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Lifelong Learning: Romance, Evidence, Implementation?

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Paper: Lifelong Learning: Romance, Evidence, Implementation?

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Abstract:

This paper asks if there is evidence that implementation of a lifelong learning agenda in Ireland has progressed in the decade since the 1995 European Year of Lifelong Learning. It tries to answer the question by analysis of over forty documents related to lifelong learning produced since 1984. It concludes that while there is now much research-based knowledge and much convergence of opinion and policy on the main themes to be addressed, there has been indifferent progress and that persistent challenges remain.

I was very pleased to be invited by my colleagues in the DIT Faculty of Engineering to contribute to this important conference on apprentice training.

The subject I have been asked to address is a broad one, and indeed it is sometimes difficult to discuss education and training at present without contextualising such discussions in the wider context of national and European policies and practices of a lifelong learning framework.

It is probably obvious to us by now that lifelong learning is both an educational concept and a policy position. As a policy position it is relatively easy to express lifelong learning in terms of actions and measures. As a concept it is less easy to fix on a constant, agreed meaning that is applicable across all European realities and contexts, or even across all education and training sectors at a national level. Even if 'lifelong learning' is sometimes a slippery concept it is reasonable to ask if over the ten years since the publication of the EU Commission White Paper '*Towards a Learning Society*' in 1995, we can claim that the lifelong learning agenda has been firmly fixed at the centre of EU education and training policies and programmes.

The rounds of Socrates-Grundtvig programmes for higher education (HE) and the Leonardo de Vinci programmes for vocational education and training (VET) in which many of us continue to participate, have indeed contributed hugely to extending our understanding of how an integrated and synthesised concept of education and training serves us better than a diffused approach. We would know less without such research and piloting.

But has progress been made at an acceptable pace?

Mid-way in the decade of lifelong learning, in 2001, the EU did not think so, and urged more accelerated implementation of the key ideas of lifelong learning and articulated them in the document '*Towards a Europe of Knowledge: making an EU area of lifelong learning a reality*'. At that stage too, not all education commentators and practitioners were convinced that anything real had been achieved. For instance, Frank Coffield, in his introduction to the second volume of the research reports, '*Differing Visions of a Learning Society*', claimed that the EU plan for lifelong learning was still in the 'romance' stage with little proof that we had moved to research-based 'evidence' or to 'implementation'. He claimed that lifelong learning as an over-arching concept for EU education and training policies was

so seriously under-theorised and under-researched that it seems a rather underdeveloped candidate to play the role of a panacea for the economic and democratic problems of Europe.

Coffield further claimed the lifelong learning is a safe, middle class view of learning

which is removed from the clash of conflicting views and interests, and which is promulgated by those who appear never to have studied, never have experienced poverty, exclusion or unemployment. It is enough to turn even well motivated learners off learning for life.

Coffield was plainly arguing for thorough and robust research evidence to inform the implementation of lifelong learning, rather than having such implementation based on romantic rhetoric, 'political convictions or armchair musings'.

To some extent, Coffield's concerns were expressed in less strident terms in the EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning 2001, acknowledging that member states had made little progress towards implementation of what had been widely agreed as policy objectives years earlier. The Memorandum stressed the six basis messages of the role of lifelong learning, summarised by Field (2002) as follows:

- *New basic skills for all, including social competence, enterprise and foreign languages, which the Commission argues to be as necessary today as more conventional basic skill, such as literacy, numeracy and IT competence of the past*
- *Higher investment in human resources*
- *Innovation in methods of teaching and learning, including wider application of new ICTs*
- *Recognition of learning, including a greater value on learning from experience and in informal settings*
- *Rethinking the role of career guidance and educational advice, with a focus on locally accessible sources of information*
- *Bringing learning and learners closer together, both through ITC applications and the development of local opportunities.*

Field blamed the slow pace of lifelong learning implementation on the fact that education and training policies tend to divide along national fault lines where legal responsibility for education and training policies remains within the *direct* control of member states, with EU influences being more *indirect*. Field also stressed that the EU focus on the mobility of workers is not a 'real' issue of immediate urgency, when the reality is that most adults with family and work responsibilities are not free to be mobile. It is interesting that two years later, following the EU conference, '*Towards 2010: Common Themes and Approaches across Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training in Europe*' during the Irish Presidency, the conference background research report 'found that the goal of promoting mobility of learners and workers throughout Europe has informed much recent European policy development in education and training'!

The possible interpretations of 'mobility', both as a concept and as a mechanism, is an interesting consideration in any discussion about lifelong learning. Interpretations should surely include 'mobility' across and within accreditation frameworks *in situ* as well as trans-frontier mobility across spaces and places! For a small, island nation this former is probably the notion of mobility that is of immediacy and urgency.

So, from the perspective of this conference, how have we in Ireland travelled on the journey to lifelong learning, through Coffield's romance stage and research-evidence stage to an implementation stage?

To get a general picture in response to this question, I trawled a selection of *circa* thirty-five Irish documents and eight EU documents which relate to lifelong learning as a concept and as policy which are listed in the Appendix to this paper. The list starts with the 1984 Kenny Report on Lifelong Learning and ends with the 26 April 2005 statement of the Minister for Education and Science on the implementation of some recommendations from the OECD Review Report on Higher Education which include dimensions of the lifelong learning agenda. The aspects of the documents noted in the analysis indicate philosophical and policy emphasis, keeping in mind that the economic and social context of the mid-1980s was significantly different to the context of the late 1990s and indeed hugely different to the current context of economic growth and growing multiculturalism in 2005.

What is immediately obvious from the documents is that there has been little or no emphasis on 'mobility' of Irish learners in the trans-frontier, outward mobility sense, contrary to the emphasis on mobility during the Irish EU Presidency last year. What is not there either is any articulated awareness of, or provision for, non-national Irish residents who need our systems of lifelong learning to respond to their trans-frontier mobility!

Consistent and persistent themes since the 1980s, however, are relatively easily identified in the documents, even if the emphasis changed among and between sectors and stakeholders during that time. The most constant themes are as follows:

1. **Educational guidance** of adults available locally and for all categories.
2. **Access** to affordable, locally available education and training as a right, for personal growth, employment and civic participation. Mechanisms recommended, piloted and mainstreamed to differing degrees include literacy programmes, return to learning and foundation programmes, and bridging studies.
3. Recognition of Prior (Experiential) Learning (**AP(E)L** and **RPL**) for initial entry, access at advanced standing, credit accumulation, and exemptions.
4. **Up-skilling** and **re-skilling** opportunities for workers.
5. Flexible **progression routes** within FE/VET and HE.
6. Improved **methods** of education and training programme delivery including widely available part-time delivery, wider use of technology, distance learning, work-based learning, contract learning, modularisation, credit systems, and the use of learning outcomes.
7. A **culture** of support and encouragement in HE for all learners.
8. **Inclusion** of minority groups and interests.
9. **Partnership** models and unitary commitment for programme design and for accreditation systems.
10. Emphasis on education for social cohesion, on prevention of persistent poverty and on **civic participation in participatory democracy**.

So, how well are we doing?

If we use Coffield's analytical framework of 'romance, evidence, implementation' stages of lifelong learning it would seem that our tradition of adult education pre-ceded the age of lifelong learning in terms of research-based practice and concerns about the role of locally-based education in capacity building for social and economic sustainability, as well as for the advancement of the individual in society.

From the perspective of this conference it might be valid to say that the biggest change in apprentice training has been the move to the standards-based model: a model which is very much in line with the EU/Cedefop thinking regarding mobility and up-skilling. While there may be concerns about the impact of moving to an outcomes-based, competence-based model of teaching and learning in both VET and HE, there is no doubt the debate on the issues is generating greater understanding of education and training theories and a greater transparency in systems.

As a rounding up comment on the documentation of the last two decades, I would seriously question if adult education and lifelong learning discourse here ever **have** been significantly 'romantic', naive or lacking in robust research evidence. Quite the contrary! I would argue that we have researched and piloted key concepts and mechanisms over and over again, with both national funding and under EU programmes. There could be a case to argue that lifelong as a discourse and as a policy agenda has clouded much previous progress, and perhaps indeed has stalled implementation of its ideas while sectors re-position themselves within the new lifelong learning framework. This is certainly the case for community education and perhaps is somewhat true for apprentice training as well.

Policy developments and development of principles and guidelines for FE and HE are not scarce. Implementation of national policies has resulted in small increases in numbers of adults in FE and HE and a stage of almost universal access to tertiary education for school leavers, with good regionally distributed provision. This may or may not be a direct result of lifelong learning policy *per se*.

What still remains to be addressed, and is currently being addressed, especially by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), is the rigidity of systems and the difficulties faced by individuals in taking advantage of lifelong learning opportunities as articulated in EU policy documents. One such rigid system is apprentice training. Moving that system to a more fluid system of training, to work-based learning and mixed assessment modes is now one of the main remaining challenges for the NQAI, and one which will be followed with much interest by academics and learners over the next two or three years.

I would like finally to draw attention to Minister Hanafin's statement of 25 April on the Government's acceptance of many of the findings of the recent OECD Review Report.

From the perspective of this conference, the section of the statement of most interest is as follows:

'Minister Hanafin outlined some of the key priorities that will guide a national strategy for higher education. These include the need for further improving participation and access, improving the quality of teaching and learning, supporting lifelong learning, ... No one can quantify the wider importance and benefits of higher education which provide independent intellectual insights and enrich human understanding''

This section picks up many of the themes identified in the main literature since 1985, and if it is backed by considerable resources, as seems to be promised by the Minister, it can only be good news for apprentice progression and for possible changes in the apprentice paradigm of

learning, teaching and assessment. It is interesting that there is no mention at all of worker mobility! But it is certainly heartening that there is an emphasis on the wider remit of higher education in maintaining both individual development and societal sustainability and progress.

So it looks that for the immediate future we can look forward to both systems changes and culture changes in tandem with the structural and financing changes implied in the OECD Report and which the Government seems to be adopting.

I hope the issues raised in this paper will in some way frame your discussion to-day and contribute to the debate on the many interesting topics on your agenda.

Comments and questions are welcome.

APPENDIX

Selected Reports/Acts/Documents with a relevance for Lifelong Learning

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Report/Act/Regulation</i> | <i>Aspect of Lifelong Learning</i> |
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| 1984 | Report of the Kenny Commission on Adult Education: <i>'Lifelong Learning'</i> | This report focused on the education of adults but made little real impact as it coincided with a stage of rapid expansion of primary and secondary education in a decade of financial restraint. |
| (1994 1995 | EU White Paper on Employment Policy) EU Comm. White Paper <i>'Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society'</i> EU Task Force Euro-Delphi Report: <i>'The Future Goals and Policies of Adult Education in Europe'</i> , <i>National Report for Ireland</i> | Focused on policy and institutional challenges posed by a commitment to lifelong learning especially regarding relationships between places of education and places of work, accreditation, and the training of trainers. A sixteen country survey on the needs of adult learners and the recommended policies for future provision. |
| 1995 | HEA publication: <i>'Access to College: Policies of Continuity and Change'</i> (P. Clancy) | Stressed that second-chance education should not be seen as a luxury that can be attended to when the demographic trends are favourable, but that it is both a social justice and an economic necessity. |
| 1995 | White Paper: <i>'Charting our Education Future'</i> | Recommended lifelong learning and continuous training for updating of skills, but focused on school-based education. |
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| 1996 | EU Comm. Designated Year of Lifelong Learning | Stimulated research activities, discourse and debate. |
| 1996 | OECD: <i>'Lifelong Learning for all'</i> | Emphasised the responsibilities of institutions in facilitating the individual's educational progress throughout the lifecycle. |
| 1997 | OECD: <i>'Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society'</i> | Found that Irish adults had undesirably high levels of literacy difficulties. |
| 1997 | White Paper: <i>Growth, Competitiveness and Employment</i> | Emphasised that up to 40% of early school-leavers have no qualification. |
| 1997 | Report of the Commission on the Points System | Stressed that there is a need for more opportunities for students to attend higher education on a part-time basis and that funds should be available for such students. |
| 1997 | White Paper on Human Resource Development | Emphasised the need to provide opportunities for training and up-skilling of adults in the workforce for future economic growth. |
| 1997 | The Universities Act | Did not significantly alter the divide between the universities and other higher education providers. |
| 1998 | Green Paper: <i>'Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning'</i> | Emphasised the need to shape a national lifelong learning agenda in combating disadvantage, in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty, in personal and cultural development and in enhancing national competitiveness. |
| 1999 | NUIM Conference: <i>'Higher Education: the Challenge of Lifelong Learning'</i> | Critical papers on university policy emphasised the need for cultural and structural change in HE. |
| 1999 | CORI response to the Green Paper: <i>'Social Transformation and Lifelong Learning'</i> | Emphasised the need for a social justice agenda in lifelong learning. |
| 1999 | AONTAS response to The Green Paper; <i>'Making an Impact'</i> | Emphasised the professionalisation of adult education, accreditation of experiential learning, development of structures for adult education and the development of community education for personal and social change. |

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| 1999 | Community and Voluntary Accreditation Forum Report: <i>'Towards an Integrated Accreditation Framework'</i> | Recommended a radical change in systems of accreditation which would involve a partnership between providers, other stakeholders and the community and voluntary sector. |
| 1999 | NESC: <i>'Opportunities, Challenges and Capacities for Change'</i> | Emphasised the centrality of lifelong learning in the social and economic strategies of any country. While it emphasised the importance of lifelong learning for underpinning employability and adaptability, it considered learning to be essential both for personal fulfilment and for the labour market. To achieve this it required improved systems of certification and accreditation, and expansion of progression pathways. It stressed the need to acknowledge the importance of the concept of the learning society and of lifelong learning in planning for dynamic national competitiveness. |
| 1999 | Report of the Commission on the Points System | Recommended quotas in higher education for mature students, improved methods of delivery, access courses and support systems. |
| 1999 | Report from the Information Society Commission: <i>'Building a Capacity for Change; Lifelong Learning in the Information Society'</i> | Recommended increased use of PRL, WBL, with capacity building at local level. |
| 1999 | Report of the Review Committee on post-secondary Education and Training Places | Recommended increased flexibility in access to further and higher education, increased recognition of the importance of opportunities for part-time study, distance learning, workplace delivery and mechanisms for the accreditation of prior learning and work-based learning. |
| 1999 | Qualifications (Education and Training) Act | Established the NQAI, FETAC and HETAC. |
| 1999 | WIT Integra Report: <i>'Looking for Something in the Dark: educational guidance provision for adults'</i> | Emphasised the need for formal national provision of educational guidance for all adults who seek it. |
| 1999 | HEA Final Report of the Technical Working Group on Outreach Centres of Higher Education | Recommends mixed mode outreach centres with strong local partnerships |

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| | Institutes | catering for not fewer than 800 FE and HE students each with extensive use of technologies for delivery. |
| 2000 | HEA Report on Systems of Open and Distance Learning | Recommended well-founded introduction of distance learning technologies in association with outreach and research-based good traditional practice. |
| 2000 | White Paper on Ault Education: <i>'Learning for Life'</i> | Recommended <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National Adult Learning Council (NALC) - Local Adult Learning Boards with strong VEC links (LALBs). - A National Adult Guidance and Counselling Service - AP(E)L and WBL - Services for minorities. |
| 2000 | 2000-2006 National Development Plan | Set out an integrated programme of education, training and infrastructural measures to promote social inclusion, employment, communications, sustainability and regional balance. This included allocation of state funds for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an adult guidance service - third level access mechanisms - educational equality initiatives. |
| 2000 | Coffield: <i>Differing Visions of the Learning Society</i> | Report of research projects in the UK |
| 2000 | Programme for Prosperity and Fairness | Set out a range of actions aimed at promoting a socially inclusive, adaptable, knowledge-based society by removing access barriers to participation and by addressing blockages in apprentice training. |
| 2000 | National Employment Action Plan | Set out a framework for labour market reform including educational guidance, educational support and placement for work experience. |
| 2001 | EU Commission Communication: <i>'Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality'</i> | 'Lifelong learning should encompass the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning. ... including active citizenship, personal |

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| | | <p>fulfilment and social inclusion as well as employment-related aspects' p.3</p> <p>It stressed a partnership approach, adequate resourcing, focus on the needs of the learner, facilitation of access, valuing of all learning and an information and guidance service for adults.</p> <p>Socrates-Grundtvig HE programmes and Leonardo FE programmes encouraged to focus on lifelong learning.</p> |
| 2001 | Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education | <p>Recommends foundation courses for adults, Summer access courses, recognition of access courses for entry, national transparent access mechanism for mature students, AP(E)L and adult guidance.</p> |
| 2003 | NQAI: <i>Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners</i> | <p>Commitment to principles, operational guidelines and monitoring.</p> |
| 2004 | AONTAS Report ' <i>Community Education 2004</i> ' | <p>Offers rationale for community education and recommends that its principles and philosophies be maintained in adult education.</p> |
| 2004 | CIPD research report: ' <i>Who Learns at Work?</i> ' | <p>Key finding that workers with no qualifications are less likely to be offered training opportunities.</p> |
| 2004 | EU Common European Principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning, final proposals from Working Group H ' <i>Making learning attractive and strengthening links between education, work and society</i> ' | <p>Offers glossary of terms, principles and quality assurance mechanisms in somewhat techno-rational language.</p> |
| 2004 | EU Irish Presidency Conference Background Research Paper and Final Conference Report: ' <i>Towards 2010, Common Themes and Principles across HE and VET in Europe</i> ' | <p>Emphasised the need for vocational training for mobility of workers across Europe: (EuroPass, European CV, MobiliPass, Certificate/Diploma Supplements, European language Portfolio).</p> |
| 2004 | HEA Report: ' <i>Towards a National Strategy: initial review of HEA targeted initiatives to widen access to higher education</i> ' | <p>Found that greater access had been achieved for students with a disability, mature students and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.</p> <p>Found a need to convince HE that equity and quality can co-exist.</p> |

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| | | Recommended that HE should widen its approaches to learning and teaching. | |
| 2005 | HEA Action Plan 2005-2007: <i>'Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland'</i> | Included a national policy and initiatives framework, wider routes for access and progression, a broader range of teaching and learning practices in HE, supporting resources and encouraging research. | |
| 2005 | Report of the Forum on the Workplace of the Future: <i>'Working to our Advantage'</i> | Emphasised Ireland's transition to a knowledge economy with work places that are agile, customer centred, knowledge intensive, responsive to employee needs, networked, highly productive, involved and participatory, continually learning, proactively diverse. This will require commitment to workplace innovation, capacity for change, development of future skills (increased investment in training, facilitation of continuous learning, ongoing up-skilling and re-skilling, three-way commitment to lifelong learning among government, employers and employees, an integrated approach to skills development), access to opportunities, and good quality in working life. | |
| 2005 | OECD Review Report on Higher Education in Ireland for the HEA | Emphasised the need for greater emphasis on science and technology on HE and the restructuring of funding mechanisms and the creation of a single tertiary education authority. | |
| 2005 | Council of Europe Year of Education for Citizenship | Joint initiative with the EU in promoting the maintenance of civic society and the active involvement of young people in participatory democracy. | |
| 2005 | Minister for Education and Science, statement on implementation of recommendations of the OECD Review Report | Emphasises the Government commitment to access, widening participation, improving learning and teaching cultures, and to lifelong learning. | |

Reference not listed above

Field, J. (2002) *Promoting European Dimensions in Lifelong Learning*, U.K.: NIACE