



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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# **REIMAGINING LIFELONG LEARNING A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN IDEA**

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## O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

FETL Occasional Papers are short, authoritative treatments of issues key to the leadership of thinking in further education and skills. Written by expert commentators, they are intended to inform and encourage new thinking about important topics.

### ***Commissioned by Dame Ruth Silver, member of the Independent Commission on Lifelong Learning and President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership***

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This paper was commissioned by Dame Ruth Silver, President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership, as a contribution to the work of the Independent Commission on Lifelong Learning. It gives an overview of the use of the term 'lifelong learning', how it emerged as an idea and how it has since been re-understood and reimagined by policy-makers, planners and educationalists, viewed through the lens of key developments in thinking and influential policy documents and statements. It does not pretend to be comprehensive but aims, instead, to give an overview of the main trends and ideas that led to the concept's adoption, globally and at national level, as an important educational paradigm, and to its subsequent revisions and reimaginings.

# LIFELONG EDUCATION AND RECONSTRUCTION

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**The idea of 'lifelong education' was first articulated clearly in the 1920s by Basil Yeaxlee.**

However, the roots of the idea can be traced to the First World War and the 1919 Report of the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee, to which Yeaxlee contributed, and to the tradition of post-compulsory part-time adult education, delivered particularly through the Workers' Educational Association (WEA).

Yeaxlee had worked as an assistant Congregational minister and as education assistant to the London Missionary Society before joining the YMCA in 1915. The YMCA had been commissioned to organise educational activities for the armed services during the war and Yeaxlee's brief was to recruit academics and other experts to give talks, lectures and informal classes to troops at home and abroad. Lectures usually took place in huts established and operated by the YMCA as a refuge for soldiers who were provided with food, drink, cigarettes and reading and writing materials. Usually there was also a gramophone and some records. Run by women volunteers, the huts were set up at the principal army bases, often very close to the front line, and at locations such as railway stations through which large numbers of troops were likely to pass. Yeaxlee was impressed by the atmosphere he encountered in the huts, describing a 'fever of letter-writing' in smoke-filled rooms. Soldiers could use the space as they liked and had the opportunity to attend lectures and talks if they liked. Many did and soon the YMCA was overseeing a genuinely mass programme of adult education.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, M.K. 2007. 'Basil Yeaxlee, lifelong learning and informal education'. *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*: [www.infed.org/thinkers/et-yeax.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-yeax.htm).

Yeaxlee's key role in delivering this programme was recognised in his appointment, in 1917, to the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee, alongside such luminaries as Albert Mansbridge, founder of the WEA, and chair Arthur L. Smith, Master of Balliol College and another key figure of the British adult education movement. The Committee was charged with considering 'the provision for, and possibilities of Adult Education (other than technical or vocational)'. Its *Final Report* (better known as the '1919 Report')<sup>2</sup> emphasised the social purpose of adult education in supporting enlightened and responsible citizenship and in creating a 'well ordered welfare state or Great Society' organised around 'the common good'. Technical education 'though it must be an integral part of our educational system, is not an alternative to non-vocational education. The latter is a universal need; but whether the former is necessary depends on the character of employment'. The report urged substantial development in adult education, supported by public funds. In particular, it called for an expanded role for universities in delivering adult education, especially through the establishment of extra-mural departments, more and better-paid staff, and an increased role for the WEA and other voluntary organisations.

The report argued that adult education 'must not be regarded as a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there, nor as a thing which concerns only a short span of early manhood [*sic*], but that adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong'. In the words of R.H Tawney, who drafted much of the report, it demonstrated that adult education was 'an activity indispensable to the health of democratic societies'.<sup>3</sup> Its focus on the role of education in supporting participatory democracy drew on the intellectual origins of the WEA and its insistence on the importance of 'true education' which 'directly induces thought', and shaped and influenced the practice of British adult educators for decades to come, informing their view of their work as invested with 'social purpose'. It led to

the creation of an Adult Education Committee to advise the Board of Education on the development of adult education provision. The Committee argued for a stronger coordinating role for local authorities and sought to expand the range of 'responsible bodies' involved in adult learning, alongside universities and the WEA, through the 1924 Board of Education (Adult Education) Regulations. This was, in part, a recognition that the report's limited focus on liberal studies and the university connection neglected the vocational dimension of adult education and that a more comprehensive approach was required.

Yeaxlee had meanwhile become joint secretary of the Educational Settlements Association, the central organising body for British non-residential educational settlements that grew largely from the Quaker adult schools movement (and should be distinguished from residential university and social settlements, such as Toynbee Hall, which had a wider social purpose, though education was key to achieving it). In 1929, he published what was probably the first full treatment of education as a continuing aspect of everyday life. His book, *Lifelong education*, surveyed the roots of the British adult education movement, giving equal weight to formal, non-formal and informal learning, and emphasising the importance of education in achieving 'creative enjoyment' and as 'an aid to the realization of political or economic freedom'. As we make progress, Yeaxlee wrote, '[w]e discover more, and not less, need of adult education,' which 'rightly interpreted, is as inseparable from normal living as food and physical exercise'.<sup>4</sup> Education, he argued, 'involves knowledge, experience and fellowship. For that reason it is never finished, and cannot be more than begun in childhood and youth'.<sup>5</sup>

As Angela Cross-Durrant notes, Yeaxlee was a significant figure because he 'viewed education at school as merely the start of the process, and in that sense projected education for adults beyond a compensatory, or occupationally expedient,

<sup>2</sup> British Ministry of Reconstruction, Adult Education Committee. 1919. *Final Report*. London, HMSO.

<sup>3</sup> Fieldhouse, R. 1996. *A History of Modern British Adult Education*. Leicester, NIACE, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> Yeaxlee, B.A. 1929. *Lifelong Education*. London, Cassell, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

activity'.<sup>6</sup> As such, his work could be described as 'prophetically optimistic', giving 'expression to reform of education to prepare the way for a lifetime of learning' and seeking 'to bridge the unnecessary elitist divide between "academic" and "vocational" education'.<sup>7</sup>

## WAR AND DEMOCRACY

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**The British Institute of Adult Education (BIAE), founded in 1921 as a 'thinking department' focused on research and advocacy (it became the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education in 1983; and is now the Learning and Work Institute), quickly moved away from its early focus on university extension classes to take an interest in what it termed 'various auxiliary services', meaning the wide array of voluntary agencies, usually with a primary purpose outside adult education, involved in creating less formal, but often more accessible, opportunities for adults to learn.<sup>8</sup>**

Its activities included collaboration with the BBC on developing an educational use for the wireless, a commission on educational and cultural films, an inquiry into public reading habits and a national advisory committee, set up with the National Council of Social Service, to develop educational work for the unemployed.

Some of this work led to the creation of new, specialised bodies which were able to take forward work begun by the Institute. The commission on educational and

<sup>6</sup> Cross-Durrant, A. 2006. 'Basil Yeaxlee and lifelong education: Caught in time'. In: *From Adult Education to the Learning Society*, Peter Jarvis (Ed), London, Routledge, p. 107.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>8</sup> Stanistreet, P. 2011. 'A force to be reckoned with'. *Adults Learning*, Volume 22, Number 6, February 2011.

cultural films, which the Institute set up in 1929 to explore the use of films in education, the development of public appreciation of films and the establishment of a 'permanent central agency' to achieve these aims, produced a report in 1932, *The Film in National Life*. It recommended the creation of an independent film institute, funded from the public purse. This resulted in the creation of the British Film Institute. In 1935, on the direction of its Secretary W.E Williams, the BIAE set up *Art for the People*, a scheme to give ordinary people the opportunity to experience works of art. Williams convinced private collectors to loan their paintings to the Institute for the purpose. The work led to the creation of the Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) which, throughout the Second World War, put on musical and theatre performances and arts exhibitions around the country, preventing what Kenneth Clark termed a 'cultural black-out'. In 1946, CEMA became the Arts Council of Great Britain, with a remit that included making the arts more accessible to the general public.

Williams was also instrumental in setting up a number of wartime adult education projects. These included an Air Raid Shelter Libraries and Reading Rooms scheme, a programme of Army Study Centres, and, most significantly, the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA). ABCA was established in 1941 by the War Office to provide weekly current affairs talks and discussions, led by regimental officers and supported by the fortnightly publication of pamphlets on issues 'of topical and universal importance', which Williams oversaw. These sessions included discussion of alternative ways of organising society (though a pamphlet on the Beveridge Report was personally withdrawn by Churchill). They were supplemented by a scheme to provide military personnel with three hours of compulsory education per week, one hour for military training, one for general subjects and personal interest, and one for education in citizenship. Williams felt strongly that serving men and women should not only have access to basic information about the war, but also have the opportunity to take part in the discussions that would shape the

country that emerged from the conflict. General Sir Ronald Adam, President of the British Institute of Adult Education from 1945 to 1949, told the Institute's 1945 conference that the ABCA programme was 'a great manifestation of democratic faith'.<sup>9</sup>

The ABCA sessions have been credited with engendering increased political awareness among troops and even with securing the election of a Labour government in 1945 (some sources estimate that as many as 80 per cent of soldiers voted Labour). They may also have contributed to renewed advocacy for improved adult education provision in peacetime. The 1943 White Paper on *Educational Reconstruction* described wartime developments in army education as a catalyst for adult education reform and stressed the need for training in democratic citizenship through adult education. The 1944 Education Act, which promised 'secondary school for all' for the first time and raised the school leaving age to 15, also placed a duty on local education authorities (LEAs) to 'contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community by securing that efficient education throughout those stages [primary, secondary and further] shall be available to meet the needs of the population of their area'. It would be the responsibility of every LEA to provide 'adequate facilities' for full-time and part-time further education 'for persons over compulsory school age' and 'leisure-time occupation, in such organized cultural training and recreational activities as are suited to their requirements, for any persons over compulsory school age who are able and willing to profit by the facilities provided for that purpose'. As a result of the Act, the number of evening institutes offering courses for adults more than doubled between 1947 and 1950, from just over 5,000 to nearly 11,000, while the number of students increased from 825,000 to 1,250,000.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Fieldhouse, 1996, p. 58.



# UTOPIAN STIRRINGS

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The immediate post-war period was notable also for the creation of UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, from which emerged new, utopian thinking about education, informed by a 'humanistic and emancipatory approach that aimed at bringing out the full potential of human beings and enabling them to shape their societies towards greater democratization and social justice'.<sup>11</sup>

This 'humanist ideology' was, to a very large extent, a reaction to the atrocities committed during the war and the misuse of education for political purposes. To guarantee peace and to address the dangers of totalitarianism, UNESCO's founders argued for the rejection of instrumentalist views of human beings, including in education. Julian Huxley, the English scientist who became the organisation's first Director-General, described his vision as

a world humanism, both in the sense of seeking to bring in all the peoples of the world, and of treating all peoples and all individuals within each people as equals in terms of human dignity, mutual respect, and educational opportunity.<sup>12</sup>

Education, Huxley and his colleagues believed, was a human right; a 'second-generation' right after political and civil rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion. As such, it had an 'intrinsic' value, essential to the nature of human beings, and was not to be subject to other, extraneous purposes.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Elfert, M. 2018. *UNESCO's Utopia of Lifelong Learning: An Intellectual history*. London, Routledge, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

It was in this context that Yeaxlee's notion of 'lifelong education' was revived, becoming identified in particular with the activities of the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE), established in Hamburg in 1950 (and later to become the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning). Maria Montessori, the early childhood education pioneer who was a leading figure on UIE's inaugural board, said in a speech before the board's first meeting:

If the institute is justified in existing, then it is only in pioneering a new path for education, that is to say one for education as a support to the inner life of man [*sic*]... the school should not be the objective of this institute but people, the whole person, and this person begins at birth.<sup>14</sup>

The new Institute also shared Yeaxlee's association of adult education with non-vocational learning and, in particular, learning for democratic citizenship, linking participation in society with the full realisation of human potential.

Lifelong education began to be promoted as an educational paradigm in the 1960s, with much of the impetus deriving from Paul Lengrand who popularised the notion of *éducation permanente*, in France, as one of the founders of popular education movement *Peuple et Culture*, and internationally, as head of UNESCO's adult education department. Lengrand had been influenced by the 1919 Report and the British extra-mural tradition, which he admired.<sup>15</sup> Lifelong education did not, however, emerge as a central organising principle of UNESCO's work until the early 1970s, at least not in a clearly defined way. This changed with the publication of *Learning to be*, better known as the Faure report, in 1972. The report, commissioned by Director-General René Maheu, reasserted UNESCO's humanitarian values and defended them against a growing tendency, within UNESCO and in national government, to assess the value of educational outcomes in economic terms. Edgar Faure, Gaullist politician and former French Minister of Education, was appointed chair of the International Commission on the Development of Education, which

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 65

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 85

was charged with developing the report. In a letter to the Director-General presenting the commission's final report, Faure asserted his belief that

only an over-all, lifelong education can produce the kind of complete man [sic] the need for whom is increasing with the continually more stringent constraints tearing the individual asunder. We should no longer assiduously acquire knowledge once and for all, but learn how to build up a continually evolving body of knowledge all through life – 'learn to be'.<sup>16</sup>

The report argued that lifelong education should be 'the master concept for educational policies in the years to come for both developed and developing countries'.<sup>17</sup> Lifelong education was 'not an educational system but the principal on which the over-all organization of a system is founded, and which should accordingly underlie the development of each of its component parts'.<sup>18</sup> It should be at the heart of 'learning societies' (a term the report coined) where the focus was not on schools or the institutions of learning but, rather, on the formation of the 'complete man', an individual capable of acting as an 'agent of development and change, promoter of democracy, citizen of the world and author of his own fulfilment'.<sup>19</sup> The report also stressed the importance of lifelong education in promoting political consciousness and understanding the mechanics of power, and contributing to the replacement of 'a mechanical, administrative type of authority by a lively, democratic process of decision-making'.<sup>20</sup>

The Faure report marked an important shift in thinking about education: from an overwhelming focus on schools and universities to a broader perspective that recognised adults' lifelong need for learning and acknowledged the importance of non-formal and informal learning, both to individual fulfilment and to the successful functioning of democratic societies. Nevertheless, it was not without its critics, who pointed to the report's perceived lack of practical application,

<sup>16</sup> Faure, E. et al. 1972. *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow*. Paris, UNESCO, p. vi.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151

particularly for countries in the developing world, and to its reliance on wider social transformation for the delivery of its aims. And while the report had some initial impact, prompting, for example, the Institute for Education to adjust its remit to focus on lifelong learning and the OECD to implement a programme on 'recurrent education', global economic recession and the heightening tension of the Cold War ushered in an era of political pragmatism which sidelined its utopian ambitions.<sup>21</sup>

It was 24 years before UNESCO revived its humanistic vision of education, this time in very different political and socio-economic circumstances, in a world facing a new set of challenges, where a market-driven vision of education was becoming prevalent.

## IDEALISM VERSUS PRAGMATISM

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***Learning: The Treasure Within*, better known as the Delors report, was published in 1996 by the Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, chaired by another notable French politician, the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors.**

The commission was mandated by UNESCO to explore the kind of education that would be needed in the society of the near future. In his foreword to the report, Delors noted that 'while education is an ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills, it is also – perhaps primarily – an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations'.<sup>22</sup> He highlighted a number of key contemporary challenges for education in an increasingly globalised world, including tensions between the global and

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<sup>21</sup> Elfert, 2018, pp. 139–143

<sup>22</sup> Delors, J. et al, 1996. *Learning: The Treasure Within*. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century. Paris, UNESCO, p. 12.

the local, the universal and the individual, tradition and modernity, and the need for competition and the concern for equality of opportunity. The pressures of competition, he wrote, had 'caused many of those in positions of authority to lose sight of their mission, which is to give each human being the means to take full advantage of every opportunity'.<sup>23</sup> There was, he noted, an increasing gap between 'those who govern and those who are governed'. Learning, the report argued, had a crucial role in addressing this and in the creation of a more just society characterised by a 'greater sense of responsibility and greater solidarity'.<sup>24</sup>

Delors proposed an integrated vision of education reaffirming the spirit of the Faure report, and particularly its concern about the instrumentalisation of education, but preferring the concept of 'learning throughout life' to 'lifelong education'. This subtle change of use was an attempt to convey that learning needed to be not only 'lifelong' but also 'lifewide', meaning that it could take place across a range of spheres and contexts. The vision of the report was based on two key paradigms: lifelong learning and what the report called the 'four pillars of learning': learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together.<sup>25</sup> Formal education, it argued, tended to emphasize the acquisition of knowledge to the detriment of other types of learning essential to human development. The report stressed the need to think of learning over the life course, and to address how everyone can develop relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes for work, citizenship and personal fulfilment.

The proposals outlined in the Delors report were in part a reaction to the drift to the right in global politics that followed the end of the Cold War and the belief that the market should be the main regulating factor in education, where the tone of policy-making became increasingly utilitarian. The report emphasised the role of learning both in allowing people to adjust to economic demands and in enabling them to 'retain mastery of their destinies'.<sup>26</sup> In this respect it exercised significant

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 15–16

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 51

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 85–98

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 101

influence, with its 'four pillars' widely cited, both in policy reports and in the scholarly literature, though, as with the Faure report, it had little direct influence on policy in nation states. Some critics compared the report unfavourably to the more pragmatic approach of the OECD and the World Bank. And while European Union's 2000 Memorandum on Lifelong Learning recognised the twin aims of economic growth and social inclusion, it gave overwhelming emphasis to the former.<sup>27</sup> Even within UNESCO, the notion of lifelong learning faded in the two decades that followed, only returning to prominence in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals, in which lifelong learning was accorded a significant role, though still a much more limited one than that envisaged by Faure and Delors. The importance of the two reports probably lies more in their articulation of an alternative to the prevalent instrumentalist view of education, with its strong emphasis on work-related skills enhancement and the (usually very narrowly conceived) needs of the economy. For this reason, perhaps, they have retained their resonance, even though there are few instances of national governments picking up the lifelong learning baton in such a comprehensive and expansive way.

## RUSSELL AND AFTER

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### **Britain's own utopian moment might be said to have come with the publication of the Russell Report<sup>28</sup> in 1973.**

The Russell Committee was appointed in February 1969, under the chairmanship of Sir Lionel Russell, then Chief Education Officer of Birmingham. Its brief was to 'assess the need for and to review the provision of non-vocational adult education in England and Wales', though, in practice, the committee sought to recognise

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<sup>27</sup> Bynner, J. 2017. 'Whatever happened to lifelong learning? And does it matter?' *Journal of the British Academy*, 5, p. 70.

<sup>28</sup> Russell Committee on Adult Education. 1973. *Adult Education: A plan for development*. London, HMSO.

all forms of adult education. The Russell Report acknowledged the necessity of 'a great development of non-technical studies ... vital to provide the fullest opportunities for personal development and for the realisation of a true conception of citizenship'. Too great an emphasis, it argued, 'had been laid on material consideration and too little regard paid to other aspects of life':

The value of adult education is not solely to be measured by direct increases in earning power or productive capacity or by any other materialistic yardstick, but by the quality of life it inspires in the individual and generates for the community at large.

The committee concluded that adults should have opportunities to learn throughout their lives and in all the various roles they play in life, whether as parents, carers, employees and employers, family members, members of the local community or as active citizens. It called for a coherent and consistent service 'integrated with all other sectors of the educational system but at the same time firmly rooted in the active life of local communities'. The report put particular stress on the need for more targeted provision for 'disadvantaged adults', those excluded from social and community life by virtue of 'personal capacity' or social or economic disadvantage. It emphasised the 'urgency of these unmet needs' and the threat they posed to 'the development of a free, democratic society'.

The report was submitted to Secretary of State for Education Margaret Thatcher in December 1972. It was coolly received. There was to be no endorsement of the committee's broad vision for 'a comprehensive and flexible service of adult education, broad enough to meet the whole range of educational needs of the adult in our society,' and while its recommendations called for only modest increases in expenditure, few were ever implemented. The frosty reception the report received ensured adult education remained marginal to government policymaking, but it had an enduring influence on adult education practitioners and providers, particularly those who saw their work as, in the tradition of the 1919 Report, socially purposeful. It led many to refocus their work on disadvantaged groups of learners, and to devote more resources and energy to those with the greatest and most urgent learning needs.

When Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, her government made clear that it intended to refocus its adult education spending to prioritise provision related to employment and skills. In a context in which public spending was being squeezed across the board and unemployment rising, this began to change the profile of adult education provision in the UK, with spending on training activities increasing threefold between 1979 and 1991 and other forms of provision under growing pressure. The government aimed to increase employers' involvement in training and development, and there was much talk of employers leading the sector. However, while take-up of vocational education increased during the 1980s, other forms of provision, particularly courses in academic subjects, the arts and social sciences, were becoming more and more marginalised.<sup>29</sup> The Education Reform Act 1988 resulted in the dismantling of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), which had been responsible for much of the most creative and innovative practice in adult learning during the 1970s and 1980s. According to NIACE, in 1986-87 ILEA provided 14 per cent of all non-vocational adult education in England and Wales.<sup>30</sup> It was broken up on 1 April 1990 and its responsibilities transferred to the inner London boroughs.

The gap between vocational and qualification-bearing courses and adult education for personal and community development was further reinforced by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which, as well as removing further education colleges from local authority control also gave the newly defined further education sector a responsibility for securing adequate provision of only certain categories of provision. These were listed in 'Schedule 2' of the Act and included vocational and qualification-bearing courses, higher education access courses, adult literacy and numeracy, ESOL, and skills acquisition for people with learning difficulties. Local authorities were given a statutory duty to provide non-Schedule 2 adult education: recreational, social and leisure provision. This represented a significant concession to campaigners, including NIACE and the National Federation of Women's

<sup>29</sup> Sargent, N. 1991. *Learning and Leisure*. Leicester, NIACE.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*



Institutes. The 1991 White Paper, *Education and Training for the 21st Century*, had proposed a statutory responsibility to fund only courses that led to vocational or academic qualifications, what it termed 'useful' learning. This was bitterly opposed by campaigners, who convinced education secretary Kenneth Clarke to clarify his position. However, while local authorities were now required to secure 'adequate' provision, the notion of adequacy was never defined, and many LEAs, unsurprisingly, felt support for local schools was a higher priority. As a result, local authorities reduced funding for non-vocational adult education and there was an erosion of cooperation between LEAs and voluntary and community organisations.

## THE LEARNING AGE

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**The 1992 Act created the Further Education Funding Council and gave it a brief to promote access to further education 'for people who do not participate in education and training, but who could benefit from it'.**

In 1994, the council appointed Helena Kennedy QC to chair a committee to advise it on this aim. The committee's final report, *Learning Works*,<sup>31</sup> published in June 1997, placed 'second-chance education' for those 'forced by necessity to make unfulfilling choices' at the heart of further education's mission and was strongly critical of what it saw as its neglect. It expressed concern that colleges operating in a more competitive environment were more likely to pursue students who had the best chance of succeeding and to neglect those most in need. The report argued that education was the common foundation for both economic prosperity and social cohesion and condemned the inadequacy of policies that had achieved

<sup>31</sup> Kennedy, H. 1997. *Learning Works: Widening participation in further education*. Coventry, FEFC.

significant growth in post-16 learning in the 1990s on the grounds that they had failed to include socially and economically disadvantaged adults. 'Education must be at the heart of any inspired project for regeneration in Britain,' it said:

It should be a springboard for the revitalization that our communities so urgently need. However, in all the political debates, it is the economic rationale for increasing participation in education which has been paramount. Prosperity depends on there being a vibrant economy, but an economy which regards its own success as the highest good is a dangerous one. Justice and equity must also have their claim upon the arguments for educational growth. In a social landscape where there is a growing gulf between those who have and those who have not, the importance of social cohesion cannot be ignored.<sup>32</sup>

The report called on government to take the lead by creating a national strategy for post-16 learning to support the aspiration that all should achieve at Level 3 (A-level or vocational equivalent) and to reinforce this by creating a 'lifetime entitlement' to education up to Level 3, establishing new national learning targets and local targets for participation, and offering financial incentives to enable colleges to expand their missions. Widening participation should be at the heart of the priorities set for the education world, with particular attention paid to people outside the workforce, women returners and adults with poor basic skills, it said. The committee saw the opportunity to achieve at Level 3 as the essential basis for the creation of a 'self-perpetuating learning society' and argued that public funding should be redistributed towards those with less success in earlier learning, moving towards equity in funding in post-16 education. It argued that learning for work and learning for life were inseparable and that distinctions between vocation and non-vocational learning were 'becoming less and less valid'. The report also called for a credit accumulation system and new 'pathways to learning': a 'united system for recognising achievement'.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.

The newly elected Labour Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, warmly endorsed the vision and spirit of the report. He created a National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (NAGCELL) to advise him on a new strategy for lifelong learning, chaired by Bob Fryer, Principal of Northern College, with NIACE Director Alan Tuckett as vice-chair, and with strong representation from the WEA and trades unions, as well as further education, local authorities and employers. NAGCELL published its first report, *Learning for the Twenty-First Century*<sup>33</sup>, in November 1997. Drawing extensively on *Learning Works*, the report argued that 'Lifelong learning can help people seize new opportunities, engage critically with change and shape their worlds by asserting some ownership and direction over their own lives, in work and beyond.' It called for the development of 'a new learning culture, a culture of lifelong learning for all' to meet the challenges of economic, social and technological change. Achieving such a culture change would require a 'revolution' in people's attitudes to learning, the report said, particularly among those least engaged or with fewest opportunities to participate in education. It also demanded a simplified, coherent framework for the promotion of lifelong learning, giving increased emphasis to the home, the community and the workplace as key places of learning, supported by 'individual learning accounts'. Such a revolution would require a national promotional campaign, increased investment from government, employers and learners, greater use of new technology and 'systematic outreach and development work'.

The purpose of NAGCELL was to advise ministers in preparing a White Paper on lifelong learning and its report represented a lively and far-sighted agenda for policy change. However, the paper encountered opposition from within government, with both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown seemingly concerned at the 'lack of rigour when dealing with standards to be set and the open-ended costs

<sup>33</sup> Fryer, B. 1997. *Learning for the Twenty First Century: First Report of the National Advisory Group on Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning*. National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning.

of further education expansion'.<sup>34</sup> The White Paper was shelved and instead the government published a Green Paper, *The Learning Age: A renaissance for a new Britain*, which, while still rich in ambition and capturing the spirit of *Learning Works* and *Learning for the Twenty-First Century*, did not entail any major new spending commitments on behalf of the government. It is best remembered for its remarkable foreword, drafted by David Blunkett. Learning, he wrote, was 'the key to prosperity', both for individuals and for the nation as a whole, which was why the government was putting it 'at the heart of its ambition':

The fostering of an enquiring mind and the love of learning are essential for our future success. To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable labour force. To cope with rapid change and the challenge of the information and communication age, we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives. We cannot rely on a small elite, no matter how highly educated or highly paid. Instead, we need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people.<sup>35</sup>

Learning not only secured our economic future, but also had 'a wider contribution', Blunkett continued:

It helps make ours a civilized society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings. To realise our ambition, we must all develop and sustain a regard for

<sup>34</sup> Nash, I. and Crequer, N. 1998. 'Red faces after white paper is torn up'. *Times Educational Supplement*, 13 February. Cited in Holford, J. and Welikala, T. 2013. "'Renaissance" without Enlightenment: New Labour's Learning Age 1997–2010'. In: Ellu Saar, Odd Bjorn Ure; John Holford (eds), *Lifelong learning in Europe: National patterns and challenges*. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, pp. 140–164.

<sup>35</sup> DfEE. 1998. *The Learning Age: A renaissance for a new Britain*. London, HMSO, p. 7.

learning at whatever age. For many people this will mean overcoming past experiences which have put them off learning. For others it will mean taking the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to recognize their own talent, to discover new ways of learning and to see new opportunities opening up. What was available only to the few can, in the century ahead, be something which is enjoyed and taken advantage of by the many. That is why this Green Paper encourages adults to enter and re-enter learning at every point in their lives.<sup>36</sup>

The Green Paper may have been light on new spending commitments and rather heavier in rhetoric but it was responsible for a number of significant innovations. These included plans for 'Individual Learning Accounts' to enable 'men and women to take responsibility for their own learning with support from both Government and employers' and a 'University for Industry', which would 'offer access to a learning network to help people deepen their knowledge, update their skills and gain new ones' (both already set out in Labour's general election manifesto). Other recommendations included the expansion of further and higher education to provide for an extra 500,000 people by 2020; increased support for adult basic literacy and numeracy; widening participation in and access to learning, both in higher, further and adult and community education and through the University for Industry; and raising standards across post-16 teaching and learning. The paper also launched two new funds to support efforts to widen participation in learning: the Adult and Community Learning Fund, administered by NIACE, which aimed to support local initiatives designed to empower marginalised groups; and the Trade Union Learning Fund, which aimed to promote innovative activity by trade unions to support the creation of a learning society.

Both funds had significant success in motivating people to get involved in learning. However, not all of the paper's initiatives fared as well. Individual Learning Accounts generated a large amount of demand but had been introduced in a hurry and were not well enough safeguarded against fraud. A small number of

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 7–8

fraudulent agencies established operations to gain individuals' money without offering services. As soon as evidence of fraud emerged, the scheme was halted, to the regret of many in the sector who had begun to see its value. By the time the scheme was abandoned in October 2001, there were 8,500 accredited providers nationwide. The Department for Education and Skills was investigating 279 on the basis of substantial evidence of misselling, and police had arrested 30 people. Nevertheless, the scheme had demonstrated that individual demand could be stimulated, and that it was possible to engage people previously sceptical about the value of learning in their lives. The second of the Green Paper's flagship initiatives, the University for Industry, charged with using online technology to transform the delivery of learning and skills across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, underwent numerous changes to its remit, and, in 2000, launched leardirect, which became its public-facing brand.<sup>37</sup>

## 'WORLD CLASS' SKILLS

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**David Blunkett's four years as Secretary of State saw the beginning of significant restructuring of the further education and skills system, as well as significant investment in adult learning.**

In 2001, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) was created and made responsible for the planning, funding and quality assurance of further education in England, replacing the Further Education Funding Council and 72 Training and Enterprise Councils (an equivalent body for Wales – Education and Learning Wales – was also established). The LSC's 2001-02 grant letter stressed the importance of increasing and widening participation in learning, particularly among 'disadvantaged' groups,

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<sup>37</sup> Stanistreet, P. 'The Learning Age and after'. *Adults Learning*, Volume 22, Number 8, April 2011.

and urged the provision of 'more learning opportunities based in the community and voluntary sectors for adults in disadvantaged communities'. And while there was no target for adult participation in learning, it was clear that in other respects departmental priorities were becoming more centralized. The Prime Minister's Delivery Unit was established, also in 2001, to monitor key priorities for education, health, crime and transport, with Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets agreed between departments and the Treasury. Following the Moser Report, which found that there were between 5 and 7 million functionally illiterate and innumerate adults in the UK, the government introduced a PSA target for adult literacy and numeracy, as well as targets for the achievement of Level 3 and for higher education participation (50 per cent participation by the age of 30). A Skills for Life strategy was launched with the aim of improving the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adults by 2004.

The overwhelming emphasis on qualification targets made it increasingly difficult for providers to work in flexible, responsive and innovative ways to reach the most disadvantaged and disengaged adults. Government interest shifted from the broader, life-wide conception of lifelong learning outlined by Blunkett to a much narrower focus on skills deemed economically useful.<sup>38</sup> This apparent sea change was evident in the 2003 skills strategy White Paper, *21st Century Skills: Realising our potential*,<sup>39</sup> which set out the government's intention to pursue equality and fairness through economic modernization, with far less emphasis on the importance of widening participation in pursuit of a fair and equal society. Adult learning was accorded a significant role in ensuring that 'employers have the right skills to support the success of their businesses and organizations, and individuals have the skills they need to be both employable and personally fulfilled'.<sup>40</sup> A second skills strategy, *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work*,<sup>41</sup> published in

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Department for Education and Skills. 2003. *21st Century Skills: Realising our Potential. Individuals, Employers, Nation*. London, HMSO.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 8

<sup>41</sup> DfES. 2005. *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work*. London, DfES.

2005, consolidated efforts to put employers' needs centre stage in the design and delivery of training and launched a new flagship training programme, Train to Gain, to deliver vocational training to employed adults. Later that year, Sir Andrew Foster published the results of his government-commissioned review of further education, *Realising the potential: A review of the future role of further education colleges*,<sup>42</sup> which called on the FE sector to focus more sharply on employability and the supply of economically valuable skills. Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, agreed with the report's main contention that the 'building of skills' was the 'primary purpose of further education colleges'.

In 2006, the report of the Treasury-commissioned Leitch review of skills, *Prosperity for all in the global economy: world class skills*,<sup>43</sup> was published. The report called on the UK to 'commit to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020' by focusing on 'economically valuable skills' to 'provide real returns ... in the labour market for individuals and employers'.<sup>44</sup> To ensure the UK reached the top quartile of OECD countries by each of the indicators used in international comparisons, the report recommended a number of skills targets, including 95 per cent of adults achieving basic skills in literacy and numeracy, 90 per cent qualified to at least Level 2, 1.9 million additional Level 3 attainments and more than 40 per cent of adults qualified to Level 4. It foresaw that responsibility for achieving these targets would be shared between government, employers and individuals, with each stakeholder encouraged to increase investment and focus on economically valuable skills. It also recommended making the system more demand-led, with an emphasis on 'strengthening the voice of employers'. Lord Leitch's questionable view that driving up qualifications was the critical factor in improving economic productivity was taken up enthusiastically by the government.

<sup>42</sup> Foster, A. 2005. *Realising the potential: A review of the future role of further education colleges*. Learning and Skills Development Agency.

<sup>43</sup> Leitch Review of Skills. 2006. *Prosperity for all in the global economy: world class skills*. Final Report. London, HMSO.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.



The government's change of focus resulted in the loss of areas of provision which were not focused on employability or work-related learning, as well as large numbers of adult learners. While there were modest gains in workplace learning, more than 1.4 million adults were lost to publicly funded provision between 2004-05 and 2006-07. NIACE's 2008 survey of adult participation in learning found participation to be at its lowest level since Labour came to power in 1997. Meanwhile, it was becoming clear that although Train to Gain, which now accounted for a third of all public spending on adult learning, had secured some gains in participation among older workers, much of the public funding channelled through the programme was merely displacing private money that was already being spent on training, while public support was being taken away from other adult learners to pay for it. Alison Wolf noted in 2009 that a decade of 'tighter and tighter central regulation' and 'endless reorganisation', premised on the conviction that 'the only forms of education and training that justify government subsidy are those that contribute directly to economic productivity', had resulted in the disappearance of non-vocational adult education from state-subsidised institutions, with no discernible gains in terms of productivity or wage growth.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, the government's decision to withdraw funding for higher education students studying for qualifications equivalent to or lower than qualifications they already held (the so-called ELQ rule) was having a damaging impact on university lifelong learning departments, many of which had closed as a result, and on Open University recruitment. Ewart Keep wrote that the new dawn briefly heralded by *The Learning Age* was 'fading to nothing ... the wider concept of lifelong learning is effectively dead as an important element in English official thinking'.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Wolf, A. 2009. *An Adult Approach to Further Education*. London, IEA, pp. 38–39, pp. 51–54.

<sup>46</sup> Keep, E. 2007. 'Unless we link skills policies to economic development, much effort will be wasted'. *Adults Learning*, Volume 19, Issue 1, September 2007, p. 15.

# REBALANCING THE SYSTEM

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**In 2007, NIACE commissioned a two-year independent Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, led by Tom Schuller and Sir David Watson, to articulate a 'broad rationale for public and private investment in lifelong learning', to 'reappraise the social and cultural value attached to it by policy-makers and the public', and to develop new perspectives on policy and practice.**

Its final report, *Learning through Life*, was published in 2009.<sup>47</sup> Beginning from the premise that 'the right to learn throughout life is a human right', it proposed a new model of the educational life-course – divided into four stages: up to 25, 25–50, 50–75 and 75-plus – and demonstrated how expenditure on learning, significantly skewed in favour of young people, could be 'fairly and sensibly' rebalanced, with little financial pain, to reflect demographic and labour market changes.<sup>48</sup> At the time the report was published, public and private spending on education was split across the four life stages as follows: 86; 11; 2.5; 0.5. The report recommended rebalancing this, by 2020, to 80; 15; 4; 1, 'approximately doubling the proportional support for learning in the third and fourth stages'.<sup>49</sup>

The costs of the adjustment, Schuller and Watson argued, would be significantly reduced by the projected reduction in the number of young people in the population over the next decade (the 18–24 population was predicted to decline by 9 per cent by 2020, while the third and fourth stage populations were projected to rise by 18 per cent and 28 per cent respectively over the same period). At the same time, within each age group, 'specific attention should be given to the fair

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<sup>47</sup> Schuller, T. and Watson, D. 2009. *Learning through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*. Leicester, NIACE.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

and equitable distribution of resources', including which groups benefit most, and which are excluded. This, the report argued, was essential in ensuring 'a continuing commitment to equalizing opportunity', covering 'equity both between sectors (HE, FE, community, etc) and within them'.<sup>50</sup> This rebalancing of resources, Schuller and Watson argued, should be supported by a strategy to increase participation based on learning entitlements channelled through a national system of learning accounts, drawing on the experience of Scottish Individual Learning Accounts and Blunkett's ill-fated Individual Learning Accounts in England.<sup>51</sup> The report also called for a revival of local responsibility, with 'a strategic role for local authorities, a strong local focus for colleges and places for cultural institutions, universities and voluntary organisations within the local strategy'.<sup>52</sup> Centralisation, the authors argued, had gone too far, with 'excessive levels of top-down micromanagement' now prevalent.<sup>53</sup>

## LOCALISM AND AUSTERITY

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**While few of *Learning through Life's* recommendations were translated into policy, the devolution of power from central government to local communities was an important theme for the incoming Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, which also made a number of effusive early commitments to lifelong learning. Prime Minister David Cameron said:**

Learning isn't just about consuming chunks of knowledge in order to be able to do a job. It's about broadening the mind, giving people self-

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 112

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

belief, strengthening the bonds of community ... It's that self-belief that leads people to become more active citizens. Given that my vision for this country is for all of us to get involved and play our part in national renewal, I believe adult learning and the way it inspires people is crucially important.<sup>54</sup>

New Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Vince Cable, and new Minister of State for Further Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, John Hayes, made it clear that they did not want state support for learning limited to narrowly conceived utilitarian programmes. John Hayes used his first speech in office to say that adult education 'brings hope and the promise of a better society founded on social mobility, social justice and social cohesion. It enriches the lives of individuals and the communities of which they are a part. Adult learning is not a luxury, it is an essential component of our education system ... Unless everyone – rich or poor, young or old – is offered the chance to learn and to carry on learning through their lives then these ideas will not be realised.'<sup>55</sup>

The October 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review protected the £210 million Adult Safeguarded Learning budget, following a campaign involving NIACE and the Institutes of Adult Learning (the fund, which supported informal adult and community learning, was subsequently merged with the Adult Education Budget). However, Chancellor George Osborne also announced that further education funding would be reduced from £4.3 billion to £3.2 billion by 2014-15, a 25 per cent cut, as part of the government's programme of austerity savings.<sup>56</sup> Train to Gain was abolished and there was a pledge to increase spending on apprenticeships. A new skills strategy, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, was launched in November, putting 'fairness, responsiveness and freedom' at the centre of further

<sup>54</sup> Cameron, D. 2010. 'Adult learning and the way it inspires people is crucially important'. *Adults Learning*. Volume 21, Number 9, May 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Speech given to NIACE's policy conference, May 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Vince Cable told a fringe meeting of the 2014 Liberal Democrats party conference that he had personally blocked a move to withdraw *all* state funding from further education (a step, civil servants assured him, that 'nobody will really notice').

education reform and proposing the introduction of loans at Level 3 and above for further education students aged 24 and over from 2013-14 (the scheme was expanded in 2016-17 to include 19- to 23-year-olds and courses at levels 5 and 6). The government's reform agenda was further elaborated in two subsequent policy documents, *New Challenges, New Chances* (2011) and *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills* (2013). In higher education, Universities Minister David Willetts accepted Lord Browne's recommendation to level the playing field between part-time and full-time students by making part-time students studying between 25 and 75 per cent of a full-time course eligible for tuition fees loans, as part of a raft of funding reforms which also saw fees across the board increase steeply. The shift in funding responsibility from the state to the individual, however, left a number of questions unanswered, among them the appetite of part-time higher education students and adult further education students for tuition fee loans.

The government embarked on a sustained period of deep entrenchment in public spending which had a huge impact on the provision of lifelong learning. Between 2009 and 2015 there was a 35 per cent reduction in spending on adult further education, resulting in the loss of one million learning opportunities for adults.<sup>57</sup> The prospect of a further 24 per cent cut to adult skills spending excluding apprenticeships led the Association of Colleges (AoC) to warn in March 2015 that if the government continued to cut funding at the same rate there would no longer be an adult education system by 2020.<sup>58</sup> The additional reduction would result in the loss of 190,000 adult education places in the next year alone, the AoC said. An evaluation of the impact of the government's further education reform agenda reported concern among providers at low interest and poor take-up of FE loans by particular groups of learners, including those from disadvantaged communities, with many reporting a decline in participation at level 3 and above.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> <https://feweek.co.uk/2015/03/25/government-cuts-could-decimate-adult-education-by-2020-aoc-warns/>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.tes.com/news/why-adult-education-may-be-extinct-2020>

<sup>59</sup> BMG Research, CFE Research and Learning and Work Institute. 2017. *Evaluation of the FE Reform Programme 2015. Research report*. October 2017. London, Department for Education

In higher education, while full-time student numbers held up, including among disadvantaged students, following the trebling of tuition fees and the introduction of new loan arrangements, part-time student numbers declined by 51 per cent between 2010 and 2015, with the Open University, the UK's largest provider of part-time study, suffering the most, with a 63 per cent reduction over the period.<sup>60</sup> The fall was highest among mature students over 35, those pursuing 'bite-size' courses and those with low-level entry qualifications. A study commissioned by the Sutton Trust suggested that around 40 per cent of the decline could be attributed to 2012 reforms and the dramatic increase in part-time fees.<sup>61</sup>

## OUT OF THE ASHES: THE FUTURE OF LIFELONG LEARNING

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**Despite the support of sympathetic and well-informed ministers and secretaries of state such as Hayes and Cable, public support for lifelong learning shrank markedly at the start of the twenty-first century.**

Unhappily, more than 20 years after the publication of *Learning Works and The Learning Age*, Helena Kennedy's memorably phrased admonishment, 'If at first you don't succeed, you don't succeed', remains as relevant as ever for people from less privileged backgrounds. There are signs, however, that attitudes to lifelong learning are changing, internationally and at home. The 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, to which Britain and other UN Member States signed up, includes a prominent commitment to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and

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<sup>60</sup> Callender, C. and Thompson, J. 2018. *The lost part-timers*. London, The Sutton Trust.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.<sup>62</sup> In 2017, the *Economist* published a special report arguing that technological change was making lifelong learning an economic imperative and highlighting a need for 'continuous connection' between education and employment.<sup>63</sup> Technological innovation is a major driver of these changes, with the digital revolution demanding new skills of workers, and robotics and artificial intelligence transforming the world of work. Demographic change is another key imperative, requiring that adults already in the workforce fill a large proportion of the jobs of the future. And, of course, Britain's imminent departure from the EU places an even greater premium on the skills of those already in the workforce. It is increasingly accepted that such shifts, and the growing complexity and precarity of modern life and work, demand a workforce that is flexible, resilient and creative, and a system of lifelong learning that both fosters and embodies these qualities.

When Prime Minister Theresa May launched the government's review of post-18 education and funding in February 2018, she noted a need 'to support flexible, life-long learning, including part-time and distance learning'. Retraining and upskilling throughout a career, she said, 'will only become more necessary as new technologies have an impact on our economy'. The government's new industrial strategy supports this ambition with undertakings to improve technical education and to ensure 'people have the opportunity to learn and train throughout their working lives',<sup>64</sup> including through an 'ambitious national retraining scheme' and by devolving the adult education budget to mayoral areas from 2019.<sup>65</sup> It remains to be seen whether the post-18 review delivers a genuinely 'joined-up system that works for everyone ... is accessible to all and is supported by a funding system that provides value for money and works for both students and taxpayers'.<sup>66</sup> The damage inflicted on the lifelong learning infrastructure over the past two decades makes this challenging indeed.

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>

<sup>63</sup> Palmer, A. 2017. 'Lifelong learning is becoming an economic imperative'. *The Economist*. January 2017.

<sup>64</sup> HM Government. 2017. *Industrial Strategy. Building a Britain fit for the future*. London, HMSO, p. 99.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116–117.

The renewed focus on lifelong learning in the UK mirrors developments in other countries, particularly in Asia, where lifelong learning has become a central plank of economic expansion. However, the vision of lifelong learning reflected in the industrial strategy and in the policies of countries such as China and Singapore is an attenuated one, some distance from the broader, life-wide conception employed in the 1919 Report and echoed in the Faure and Delors reports, as well as by Russell and Blunkett. While the political mood music suggests an appreciation of the wider value of learning, policy very often falls short of the ambition to create a learning society in which learning for work is valued alongside learning for personal growth, community development, active citizenship and the 'common good'. As Gert Biesta argues, lifelong learning is 'increasingly understood in terms of the formation of human capital and as an investment in economic development', which, of course, has an impact on the type of learning opportunities available to adults, as well as on their ability to choose what they learn.<sup>67</sup> More and more, lifelong learning is perceived not as a right, which states have a responsibility to guarantee for their citizens, but rather as a responsibility, a duty of adults to ensure they are work-ready throughout their career.<sup>68</sup> Whether there is room in this new order for broader conceptions of lifelong learning, linked to personal fulfilment and democratic participation, is an open question. Another question concerns whether a narrow focus on 'economically valuable' skills can deliver the mix of creativity, resilience, flexibility and willingness to learn demanded in the modern workplace, let alone equip adults with the skills and knowledge they need to play a full part in society, as democratic citizens. The lessons of the recent past suggest it cannot.

The turbulent history of lifelong learning demonstrates that the idea is not only resilient but also highly mutable. A few years ago, it may have seemed no more than a casualty in a battle of ideas that was already lost. Its resurgence, however,

<sup>67</sup> 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*, Volume 5, Number 3/4, p. 169.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.



is not all that surprising. Lifelong learning will be part of the way in which we think about and plan our societies as long as the struggles from which the notion emerged and which have continued to define it remain with us: struggles between humanism and neoliberalism, public and private value, idealism and pragmatism, totalitarianism and democracy. At the same time, changes in technology and the world of work are creating new opportunities and challenges, prompting us to think harder about the place of lifelong learning in our education system, while emerging agendas such as cities of learning are reaffirming the value of genuinely lifewide learning and reinventing the notion of a 'learning society'. In the battle of ideas, there is ground still to be won; minds still to change. One thing is clear: the challenges of the future – environmental, technological, economic and democratic – demand more not less learning if we are to develop the wide range of capabilities necessary for individual, family, work and community life. And where people learn they also, very often, start to desire something better, for themselves, their families and their communities.

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