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National Strategies for Implementing Life Long Learning (LLL): an International Perspective

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National Strategies for Implementing Life Long Learning (LLL): an International Perspective

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Introduction

This paper was presented at the Asia European Meeting (ASEM) Conference in Beijing on 25th November 2008. The conference focussed on national strategies for Life Long Learning (LLL). The paper addresses some of the critical issues and problems facing the implementation of life long learning at national levels. It ends with some possible scenarios for the future of LLL.

Please note the views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of those Governments and Organisations mentioned in the paper.

Where are we coming from?

The last 40 years of international debates and developments around LLL have strong roots in the Scandinavian countries. Given these countries' century old traditions of strong democratic movements, including innovative initiatives in favour of adult education, it should not come as a surprise that the early concept of LLL and recurrent education originated here.

If a particular person should be mentioned it would be the late Olaf Palme from Sweden. Before becoming Prime Minister, he was Minister of Education and took part in the European Education Ministers meeting in Versailles in 1969. He then presented the first proposal for LLL implemented through a strategy of recurrent education. At the same meeting, the French Minister of Education, Monsieur Edgard Faure, presented the concept of Permanent Education, but without a strategy for its implementation.

The concept of Recurrent Education (RE), as a strategy for the implementing LLL was picked up by OECD, and that of Permanent Education, by UNESCO. When I joined OECD at the end of 1971 to work on RE and LLL, the work was just starting. By the end of 1972, we had produced the clarifying report called 'Recurrent Education: A Strategy for Lifelong Learning' (OECD, 1973).

The book was a great success for OECD, and soon RE and LLL became the education policy priority for OECD countries. A second publication, called 'Recurrent Education: Trends and Issues' (OECD 1975) was presented to the European Education Ministers Meeting in Stockholm in 1975 and adopted as the strategy for the future implementation of LLL. The basic objectives were, first, to reduce educational disparities between the older and younger generations in favour of the older ones, second, to strengthen the efficiency of the labour market and the economy, and finally, to improve co-ordination, vertically, between different education administrations (primary, secondary, higher education and adult education) and to better co-ordinate, horizontally, between different government departments (education, labour and economic) (OECD, 1976). A huge amount of work was carried out within OECD countries and by the OECD on the subject during the 1970s.

At the beginning of the 1980s the overall policy context changed. Following the second oil shock in 1978-9, when OECD recommended to governments a more strict public expenditure policy, the commitment to RE and LLL started to falter. One specific reason was that in many countries a policy for RE and LLL was considered to be more expensive than slight expansion of the traditional front-end model of education. So during the 1980s the OECD's education policy agenda became dominated by a concern for raising standards in traditional education systems and to measure individual outputs. This is the period when the education indicators movement started.

But the concept of LLL survived at the enterprise level. The 1990s is the period when new technologies enter forcefully into process and product innovations at the enterprise level. At this level, human resource development became a competitive edge and continuing up-grading of skills and competences for workforces, a must.

In the 1990s, LLL is back on the policy agenda for public education (OECD, 1996). LLL is back because Ministers of Education started to understand the dramatic changes taking place in the global economy, in which each country started to compete with skills and competences, and where skills and competences from the front-end model of education quickly became obsolete. However, the policy concept of LLL from the 1990s was, and still is today, a very vague concept, defined as learning from the cradle to the grave without a coherent strategy for implementation.

Where do we stand today?

So where do we stand today at the beginning of the new century? What seems to emerge is a kind of paradox. On the one hand, LLL is accepted in policy terms by all OECD countries and by others as the only viable education and learning objective for this century. But on the other hand, its implementation is weak,

uneven, and without strong commitment. For instance, when it comes to some form of organised education and learning for adults, about two thirds of the adult population in OECD countries do not participate. An OECD stock-taking on developments in LLL based on data available up to 1999 points to four broad groups of OECD countries. The Nordic countries stand out with good performances across multiple sectors. A second tier of countries – Canada, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands and New Zealand – also do well, but have certain gaps or weaknesses in more areas. A third tier, including Australia, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States, is characterised by comparatively uneven performance on the available measures, especially on measures of literacy. Finally, a fourth tier of countries – Ireland, Hungary, Portugal and Poland – do poorly in comparison to other countries on most measures (based on OECD, 2004).

The reasons behind this slow and uneven pace of implementation of LLL are many and varied from country to country, but there seem to be three main reasons that operate in all countries.

The first one is the lack of workable and agreed strategies for implementation. Today's agreed definition of LLL as learning from the cradle to the grave is far too vague, and not very useful in concrete policy action. What is needed seems to be a strategy like Recurrent Education based upon alternation between study and work and with clear implications of how to change initial education to foster LLL later in life.

The second reason is the lack of a coherent and equitable system of financing LLL for all. No OECD country has yet put together a system of financing, although a lot of debate still takes place. Existing systems tend to contribute to further inequalities in access to learning and education, not least for adults.

The third reason for the slow implementation of LLL is the quite often underestimated resistance to change among the main stakeholders in the traditional system of education. We must always bear in mind that LLL represents a radical change from existing norms and patterns of learning as it is practiced today in traditional front-end education. Teachers and school leaders are still today trained for transmitting content and learning based on principles and norms dating back to the beginning of the last century. No-one should be surprised that there is resistance. Therefore, there seems to be an urgent need to reform teacher training in favour of a greater emphasis on how to teach students 'to learn to learn'.

Where could we possibly go?

There is certainly no universal strategy for the implementation of LLL that would fit all countries. Each country will have to develop its own unique strategy, given the significant differences which exist in the political, economic, social and education

context. But it can be argued strongly that in doing so they all have to address a certain number of policy and research issues that are common to all countries. I would like to mention briefly five such issues that will have to be addressed, and solutions found, in order to establish a successful national strategy for implementing LLL.

The first issue is to create the foundations for joined-up government and administration for planning and action in favour of LLL. Such planning and action need to be addressed vertically among different parts of the education system, with the purpose of identifying and adopting each part's unique contribution to fostering the objectives of LLL. These would cover educational content and pedagogical approaches that would better fit the evolution of the learners' need over his or her life cycle. In this respect, one would have to address the pertinent issue of where human, social and cultural capitals are best formed over the individual life cycle. For instance, over the last thirty years growth in human capital formation has been impressive in most OECD countries, but often to the detriment of forming social capital (OECD, 2001a, 2007a). The question has to be posed whether obligatory education should have a greater role in forming social capital, and that learning and education afterwards in a LLL system should have a greater role in forming human and cultural capitals.

Planning and action will also be needed at the horizontal level, that is, among government departments at national and regional levels. It would have to include at least departments of education, economic, labour and social affairs. This is important because the individual learning during the life cycle will be affected by all these policy areas. A possible way to start this whole and complex process could be to organise annual forums on implementing LLL at national levels, in which all main stakeholders would take part, in particular government departments, social partners and the education and research communities.

The second issue relates to the need to create a coherent and affordable system of financing for LLL. No such system exists today among OECD countries. The task is enormous, but the future success of LLL will, to a great extent, depend on whether such systems of financing exist. Among OECD countries a consensus seems to be emerging that such a system will have to be based upon three sources of finance, namely the public and private sectors and the individual learner. When it comes to the respective contributions from each of these sources, huge differences and practices and traditions exist between countries, making any general model impossible at this stage. Each country will have to find its own model of how much each source should contribute. But the principal point is that all three sources will have to contribute.

In addition to the three sources of financing LLL, there are two other considerations to bring in to the picture. On the one hand we have the issue of national accounts.

Today in the national accounts, education is counted as consumption and not investment. Most economists today agree that we are moving fast to a knowledge-based economy, in which each country's knowledge stock becomes its most important asset. In this perspective, education needs to be seen as investment and not consumption. The consequences of such a shift in public finance are important as investment is less penalising for public deficit than consumption. Work on revising national accounts is ongoing, but not directly on education. Each country committed to LLL needs to put pressure to include education in this revision (OECD, 2008a).

On the other hand we have, of course, the deep ongoing crisis in the global finance sector, affecting all countries. The reform of this sector is urgently needed and will most likely be done. One of the critical issues here is to better connect the financial sector with the real economy. One of the reasons for the present crisis is that much of that connection has disappeared over the last 20 years. In respect of better connecting the two economic sectors, and given the fact that the real economic sector is becoming a knowledge sector, the question should be posed whether it would be profitable for the finance sector to invest in skills and competences in the real knowledge-based economy. After all, the knowledge-based economy will increasingly compete and make profits based upon skills and competences. The implications of such a policy for the financing of LLL from the private finance sector would be fundamental. It is important to start a policy debate about this now, given the situation in the finance sector and its readiness to reform.

The third issue relates to the need to examine the links between qualifications and LLL. To learn one set of skills at school and university is no longer enough for an individual's performance in working life. There is one basic skill that is of fundamental importance in a fast changing knowledge economy, namely being able to learn and adapt to a new skill requirement. But learning to learn is not sufficient: individuals need to be sure that the new skills that they acquire are also reflected in the qualifications systems that give them credit for the experience and knowledge that they have gained, whether in the classroom, in the workplace or elsewhere. Countries have been trying for some time to reform their qualification systems to make LLL more possible.

Most policy makers believe that there is a link between qualification systems and LLL, but it is not clear up to now what link there is and how it works. If we can identify and understand the ways in which national qualifications systems deliver, or fail to deliver, LLL, the positive links can be used by policy makers as a basis for reforming qualification systems for the benefit of LLL. The ultimate goal is a qualification system that provides high quality recognition of LLL. There is no unique solution, each country has its own system and culture to start from, but it should be possible to identify the factors that need to be taken into account in developing qualification systems for LLL. For example, there seems to be general

agreement about the fact that an individual's experience during compulsory schooling has a powerful impact on attitudes to learning in later life. An individual who leaves the compulsory school system with a sense of failure may well avoid learning in the future, seeing it as simply a chance to fail again (OECD, 2007b).

The fourth issue relates to the need to develop indicators to track the implementation of LLL. In the late 90s, OECD started to develop institution-based indicators for LLL. It tried to measure how LLL objectives and participation were manifested in different parts of the education system. It provided useful information, but considerable problems emerged in terms of definitions of what were the elements of LLL in different parts of the system including adult education, and not least, learning in the workplace. Given the world wide success of its work on the PISA study (Program for International Student Assessment www.PISA.OECD.org), the OECD is now launching a new and bigger study called PIAAC (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competences, www.OECD.org).

This survey study of adults in the age brackets from 16 to 65 will, for the first time, provide comparative data on adult competences ranging from cognitive to workplace skills and competences. Needless to say, PIAAC will, by definition, provide pertinent information about progress or lack of progress in implementing LLL. The study will start in the field in 2010 and over time it might turn out to be an even more source for policy makers concerned with the implementation of LLL than the information provided by PISA. Hence the importance for countries to get involved in PIAAC, or at least follow the results closely.

The fifth issue relates to the need to strengthen R & D for LLL. Present systems of education R & D tend to be too biased towards learning and education for young people and not enough R & D is devoted to learning and education over the individual life cycle. There is a double challenge for R & D on LLL. First there is the need to raise fresh financial resources. In general the education sector is the most underfunded knowledge sector in terms of R & D in the whole knowledge economy. Moreover, most of the R & D for education is funded from the public sector. Hence there is an urgent need to bring in new resources from the private sector to finance R & D for LLL.

Second, there is also the need to stimulate and develop more interdisciplinary R & D on LLL. There is a need for teamwork between educators, economists, political scientists and others. Most OECD countries have a nearly hundred year old tradition of research on pedagogy and learning, but this research has produced very little by way of tangible results for LLL.

Over the last 15 years a new research discipline has emerged thanks to the use of scanner technology, in terms of neuroscience and brain research. OECD created in

the late 90s an international network of leading neuroscientists and brain researchers with the purpose of studying learning of the brain's life cycle. The work continues, but has already provided some findings with deep and clear cut implications for LLL. For instance, the human brain is fully capable to learn throughout its life cycle if provided with a rich and stimulating environment. Furthermore, the brain learns through a variety of ways from study as well as from practice. Again, emotions and the way of learning play an important role in memorisation. Confucius' words from a thousand years ago seem still to be valid, 'I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand'.

Some concluding remarks and a glance ahead

The analytical story described above is a story of success and failure for LLL: success in terms of acceptance by the policy community, failure in terms of its weak implementation. I have tried to present briefly the story of the LLL movement: where it comes from, where it stands today, and the critical issues which have to be addressed in the near future to accelerate the implementation of LLL. The LLL movement covers a period of over forty years, and it is tempting at the end of this paper to reflect about where LLL might be in forty years ahead. Scenarios for the future of schooling, the future of universities have been done by OECD (OECD, 2008b, 2009) but nothing to my knowledge has been done about the future of LLL. To stimulate further thinking on this topic I would like to propose briefly three possible scenarios for LLL forty years ahead.

Scenario 1

LLL has been implemented. The critical issues and challenges outlined above have been settled. Profound changes have taken place in the front-end model of education integrating it into a coherent system of LLL. Programmes and curricula have been redesigned to be brain friendly based upon brain research. To combat social exclusion and increase LLL contribution to the knowledge society and economy, governments have revised the notion and practice of obligatory education. It now covers a reduced period for youth and shorter periods of obligatory recurrent education and learning for adults.

Scenario 2

LLL continues to be a marginal activity in the educational landscape. It is still situated on the periphery of mainstream front-end education. This system is successfully defended by powerful stakeholders ranging from professionals in the system to parents. The demand for traditional education continues to shift from public to private education. Job training and learning at the workplace has become an integral part of the jobs for those employed in the formal economy. Social exclusion continues to grow.

Scenario 3

Educational policy making is in a mess. The front-end model of education is melting down. It has failed to respond to the demands from the knowledge society and has aggravated social exclusion. For those employed in the formal economy a high performing LLL system exists, but the number of people socially excluded has increased considerably. Demand for traditional private education is decreasing due to high fees. Private initiative, less costly, in favour of IT-based education and learning is on the increase. Dropouts from formal public education continue to increase and the notion and reality of obligatory education is being seriously questioned. Governments are hesitating between a profound overhaul of the existing fragmented system in favour of a coherent LLL system, or to leave the formation of skills and competences to the market. After all, the most important assets in the market are skills and competences; hence the market should pay for them. The principal argument in favour of LLL is that it would most effectively combat social exclusion.

These three roughly painted scenarios are presented just to stimulate thinking and to raise awareness of the extremely complicated economic, social and cultural factors that will be involved in any serious attempt to implement LLL. As an example with humour of the absurdity of the present educational model, let me finish with a quote from T Jessup (1969):

'What a paradox we British are! Youth studies but cannot act: the adult must act but has no opportunity to study; and we accept the divorce complacently. We behave like people who should try to give their children in a week all the food they require for a year, a method which might seem to save time and trouble, but would not improve digestion, or health'.

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Under his leadership, OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) carried out wide-ranging research on lifelong learning, the school-to-work transition, the links between education and economic development, and sustainable development. He led the group in analysis of education statistics, particularly as they relate to human and social capital. Prior to joining OECD he was Professor of Education at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden and Advisor to the Swedish Minister of Education.

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