
Global Perspectives on Higher Education and Lifelong Learners

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In the wake of the OECD's most recent review of the state of global education 'Education at a Glance' (2012), this book is a welcome addition to several current debates.

In editing this collection, Maria Slowey and Hans G. Schuetze have set out to build upon their substantial previous work in this area and to assess global progress towards the goal of lifelong learning, in the decade since that research. As well as an assessment of global progress, the work also seeks to address a number of general questions including the relevance of the concept of lifelong learning to higher education in contemporary societies; differences in the definition of lifelong learning between countries and country groupings; the extent to which the key issues of equality, widening participation and the social justice dimensions of lifelong learning in higher education been affected by neoliberal economic ideologies; and the development (or lack of) e-learning as a key technology in the full realisation of the potential of lifelong learning.

This collection is organised by individual countries clustered together in 'country groupings' comprising: 'Europe', 'North America', 'Pacific, Australia Japan and New Zealand' and 'Perspectives from two (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) 'BRICS' countries. An introductory section sets the scene and describes the scope of the book and the epilogue draws together the key findings and provides some initial thoughts for potential future developments. Each individual chapter author brings a distinctive approach to the review of their own context while retaining appropriate consideration of the 'global' issues.

Key global thematic issues are identified throughout the book including: the extent to which higher education in each context is part of a country-wide 'system' (which through mechanisms such as inclusivity in admissions policies, diversity of delivery in educational provision, and recognition of credit – offer the flexibility which is key for lifelong learning); the extent to which higher education institutions have sufficient (or too much) autonomy in order to operate successfully in a flexible 'system'; and the effect of the global financial crisis and associated funding constraints.

At the outset Slowey and Schuetze identify the four main conceptions of lifelong learning as:

1. Life stage of the learner – i.e. those that entered higher education as mature students after period of ‘engagement with economic, social and/or civic life’.
2. Mode of study – i.e. those studying part-time, online, or through distance education.
3. Type of programme – e.g. continuing professional development or post-experience courses.
4. Organisation of provision – e.g. specialist institutions such as open universities – or mainstream institutions but with dedicated centres for lifelong learning.

Slowey and Schuetze identify that in some countries any one of these conceptions, for instance the life stage of the learner, may be synonymous with lifelong learning itself, while in others the position maybe more complex.

Much of the book focuses on the extent to which under-represented groups have been successful in accessing (lifelong) learning opportunities in each of the contexts and considers the likely prognosis for further developments in the foreseeable future given the current economic and developmental position of each country. In addition to the mature students identified above and who form a major focus of the book, also in scope are: those from lower socio-economic groups, individuals with disabilities, immigrants (but not in all countries), women (in some contexts only) and indigenous peoples (e.g. Aboriginals in Australia).

To an extent each country is assessed with reference to these global issues together with the inclusion of appropriate contextual and country-specific considerations. So for example in Austrian higher education institutions have little discretion over admission policies which poses significant problems for recognition of prior learning, whereas in Canada responsibility for higher education is so devolved to provincial governments that the development of a national approach is difficult.

Some countries are identified as demonstrating theoretical commitment to the goals of lifelong learning, but without corresponding evidence of the practical implementation of genuine opportunities for learners in particular those from (some) under-represented groups. Threats to the implementation of lifelong learning as a practical reality are identified as: significant unrealised potential in the use of e-learning (in particular beyond its role as a supplement to traditional modes of educational delivery), the global financial crisis and associated decreased funding for higher education (which has in part lead to a focus on traditional age students at the expense of ‘more marginal’ groups), a significant decrease in the availability of part-time and adult education learning opportunities (traditionally significant ‘routes’ for students from under-represented groups), and increased focus on the importance of international league tables which tend to emphasise

research and elite missions, again at the expense of a focus on under-represented student groups which are then further marginalised as a result.

‘Structural’ threats to development are also identified as incompatible levels of institutional autonomy—too much (e.g. the United Kingdom) or too little (e.g. Austria)—and the lack of a coherent national ‘system’ which can mitigate against flexibility—although conversely in some contexts (e.g. Sweden) a lack of coherence has historically supported lifelong learning by facilitating flexibility.

As indicated above this book does consider the impact of the global financial crisis of the last 4–5 years, the associated decrease in public funding for higher education and the transfer of cost from public to private (both individual and organizational). However, given that in many OECD countries there is a discernible trend towards a longer working life with the *de facto* removal of a defined retirement age, it might have been useful for the authors to give further consideration to the role of other providers—in particular employers—in the delivery of lifelong learning opportunities. Employers (in particular large ones) could be particularly well placed to realise the potential of e-learning with educational provision which is more practically accessible and professionally relevant.

Also considered is the ‘dual axis’ of lifelong learning—individuals who learn throughout their life (the vertical axis) and those who learn in lots of different contexts including not only though formal education, but also informal and community-based routes (the horizontal axis). This reviewer would question whether there is a contradiction between the major focus of the book on those who have not progressed directly from school to higher education and the dual axis of lifelong learning. For instance the nature of lifelong learning is that direct progression from school to higher education may not be appropriate for all and that in any event a substantial proportion of learning can be achieved informally.

However this book is effective at teasing out some of the key contradictions in any assessment of lifelong learning. For instance there is a perception in several places within the book that a global focus on position in international league tables (and associated key performance indicators) necessarily mitigates against the needs of lifelong learners (who maybe from marginal groups), leading to a concentration of students from ‘marginal’ groups in either (perceived) ‘lower status’ or private institutions. But is this in fact a problem if those institutions are meeting the needs of the learners concerned?

Much of the general and previous literature on lifelong learning focuses either on individual countries or on specific issues, for example the participation of individuals from lower socio-economic groups. This work is to be applauded both for its breadth and depth, and dual (both linear and contemporary) comparative approach.

I would recommend this book as a valuable resource for anyone who has an interest in: lifelong learning, issues relating to widening participation or access, and international or comparative higher education. The collection is well laid out, and sufficiently readable to be of interest to non-specialists and those with a more general interest.

References

OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing.
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