

# Global Perspectives on Higher Education and Lifelong Learners

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With the tumult of the first years of the twenty-first century, from prosperity to banking crisis, it is easy to lose sight of the institutions, besides the economy, which form our society. Further, the focus on money shifts the construction of values from society and citizenship to consumption, growth and expenditure. This book re-directs the focus to the pivotal social institution that shapes the lives of every member of society, namely, education, without which the social good could not be achieved. Maria Slowey and Hans Schuetze revisit their earlier publication of 2000, to explore the changes if any, to the social contract towards equality through education. This publication provides an invaluable resource that enables us to contextualise the issues with the comparative global perspectives. In particular, it integrates lifelong learning with higher education, an undertaking crucial for adult educators with our interest in post-compulsory education along the lifespan, access and equality.

This integration enables an analysis of the role of higher education in society. It unpacks the social project of the formation and reproduction of the next generation. The turbulence arising from the encroachment of neo-liberalism into social life obscures this function, transposing it into a vocational training goal for the so-called knowledge economy.

The editors, however, are taking an interrogative approach to the issues and trends in higher education and lifelong learning, particularly the marketisation and privatisation that has blurred the borderlines between social good and private profit. Thus, the collection engages with these issues with the comparative accounts from across the globe. Higher education is framed as the key route to social and cultural capital for the social good and democracy, and participation in lifelong learning, in this volume, focuses on one particular aspect,

that of higher education for people who have not progressed directly through the traditional routes, including mature students, and part-time and distance students. Lifelong learning, in spite of the focus on human capital, is used as a key indicator of access for adult students, but also indicative of access by other marginal or minority groups. This dual frame enables the examination of the distribution of benefits of education as a social institution over the population, and this provides a structure to show the 'one step forward, two steps back' (p. 282) that characterises the field globally.

The book is organised along regional lines, Europe, North America, Pacific, together with perspectives from two 'BRICS' countries, South Africa and Brazil with the back-up of substantial data on diverse aspects of the backdrop from enrolment trends to the status of higher education in broader landscape in lifelong learning. These figures and tables make fascinating reading on their own, and convey the complexity of the topic in the overall context. They provide a tip-of-the-fingers presentation of national and comparative trends. For example, Figure 6.1 of the Swedish education system shows the flow between the different stages of education, and, with our Irish lens, we can see how our system is piecemeal in comparison. Indeed a similar exercise for Ireland would have to be depicted with ghost categories, namely, early childhood education and adult education. That is, education in Ireland is seen as the holy trinity of primary, second-level and tertiary, and the Irish DES does not truly recognise anything else. The Department would do well to take a look at Figure 16.1, which maps higher education in the broader landscape of lifelong learning (p. 287).

The viewpoints are presented from the inside, by a range of writers with various roles and backgrounds in higher and adult education. These contributors are mainly professors, researchers and lecturers of adult education in higher education, such as Hans Schuetze, the co-editor, whose academic career has taken him from Europe to Canada. Maria Slowey, with her own academic journey from Maynooth to DCU, via the UK, is ideally poised to provide an overview of the situation in Ireland. Her focus on the democratising of learning through innovative and creative practice, primarily developed in adult and community education, brings the actual numbers and groups concerned into the limelight. These numbers show that little substantial progress is discerned in relation to access to higher education by marginal students. For example, of new entrants to higher education, less than 5% of people were over the age of 30 in 2009. That is, in spite of the innovative and pioneering work at community education levels, commitment to equality and access, nationally, and the brief, but signifi-

cant wealth of the Celtic tiger years, sadly, higher education is characterised by inequality rather than fairness. This picture is replicated in many instances, and the editors conclude that the inequalities are stark. In developed countries, such as Sweden and Japan, equality outcomes are on surer ground, but otherwise, the inequalities are not just in terms of national trends, but also, worryingly, about a north-south divide.

This picture unfolds through the chapters. Chapter one is an introduction to the text, and it unpacks the idea that lifelong learning is an organising principle in the international organisations such as the EU, OECD, and UNESCO, for a potentially new approach to teaching and learning. They review the global developments, which have particular relevance for lifelong learning; they outline their methodology and themes, to be examined in the individual country case studies presented in the book; they examine the patterns which emerge from the case studies, and finally, they draw the themes together. Thus the first chapter provides a significant key to the text.

The regional categories are not equally divided, and Europe is the biggest, with six countries represented, from Sweden in the north and Portugal in the south, and Ireland, of course, which makes the book all the more interesting for Irish readers. The North America section illuminates the three huge territories, the USA, Canada and Mexico, while Australia, Japan and New Zealand represent the Pacific. The choice of these countries are particularly telling for the Irish reader again, as New Zealand is similar to Ireland in terms of population, development and climate, but mostly, due to the proximity to the bigger country that overshadows it and obscures their differences. Finally, the global South is represented by South Africa and Brazil, vital inclusions in order to triangulate the explorations from the global North. These case studies are both heartening in terms of the commitment of the writers in their roles as public intellectuals, to justice and equality, but also disheartening, in terms of the external crises that drain all that hope away, for want of forethought, a sense of responsibility, an obligation to all citizens, and, most sickeningly of all, the waste of money into superficial and trivial constructions of the public good.

The Hamburg Declaration on Adult Education in 1997 stated that lifelong learning is both a consequence of active citizenship and a condition for full participation in society. It is essential in promoting democracy, justice, and scientific and technological development. Crucially, it is essential for building a world in which violent conflict and war is replaced by dialogue and the culture

of peace (p. 105). The chapter on Sweden asserts that it was easy to implement this vision, due to the tradition of non-formal adult education. However, globally, and perhaps even in the Nordic models, lifelong learning has been affected by the neo-liberal contagion, due in part to the absence of a truly resilient emancipatory philosophy, which, while it was originally perceived as a means of de-schooling society, promoting social justice and fairness, unfortunately, is now constructed in neo-liberal social policy as a means of the continuing invigilation of workers and educators, and providing skills for the labour market.

Nevertheless, Slowey and Schuetze end on an optimistic note. Their analyses leads them to believe that finding ways of meeting the needs of lifelong learning is far from being a problem to be addressed in elaborate programmes of integration and inclusion in higher education institutions, rather it is more likely to be a *solution*, relying as it does on the rich work and life experience and motivations of lifelong learners.

This book is essential reading for adult educators, for policy makers and for higher education institutions. The comparisons are telling, in a fundamental way. Experiential learning is essential in knowledge creation in lifelong learning. The next stage of wisdom is to learn from others' experience.

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