2. ADULT LEARNING: FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM

The previous chapter showed the key role of the European Commission in developing adult learning policy. This chapter explores the wider intellectual and policy background to its work in this field. Over the past two decades, the Commission has appropriated – though it has also played a part in developing – a language related to adult learning which itself has a long history. This can be examined at a number of levels: from educational institutions and movements across the globe to the thinking of national governments and international organisations. This chapter examines adult learning’s transition from a relatively marginal field to a prominent one in the language of the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament. In doing so, it explores how the terminology evolved, how a lifelong learning agenda grew, and how it gradually changed in focus.

DEVELOPMENT OF THINKING ON LIFELONG LEARNING

Though some analysts (Jug 1997, Doukas 2003) have argued that adult education started in the Hellenistic period, citing Socrates (5th century B.C.), and in ancient China (Confucius 6-5th centuries B.C.), European history generally traces the development of adult education to 17th-century thinkers and pedagogues (e.g. Jan Amos Komensky-Comenius, Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig) who recognised the problem of illiteracy and sought to overcome it through the education of adults. One can thus argue that the idea of lifelong learning has been present on and off in pedagogical thinking for centuries. This chapter discusses the development of the idea, from ‘lifelong education’ as seen in the Faure Report, Learning to Be (Faure et al., 1972) to ‘lifelong learning’ as embraced by the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The beginnings of lifelong learning in the contemporary world can be traced back to the notion embraced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – to meet the challenges of a changing world – in the 1960s. As Wain (2001) put it, referring to the second International Conference on Adult Education, held in 1960:

UNESCO declared ‘lifelong education’ as the master concept for all its educational planning, policy-making, and practice for the future. . . . New developments emerging out of subsequent experiments, pilot projects, studies
and seminars had resulted in a crystallizing and clarifying of the concept of ‘lifelong education’ (Wain, 2001: 183).

Wain maintains that the shift can be seen in the documents of UNESCO’s International Committee for the Advancement of Adult Education. Approximately every 12 years UNESCO organises an International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA: from the French Conférence International sur l’Enseignement des Adultes). The Montreal conference of 1965 represented, in Wain’s view, the turning point in adult education. Its impact, thinking and recommendations, have been reflected, felt and embraced in adult education programmes across the world. At that time, the notion of lifelong education came to the fore.

_Learning to Be_, commonly known as the Faure Report, commissioned by UNESCO, underlined that the “concept of . . . lifelong education (all through life as well as during childhood and adolescence) is emerging clearly as a conscious aspiration” (Faure et al., 1972: 48). In the same year, Faure, in his article _Education and the Destiny of Man_, stressed two fundamental concepts: lifelong education and the educational community. If learning is the affair of a “lifetime and of a whole society, then it is necessary to look beyond the reform of ‘educational systems’ and think of an educational community. That is the real educational challenge of tomorrow” (Faure, 1972: 9). As Schuetze (2006: 290) observed, Faure’s notion “formulated the philosophical-political concept of a humanistic, democratic and emancipatory system of learning opportunities for everybody, independent of class, race or financial means, and independent of the age of learner”.

As Wain points out, this ‘maximalist’ concept was not universally accepted. Bagnall, for instance, saw three models of lifelong education: (1) the preparation of individuals for the management of their adult lives; (2) the distribution of education throughout the lifespan of the individual; and (3) the identification of education with the whole of life (Bagnall, 1990: 186). Antikainen (2009), drawing on Dehmel (2006) and Rubenson (2006), recognised many discourses and narratives but suggested they are usually divided into three phases and points of view; the first two are more elaborated. The first phase is represented by the humanistic view: that lifelong education should “aim . . . to enable man to ‘become himself’, i.e. the whole person” (Antikainen, 2009: 4). Such education also brings advances in knowledge that foster and emphasise human development. According to Antikainen (2009: 4), Faure proposed “lifelong education as the master concept for educational policies in the years to come”. The second phase, Antikainen suggested, is represented by the more economic viewpoint taken by both the OECD and the European Union. Their concern was for the development “of the knowledge economy and the knowledge society due to globalisation. Learning and work or employability and education became the . . . central issues” (Antikainen, 2009: 4). This has much in common, as Schuetze (2006) pointed out, with another concept developed by the OECD: ‘recurrent education’, education beyond compulsory schooling organised to articulate with recurrent periods of work and other social activity. This too focused on the need to maintain individuals’ skills and update them to retain competitive
edge. The third phase, on this argument, is the hoped-for realisation that the human being is not only ‘homo economicus’ but also a person with personal, social and cultural goals and should be offered opportunities in each and every sphere of their interest.

According to Wain, the notion of lifelong education receded into a more pragmatic phase (2001: 186) even within UNESCO, giving way to the lifelong and life-wide prospect of ‘lifelong learning’, which set the path for non-formal education and informal learning to be recognised, and enabled the emergence of a ‘learning society’ which, ‘imbued with the spirit of scientific humanism’, would enhance “the quality of life of both individuals and their communities in a fast changing, increasingly technologized, world” (ibid.: 184). Although broader political factors played a part in this (it was said to be imposing a hegemonic Western model of the learning society on international discourse, and there were differing views among different UNESCO spheres of interest: south and north, east and west, developed and developing countries), it was also “because of . . . ‘bureaucratie’ and political opposition to it from within the organization itself” (ibid.: 186).

From lifelong education to lifelong learning

Why was lifelong learning, in its ‘economistic’ version, embraced by these organisations? The principal factor appears to be the perceived value of human capital in a competitive and globalised world. With changes to the global economy since the 1970s, beginning with the oil crises of 1973 and 1979, and intensified by growing unemployment and eroding job security, decreasing demand for low-skilled labour, and increased demand for highly qualified workers, lifelong learning “has gradually come to be appropriated more and more within the narrower instrumentalist discourse of further training and professional development” (Wain, 2001: 187). With globalisation (arguably a synonym for neo-liberalism), the growth of the internet and other information and communication technologies, knowledge has become more and more important, to the point of being regarded as a main factor of production. As Castells (2000: 52) has suggested, the whole planet is now, for the first time in history, “either capitalist or highly dependent” on capitalist processes (as cited in Riddell & Weedon, 2012: 2). In this light, it is no surprise that ‘lifelong learning’ discourse was re-introduced and stressed: knowledge embedded within human beings has been perceived as the predominant, if not the sole, source of competitive advantage.

The Rome conference on Lifelong Learning – A Survival Concept for the 21st Century, the ‘First Global Conference on Lifelong Learning’, organised by the Brussels-based European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI) in November-December 1994 – and supported by the European Commission – stressed the multilevel importance of lifelong learning. In the conference material lifelong learning was defined as:

. . . the Development of Human Potential through 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 (Ball & Stewart, 1995: 2, emphasis in original text; see also Longworth & Davies, 1994).

Human potential was thus deployed as something to be acquired and possessed: ‘human capital’, as it has subsequently been developed in European documents.

In UNESCO’s later paper, An Action Agenda for Lifelong Learning for the 21st Century (1995) lifelong learning was defined in the same way as ELLI defined it. Over the following couple of years two developments played a crucial part in the adoption of the lifelong learning idea. The first was OECD’s paper Lifelong Learning for All (1996), presented to a meeting of education ministers: in adopting it, the ministers accepted its goal of “aiming for Lifelong Learning for all, marrying the economic rationale with wider societal objectives” (Schuetze, 2006: 292). The OECD paper’s rationales for lifelong learning were fivefold: the role of knowledge, information and ideas; the speed of technological change; the inadequacy of redistribution policies and changing and flexible lifestyles; active employment policies; and the need to address the challenges to social cohesion posed by those who miss out on educational opportunities.

The second development was UNESCO’s CONFINTEA V, held in Hamburg in 1997. Support for lifelong learning was re-affirmed by all delegates. A quarter of a century after Learning to Be, the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, chaired by Jacques Delors, concluded:

The concept of learning throughout life is the key that gives access to the twenty-first century. It goes beyond the traditional distinctions between initial and continuing education. It links up with another concept, that of the learning society, in which everything affords an opportunity for learning and fulfilling one’s potential. (Delors et al., 1996: 38).

The Commission’s report, Learning: The Treasure Within, emphasised the importance of four ‘pillars’ of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be (ibid.: 37).

The Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning denoted lifelong learning as a process of adult learning which,

. . . encompasses both formal and continuing education, non-formal learning and the spectrum of informal and incidental learning available in a multicultural learning society, where theory- and practice-based approaches are recognized (UNESCO, 1997: 1).

This is similar in many ways to the definition adopted by the European Commission in its Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (CEC, 2000).

A contrast is often made between Faure’s (1972) maximalist, humanistic and liberating view of lifelong education, with a more pragmatic, economistic, perspective – adopted by international organisations such as the OECD, the EU, and the World Bank – tending to treat lifelong learning more instrumentally, as a means
to achieve employability. However, the EU’s view has not always been so narrow: its *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (CEC, 2000), for instance, also stressed lifelong learning’s role in social cohesion, active citizenship and social inclusion. Recent research has shown that when educational institutions have adopted the idea of lifelong learning, they have often used it more as a ‘catch phrase’, to be in line with current policy. Collins’ observation remains valid: “the term lifelong learning is routinely incorporated into conventional curricular discourse” (1998: 49), but the concept is not central to how curricula are organised.

**THE RISE OF A LIFELONG LEARNING AGENDA IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Education came to the fore in the European Commission’s interests only with the *Maastricht Treaty* (TEU, 1992; see also Holford et al., 2008; Milana, this volume; Rasmussen, this volume). Previously it had been a more marginal concern. The first enlargement (1974) extended the scope for cooperation in education to some extent, but re-emphasised the need to work within the traditions and policies of each country (Holford et al., 2008). However, with growing international competition, there seems to have been a realisation of education’s potential as a tool for economic development (cf. Malan, 1987). The Commission began to show interest particularly in vocationally-oriented areas of lifelong learning such as school-to-work transitions and ‘adult anti-illiteracy campaigns’ (Holford et al., 2008: 46).

Soon after the *Maastricht Treaty* (TEU, 1992) gave the EU a basis for promoting education, the ELLI organised a conference on lifelong learning in Rome (1994). It was attended by all the major proponents of lifelong learning. Two years later, 1996 was proclaimed the ‘European Year of Lifelong Learning’. It aimed to draw attention to the need for cooperation, especially ‘between education and training structures and the business community’ – with a particular focus on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), now a European Commission ‘fil rouge’ – to establish a ‘European area of education and training through the academic and vocational recognition of qualifications within the European Union’,1 and to contribute to equality of opportunities. Reflecting nearly three years later, the Commission concluded that, as a result of the ‘European Year’,

Lifelong learning has now become central to policy debate throughout the European Union. It is a cornerstone of the reform of the structural funds and the Community’s employment policy.2

There is room for debate as to how far the member states endorsed the idea of lifelong learning, but they most certainly embraced the funds which the Year of Lifelong Learning brought. The measures were implemented on a decentralised basis, in partnership with bodies identified by member states: 550 projects, encompassing approximately 5,000 events (publications, conferences, seminars, and the like), and a budget of 34 million European Currency Unit.3
According to the Commission’s own Report, the Year of Lifelong Learning had a ‘major political impact’ at the European level. It put lifelong learning at centre-stage, involving ‘new players’ in a field previously ‘reserved for the specialists’. It also stimulated closer cooperation between various authorities (including government departments at different levels), educational providers and business. However the EU’s contribution was also marked, it claimed – this was not universally accepted (cf. Boshier, 1998; Field, 2006; Holford et al., 2008) – by its “broad concept embracing a ‘cradle to grave’ approach which does not subordinate learning to economic imperatives and gives full place to such issues as personal growth, participation in the democratic decision-making process, recreational learning and active ageing”.

In the light of the European Year of Lifelong Learning and its impact, the Council of the European Communities made “its own distinct contribution to the active realization of a strategy for lifelong learning” (CEU, 1996: §7). While acknowledging the contributions of UNESCO, the OECD and the Council of Europe to the idea, its strategy embraced lifelong learning across the whole life span and stressed that initial education and training should embrace not only core skills, but a broad base of knowledge, skills, attitudes and experiences to encourage and support “learning through life” (ibid.: 7). This endeavour would cover: school systems; economic and social areas; local community development through education and training; continuing education and training; pathways and links between general and vocational education; access, certification, and accreditation; teachers and adult educators and the role of new technologies (ibid.: 7-8). Stemming from this strategy, a European-wide debate ensued on new basic skills: information technology, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills. The choice of skills was undoubtedly affected by the International Adult Literacy Survey (carried out in 1995 by the OECD and Statistics Canada). To promote digital literacy the Lisbon strategy (CEU, 2000, §26) envisaged a European diploma (with decentralised certification) for basic IT skills, and also aimed to give:

... higher priority to lifelong learning as a basic component of the European social model, including by encouraging agreements between the social partners on innovation and lifelong learning; by exploiting the complementarity between lifelong learning and adaptability through flexible management of working time and job rotation; and by introducing a European award for particularly progressive firms. (CEU, 2000, §29)

Progress towards these goals was to be ‘benchmarked’ (ibid.). Circumstances were calling for further expansion of the idea of lifelong learning.

EXPANDING THE IDEA OF LIFELONG LEARNING

From 1996 a series of crucial documents was adopted by various European bodies, from the European Council to the European Parliament, paving the way to a ‘learning society’ based on lifelong learning as a key lever and means of survival. If
the key characteristic of lifelong education as conceptualised in the 1970s (and used in the UNESCO vocabulary until CONFINTEA V) was its humanistic dimension, when lifelong learning emerged in ‘national and international policies in the 1990s, the emphasis was firmly on aiding economic performance, whether individual or societal’ (Holford et al., 2008: 46), within a human capital approach. As Walters (1997) noted, human capital has been closely associated with neo-liberal ideology; this approach can be seen in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (CEC, 2000). In its move towards a knowledge-based society, Europe needed access to up-to-date information, knowledge, and skills for its competiveness and to improve its workforce’s adaptability and employability. The neo-liberal paradigm was also reflected in the emphasis on individuals’ need ‘to plan their own lives’ and learn. In the discussion of the Memorandum, many pointed out that, despite some mention of equipping citizens to participate fully in democratic life, the document was underpinned by a homo economicus approach. Subsequent documents proved the critics right (Van der Pas, 2003). The Memorandum was issued following the European Council at Lisbon in March 2000 – the meeting which also launched the Lisbon strategy with its strongly economic target of making “the European Union the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world” (CEU, 2000).

SYSTEMATIC WORK ON LIFELONG LEARNING

The action plan arising from the Memorandum consultation, Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality (CEC, 2001) changed the priorities, indicating a clear neoliberal agenda for economic growth through education and adult learning (cf. Holford & Mohorčič Špolar, 2012). In place of the Memorandum’s six key messages (new basic skills for all; more investment in human resources; innovation in teaching and learning; valuing learning; rethinking guidance and counselling and bringing learning closer to home) it emphasised valuing learning; information, guidance and counselling; investing time and money in learning; bringing together learners and learning opportunities; basic skills and innovative pedagogy.

Under the Lisbon strategy a set of educational goals, discussed and endorsed through the Open Method of Coordination, led to the document Education and Training 2010 (CEU & CEC, 2004). This set out aims for the decade, as well as benchmarks and indicators to monitor how achievement. To this end a report was produced annually by the Commission showing the progress made. This soft governance has provided a ‘framework’ in which international institutions, such as the EU, can ‘adapt their arrangements as circumstances change’ (Koutidou, in press). In pursuit of the Lisbon aims, a number of policy documents emerged, including a Council Resolution on Lifelong Learning (CEU, 2002), Investing Efficiently in Education and Training: An Imperative for Europe (CEC, 2003), Adult Learning: It is Never Too Late to Learn (CEC, 2006), and Adult Learning: It is Always a Good
Time to Learn (CEC, 2007). These significantly raised the status of lifelong learning, though as Holford and his colleagues (2008: 51) stated, “there is no little ambiguity within and between the various documents” about the term.

In keeping with the emphasis established for the EU’s role in education and training by the Maastricht Treaty, and in line with the predominant thrust of international policy literature, the strong emphasis remained on the role of lifelong learning in relation to economic needs – the knowledge economy (and the knowledge society conceived as a function of the knowledge economy) (Holford et al., 2008: 51).

Implementation of lifelong learning, the Commission argued, was to be through existing processes, programmes and instruments. Additional support would be provided through the exchange of good practice and experience, and sharing of problems, ideas and priorities. Databases on good practice and on information and experience about lifelong learning at all levels were promised. Existing Commission programmes like Socrates (promoting multinational cooperation in general and higher education), Leonardo da Vinci (promoting vocational training) and Youth (policy measures and projects for youth) would also pave the way towards lifelong learning. A new programme, Grundtvig, was established, specifically for adult learners. Apart from these, various other instruments available to the Commission – such as the European Social Fund (ESF) and the ESF Community Initiative EQUAL – would be used. Progress would be measured and monitored through the use of agreed indicators and reported regularly.

Since the mid-1990s, then, the Commission has followed its agenda on lifelong learning, deviating little in either employment or educational spheres. Education and Training 2010 integrated all actions in education and training at European level, including vocational education and training (the Copenhagen Process) and higher education (the Bologna Process). In 2005 the Commission adopted the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) as a key priority.

The objective of the EQF was to facilitate the transfer and recognition of qualifications held by individual citizens (whether attained through non-formal education or informal learning) by linking qualifications systems at the national and sectoral levels and enabling them to relate to one another. Apart from encouraging recognition of learning, the EQF was intended to act as a ‘translation device’ for qualifications and thus to facilitate citizens’ mobility for work and study, alongside such schemes as Erasmus, the European Credit Transfer System and Europass.

Of the policy documents in adult education accepted since 2001, three have had particular effect on the national scene: the Commission Communications Adult Learning: It is Never Too Late to Learn (CEC, 2006) and Adult Learning: It is Always a Good Time to Learn (CEC, 2007), and the European Parliament’s Resolution on Adult Learning: It is Never Too Late to Learn (2008). Active citizenship and social cohesion, evident in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, largely disappeared from these two Commission documents. Their goals were more connected to the
economic dimensions of adult learning, which in the absence of a European view on the wider benefits of learning, are almost acceptable: other policies advocate the recognition, monitoring and economic benefits of adult learning. Both these documents advocated indicators to monitor progress. At the same time, however, they encouraged partnerships (with social partners) and saw the importance of learning beyond retirement age.6

The European Parliament’s Resolution on Adult Learning: It is Never Too Late to Learn (2008) emphasised Europe’s commitment to adult learning and education. Adult learning was ‘becoming a political priority’ and needed ‘concrete and adequate programmes, visibility, access, resources and evaluation methods’. It focused on improving adults’ motivation to participate in learning, and recognised the need for good statistical data. It also called for intergenerational and intercultural solidarity, stressed the importance of learning languages and the particular needs of groups ‘at risk’, and argued that access to higher education should be opened to a wider public. The Resolution also recognised the need to improve quality, teaching and the variety of provision, and suggested that those prepared to invest in their own learning should have a stronger employment orientation. And, as is quite common, it called for investment in programmes and qualifications to make people’s access to education and training easier.

The Council Conclusions on Adult Learning (CEU, 2008) recognised the importance of the two Commission documents (It is Never Too Late to Learn and It is Always a Good Time to Learn) and called on member states to remove barriers to participation in adult learning, “to speed the process of validation and recognition and to ensure sufficient investment in and monitoring of the field” (CEU, 2008: 10). An Annex set out specific measures for the period 2008-2010, divided into those to be undertaken “by the Commission with cooperation of the member states” and those to be undertaken by “member states with the support of the Commission” (ibid.: 12-13).

These endeavours show the Commission was systematically advocating lifelong learning in its youth, employment and adult education policies and programmes. In its progress reports, however, the Commission identified various obstacles to its aims, and in 2010 it recognised that despite a general improvement in education and training performance across the EU, the majority of benchmarks set for 2010 would not be reached: implementing “lifelong learning through formal, non-formal and informal learning, and increasing mobility, remain[ed] a challenge” (CEU & CEC, 2010: 2).

According to the Council’s conclusions on the Social dimension of education and training “education and training systems contribute[d] significantly to fostering social cohesion, active citizenship and personal fulfilment in European societies” (CEU, 2010). Increased international competitiveness would require high professional skills which could be obtained through lifelong learning as well as in traditional education and training systems. In such circumstances it was,

. . . even more important for education and training systems to raise overall attainment levels, whilst ensuring that all people, young and adult – regardless
of their socio-economic background or personal circumstances – are enabled
to develop their full potential through lifelong learning (CEU, 2010).

In May 2009 the European Council adopted a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020) (CEU, 2009). This proposed two main aims for the future of European education and training: first, the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens; and second, sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue. It also distinguished four strategic objectives:

1. Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; 2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; 3. Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; 4. Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training (CEU, 2009).

A close reading of ET2020 shows that lifelong learning is primarily used in relation to employability rather than personal development and social cohesion.

The European Council Resolution on a Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning (CEU, 2011) again stressed the importance of adult learning – along with formal, non-formal and informal learning, valuing learning, the importance of quality, learning opportunities and monitoring. It identified five priorities for adult learning in Europe for 2012-2014; four were drawn from ET2020, but one was specific to adult learning: improving the knowledge base on adult learning and monitoring the adult learning sector. These would both help establish the benefits of adult learning, and encourage citizens and governments to value it.

The Agenda for New Skills and Jobs: European Contribution Towards Full Employment encouraged ‘comprehensive lifelong learning policies’ to support employability, flexicurity and other flexible contractual arrangements in the labour market (CEC, 2010: 5). It advocated improved access to lifelong learning, targeted approaches for more vulnerable workers and enhanced stakeholder involvement and social dialogue. The idea of lifelong learning in this document has similarities to the OECD’s 1976 notion of ‘recurrent education’ – as the Agenda put it “more flexible learning pathways can facilitate transitions between the phases of work and learning, including through modularisation of learning programmes” (CEC, 2010: 5).

In these documents lifelong learning has shrunk from the ‘maximalist’ view of Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality (CEU, 2001) and ET2020 (CEU, 2009) to a far more pragmatic one (Wain, 2001). Nevertheless lifelong learning remains on the EU agenda as something which can contribute substantially to further development. As Malan wrote of educational planning policy, education is prioritised “both as an instrument of modernisation and as a factor of social cohesion” (Malan, 1987: 19).

Since economic crisis hit Europe – along with other countries – lifelong learning has become more and more instrumentalised. Though still given an important
position in policy, its focus has shifted towards areas which were seen as bringing employability, employment and income. The adult learning agenda has narrowed, concentrating on more specific areas such as basic skills, increasing the proportion of 30-34 years-olds who have completed tertiary education (to 40% by 2020), and monitoring the adult learning sector (including through the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences PIAAC). In November 2012 Rethinking Education: Investing in Skills for Better Socio-Economic Outcomes confirmed that the “broad mission of education and training encompasses objectives such as active citizenship, personal development and well-being” (CEC, 2012: 2). However, these were to go hand in hand with the need to upgrade skills for employability. Against the backdrop of sluggish economic growth and a shrinking working-age population, “the most pressing challenges for member states are to address the needs of the economy and focus on solutions to tackle fast-rising youth unemployment” (ibid: 2). The emphasis was therefore laid on delivering the right employment skills, increasing the efficiency and inclusiveness of education and training institutions, and “working collaboratively with all relevant stakeholders” (ibid: 2). In this document ‘lifelong learning’ is mentioned three times: once when describing adequate skills or lack of them to participate in lifelong learning (ibid: 2), once when presenting data on adult participation in lifelong learning, third in connection with validation of learning and lifelong guidance (ibid.: 5) and finally in connection with different lifelong services (ibid.: 15). Learning is connected to skill acquisition and qualifications as means to opening doors to employment.

FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM AND THEN . . .

The idea of lifelong education sprang from the field of adult education and was a response to the rapidly changing world of market economies, competition and economic transformation. It crystallised in the UNESCO report Learning to Be (Faure et al., 1973). Some scholars saw this as encouraging a humanistic, democratic and emancipatory system of learning opportunities for all, independent of class, race, financial means and the age of the learner. Though propagated by UNESCO it was never fully realised – due partly to opposition within UNESCO itself, and partly to differing political priorities. The Delors Report Learning: The Treasure Within drew worldwide attention to lifelong learning, but it was the “European Union which took the concept seriously and systematically translated it into policy statements, programs and projects” (Ouane & Hinzen, 2003: vii).

The Treaty of Rome (1957), which established the European Economic Community, did not see education as a central lever of economic or social advancement. It spoke of “an effective co-ordination of efforts in the spheres of vocational training, of research and of the dissemination of agricultural knowledge”, and allowed that “this may include joint financing of projects or institutions” (Article 41). However it also stated (“Without prejudice to the other provisions of this Treaty and in conformity with its general objectives”), that “the Commission shall have the task of promoting
close co-operation between member states in the social field, particularly in matters relating to: employment; labour law and working conditions; basic and advanced vocational training” (Article 118).

Vocational retraining was also seen as a way back to employment (Article 125a); European Social Fund finance was therefore available. The Treaty also asserted that the “Council shall, acting on a proposal from the Commission and after consulting the Economic and Social Committee, lay down general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy capable of contributing to the harmonious development both of the national economies and of the common market” (Article 128).

However over the following 20 years, the world changed. With the intensifying economic competition from the United States of America and Japan, and with globalisation generally, the EU sought to transform itself into an advanced knowledge-based society. Education and learning were seen as vital to this end. As Malan (1987) suggested, in times of crisis, education is often seen as the solution. The EU therefore embraced the idea of lifelong learning, systematically translating it into documents, communications and programmes. However, it narrowed its scope from a broad conception of education (lifelong and lifewide) to a narrower, more instrumental version. In this neo-liberal form, lifelong learning has become an explicit agenda for the EU and a crucial key in its economic development.

The reporting and monitoring of progress against indicators and benchmarks has led to member states having their achievements or failings paraded (a process of ‘fame and shame’). Thus education and learning, in principle matters of each country’s discretion, have progressively become a more central part of the common European agenda. Little account was taken of national misgivings. In order to achieve the targets set, additional support has been provided through exchange of good practice and experience, and sharing of problems, ideas and priorities. A database on good practice has been encouraged, while existing Commission programmes like Socrates, Erasmus, Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci and Youth were enriched by Grundtvig (non-formal adult education) – thought more recently all have been merged into the Lifelong Learning programmes. Research on, and analysis of, lifelong learning have been stimulated and supported. Thus in EU documentation, lifelong learning came to be understood as a tool, a means to achieve economic targets and employment. The economic crisis of 2008 further limited the vocabulary. Recent documents have tended to restrict lifelong learning to ‘adult lifelong learning’, with the liberating aspect of education for personal and social development being lost. Though references to lifelong learning as a means to empowering the European population remain, education and training seem to be losing much of their social dimension.

The idea of lifelong learning as addressing adult learning has had benefits at many levels. It has brought the significance of adult education to a wider audience, and emphasised its national importance. With the need for governments to report on progress, many new opportunities have been opened for adults. Countries unacquainted with the idea of lifelong learning have been brought into the arena, even though sometimes accepting the idea without much discussion (Holford et al.,
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2008). More longstanding EU member states have adjusted lifelong learning to their own purposes and national circumstances.

However, two decades after lifelong learning emerged into the EU policy agenda, it has become overwhelmingly seen as a tool for achieving decisive advantages in economic prosperity and competitiveness; the social, cultural and humanistic element can seem irrevocably lost. But . . . as Edgar Faure wrote 40 years ago, “if learning is the affair of a lifetime and of a whole society, then it is necessary to look beyond the reform of ‘educational systems’ and think of an educational community. That is the real educational challenge of tomorrow” (Faure, 1972: 9). Now as people question why the Lisbon strategy has been so qualified a success, another route to economic growth – or to changing how we lead our lives – is called for. Education and learning will always form an important part of society, but whether it will be lifelong learning in the truest sense of the word – and with all it should imply – remains to be seen. Global capitalism constantly reminds us we are individuals, succeeding or failing in a world of markets and risk. But even neo-liberal policy pronouncements accept that we have rights to education and learning, including adult learning, throughout our lives. As human agents, we are creative; let us use that creativity to educate ourselves, and our fellow-citizens, not just as ‘governed subjects’, but as freely-thinking women and men.

NOTES

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid. For a fuller official evaluation of the European Year of Lifelong Learning, see European Parliament: Committee on Culture, Youth, Education, the Media and Sport (2000).
5 The Socrates programme formerly encompassed a number of sub-programmes: Comenius (secondary education), Erasmus (higher education), Grundtvig (adult education), Lingua (language teaching and learning), and Minerva (open and distance learning and the introduction of new technologies in education).
6 The elderly, it was envisaged, would be a major part of the European population by 2050. The EU27 population demographic would continue to age, with those aged 65 years and over rising from 17.1% in 2008 to 30.0% in 2060. The proportion aged 80 and over were expected to rise from 4.4% to 12.1% over the same period (Eurostat, 2008).

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