University engagement and the post-2015 agenda. What are the roles and functions to support adult education and lifelong learning?

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Abstract

The global context of competitive mass higher education damages university support to adult education and lifelong learning (AE&LLL). Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) had limited success, making this a crucial time for AE&LLL in the next global planning cycle commitment to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) post-MDG. Adult educators and universities must both address the real needs of a stressed fast-changing world. Education and higher education are not closed systems, but we may lose sight of what they are for. What are the implications for AE&LLL of longevity and ageing, massive migration, and emergent ‘knowledge societies’? What about new socio-political and cultural challenges, threats of global warming, and finite natural resources? Individuals and social systems need lifelong learning more than ever, but policy-making favours metrics, quality and testing; what are the high-level policy objective? We confuse ‘education’ and ‘learning’, and are unclear what the difference means for AE&LLL policy. The roles of universities include basic and applied research on learning, learning needs, and the professional development of AE&LLL staff, and direct provision, and partnership with providers in their regions. Adults need equal priority with young learners. LLL delivered locally should be at the heart of new ideas about learning cities, regions and neighbourhoods. Can university leaders and their governments resist ‘world class’ league tables and provide world class fit-for-purpose higher education systems?

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University.

Keywords: adult education and lifelong learning (AE&LLL); universities; global ranking (of universities); engagement (of universities); regional university; Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); learning cities and neighbourhoods

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University.
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.582
1. Schizophrenia: the regional university in a global environment

The numbers of universities worldwide and in many countries have increased in the transition from elite to mass higher education and there are many efforts to categorise them according to age and status, performance, priority roles and functions. Some countries have organised groups hierarchically ranked. Dominant criteria are research published in prestigious journals and quality of undergraduate intake judged by final school exam results. Institutions and groups ranked lower usually make access, equity, ‘social justice’ and regional community service central to their mission. Actually most of the world’s universities are regional in identity and work. Competing global and national rating agencies powerfully and harmfully influences governments and HEIs, as a growing literature shows, especially for universities best placed to support AE&LLL (Chao, 2014).

Lifelong learning has become stated policy for most governments, actively promoted by the OECD and UNESCO for over 40 years and by other international bodies (OECD, 1973, 1996, 2004, UNESCO, 1972, 1996, Gibbons, 1998, Bjarnason and Coldstream, 2003, Longworth and Osborne, 2010, Bengtsson, 2013). There have been several phases (LLL generations) from the visionary 1972 Faure Report to a narrow focus on skills and competencies for economic performance. Adult educators trying to protect their State grant have: (a) increasingly favoured ‘learning’ over ‘education’ as being student- or rather learner- centred and politically correct; (b) followed the economic flag, arguing their case in job-related skill and competence terms and not politically unfashionable social, civic and cultural objectives. This has undermined the foundations for money and resources for educational provision, yielding the high ground of long-term and wider necessity.

Consistent with neo-liberal economics from the Reagan-Thatcher years and boosted by Gorbachov-Thatcher Glasnost has been a policy emphasis on competitive economies and innovation. Neo-liberalism swept Eastern Europe as well as the ‘developing’ or ‘third’ world in a more ideologically unified global economy and polity. This celebrates individual, institutional, regional and national competitiveness more than conviviality. The market is thought wiser than the State, now viewed in older US-led democracies as a necessary evil, the smaller the better. A reduced role for central government goes with tighter regulation to measure, regulate and control (Putman, 2000, Peters, 2006, Sennett, 2006, Judd, 2010, Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010, Stiglitz, 2012, Holmwood, 2014). Romania has the same bureaucratic results as in more wealthy EU countries. Earlier soviet-era bureaucracy combined with western-style management in the EU environment favours a narrow economic idea of LLL.

Neoliberal ideology reduces the scope and vision of LLL. It subverts university aspirations to serve communities and societies in ways for which they are well suited. Benchmarking, an in-house means to enhance quality, has grown into the monster of competitive university ‘league tables’ fuelled by a traditional discipline-based understanding of research published in the most prestigious academic journals. National ranking as a tool to determine resource allocation usually favouring traditional academies, fields and modes of study has grown into global ‘world class’ ranking of ‘top universities’. Community service and AE&LLL has no place. Global ranking is itself a competitive frequent changing private-sector industry that disrupts ‘engagement’.

The damage to meeting AE&LLL needs in the local city or region is immeasurable. A few elite universities drive policy for the great majority away from their natural contextualised region-city mission in a direction where they can only lose. There are no rewards for the local, useful and particular. Words about social inclusion and civic development become empty. From this perspective resources expended in AE&LLL are resources wasted. This might matter less if all rectors were strong and purposeful; and if governments resisted a patriotic quest to have one or more universities ranked world class. This can starve the national system to build up one or two institutions, especially in smaller and less wealthy countries. Those making AE&LLL and community service central are penalised. Universities could advance the post-2015 development agenda locally, but ignoring this brute realpolitik would be naïve. Few universities, even the courageously led, can resist the political imperative of world rankings.

2. MDG and EFA to SDGs – what future for AE&LLL globally?

The World Education Forum in March 2000 in Dakar, Senegal had 1,500 participants from governments, multilaterals, NGOs - a diversity of stakeholder and professions in the broad area of education. There was a memorable struggle in the plenary and behind the scene to have everything and everybody included and make sure that a conducive agenda could be carried forward to implement. No doubt “The Dakar Framework for Action.
Education for All – Meeting our Collective Commitments” was inclusive enough to be formally adopted for a period of the years 2000–2015. Even reading it today one realises that it captured the lifelong learning paradigm: it had early childhood, primary education, learning needs of young people and adults, skills, literacy, ‘continuing education for all adults’, gender, quality, access, and many more of the key words framed in a set of six goals. It even included financing via development aid: ‘We affirm that no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources’. (Hinzen 2000)

Later, in the same year 2000 the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in New York came up with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): 193 member states agreed on eight goals; reducing poverty, child mortality, HIV/AIDS, primary education, gender equality, maternal health, environmental sustainability and partnership for development were the key words. Again, the timeline was set as 2000–2015. The major issue for all in AE&LLL was the reduction of the EFA lifelong learning agenda of Dakar to ‘primary schooling’ only. We do not argue that we should not have the best basic education for all children, youth and adults. But with this reduction most of the flavour and foresight of EFA got lost. The attention of governments and funders went to primary schooling, and then to access, with little to quality. Soon phrases like EFA meant ‘Except for Adults’, and ‘Basic Education for the South – Lifelong Learning for the North’ sprang up within the AE&LLL community.

Today we are witness, or are part of the review process, for 2015 which is just around the corner. What becomes daily clearer at national, regional and global level is that despite achievements and gains, most of the agreed-upon goals will not be reached, especially those related to youth and adult education and their learning and training needs. Within the growing post-2015 debate we see a need to complete the EFA agenda, at the same time realising that the world has changed these past 15 years. New challenges and threats to the development agenda must be included. The Civil Society Communique of the Global CSO Forum on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, held in Bali March 2013, concluded that a future “framework must include goals and zero-targets on universal access to equitable healthcare, quality, inclusive education and life-long learning, water and sanitation, and food and nutrition security.” It therefore it seems that there will be a move to ‘SDGs’ – Sustainable Development Goals, broader and deeper than the MDGs, with an inclusive education agenda covering all aspects of education, training, learning. This must permeate all the implementation of the new development agenda.

A “Quality Education, and Lifelong learning for all” perspective is emerging. This could cover the education part of the development agenda, and at the same time help shape a specific education agenda. The 37th session of the UNESCO General Conference added, in a “Concept note on the Post-2015 education agenda” the ‘Equitable’. In another document is phrased ‘Ensuring equitable’, which we feel bringing in ‘Lifelong learning for all’ covers already.

There is still some time to go. We wonder how it will look like when in May 2015 the next World Education Forum is convened in Seoul, Korea. Let us see whether the paradigm of lifelong will survive this time.

Another important process for AE&LLL is the World Conferences on Adult Education convened by UNESCO every 12 years, starting in 1949 in Helsingoer, Denmark. The latest one, ‘CONFINTEA VI’, was in Belem, Brazil, in 2009. These have been important milestones in professionalizing the field, highlighting policy frameworks and priority themes for the international agenda. There was at the same time a need to relate it closely to the EFA process as discussed by Duke/Hinzen (Duke and Hinzen, 2008). In 2009, the first Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) was published. This critiqued planning and delivering ‘development’ internationally, and achievements and disappointments of the previous decade. It was followed up in GRALE 2 in 2013 UIL (2009, 2013).

3. Beyond the education sector - broader dimensions of the ‘global problematic’

Apparent solving one complex problem today may unexpected negative consequences elsewhere. We classify these as being economic or social, political or ecological like looming environmental crises to do with exhausting non-renewable resources and global warming, but the elements are entwined.

Within each category are many different issues. Thus ‘social’ embraces health, social welfare, security, migration, increased longevity, a growing ageing population, housing and urban planning, social injustice, inequality and exploitation, divisions on ethnic, gender and religious grounds, well-being and happiness, culture in its different
meanings, and education itself. Many of these are also acute political problems, and they have economic and ecological dimensions. Some have already become acute in some different places. Some threaten locally and globally, like still contested global warming. The term sustainability now attaching to the next cycle of development planning increasingly extends beyond the environment to all areas of governance and civil society. These challenges need integrated long-term planning and require difficulty decisions. We really don’t know how to govern for such times.

Lifelong learning led into concepts of a high-skill learning economy; and more broadly an active and capable civil learning society which is partly who we now have mass higher education. The curricula (formal and hidden) of universities, their choice research programmes, the uses to which the outcomes are put to use, should all be planned by reference to real needs and problems. Recurrent education as a strategy for lifelong learning (OECD, 1973, UNESCO, 1972) makes AE&LLL every university’s business: you cannot cover seventy years of post-school learning in three or four years of study.

Post-War euphoria, rising prosperity and individual freedom in the West flows on to rising aspirations and a climb out of extreme poverty and illiteracy by most of the post-colonial (‘developing’ or ‘third’) world. The BRICs and other formerly weak economies move towards the top of economic league tables. New problems as well as prospects emerge, including the ongoing ‘global financial crisis’ from 2007-08. Academic freedom, strong in the liberal tradition highly valued in the West, is also an excuse for conservative irresponsibility. We now have a flood of literature about ‘university engagement’: the involvement of universities with their local and regional communities in a shared process of learning, development and knowledge-making puts AE&LLL centre-stage (Gibbons, 2008; Bjarnesone and Coldstream, 2003; Beere et al., 2011; Duke et al., 2013; Goddard 2009; Lundvall 2002; OECD 2007, 2008; Slowey and Schuetze, 2013; Watson, 2007; Watson, et al., 2011; Riddell, 2014). This is in head-on collision with global league tables. Gibbons for the World Bank argues that new universities, which are mostly also regional, have a perfect niche in regional engagement (Gibbons, 2002). Engagement requires universities to address the real world problems in they do. The education system can no longer be a semi-closed planning arena – or just another profit-seeking industry in a competitive commercial environment.

There are obvious moral and political arguments for this (Garlick and Matthews, 2013). Public and many private universities are part-financed by the community and civil society of which they are part. They must earn the right to exist by their relevance and use, not just to special interests and the disciplines of the academy. A deeper argument is based on understanding how new knowledge is created, and should be owned, shared are used: (Gibbons et al., 1994; Gregersen and Johnson, 1997; Jacob and Hellstrom, 2000). This describes Mode 2 knowledge co-production from partnership between HEIs and other groups, organisations and institutions. This recognises the reality of different often contextualised kinds of knowledge; and the difference between information, its comprehension and its use as shared working knowledge.

4. Universities and AE&LLL – practical contributions

If we analyze where universities do most of their research we soon see that it is not where and what demography would say. More people live and work longer, more people learn more in the second part of life than in childhood or youth. All have to and do continue learning. The latest results of PIAAC (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) and BELL (Benefits of Lifelong Learning) studies and projects show levels of competencies and skills, what is missing, and what people needs doing to implement what the EU calls “One level up” for everybody. AE&LLL is not at the heart of research, and universities are doing little in respect of research to strengthen evidence-based policies. New university engagements with communities and people might then be found that show how local activity on the ground is better than what policies would have us do, involving the commonsense and wisdom of people as citizens, local residents, and workers.

The ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning is a network for university cooperation in lifelong learning between Asia and Europe. ‘ASEM’ stands for Asia-Europe Meeting, as cooperation between ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the EU. It may be one of largest networks globally. More than 100 colleagues work together, mostly from universities but others from Ministries and international organisations (http://asemlllhub.org) They publish the ASEMagazine for Lifelong Learning and organize cooperation through five research networks: Development of ICT skills, e-learning and the culture of e-learning in LLL;
workplace learning; professionalization of adult teachers and educators in ASEM countries; national strategies for LLL; and ASEM core competencies.

As a member of the earlier Reference Group on Education for All in Higher Education we remember an attempt to correct the imbalance of EFA towards primary schooling. This has been further strengthened by a section of the International Association of Universities (IAU) with good information sharing via the Portal on Higher Education/Research for Education for All (http://heefa.net/), organizing conferences and capacity-building workshops. The latest was at the University of Delhi in February 2014: ‘A three-step activity to envision higher education for Education for All locally’. University, government, civil society and other stakeholders sought to develop ‘an action plan on how to reinforce higher education’s contribution in achieving Education for All’.

UNESCO has realized how small and weak AE&LLL are as well as university support for research, training and development for this area. The future of education and learning is bleak, light years away from the visions of Faure Learning to Be and Delors Education. The treasure within. It is something that the UNESCO Concept Note gives ‘post-basic education including tertiary education’ its own objective. In the Action Plan for Adult Learning and Education (ALE) agreed at the CONFITEA VI Regional Follow-up Meeting Asia Pacific for Asia and the Pacific in October 2013 in Korea, there is a notion to “establish networks with universities, teacher associations and civil society organisations” and work towards “improving capacity building and the professionalization of adult educators” (Hinzen/Knoll, 2014).

Let us mention two among several more initiatives that are just forming as potential follow-up on this Action Plan: In early March 2014 during a Non-formal Education Conference in Vangvieng, Lao PDR, a group of some 15 University colleagues, mostly from Southeast Asia met to inform and exchange on the policies and experiences of AE&LLL in their institutions, on Master programmes in NFE, and on possible ways of future support and cooperation. Later in March 2014 the 1st International Forum on University Global Social Responsibility under the theme “Universities in Action: Emerging Perspectives in Global Responsibility” was organized by the Seoul National University. What they have in common is to bring the university closer to AE&LLL, especially related to local communities and their needs. It is a kind of late follow-up on earlier tradition of ‘extramural studies’.

We argue also that inasmuch as universities are involved in the training of teachers and administrators for schools on all levels, they should similarly be involved in the training of facilitators and managers of community learning centres, adult educations institutes, and the variety of personnel in diverse adult, non-formal, continuing education. Research should identify education and training functions actual and required now and for the future. There should be many more bachelor and master level degrees including AE&LLL devoted to this. EU has the Erasmus Mundus exchange for university staff and students. There should rightly be more opportunities for adults also, as universities become centres for lifelong learning.

5. Local Lifelong Learning: AE&LLL, Universities, the Learning City

An ambitious conference in Hong Kong, in late 2013, Cities learning together (Duke 2013, PASCAL Website) explored connections between central, local and neighbourhood levels across economic, social, health and environmental policy areas, and between public, private and civil society sectors, including universities which were strongly represented. The meeting asked how economic growth and balanced social development could be reconciled in healthy, eco-friendly and sustainable ways, long- and short-term, with growing megacities in a world now over 50% urbanised. Such might seem to be ‘mission impossible’, but at least it sketched the complexity of the agenda to be addressed if we are to govern ourselves capably and ‘learningfully’ in an ever more hazardous world.

The conference did not establish general principles whereby local neighbourhoods can become active learning communities owning and carrying out policies established as priorities at national level. Connecting across these levels is necessary for sustainability, and difficult. Participants learned of new learning city and neighbourhood policy initiatives in several countries of East Asia, visiting examples in Hong Kong where vital health, local economy, migration, labour market, and green environment problems are being addressed. Universities from all continents described community engagement, partnership and service. The diversity of context, tradition, and political-administrative circumstance (also revealed in the engagement literature) precludes highly prescriptive conclusions.
The problem for local university engagement with access and equity missions in the face of global competition was often cited. The best examples were where universities really committed themselves to working locally: institutionally from the CEO down (Pettfer, 2013; Curry, 2013); or even ‘below the radar’ through small groups and individuals, in participatory action research on big challenges locally. Given political realities, working locally and almost invisibly may be the best that can be done. Desirably central governments will support universities to engage in their local regions, eg by high quality research applied to global and local problems, and through sustained partnership with agencies and institutions across the local-regional socio-economic spectrum. At times, the drive for global academic status is just too strong.

How relevant are learning cities and universities with a regional mission to post-2015 AE&LLL development planning? The poorest of the mainly rural poor are a traditional priority for adult non-formal education. Informal education has long been included, but not much done to turn it into policy. Here is another way to renew and deepen the full meaning of LLL. in Faure, Delors, and the earlier work of the OECD, never effectively interpreted into practice, and now emasculated in the ‘audit society’. Can a strong international policy lead embolden regional universities, their leaders and governing bodies, to rediscover the community service mission on which many now prestigious ‘global’ universities were founded? Civic engagement and local action with other regional stakeholders brings enrichment. Universities could break free from world rankings and be all-age agents of AE&LLL. The ‘global problematique’ is highly complex, experienced in different ways in different parts of the world, and in different towns and regions in each country. There is an inescapable need for locally grounded educational support for lifelong learning in this knowledge society. Diverse, responsive priority universities embedded in their cities and regions could play these roles.

6. Language and Dialectic

Words are our tools for working together, but not fixed and God-given, Change is assumed to be good and our words change faster than ever. Some terms are almost useless, corrupted by fashion, politicians and fanatics. We must still think and speak clearly in work and civil life, otherwise we cannot manage and govern ourselves well.

This is compelling with the words that are educators’ stock in trade. We weaken our position, confuse our purposes, and muddle what we stand for when we use learning to mean education because it sounds nicer. We all know that everyone has the capacity, which few ever lose, to learn as naturally as we breathe and for as long. To demand resources for what we all anyway is weak. What we mean is formal support by way of education (not LLL) to become better at learning. We need an infrastructure of people, policies, curricula etc. that really helps learners, employers, the State and society. If we call this learning we shoot ourselves in the head as advocates for resources.

Of course resources, budgets for education are not allocated where most needed across the life span and the social spectrum. We must restate forty-year-old policy for recurrent education as a strategy for lifelong learning – and speak of education when that is what we mean. Being ‘politically correctly’ obfuscates, and we also lose sight of a bigger and still more important task: building the kind of political, social, economic, cultural and civic system where lifelong learning for all is also life-wide. We must design workplace and non-workplace environments to make them learning situations and opportunities for all of the people all of the time. This presents big problems: special interests, habits and prejudices to identify, understood and resolve. Universities should lead this really big agenda for LLL and a learning knowledge society.

So we have the individual in society; and the State with the individual citizen. To synthesise the individual and the collective echoes the global life-struggle between ‘socialism’ and ‘neo-liberalism’. It explains much of our confusion and conflict. Can we reconcile each citizen’s opportunities, rights and duties to learn, with creating a healthy, sustainable and equitable society making fulfillment possible? Or are we scared by the idea of a learning society that sacrifices individual liberty? LLL must not be reduced to only the learning (or education?) of each ‘autonomous’ individual.

In European and western systems and traditions we dichotomise: winners and losers, right and wrong. Something black cannot also be white. In a socially networked interdependent and at times listening smaller world we can if we wish learn from the other ways of seeing and knowing of different religions and philosophies especially but not only of Asia (Osborne et al., 2013; Duke, 2014).
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