

## LIFELONG LEARNING AS A POLICY RESPONSE

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### **Introduction**

It is difficult to argue against the *idea* of lifelong learning. On-going economic and social changes have increased the importance of up-to-date skills and knowledge. A growing share of economic activity is knowledge and information-intensive, and the complexities of modern societies require people to be open to new ideas and adept at new ways of doing things. Those who are not able to anticipate and adapt to change – to continue learning – are likely to become increasingly marginalised in economic and social life. Concerns and views such as these have fuelled considerable interest in lifelong learning in recent years.

Lifelong learning has been adopted as the key organising concept in the education and training programs of the European Union (1995), the OECD (1996) and Unesco (1996), as well as at national level in countries such as Norway (1997) and the United Kingdom (1998). In Australia recent reports on the future shape of higher education (West, 1998) and the development of a training culture (ANTA, 1998) have been framed in terms of the need for continual learning over the life span. Lifelong learning is clearly an idea whose time has come.

What is not so clear, though, is what lifelong learning actually *means*, and what *policy actions* may be necessary to bring it about. This paper attempts to identify the major elements of a lifelong learning framework, and the policy priorities if its aims are to be realised. In doing so, it comments on the progress that Australia has already made in this regard.

### **A Focus on Improving Employability**

The particular focus of the paper is the contribution that lifelong learning could make to maintaining and improving people's *employability* in the face of rapid and uncertain economic change. Lifelong learning is an all-embracing concept that encompasses personal, social and economic objectives, and national policy debates generally reflect the multiple dimensions involved. However, given the theme of this conference, and the fact that there has generally been more analysis of the costs and benefits of employment-related learning than of other forms, a focus on the links between lifelong learning and employability seems appropriate.

As it happens, this emphasis probably also encapsulates the main themes in the current Australian debate on lifelong learning. The OECD (1998a) has characterised Australia as one of the countries where discussions on lifelong learning tend to emphasise skills training and retraining for improving employability and economic competitiveness. Japan, by contrast, is seen as paying relatively more attention to the potential contribution of lifelong learning to citizenship, and a better enjoyment of life, especially in light of that country's ageing population.

While it is helpful to focus on particular aspects of lifelong learning (in this case, the economic) in order to keep the discussion manageable, it is important to keep in mind the full range of goals that the concept entails. Most of the documents that advocate lifelong learning are couched in terms of its potential for achieving both economic and social goals and for integrating efficiency and equity concerns. Indeed, much of the interest in lifelong learning has sprung from the particular needs of disadvantaged groups facing uncertain economic futures and the strains put on social cohesion by a knowledge-intensive economy. From this perspective, lifelong learning has the potential to achieve a greater harmonisation of social and economic objectives than current approaches which emphasise the acquisition of skills and knowledge early in life.

### **The Lifelong Learning Concept**

The breadth of the concept is captured in the definitions used by the European Lifelong Learning Initiative and the OECD:

Lifelong learning is a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances, and environments (cited in Kearns, 1998).

Lifelong learning is far broader than the provision of second-chance education and training for adults. It is based on the view that everyone should be able, motivated, and actively encouraged to learn throughout life. This view of learning embraces individual and social development of all kinds and in all settings: formally, in schools, vocational, tertiary and adult education institutions; and non-formally, at home, at work and in the community (OECD, 1997a).

The very breadth of the lifelong learning concept is both a weakness and a strength. Concepts as broad as this are hard to analyse and express in operational terms. Almost anything could be considered to come within the lifelong learning ambit, but the lack of precision about ends and means can make it difficult to judge whether progress is being made, and expectations may be unduly raised. On the other hand, ideas of this scale can be important for focusing attention on the inter-relationships between learning, the economy and society, drawing disparate interest groups into a common cause, and lifting people's horizons about long-term societal goals. The power of the idea is evident in the observation, now increasingly made, that lifelong learning represents as significant a social and economic shift for the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as the introduction of compulsory schooling was for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet, unlike a system of compulsory schooling with its teachers, buildings and curriculum, lifelong learning does not exist in a concrete, readily identifiable form. Lifelong learning is most appropriately thought of as a long-term planning strategy rather than as a ready-made, implementable alternative to the present education and training system. From this perspective, the main concern should be whether particular policies and practices are consistent with opening up learning opportunities over the life span, and less with whether the concept itself is continually invoked. Indeed, one could eventually judge the success of the lifelong learning concept by the extent to which it becomes absorbed into

everyday thinking about education and training rather than, as at present, being the focus of debate in itself.

### *Lifelong learning and recurrent education*

The experience with the last major idea of this kind, *recurrent education*, is instructive in this regard. Twenty years ago educational debate in Australia and elsewhere was strongly influenced by the concept of moving away from a ‘front-end’ educational system to one in which education was redistributed over the individual’s life span in a recurring manner interwoven with work and other activities<sup>1</sup>. Recurrent education was seen as the main strategy for promoting lifelong learning, throughout life and paid educational leave for workers as a key policy instrument for bringing this about (OECD, 1978). However, by the early 1980s the term recurrent education had largely disappeared from public use.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the death of recurrent education as an organising concept, many of the objectives and strategies of recurrent education and its related concepts from the 1970s (*lifelong education* as promoted by Unesco, and *education permanente* from the Council of Europe) are now evident in many countries. In Australia, for example, enrolments by mature age students in higher education have increased substantially over the past 20 years. This growth has been facilitated by special entry schemes, credit transfer, recognition of prior learning and other, strategies that were all evident in the recurrent education literature. Distance education and open learning, and the various combinations of work and learning that are now so evident, are all consistent with ideas that were first given a high profile under the recurrent education banner.

Although there is considerable overlap between the recurrent education and lifelong learning concepts, they differ in two crucial respects. Firstly, recurrent education implied a greater emphasis on learning within formal educational institutions than does lifelong learning, which potentially encompasses all forms of learning no matter where and when they occur. Secondly, almost all the current policy discussions concerning lifelong learning pay considerable attention to strengthening the foundations for effective learning throughout the life span. In practice this entails developing the skills, knowledge and motivation among young people to enable them to be self-directed learners. Recurrent education proposals, by contrast, tended to place the main emphasis on programs for adults.

A key concern advocates the recurrent education was to reduce the length of time that many young people spent in initial education by developing mechanisms that would allow deferral of some education to later in life. This thrust was especially evident in northern Europe where education programs are commonly very long, and where there was widespread concern in the 1970s about young people’s alienation from the wider society. Lifelong learning advocates do not necessarily support an increase in the length

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<sup>1</sup> McKenzie (1983) traces the development of the recurrent education concept and its application in Australia.

<sup>2</sup> According to folklore, Margaret Thatcher administered the fatal blow by arguing that the European Union should not include paid educational leave in its social and labour charters as it would make European industries uncompetitive.

of initial education across-the-board. Rather, the concern is to ensure that all young people complete at least the minimum level of education – commonly taken to be the end of secondary school or its vocational equivalent – judged necessary to access the labour market and facilitate on-going learning.

### **A Policy Framework for Lifelong Learning**

Perhaps the most extensive discussion of the purposes of lifelong learning and the policy instruments needed to bring them about is provided by *Lifelong Learning for All*, the document endorsed by OECD Education Ministers in January 1996 (OECD, 1996). The key idea underpinning this document is that while everyone is able to learn, all must become motivated to learn, and should be actively encouraged to do so throughout life. While this notion of lifelong learning was already experienced by certain groups in society – especially those with high levels of initial education and training – the Education Ministers argued that steps needed to be taken to make lifelong learning a reality for all.

The policy framework developed by the OECD to do this has five main elements:

- strengthening the foundations for lifelong learning by improving the accessibility and quality of initial education;
- improving the pathways and transitions between formal and non-formal learning and work over the life span;
- re-thinking and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the various ministries and levels of government, community organisations, employers and trade unions for policy development and implementation;
- creating incentives for individuals and enterprises to invest in lifelong learning by increasing the benefits and decreasing the costs, and facilitating access to finance; and
- developing the capacity to monitor progress in achieving the goals of lifelong learning, and evaluating the impact of policy instruments.

A significant feature of the meeting of OECD Education Ministers was the recognition that achieving the goals of lifelong learning will involve far more than education policies alone. The Ministers stressed the need to ‘deepen co-operation with their colleagues in the areas of social, labour market, economic and communications policies, in order to make sure that policies which affect education are coherent and cost-effective’ (OECD, 1996). This was a notable departure from the debate on recurrent education during the 1970s which, given its focus on the redistribution of formal education provision over the life span, was largely confined to education circles.

A landmark development in the broadening of policy interest in lifelong learning occurred in October 1997 when OECD Labour Ministers endorsed the concept and agreed that facilitating lifelong learning formed part of their portfolio responsibilities. The background document prepared for that meeting argued that the debate about lifelong learning is relevant to Labour Ministers in three respects: (a) the absence of effective lifelong learning opportunities, or lack of access to them, contributes to unemployment and low earnings; (b) the lifelong learning perspective adds a longer-term, preventative

dimension to labour market programs; and (c) labour market policies have an important role to play as part of cost-effective lifelong learning strategies (OECD, 1997a).

The key policy objectives are to ensure that individuals are motivated to continue learning, that they have the skills and knowledge to do so on a self-directed basis, that they have access to the necessary opportunities, and that they have appropriate incentives to participate. Within this broad framework there seem to be two main priority areas: reducing early school-leaving; and assisting adults with low levels of education.

### **Reducing Early School Leaving**

The labour market problems of those who do not complete senior secondary school or a vocational equivalent have been extensively documented in Australia (e.g. Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 1998). Since employers generally use both qualifications and experience to select workers, early school leavers are at a double disadvantage. They tend to spend a relatively long time searching for a first job, but such jobs are often only short-term, and the unqualified young person soon returns to the unemployment pool. Early school-leavers tend to spend less time in employment in the first five years after exiting education than their better-educated peers, and this effect is particularly evident for young women (Table 1). Furthermore, the limited international data available from national longitudinal studies suggests that early school-leavers in Australia tend to spend less time in employment than similar young people in Ireland, France and Germany, although slightly more than early school leavers in the United States (OECD, 1998b).

From a lifelong learning perspective, the longer and more fragmented process of school-to-work transition now experienced by many young people poses three main challenges for policy makers: (a) how to ensure that the extended period of initial education provides skills and competences that enhance employability; (b) how to minimise the risk of some young people being excluded from the labour market on a long-term basis; (c) and how to ensure that learning continues during and after the transition process and is subsequently recognised for employment and educational purposes. Suggestions for strengthening policy initiatives in these regards are contained in the report of the OECD review team that visited Australia in March 1997 (OECD, 1997b).

**Table 1: Distribution of Time Spent Employed over the First Five Years Since Leaving Initial Education, by Educational Attainment and Gender, Australia**

<i>Highest educational attainment</i>	<i>Years spent employed (% of group)</i>						<i>Total %</i>	<i>Average years, weighted</i>
	<i>Never employed</i>	<i>1 year</i>	<i>2 years</i>	<i>3 years</i>	<i>4 years</i>	<i>5 years</i>		
<b>Lower secondary</b>								
Women	37	13	7	5	8	30	100	2.2
Men	8	7	14	17	16	37	100	3.4

<b>Upper secondary</b>								
Women	6	6	6	10	19	53	100	3.9
Men	4	5	6	15	17	52	100	3.9
<b>Tertiary</b>								
Women	2	11	8	13	13	52	100	3.8
Men	5	4	4	8	13	66	100	4.2

*Note:* The data are based on the Australian Longitudinal Survey, and focus on young people who made their permanent entry to the labour market around 1989-90. The analysis is based on dating labour market entry as the first interview in which individuals report that they are not in education, and then retaining these people in the analysis so long as over subsequent periods they do not report being enrolled in education. The reporting of employment status is taken at the time of each annual survey. Thus, the number of persons with some months employed is understated, and the number with some months unemployed is overstated. Persons leaving education at different stages will vary in their age, for example the difference in leaving age between those who leave after compulsory schooling and those who leave after university could be 10 years or more.

*Source:* OECD (1998b).

#### **Assisting Adults with Low Levels of Education**

A little over half (53 per cent) of Australians aged 25-64 years have completed at least upper secondary education (Table 2). In this respect Australia ranks 17<sup>th</sup> among the 25 OECD countries for which comparable data are available. Although many adults with low educational qualifications perform well in the labour market, the evidence suggests that low qualifications are associated with lower levels of labour force participation, a greater probability of unemployment, and lower earnings. Moreover, adults who have not completed upper secondary education perform substantially worse on tests of functional literacy than those who finished secondary school or had some tertiary education (OECD and Human Resources Development Canada, 1997). Low literacy levels raise questions about the capacity of the people concerned to adapt and acquire new skills in the face of economic change.

**Table 2: Percentage of the Population Who Have Completed At Least Upper Secondary Education by Age, Australia, and Relative to the Average for OECD Countries, 1995**

<i>Age(years)</i>	<i>Australia (% of age group)</i>	<i>OECD average (% of age group)</i>	<i>Number of countries in the comparison</i>	<i>Australia's ranking</i>
25-34	57	71	25	19
35-44	54	63	24	17
45-54	51	53	24	16
55-64	43	41	24	13

25-64	53	60	25	17
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*Note:* Upper secondary education corresponds to ISCED 3 in international comparisons. Depending on the country concerned, upper secondary education usually involves between 2 and 5 years of schooling. Admission to this level normally requires completion of lower secondary education, or a combination of basic education and vocational experience. Upper secondary programs may be mainly oriented to preparing students for direct entry to employment or to further study, or to both.

*Source:* OECD (1997c).

Despite the rapid rise in Australia's education participation rates over the past 15 years, Table 2 indicates that it is the 25-34 year-old age group where the gap between Australia's educational attainment and the OECD average is most marked. This implies that if present levels of participation continue, Australia's relative ranking may slip further over the next 20 years (Table 3). Some sense of the scale of the challenge is that Australia has around 4.4 million 25-64 year-olds who have not completed upper secondary education, a number almost as large as the total enrolments in all forms of education and training in 1995 (ABS, 1996).

The future pace of economic and social change is likely to generate demands for new learning, especially by adults with low qualifications, on a scale that will require the mobilisation of new resources. Public authorities have an important role to play in this regard, not just through financing appropriate lifelong learning opportunities but by creating an environment in which individuals and enterprises have more incentive to invest in themselves. As Wurzburg (1998) has noted, this will require policy action on two broad fronts:

- increasing the benefits and decreasing the costs of continuing education and training to ensure that that investments in lifelong learning are *economically viable*; and
- easing liquidity constraints so that current investments in learning can be financed from future earnings, that is, making lifelong learning *financially feasible*.

**Table 3: Projected Percentage of the Population Aged 25-64 Having Completed At Least Upper Secondary Education in 2005 and 2015, (Assuming 1995 Attainment Rates of 25-29 Year-olds Remain Constant)**

	<i>% with at least upper secondary education</i>			<i>Rank order of the 20 countries</i>		
	<i>1995</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2015</i>
<b>Australia</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>17</b>
Austria	69	76	79	8	9	10
Belgium	53	64	70	14	14	12
Canada	75	81	84	6	7	7
Denmark	62	66	69	11	11	13
Finland	65	74	81	10	10	9
France	68	79	84	9	8	8
Germany	84	88	89	2	2	1

Greece	43	57	66	17	17	16
Ireland	47	58	66	16	16	15
Italy	35	48	57	18	18	18
Netherlands	61	66	70	12	12	11
New Zealand	59	64	68	13	13	14
Norway	81	86	89	4	4	2
Portugal	20	30	36	20	20	20
Spain	28	41	49	19	19	19
Sweden	75	82	87	7	6	5
Switzerland	82	86	88	3	3	4
United Kingdom	76	82	86	5	5	6
United States	86	88	88	1	1	1
<b>Average</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>73</b>			

*Note:* The projections apply 1995 levels of educational attainment by 5-year age-groups in the adult population (aged 25-64) to the projected numbers in each age group for each year between 1995 and 2015. The 1995 level of attainment by 25-29 year-olds is assumed to remain constant for each 'incoming' cohort of 25-29 year-olds, subject to the constraint that this be at least as high as that of all age groups in 1995, including 20-24 year-olds. Even so, the projections are likely to under-estimate projected attainment levels in countries (such as Australia) which have experienced rapid rises in upper secondary education participation in recent years that have yet to be fully reflected in current attainment levels of the 25-29 age group.

*Source:* OECD (1997c).

## Conclusion

The current intense period of interest in lifelong learning at national and international levels clearly reflects a widely felt need for the reorientation of education and training policies. Changes in technology, the economy and the labour market are occurring at such a pace that individuals cannot rely just on their initial education and training to maintain their employability, but need to acquire new skills and knowledge on an on-going basis. Some groups in society are already well positioned to do this, but there are major segments in the youth and adult populations at risk of further social and economic marginalisation.

The concept of lifelong learning for all has considerable potential in this regard. Although not a new idea, it is able to draw together and perhaps accelerate developments that are already underway in society. Viewing the policy agenda through the lens of lifelong learning reinforces the necessity for initial education and training to provide a sound foundation for further learning, and for learning opportunities during adulthood to be available to all who want them.

The risk is, though, that the potential benefits of lifelong learning can be over-sold. Lifelong learning, even if somehow made a reality for all, is not a panacea for low economic growth and high unemployment. Macro-economic and structural policies are needed to ensure adequate demand for labour and to facilitate adjustment. However, a greater emphasis on learning opportunities throughout the life span can help to ensure that productivity and growth rates are sustained, and that the benefits are more evenly spread among the population. Even so, all forms of learning are not equally cost-effective, and there will need to be continuing attention devoted to finding learning strategies that work, especially for those with low levels of initial education and training.

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