffield: 2000).

These different conceptions of the learning society reflect the different perspectives of the various social and political players and they carry different implications for lifelong learning and its relationship to the adult education community- specifically, using Coffield's typology, the adult education perspective would be associated mainly with a combination of 'personal development', 'local learning societies', 'education reform' and 'structural change' conceptions of the learning society.

Areas of Congruence and Tension

The debate in the UK can be characterised as being between a skills' model and a social model of lifelong learning- with the balance of power firmly in the hands of the former. There were high expectations that the election of a new Labour Government in 1997 might lead to a shift in this balance. While the rhetoric reflected values held in high regard by adult educators concerning issues of equity, access, community involvement and the like, the record of New Labour in terms of policy formulation and implementation is, at best, mixed (Taylor: 2005, forthcoming). Many of those in the sector feel a degree of frustration and disappointment seven years on.

It is suggested here that one reason for the feeling of expectations being raised only to be let down is that much of the language and terminology used was not

only familiar to, but in some cases drawn from, the adult education tradition. Five distinct, but interrelated, themes are highlighted here to illustrate this point.

First is the *wider access* agenda, a major priority for Governments since the 1980s and particularly for New Labour Governments since 1997; second, the recognition and *assessment* of prior and experiential learning based on a variety of environments, including the workplace; third, an emphasis on *quality and learner centredness;* fourth, the development of *pathways* to assist in mobility through the post-compulsory education and training system; and fifth, an emphasis on *partnership* at strategic and operational levels.

To varying extents the above represent potential areas of congruence between the adult education perspective and that of the lifelong learning agenda. Before moving on to these themes however it is necessary to refer to the broader policy context, in particular the major constitutional changes which have taken place in recent years in the UK.

Constitutional Change

Devolution resulted in the establishment of the Parliament in Scotland and the Assemblies in Wales and, albeit short-lived, in Northern Ireland. Fullick's (2004) review of lifelong learning policy and structural changes in England since 1997, for example, points to a number of the complex array of agencies which have been established by Government with an involvement in the education and training of adults.

- Establishment in 2000 of the *Learning and Skills Council* (LSC) with responsibility for strategic planning, funding and quality assurance for all publicly funded post –16 education and training (excluding higher education) and operating through 47 local LSCs – widely regarded as the most significant structural change for at least a decade in the sector.
- *Regional Development Agencies* (RDAs) established in 1998 as part of increasing devolution to English Regions with, amongst others things, a remit for skills enhancement associated with regional economic development and regeneration.
- *Learning Partnerships*, numbering 104 around England, established in 1999 to act as non-statutory voluntary groupings of local learning providers and others.
- *Local Strategic Partnerships*, with a broader remit than education and training but intended to form a single body that brings together at a local level

the different parts of the public sector with employers, the voluntary sector, local authorities and the like.

- *Local Authorities* – until the 1990s one of the major providers of adult learning who although considerably weakened in powers in recent years remain important players through their involvement in libraries, sport, cultural, youth, community, social and other services.

There have been increasingly differential strategies for the development of lifelong learning in the different parts of the UK (Phillips: 2002; Gorard: 2000; Field: 2003)). For example, when the National Advisory Group on adult and lifelong learning produced a report covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland, espousing what was widely regarded in the field as being a broad and inclusive vision for adult learning, envious glances were cast southwards from Scotland. (DfEE: 1998) In contrast, the reverse was the case when, as one of its very early decisions, the newly established Scottish Parliament set up an Independent Committee of Inquiry on Student Finance (the 'Cubie' Committee). As a result of this Inquiry, Parliament acted on the recommendation to set up an Endowment scheme in place of the up-front payment of fees by full-time higher education students as had been introduced in other parts of the UK (Independent Committee of Inquiry: 1999).

In the case of Scotland also, there has been some evidence that politicians and policy makers may indeed be listening to the views of stakeholders. Thus, when the cross-party Committee on Enterprise and Lifelong Learning issued a draft consultation paper for a proposed lifelong learning strategy it was confined to adults 'of working age'. The final version of the report observes:

> Several witnesses to the inquiry expressed concern with this definition considering that it placed too much emphasis on the economic aspect of lifelong learning and seeking a broader definition encompassing the cultural, civic, individual and social inclusion aspects of lifelong learning. We agreed with these arguments, and decided not to adopt a working age limit for the inquiry….We therefore decided to adopt the following definition of lifelong learning: 'The continuous development of knowledge and skills aimed at enhancing the individual's quality of life and society's well being'.
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> *(Scottish Parliament: 2002, paragraphs 3,4)*

Despite the emergence-or, in some areas, the strengthening- of differences between different parts of the UK the following five issues have some relevance to *all* OECD states, including Ireland. They have in common a combination of dominant policy forces, emphasising the economic imperative, with an alternative adult education emphasis on the social and personal aspects of lifelong learning- both of which, confusingly, share much of the same vocabulary (Edwards: 1997).

Five Issues

(i) Widening Access

At face value, the widening access agenda would appear to give a central role to the culture, priorities and expertise associated with adult education. This has in fact been one of the dominant policy themes in post-compulsory education and training for the UK over the last decade. (From media coverage it sometimes seems that this is the *only* educational policy issue for the over-18 section of the population.)

Like Ireland, the UK higher education system has experienced dramatic growth to a point where around well over one third of school leavers enter higher education across the system as a whole, with many, in particular adults, entering further education colleges (Slowey: 2000; Parry and Thompson: 2001). A target of 50% participation for those aged 18 to 30 years has been set as a key UK Government objective to achieve by 2010. According to the statistics, this target has already been reached in Scotland where around half of new entrants to higher education enrol in colleges of further education (Gallacher: 2002; Osborne et al: 2002).

Despite this expansion, as Field points out, there has been a broadly even rise in participation levels across the social classes in England over the period 1991-2000 (Field: 2003 (b)). From an equity perspective this means that expansion has made little or no progress towards abolishing social class differentials and associated gross social inequalities. (Field also points out that most of the steep changes in expansion took place under the long running Conservative Governments of 1979 to 1997.)

The numbers and proportion of full-time mature students, those over 21 on entry to higher education, have also increased over this period. However, the strategy of Government, as translated through the Higher Education Funding

Councils, tends to equate access with young people in general, and school leavers in particular, an equation which is reflected in a variety of targeted funding initiatives. Moreover, expansion is justified very largely in terms of human capital arguments for improving the skills base of the labour force.

The adult education community, represented through the work of NIACE (National Institute for Adult Continuing Education) and UACE (the Universities Association for Continuing Education) has extensively lobbied Government about the potential, possibly unintended consequences, focusing on widening participation for school leavers and young adults and defined over narrowly in 'skills agenda' terms. There is an abundance of anecdotal evidence which points to the threat which has been posed to long standing successful access activities aimed at adult learners because the Government's access incentives are orientated in a different direction.

(ii) Recognition of Learning Wherever it Takes Place

Adult educators have long been to the fore in presenting the case for the development of learning opportunities in non-formal and informal environments, including the workplace, and associated with lobbying for the recognition of learning wherever, and whenever, it takes place.

Again, this is a topic which in the UK was taken up, albeit in different ways, by both radical adult educators and the Conservative Government as part of its skills enhancement strategy, and which has found resonances with the following Labour administrations (Taylor: 2002). One particular manifestation has been the development of a focus on work based-learning as the WEA (Workers' Educational Association) and other adult education bodies have been actively in collaboration with the trade unions in targeting low skilled and low waged sectors of the labour force. The Government's Union Learning Fund, the development of basic skills provision and the emphasis on Modern Apprenticeships Scheme are all prominent examples of Labour's commitment in the area (Fullick: 2004).

On the other hand however, despite protests to the contrary, there is at least an argument to be made about the danger of narrowing the focus to employability skills and the dominance of the human capital approach. As Jackson and Jordan observe, what was initially envisaged as a short-term response to youth unemployment and then adult unemployment associated with the business

cycle, has gradually become accepted as a central and defining component of macro economy policy (Jackson and Jackson: 2000, p.196). This is made quite explicit in one of the five goals of the Lifelong Learning Strategy developed by the Scottish Executive in the official response to the Parliamentary Committee paper. As highlighted earlier, the latter sought to develop quite an inclusive vision, whereas – despite some rhetoric to the contrary – the former reverts to the dominant skills model, with a vision of a Scotland "…where people's knowledge and skills are recognised, used and developed to their best effect in the workplace" (Scottish Executive: 2003, p.48).

As a further indication of the domination of the skills agenda, there is some evidence to suggest that some people are finding themselves in situations where they have to engage in learning in order simply to maintain their economic and/or social positions. In the national Adult Learners' Survey conducted on an annual basis by NIACE for example, 5% of respondents in Scotland and 6% across the UK who had recently, or were currently, engaged in learning in an active way said that it was not by personal choice- in most cases this was either to retain social welfare benefits or because of employer requirements (Slowey (a): 2003). Is this what is meant by a learning society?

Implicit within the adult education tradition as defined here has been the notion that more opportunities for learning for adults are, by definition, a 'good thing'. In the context of growing insecurity in the labour market for many people- probably the majority- does the learning society mean that more and more people are directly or indirectly compelled onto what might be termed a learning treadmill? The salient point here is that whereas the dominant model of lifelong learning emphasises strongly the human capital, labour market orientation, the adult education model has seen the primary purpose of adult learning as being a combination of personal development and fulfilment, and emancipatory social purpose provision, linked in turn to a strong notion of personal choice and progressive change.

(iii) Accreditation, Quality and Learner Centred Approaches
The dominant lifelong learning agenda across the constituent parts of the UK also places considerable emphasis on issues of quality. Again, this can be illustrated through another of the Scottish Executive's five goals which relates to a Scotland "…where people demand, and providers deliver high quality learning experience" (Scottish Executive: 2003, p.43). To this end the strategy states

that quality assurance frameworks should focus on outcomes and the key processes that impact on the learner's experience, including the factors that promote or hinder access; be as consistent as possible across all sectors and providers in principle and approach; and be regularly reviewed. Nothing to quarrel with here, these are simply statements which would be welcomed by any adult educator as reflecting good practice.

However, what this section of the report also reveals is the nature of the quality assurance 'industry' which has grown up around this sector, involving, to name just a few, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Councils, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Scottish Quality Management System, the Quality Assurance Agency and Community Education Validation and Endorsement. In fairness the Report does point out that the various quality assurance arrangements have been criticised by those in the field for over-auditing in some cases while not being sufficiently rigorous in others.

Whilst all involved wish to be associated with high quality provision, there are major concerns for the adult education community arising from the following strong and general tendency that:
- quality becomes equated with outcomes (bureaucratically, rather than educationally defined);
- outcomes become equated with measurement;
- measurement becomes equated with accreditation.

The challenges are to find ways in which, given the pervasive nature of the audit climate which applies to all parts of the sector, not only lifelong learning, accountability for investment in learning which does not automatically lead to qualifications can be demonstrated and the primacy of *educational* criteria reasserted. This is a challenge to which neither the adult education community nor the funding agencies have yet adequately responded.

(iv) Pathways
One of the major claims for the lifelong learning agenda is that it represents a shift away from the traditional front loaded, linear approaches to education and training (for example, OECD: 1996). The achievement of this new model is regarded as being strongly associated with the development of new and more

flexible pathways into, and around, education and training. One image is of a 'climbing frame' model where people might be facilitated in moving in, out, up, down and across the learning landscape. However, in practice to date the frameworks which have been developed are essentially linear in conception. This trend- and the minor industry which it has spawned of qualification and calibration framework experts- is closely aligned with issues of accreditation discussed above.

It is in this context that the notion of 'entitlement' is central. In a situation, as always, of scarce public resources to what extent should those who have had an opportunity to learn at a particular level have the opportunity to learn at that level again? The answer from an adult education perspective is obvious- and it is also the logic underlying lifelong learning: people should be encouraged to learn on a continuous basis at whatever level is appropriate to their learning needs at a particular time.

It is quite inappropriate, and unrealistic, to conceive of learning as an upward conveyor belt. McGivney's studies of how adults actually learn confirms that, in relation to progression, there is no clear typology of adult learning pathways:

> …any kind of learning can lead to linear progression outcomes as to other outcomes that are valued by the learners. However, all the evidence indicates that sideways or horizontal pathways are still very popular amongst adult learners.
> *(McGivney: 2003, p.48)*

Strategies to encourage progression need to take account of the enormous diversity of adult learning interests and goals, and the complex ways in which individuals move in and out of the areas in which they are interested in learning about over their lifecourse. This untidy reality of adult learning poses some challenges to policy makers. In Scotland, for example, the Parliamentary Inquiry on Lifelong Learning attempted to address this matter, recommending that the current 'entitlement' to learning should be made more flexible, so that more than one qualification at the same level can be undertaken. While this was welcomed by the adult education community as a move in the right direction, the discussion remains within the dominating discourse of qualifications- important of course for many, if not most, adult learners- but just one part of the whole landscape of adult learning.

The determining role assigned to accreditation and qualifications as the key mechanisms for ensuring quality and delineation of learning routes has been evident now for over two decades. Part of the challenge here remains the continuing difficulty which policy makers seem to encounter in addressing all forms of learning outside formal education systems. While it is difficult to find figures on expenditure on different parts of the system, despite the rhetoric of lifelong learning, the allocation of public support for education and training almost certainly remains as devoted as ever to full-time students, and young adults effectively continuing their initial education. There are understandable issues here:

> We recognise that state funded entitlements to part-time adult learning could support dead weight (that is pay for things that might otherwise have been paid by individuals and/or employers).
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> *(Scottish Parliament: 2002, paragraph 106)*

This is no excuse however for the lack of action by successive Governments for what amounts to unfair treatment by the State for the vast majority of adults who wish to learn on a part-time basis.

(v) Partnership

In recent years many of the initiatives supported at national and regional levels place an emphasis on partnership working between the public, private and voluntary sectors. Whilst this has been a persistent rhetoric, the practice has been rather different. The system is still based largely upon competitive structures and processes – providers still have to compete for initiative funding, and, of course, student enrolments. Nevertheless, the ethos of partnership has a long tradition in adult education and the sector has certain strengths, acting as an interface between the formal education sector- colleges and universities- employers, state training agencies, community organisations and individual learners.

While interagency working is always complex, particular difficulties seem to appear when the notion of partnership is translated from an organic method of operation into a bureaucratic requirement. This problem does not just apply to the educational arena. A major study on urban regeneration partnerships (URPs) in England, where partnership working is frequently a requirement for state support, concludes that:

> …while many participants in URPs are supportive of co-ordination in princi-

ple, they were critical of the ways in which partnerships operated…It was far from clear to non-community agents that communities actually become heavily involved in regeneration, instead they deal with a series of local activists, whose representitivness is often dubious. Those activists in turn, find it difficult to build up trusting relationships with other agencies that lead to widespread beneficial partnership co-operation. The principle of community participation is often at variance with its practice.

(ESRC: 2004, p.7)

One of the challenges in relation to the increasing stipulation for partnership working for the adult education sector lies in the differential nature of the power bases between the voluntary and community sectors and the more formal parts of the system including colleges, universities and public and private sector training agencies. In England, for example, the enormous budgeting power of the LSCs, mentioned above, coupled with the complexity of its bureaucratic structures make it often an intimidating, if not impenetrable, organisation for the community and voluntary sectors. The role of 'bridging' units with appropriate expertise can be important in helping forge more equal and productive links between the formal and non-formal sectors. In the case of higher education, to take one small but significant example, Departments/Centres of Adult Education or their equivalents have frequently fulfilled this function, acting at the interface between communities and their universities, an activity which paradoxically, reflecting the underlying tensions and contradictions highlighted in this discussion, is currently under some threat (Watson, 2001; Slowey (b), 2003).

Broadening the Vision

The five issues explored above are simply a selection from a range of topics which could be highlighted as offering potential areas of congruence- swimming *with* the (main)stream- between adult education (as defined for purposes of this discussion) and the lifelong learning agenda. They also however point to tensions, if not contradictions, in practice for the interests of adult learners where the adult education community finds itself swimming *against* the (main)stream.

In the UK, as in most states, these tensions are hardly surprising. At a macro level they are a reflection of different value systems manifested through different interpretations of what is meant by the learning society: on the one hand a

dominant policy emphasis on the skills agenda driven by perceived interests of capital and the economy, and on the other the social agenda, as interpreted by adult educators amongst others. Nor can the resource context be ignored.

> The policy dilemma is very clear – we want more, and more diverse, people to have access, we want to maintain the quality of what is provided, and we want to do this with shrinking public funds.
>
> *(Coffield and Williamson: 1997, p.111)*

There is little that is new in these challenges for the adult educators of Britain and Ireland steeped in a long tradition of operating on the margins and, to an extent, operating as a counter-cultural force. A great strength of this tradition lies in the ability to adapt and find new ways of maintaining and developing valuable educational work often despite dominant perspectives and legislative changes. This is undoubtedly energy absorbing as, for example, tried and tested programmes are rebranded to meet the latest funding criteria. Nevertheless, the need for an expert lobby which gives expression to the importance of a wide range of adult learning opportunities *in addition* to those orientated towards qualifications and vocational skills remains as important as ever.

While it is certainly possible to point to areas of progress over the last decade, an analysis of trends in adult participation in learning over the period 1996-2004 across the UK (as measured by the regular surveys conducted by NIACE) regrettably appears to confirm the views held by many practitioners that the emphasis on lifelong learning policy, legislation and new structures is somehow missing the point, if not actually, inadvertently, helping to create new gaps. Aldridge and Tuckett reveal a decline in the proportion of respondents who reported that they were "currently engaged in learning" over this period from 23% to 19%[2]. Even more than this, their analysis suggests that the "learning divide" has actually increased, with "… participation rates falling amongst all but the highest socio-economic groups, and participation falling amongst the poorest (DEs) declining from 26% to 23% (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2004: p.22). Perhaps most worryingly, they suggest that the focus on achievement targets may be part of the reason for this trend, leading to a narrowing of the curriculum on offer to adults "as expansion of provision for young people is bought at

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[2] Note: The definition of learning used in the NIACE survey is very broad, encompassing any form of structured learning, including independent study.

the expense of their elders" (p.23) To the extent that there is validity in this analysis it surely reflects highly undesirable and, no doubt, unintended consequences of current dominant interpretations of lifelong learning.

The thrust of the discussion in this paper, graphically illustrated by these recent survey findings, has pointed to the need for (main)stream lifelong learning policy makers across the UK and internationally to draw upon broader and more diverse perspectives – including, importantly, those associated with the adult education tradition.

This is a lesson which transcends national boundaries.

An interim review was undertaken in 2003 by the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) of progress towards agreed UNECSO goals in relation to adult learning (ICAE, 2003). This review was able to report some progress in relation to increasing recognition in official discourses of the right of men and women to learn as "an essential tool to improve their conditions of life, if not simply to survive" (p.123). On the other hand, their conclusions in relation to the implementation of this right was that adult learning "… remains, in most countries, associated with literacy and adult basic education, or with work-related learning" (p.124). Vitally important as these areas are, alone they are unlikely to deliver the broader conceptions of the learning society which remains the aim of many adult educators.

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