



Research Briefing

Widening participation and Lifelong Learning - Some theoretical and practical considerations

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Introduction

Widening participation (WP) and Lifelong Learning (LL) are two concepts that appear to be at the forefront of current educational debates in the UK. This is probably because both have been highlighted in post-school educational policies, principally since 1997. Both WP and LL can be seen as appropriate to the agenda of a government that is keen to extend equality of opportunity to all, and this applies not only to education but also to other public services. Do WP and LL represent new concepts for New Labour or are they simply the inevitable consequences of the development of educational provision in the 21st Century?

On the one hand, we can argue that they are new concepts, because they represent an opening up of post school education, to which there is not currently universal access. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that both WP and LL represent the continuation of concepts that have been underpinning educational provision in the UK for the past 100 years or so. This second argument is the one that is pursued here. I will argue that WP is not a new concept, but what is new is that it now focuses on post school education. In addition, I will also argue that LL is not a new concept, as it has its origins in the early part of the 20th Century. What is new about LL is that it has only really been accepted as a concept in general educational circles within the past 10 years or so. My argument will cover a brief history of the two concepts, how they relate to each other in the 2003 White Paper, and this will be followed by some implications they have for practice.

A very brief history of WP and LL in the UK

This very brief section traces the historical roots of the concept of WP in education and the development of LL in the UK.

Widening Participation

First, let us look at education, which in this paper means planned interventions into the lives of (mainly) young people. Mandatory universal education for the young is accepted by our society, and in turn we pass the responsibility for educational provision onto the state to fund schools, colleges and universities. In these institutions, (mainly) young people are taught how to prepare for life as adults. We now take these arrangements for granted, but if we look back over the past 100 years or so, then we can see that these arrangements are relatively new.

State funded primary education became universal only in the latter half of the 19th Century and state funded secondary education followed the same path only in the 20th Century. Indeed the raising of the school-leaving age to 16 years happened as late as the 1970s. Up until relatively recently, only some young people then went onto to further education or training in colleges or universities. However, the 'new' concept of WP implies that all young people should have access to some form of education/training beyond schooling. For some, this will take place in higher education, probably to first degree level; for others, their education/training is likely to involve some form of higher education before they reach the age of 30 years. This is essentially what the 'new' concept widening participation means in practice. It is an application of the same

concept of equality of opportunity (originally applied to primary and secondary education) but now being applied to tertiary education.

Lifelong Learning

Secondly, let us look at LL and explore what it means. As mentioned above in the introduction, the origins of the concept of LL are foreshadowed in the 1919 Education Act, but articulated more clearly and recently as a concept in the Faure Report of 1972 (UNESCO, 1972). This was published as a result of debates between academics and policy makers under the auspices of UNESCO. The Report was unusual in concept because it considered all forms of learning, including planned interventions (education) in addition to learning in informal and non-formal contexts, these latter two being the contexts in which many adults learn. Implicit in the Report was recognition that adults could (and should be encouraged to) plan their own learning with or without recourse to formal education. Additionally, the Report called for state support for all forms of adult learning to be made universally available. In essence, the Report called for the same concept of equality of opportunity (as accepted for primary and secondary education) to underpin all forms of tertiary education including adult education (i.e. education and learning specifically for adults). The Faure report did not result immediately in widespread educational policy change, but some of the ideas therein resurfaced from the mid 1990s onwards in several European Commission documents (CEC 1995; CEC 1997; CEC 2000). Contained within these documents is the concept of 'learning throughout life' (as in Faure) and several themes are highlighted as possible foundations on which to build national strategies. These themes have influenced the development of UK policies and they are:

The validation and recognition of formal qualifications as well as non-formal and informal learning (and Accreditation of Prior Learning), across countries and within robust quality assurance frameworks

Providing high quality and targeted information, guidance and counselling

Providing access for all by bringing together learners and learning opportunities from all walks of life, including specific actions for the most disadvantaged groups

Providing opportunities to acquire/up date basic skills, including information technology skills, foreign languages and social skills

Encouraging representation [partnerships] of relevant sectors in existing or future networks of learning

Training, recruitment and updating of teachers and trainers for the development of innovative pedagogy and lifelong learning

(ASEM, 2002; EC, 2002)

These themes are also reflected in a document produced by the Organisation for Economic Co operation and Development (OECD, 1999) where lifelong learning is described as:

An expansion of learning activities to widen participation for all

Changes in the content of existing learning activities

Qualitatively and quantitatively different learning activities in new settings

Learning activities to take place over a lifetime

Raising the quality of teaching and learning

Implicit in the two lists above is the idea of qualitative change and not just a quantitative change. Both lists include the concept of equality of opportunity (WP), but extend it beyond formal 'schooling' (i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary) and into all forms of adult learning. Other items

on the above lists imply curriculum change, specifically in terms of content. If curriculum change is coupled with equality of opportunity, then they represent significant changes to traditional, formal provision in tertiary (including adult) institutions. The implication is that tertiary and adult provision should change to accommodate the *demands* of learners. This is quite different to the current position, where colleges and universities *supply* prescribed, state-sanctioned education to which learners are expected to adapt. Finally, the last item on each list implies changes in the training and retraining of teachers in tertiary (and adult) education.

European Commission statements published in 2000 and 2001 (CEC 2000, 2001) share the word 'learning' in their titles. Various authors have commented on the significance of this and how 'learning' is being used instead of 'education'. Griffin for example (1999, 2000) points out that whilst 'education' can be promoted through state-funded planned intervention, 'learning' cannot. He argues that 'learning' can be encouraged, but cannot be mandated and so the role of the state will be to encourage LL rather than prescribe or fund it. This (he argues) represents a fundamental shift in stance from a position of significant state financial support for tertiary and adult education, to a position where state support becomes less and less, and private, individual financial contributions supplement the costs or bear them in full.

The relationship between WP and LL

The White Paper (2003)

The section above briefly outlined the origin of the concepts of WW and LL; this short section outlines the relationship between the two, particularly as articulated in the recent White Paper (DfES, 2003). In common with its antecedents since 1997, the Paper contains a melange of concepts and ideas that have their historical roots in concepts of both WP and LL. These roots tap into firstly, extending equality of opportunity to tertiary (post school) education, focussing on young people. Secondly, the roots tap into the ideas in the Faure Report, which is more radical and extends the ideal of equality of opportunity to all forms of learning. This radicalism is implicit in the White Paper and it raises questions about the responsibilities of the state. The state cannot take responsibility for organising 'learning' – only an individual can do this; so there are questions about who pays – is it the individual or the state? The White Paper makes it clear that all students who choose to continue learning beyond the age of 18 will be responsible for financial contributions towards their education/learning.

In summary, what is the difference between WP and LL? A simple answer is that WP is a sub set of LL, the former being defined as equality of opportunity to all tertiary provision. The latter (LL) refers to all educational provision and all forms of learning including adult learning in formal and informal contexts. LL is thus a much broader concept than WP, and for this reason it is sometimes referred to as 'a master concept' for education/learning from cradle to grave. The White Paper, although implying we are all lifelong learners now, does not really take on board the radical practical implications that are inherent in a broad concept of LL. The section that follows attempts to unravel the practical issues that emanate from a policy that extends equality of opportunity to all post-school learning.

Implications of WP and LL for practice

Introduction

Already in the UK, widening participation in tertiary education has become an acceptable idea in the minds of the public. This has happened gradually over the past 20 years or so, as increasing numbers of young people have remained in either further or higher education beyond the school leaving age. The numbers of participants continue to be swelled by increasing numbers of adults too, who study mainly on a part-time basis. This increase has changed higher education in particular from an elite to a mass sector in a relatively short period. Whilst young people have been required to contribute towards the costs of degree level studies only since the early 1990s, part time adult students and post graduates have always been required to pay a fee. In effect, the practice of participants paying at least something for their

education beyond the age of 18 years is now accepted as normal practice. However, as numerous studies show, the majority of participants tend to be from the more affluent sectors of society, so although voluntary participation has resulted in mass further and higher education, the ideal of universal further and higher education is yet to be attained.

Up until now, colleges and universities have proved themselves capable of accommodating some new learners by *supplying* them with traditional provision. However, the question is whether they can respond to the *demands* of groups who do not participate, presumably because they eschew current provision in terms of its content, its location (in time and place) and its mode of delivery. If colleges and universities were to respond to the yet unarticulated demands of new groups, then they would need to operate in different ways. However, colleges and universities operate in the ways they do because this is how they get the everyday business of education done. Education is prescribed pre-determined provision. Colleges and universities receive funding for operating according to prescription and are inspected or assessed by external state-funded agencies to ensure they are operating thus. They are unlikely to change their ways of operating unless there is significant advantage or enticement to do so. Moreover, the enticement would have to be significant indeed, because it would need to support the radical restructuring from supply led to demand led organisations. Therefore, in terms of educational provision to attract those who would not normally participate, we are likely to see new forms of education encouraged, such as foundation degrees.

There are views that the rigidity of current practices and institutional boundaries in tertiary education pose major problems and contribute to non-participation. Whether this is the case is open to debate (Wolf 2002), because even in the mandatory sectors there are non-participants. Non-the-less there is a presumption that entry to further education and higher education (in particular) is difficult because impregnable barriers surround these institutions. Arguably, this presumption underpins the UK government's support for initiatives that offer learning opportunities outside of the influence of institutional constraints. These include examples such as Learn Direct (new flexible courses, outside of institutions) that transcend entry barriers; Independent Learning Accounts (or something in similar form) that give some freedom of choice to their users; funding for non-accredited learning to community groups (normally beyond the reach of educational establishments) and so on. In addition, the boundaries between further and higher education have become increasingly blurred; this is likely to continue and is endorsed in the White Paper.

There are strong arguments made by government for its increasing intervention into post school education/learning. In addition to the argument for equality of opportunity, the other main argument in policy documents is for economic development. The argument here is that highly skilled workers are needed for national economic development, in particular to compete successfully in a new global market for goods and services. Highly skilled workers (so the argument goes) depend on vocationally oriented education/training for the development of their skills and knowledge, so education/training must provide them. This again is not a new argument, as it has been there almost since the inception of state funded education in the UK. However, the argument now is that there is a new, knowledge-based economy where skills in information technology hold the key to operating successfully. In reality, these perceived economic needs are the drivers for the current thrust of WP and LL policies, and not equality of opportunity. Scott (1995, 2000) suggests that historically, educational policy has always been driven by these two needs firstly, equality of opportunity and secondly the economic imperative. There is always a tension between the two and the economic imperative generally surfaces when there is a perception that education has failed to deliver. Such policies can be regarded as examples of 'governing by reaction' to economic crisis, implying a short-term reactionary stance. A similar view can be applied to policies now being put forward to introduce citizenship through national curricula. This is an attempt to reverse the perceived declining support for democracy, as indicated by decreasing numbers of voters in local and national elections. The solution to the problem is seen to reside in educating people to understand democracy and citizenship!

Whether or not government interventions into post school education and training can work is a question that remains to be answered. Practitioners, those who are responsible for the practices of teaching and learning hold the key to the answer. Whilst many are likely to be

sympathetic in theory to policies that extend equality of opportunity (whether it be to vocationally oriented provision or not), are they likely to embrace the changes required in practice? On the one hand, practitioners in some institutions may consider they are likely to be affected lightly by the changes implicit in the White Paper. This is because the Paper proposes a stratification of higher education where some institutions may become more research-focussed (and, by implication, remain highly selective). On the other hand, few (if any) institutions will be able to avoid the effects of intervention because the White Paper implies that equality of opportunity is likely to be a permanent feature of tertiary education policy, at least for the foreseeable future.

Curriculum

The meaning of curriculum is complex and will not be explored in this article, but the term is used here to mean curriculum at national, institutional and at programme level.

This article will now outline briefly some of the views of contemporary writers on the curriculum, specifically with respect to the links between post school curricula, high participation rates and occupational training. One view expressed by Young (1998) is that a high participation system linked to a high-skill economic system can only be achieved if curricula are congruent with both. This implies partnerships between educational institutions and 'the world of work'. There are two practical issues here for practitioners which are firstly, increasing the flexibility of student choice about what is learned and secondly, increasing the coherence of learning pathways, some of which are likely to take place outside of educational institutions. These two issues seem to contradict each other, however the task of bringing them together is not (I would argue) beyond the capabilities of practitioners. The task is not just one of ensuring a seamless transition between institutional and off-site learning, but also one of serious consideration about what should be learned when students are within the walls of educational institutions. Moreover, it is here that education, based on reflective experience and a general expansion of the mind, can best take place. Questions such as how education can help in understanding 'the real world' provide the basis for such a curriculum, and these questions represent a shift away from learning about traditional academic disciplines (supply-led curricula) towards applying academic knowledge (demand-led curricula). Decisions about institution-based learning are important if the economy is to become education-led rather than education becoming economy-led (Young, op cit).

At the heart of equality of opportunity is the ideal of making the tertiary education curriculum attractive and accessible to all. Currently it is not, and one explanation may be that this is because the curricula on offer are not attractive to all. Therefore, curricula have to change. Current curriculum content and practice is controlled by practitioners (so the argument goes); future provision, if it is to be attractive to currently non-participant groups, needs to match their needs, in other words participants need to have a say in what is on offer. The issue here is one of control, and the question is whether practitioners (and the institutions in which they work) are prepared to relinquish this control to others. This happens already (to some extent) in vocational areas such as medicine, engineering and initial teacher training but these are isolated areas within the entirety of post school provision. Obviously, the risk perceived with giving up curriculum control is likely to be a major concern to institutions, but there are precedents.

At the heart of equality of opportunity is the ideal of making the curriculum for adult learning attractive and accessible to all throughout their lifetimes. Currently it is not and evidence from the Dearing Report (DfEE 1977) and others (Sargent, 2000) indicate that current patterns of participation for adults reflect those of young people. In other words, the less affluent tend to be under represented and older adults are under represented too. There is also evidence to indicate that the significant numbers of adults enrolled in educational institutions represent the tip of an iceberg of demand for adult learning (DfEE 1997). Many more adults become engaged or would wish to be engaged in provision that is more flexible than is currently available in educational institutions. Examples of such demands include short courses (often difficult to offer), a variety of topics (often outside of institutional provision) and non-accredited courses

(often prohibitively expensive if state support is not available). Private providers, professional bodies, the voluntary sector, community groups and others fill the gap between supply and demand. If educational institutions were to work in partnership with such organisations, along the lines suggested by Young (above), then educational institutions could become more involved in this aspect of lifelong learning.

Practical issues

What then lies at the heart of the changes that are required if practitioners in educational institutions are to embrace WP and LL? In essence, these revolve around the curriculum, which, in its broadest sense, means the overall rationale for the educational programmes of institutions. Briefly stated these requirements can be summarised as

Flexibility of provision, which incorporates the demands of students (particularly those currently under represented such as those with disabilities, older adults etc) of employers (both public and private), the voluntary sector and other community based organisations, within a robust quality assurance framework

Serious consideration as to the core purposes and practices of tertiary and adult education, in the light of socio-economic and demographic changes

Substantial investment in the initial and continuing professional development of all involved in WP and LL curricula, with some emphasis on developing new forms of IT based learning

The above requirements are adapted from Watson and Taylor (1999), and they reflect the themes outlined on page 2 (above). The requirements may seem theoretical and detached from the reality of practice, but when translated into practice they influence the attitudes, values and beliefs of practitioners. The list of questions (below) is adapted from Reid (1999) who outlines the factors affecting the curriculum of any educational institution. It may be useful to consider these factors in terms of an institution or educational programme with which you are familiar.

- 1 What are the stocks of knowledge, ideas, styles and models of organisations available, from which the institution selects its ways of working, which are reflected in its curriculum model(s)? (In other words, is it a commercial/ business model; an elite/selective model; is it mainly an undergraduate model, and so on?)
- 2 What is the nature of the students it receives?
- 3 What is the destination of these students?
- 4 What is the influence of other organisations that channels students towards the institution (schools, colleges, employers, community etc)?
- 5 What is the strength of the boundary around the institution?
- 6 What is the congruence within the institution between all three of the
 - *expressed meanings-values-norms of the institution (e.g. the mission statement, admissions criteria etc)
 - *physical and other manifestations of meanings-values-norms (e.g. award ceremonies, institutional literature)
 - *processes of interaction that underpin curriculum delivery (e.g. admissions procedures, teaching/learning, on-going course support, assessment, models of 'the ideal student', the nature of interaction between students and staff, and so on)?

- 7 What is the congruence between the activities of the institution and the demands of external forces (e.g. socio-economic factors and the state)?

Once you have attempted to answer these questions, you may wish to consider what the answers would be if the institution/programme were to be committed totally to WP and/or LL (refer to pages 2 and 7 for outlines of some themes). By comparing the answers for both exercises, you can get some indication of the changes needed in moving from the present to a future state. You may also wish to consider some of the staff development implications for such changes.

Reid makes the point that curriculum change is difficult (if not impossible) unless there is a balance between the factors listed in 6 (above) and each of the remaining six factors. On an institutional level, such changes represent significant challenges indeed. At programme level, such changes are difficult if done in isolation, because the effort involved in going against institutional norms is difficult to sustain.

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