

# Age is just a Number? Rethinking Learning over the Lifecourse

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## Abstract

This paper explores the relation between EU lifelong learning policies and strategies on the one hand, and, on the other, the attributes and practices of adults in relation to learning in later life. Following a brief summary of the genealogy of the concept of lifelong learning, a critical examination is provided of EU policies on and participation rates in lifelong learning. The discussions will focus in particular on that intersection between later life and lifelong learning by highlighting the failure of much current EU legislation and perspectives on lifelong learning to take serious account of the changing nature of lifecourse patterns and, in particular, the role and involvement of the 'post-work' population.

## Introduction

National policy statements on lifelong learning abound. Yet it is a fair bet that most overall statements of educational goals still focus almost exclusively on the preparation of young people for adult life. If social outcomes are included in educational objectives, this would be a further reinforcement of the case for lifelong learning as the outstanding principle at the level of overall systems.

OECD, 2007a, p.122

Lifelong learning has become a catchphrase of our era, a slogan bandied about in conferences, symposia, and seminars by academics, policy-makers, trade unionists, NGOs and employers. Despite a clear emphasis on youth and vocational training, European Union (EU) communications on lifelong learning emphasise strongly the need to develop a 'cradle-to-grave' learning culture in member states. A much-cited definition is one in which learning follows four broad and mutually supporting objectives (personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/adaptability): "...all learning activity throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social, and/or employment-related perspective" (EC, 2001, p.9).

Life-chances, and associated opportunities for participation in learning at any age, are shaped – if not largely determined – by powerful socio-economic factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity and geography. In the context of changing life patterns and increasing life expectancy in the developed world, the question arises as to whether chronological age has little meaning other than simply as a number, or whether it has some analytic value in its own right. There is indeed a negative correlation between age and levels of participation in most forms of adult education. One

key 'break' point is around the age of 17 or 18 – after which, in the case of the UK for example, it is estimated that one-third of people do not engage in any further forms of structured learning (National Commission of Education, 2003). The age of 34 represents another statistical break point, after which it is shown that participation rates in education and training decline across most European countries (Eurostat, 2005). But the age of 55 and over also represents another grouping – after which, for example, in the UK, only 32% of adults aged 55–64, 17% of adults aged 65–74, and as few as 10% of those aged over 75 regard themselves as learners (NIACE, 2006).

It is for these reasons amongst others that older people are identified as a specific group at particular risk of exclusion in the EU Commission document on *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (EC, 2001). This key report was unequivocal in its recommendation for the allocation of more educational resources "...to senior citizens ...to give them opportunities to participate more actively in society and in the labour market, including the role they can play in intergenerational learning" (*ibid.*, p.9).

This emphasis is unsurprising considering that there is some preliminary evidence concerning the beneficial effects of continued mental stimulation in later life with regard to the maintenance of good health, especially in maintaining mental function and reversing memory decline (Springer *et al.*, 2005). On a more philosophical level it has been suggested that education in later life facilitates self-reflection and life review (Moody, 2003), as well as having the potential to act as an agent of social change whereby the relations between knowledge and power are examined and problematised (Formosa, 2002, 2005). Even if such assumptions remain difficult to demonstrate through empirical evidence, civil society has a responsibility to offer older people the full range of educational resources on the basis of equality, in the commonly accepted sense of the same opportunities being available to all irrespective of age.

These perspectives are, however, increasingly dominated by another policy agenda which is coming to the fore in the rich countries of the North and West – the challenges facing poor countries of the South and East are of a dramatically different scale. This agenda is associated with an ageing of the population profile in many of these countries – which in turns raises public funding issues concerning dependency rates, health expenditure, funding of pensions and the like. Consequently, keeping people actively engaged in the labour force "...is an increasingly popular labour market policy in

OECD countries to combat demographic trends such as the ageing of its workforce” (Ester and Kerkhofs, 2007, p.2).

## The Genealogy of Lifelong Learning

The genealogy of lifelong learning in Europe can be traced in three main phases. In the first, from the late 1980s to 1992, the EU was preoccupied with the crisis in European economic competitiveness and with increasing political integration amongst the Member States, and looked to education and training as key mechanisms for economic development. Many, to take one striking example, argue that this formed the basis of Ireland’s subsequent dramatic economic transformation (Healy and Slowey, 2006). This vision acquired new momentum between 1992 and 1999 – the second phase in the development of lifelong learning – as the EU Commission’s White Paper *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* (1995) officially relaunched the notion of the learning society as a strategy for European development. With the publication of the White Paper, the expression ‘lifelong learning’ became ubiquitous in official EU documents – the year 1996 was declared by the EU as the European Year of Lifelong Learning – so that previous concepts and slogans (such as ‘recurrent education’, ‘further/continuing education’, ‘permanent education’, and ‘lifelong education’) came to be considered obsolete. Lifelong learning, contrary to these earlier notions, configured the idea of personal responsibility for one’s own educational development. In order to remain employable, “...people, like consumers, have to be responsible for picking and choosing from what is available from the education and training market, in line with their requirements” (EU Eurydice Unit, 2000, p.8). The ‘learning society’, therefore, is the vision of a society where there are recognised opportunities for learning for everybody, wherever they are and whatever their age.

The third phase coincides with the start of the new millennium. The EU published a *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (2000) which stated that “... lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts” so that EU citizens “have equal opportunities to adjust to the demands of social and economic change and to participate actively in the shaping of Europe’s future” (*ibid.*). Thus, in a prescriptive tone, the memorandum invited “...the Member States, the Council and the Commission... within their area of competence, to identify coherent strategies and practical measures with a view of fostering lifelong learning for all” (*ibid.*). The memorandum listed four socio-political objectives underlying its support for lifelong learning policy:

- to build an inclusive society which offers equal opportunities for access to quality learning throughout to all people;
- to adjust the ways in which education and training are provided, and how paid working life is organised, so

that people can participate in learning throughout their lives;

- to achieve higher overall levels of education and qualification in all sectors, to ensure high-quality provision of education and training, and at the same time ensure that people’s knowledge and skills match the changing demands of jobs and education; and
- to encourage and equip people to participate more actively once more in all spheres of modern life, especially in social and political life at all levels of the community.

This high profile ascribed to the lifelong learning rationale in EU public policy discourse implies that it was, in some way, responsible for the creation of a ‘new’ form of social discourse. On the contrary, however, it is more likely that the EU embraced the culture of lifelong learning as a *reaction* to the new challenges of late modern and post-industrial societies. The increasing pace of globalisation and technological change, the changing nature of work and the labour market, and the ageing of populations were all key forces underlying the development of a lifelong learning policy. There was also overlap with Giddens’ (1998) concept of the ‘Third Way’ which – thanks to its adoption by the British Labour Government – was influential on policy debates throughout the 1990s. For Giddens, the Third Way permits more democratic participation and involves a politics of inclusion in which citizens have the power to shape national social policy. This socio-economic approach is based on notions of human capital theory, with the assumption that there will be economic payoffs if a society broadens access and opportunities for lifelong learning: “...governments need to emphasize life-long education, developing education programs that start from an individual’s early years and continue even late in life” (Giddens, 1998, p.125). Moreover, there is no doubt as to the influence of European employers upon the promulgation of the lifelong learning rationale (Bradshaw, 1996; Field, 2001). In the 1990s, human capital theory suggested that the economic decline could best be overturned by the implementation of more rigorous education strategies on the basis that “...the age of technology, information and communications rewards those nations whose people learn new skills and stay ahead” (Ball, 1995, p.18).

A decade later this rationale remains prominent. An analysis undertaken in 2007 by Keeley for the OECD identified three key challenges facing OECD countries, namely: (i) the ageing and consequent decline of its workforce (ii) globalisation and (iii) the swift move towards the knowledge economy (OECD, p.2007b). A key policy mechanism to address these challenges lay in the notion of post-school learning – for adults.

The dominance of such human capital perspectives on lifelong learning has been criticised vociferously (Coffield, 1997, 2000; Bagnall, 2000). At the heart of such criticism is a concern that policies favouring lifelong learning were seen by human capital advocates as the product of economic

determinism within a postmodern cultural context which, in the last analysis, tends to favour the 'economic and vocationalist' over the 'humanist and educationist' (Wain, 2004). While lifelong learning can be viewed as a more inclusive approach than that of a traditional educational policy perspective narrowly focused on schooling and the formal education system, the emphasis on the market and individual responsibility remains problematic from an equity perspective. Wain (2004) argues that this reflects "... (a) a conservative and timid acceptance of the necessity to decrease public expenditure on social welfare, (b) a reluctance to challenge the view of leading employers, (c) a comparative neglect of the role of institutions in charge, and (d) a general willingness on the part of administrators and civil servants to serve up what they suspected would be acceptable to their political masters" (*ibid.*, p.65). Lister (2003, p.433) makes the case that the central flaw in the human capital perspective on lifelong learning is that it emphasises the value of "... the future *worker-citizen* more than *democratic-citizen* who is the prime asset of the social investment state". Indeed, as the range and consequences of inequalities increase educators need to fully assess the implications for the vertical integration of lifelong learning policies. As Perkins *et al.* (2004, p.15) noted "...valuing families, communities, cultural practices, the environment and those population groups ill-suited to the labour market calls for broader social policy goals and a recognition of other forms of contributions as well as the simple one of economic participation".

Following the widely-documented increase in the number and percentage of older people who retire early from full-time employment, it is also important that policy makers consider seriously what they mean when they take up notions of *lifelong learning* – across all sectors including higher education (Schuetze and Slowey, 2000; Slowey and Watson, 2003; Watson, 2003). However, in practice, few EU policies on lifelong learning address the role of the post-work population. The genealogy of lifelong learning shows clearly that at all stages of development, older people remained a marginalised sector, as the attention of policy-makers remained fixed on "... economic competitiveness in tandem with a moral panic about the financial support of an ageing population" (Withnall, 2000, p.89). Consequently, the limited focus which there is on education and training for the post-50 population has increasingly become associated with supporting people to continue in paid employment for as long as possible. Some people welcome this opportunity as, in the developed countries, better health and lifestyle expectations lead to changing expectations, especially as McNair (2007) points out that the 'baby bulge' post-war generation see themselves as innovators and tradition breakers. On the other hand, McNair also draws attention to stark options set out by the Pensions Commission in the UK to the effect that there are only three choices: either pensioners will get poorer, or everyone will have to save more for their retirement, or most people will have to work until an older age.

This relative neglect of an equity, or philosophical, ration-

ale as to why society should assume responsibility for provision for learning in later life is perhaps not surprising. Given the dominance of human capital perspectives in the policy domain over recent decades, success in individual learning tends to be rather narrowly associated with economic and employment outcomes.

On the other hand, as the findings from the comparative Social Outcomes of Learning (SOL) work undertaken by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation of the OECD demonstrate, equity and philosophical rationales for the implementation of older adult education are not incompatible with economic arguments (OECD, 2007b). It is, for example, increasingly possible to "...measure the extent of increased participation levels of older adults in the workforce and voluntary services and of the cost savings in medical care" (Findsen, 2005, p.19). One study – which was seeking to evaluate the economic contribution of the voluntary activities underpinning the self-help approach in older adult education and was carried out through a study of University of the Third Age groups in Australia and New Zealand – found that "...conservative calculations show that the annual value of voluntarism in Australian U3As is in excess of \$4 million and, in New Zealand U3As, in excess of \$300,000" (Swindell, 1997, p.235).

## European Policies on Lifelong Learning

Following the issuing of the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (EU, 2000), the basis of current European policy on lifelong learning is found in an EU (2002) resolution which set out six priority actions:

- the provision of access to lifelong learning opportunities to all individuals, regardless of age, including specific actions aimed at the most disadvantaged persons ...;
- providing opportunities to acquire and/or update basic skills, including the new basic skills such as IT skills, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship ...;
- setting up a programme that deals with the training, recruitment and updating of teachers and trainers for the development of lifelong learning;
- working towards an effective validation and recognition of formal qualifications as well as non-formal and informal learning;
- ensuring the high quality and broad accessibility of target group specific information, guidance and counselling concerning lifelong learning opportunities;
- the need to encourage the representation of relevant sectors, including the youth sector, in existing or future networks and structures.

Detailing the various strategies by EU member states towards the implementation of lifelong learning is hampered by the lack of coherence in national policies, with little or no legislation specifically on lifelong learning as such. However, following Green (1997, 2001, 2006), lifelong

learning systems can be classified along a number of different axes – according to their institutional structures, their modes of governance and regulation, their dominant pedagogies, and their knowledge and curricula traditions – to yield a typology of four broad education systems: 1) France and the Mediterranean states, 2) Germany, German-speaking countries and other countries proximate to Germany, 3) the Nordic states, and 4) the English-speaking countries:

1. France and Mediterranean states have centralised formal initial education systems. Central government typically hires teachers, often posting them to schools, inspecting their work, paying their salaries and the like. Post-school education is also quite centralised and is based systems which, although often utilising social partner-based organisations to collect and distribute levies for training, frame the rights and responsibilities of employees and employers with regard to training in the context of national law.
2. The German-speaking countries and countries geographically proximate to them, have education systems which differ in kind from others in Europe. Regulation and control of school systems is typically undertaken on a regional basis with the central state playing a lesser part than in southern Europe, and post-compulsory education and training is largely organised through a system of formalised social partnership, although this is less extensive in relation to adult education than in relation to apprentice training.
3. Historically, the English-speaking countries have had decentralised education systems, giving local authorities considerable autonomy. This has changed in recent years in the UK as powers formerly allocated to the local education authorities have been transferred either up to central government or down to schools. The UK supports high levels of school autonomy, with devolution to schools of budgets and powers to ‘hire and fire’ within broad frameworks of policy, and subject to external scrutiny and accountability.
4. In Nordic countries regulation of school education is largely at local level in all states but within a strong central government framework which operates a policy of ‘steering by goals’. Postcompulsory education and training tend to involve high levels of public funding, but also strong social partnership traditions with regard to work-based learning, including the widespread use of training levies, licence-to-practise laws and sectoral agreements on training, and on qualifications for occupations.

Following Green (*ibid.*) the result is that while policies on lifelong learning are strongly influenced by these different structures and traditions associated with the initial formal systems, it is possible to identify four overlapping approaches. First, there is the goal of developing a ‘cradle-to-grave’ culture of lifelong learning, with high participation rates, covering not only work-related training but also

personal development and active citizenship, served by developed public and/or civil-society or informal systems, with a learning-promoting organisation of work complemented by private participation in recreational learning. Second, there is a largely employability-related approach, building on a solid initial training and focusing mainly on continuing training to adapt to changing production processes and structures, with a strong participation by both the public sector and private industry; workplace training is complemented by recognised legal or collectively negotiated rights to education and training leave (in this approach personal further development tends to be regarded largely as a private affair). Third, there is an espousal of lifelong learning which is tied into a modernisation of society and the economy and seeks to change traditional assumptions about the division of life into distinct phases of learning, working and retirement. Finally, equity policies exist which tend to adopt a social-inclusion approach targeting mainly those whose initial experience of education and training has been unsatisfactory or inadequate, and seeking to re-engage them with learning. The first stage of this re-engagement often focuses on personal development, with the objective of raising motivation and basic skills to a level where the individual is stimulated, and equipped, to progress further.

## Participation rates

Monitoring the performance of countries in meeting policy objectives in relation to lifelong learning has not been easy—especially when non-formal, community based and ‘on the job’ training is included. It is welcome, therefore, to note emerging research focusing on rates of participation of adults in formal and non-formal learning. Eurostat statistics, for example, demonstrate that in 2005 the four best performing countries in the field of participation of adults in lifelong learning were Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the UK, followed closely by Slovenia, the Netherlands, and Austria (Eurostat, 2005). However, all other EU countries were below the average performance level of 12.5% of 25–64 year olds participating in education and training – which is the European target for all states for 2010. To take just four examples, Greece, Portugal, Slovakia and Hungary had participation rates at or below 5% and among the accession countries, participation rates in Bulgaria and Romania were less than 2%.

With respect to gender, the evidence is mixed. In most countries, generic Eurostat figures indicate higher levels of participation by women than men – independent of educational attainment levels. In contrast however, OECD figures show a markedly different gender pattern in relation to participation in non-formal job-related continuing education, where men significantly outnumber women (OECD, 2006, p.339). Statistics also indicate that individuals with higher educational attainment levels, and younger age groups are also characterised by higher participation rates. Whilst highly educated people participate as much as seven times more in lifelong learning than those with lower levels of

qualifications, participation decreases substantially after the age of thirty-four.

Analysing the data by region also shows diverse levels of participation on a sub-national level. Participation in lifelong learning is high (over 15% or more) in all regions in Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. The participation rates are especially low in all regions in Greece (apart from Northern Greece), Bulgaria and Romania, in some regions they are even below one percent. Within countries, the highest participation rates in lifelong learning are often found in the capital regions, although there are some notable exceptions such as in France (Alsace, 8.7%), Italy (Sardinia, 6.1%) the Netherlands (Utrecht, 17.8%) and Austria (Salzburg, 10.1%) (EU, 2006).

Data from the Labour Force Study *ad hoc* module on participation in lifelong learning, also carried out by Eurostat in 2003, allow a more detailed analysis of the participation of adults in lifelong learning (Eurostat, 2005). This is especially true with regard to participation in formal and non-formal education and training. According to this survey, in 2003, 4.5% of the European population aged 25–64 had participated in formal education during the previous 12 months. However, participation in non-formal education was more than three times higher (16.5%) than in formal education. As in the other survey, the difference in participation rates between the highly educated and those with low qualifications in non-formal education were sometimes extremely significant. In some countries, the proportion of the population participating in non-formal education was more than ten times higher for highly-qualified people than for the other sections of the population, whilst in Greece, Spain, Italy, Lithuania, Malta and Hungary the difference between those with higher and lower qualifications in lifelong learning was relatively low (at the same time it must be noted that these countries registered overall lower rates of participation in general).

In relation to participation by fields of study, nearly 20% of all participants were engaged in computing courses (EU, 2006). Highest participation rates (20+ per cent) were recorded in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Spain, Ireland, Italy and Luxembourg. Only 7.2% of participants attended language courses, with the highest participation rates being in the Czech Republic (22.5%). In non-formal education from the perspective of integration in the labour force, those who were unemployed and the economically inactive participate more in formal education, whereas those who were employed participate more in non-formal education. However, the data also show that more than half of the 24–65 year-old Europeans did not participate in any kind of learning during the 12 months prior to the survey. Another survey, carried out by Eurobarometer, reported that only one in five Europeans intended to do more training in the near future, one in five intended to do less, and two in five will undertake the same amount of training as in the previous year (EC, 2004). The main reasons given for doing less training in the future included a view that no new

skills were needed for work (26%), lack of time (20%), lack of appropriate training on offer (18%), and employers not providing the necessary time or funding (17%).

It could be argued that the statistics emerging from these surveys are positive, as they indicate increases in the numbers of adult learners in different countries, and to that extent participation of adults in lifelong learning is heading toward the European benchmark for 2010. However, numbers do not tell the whole story. A more critical view of participation statistics finds in fact that "...notwithstanding the expansion in numbers in higher education over the years, the student profile had remained the same, the mode of study (full-time/part-time) had not altered much either, and the main attraction of higher education was still that it pays in financial terms" (Wain, 2004, p.78). Participation is still characterised by a number of inequalities in access to lifelong learning: statistics show clearly how even in countries with overall high levels of participation, adults with low educational attainment and qualification levels, those aged 34 and older, and others living in specific regions, have lower involvement levels in lifelong learning. Another worrying interpretation of participation rates is that lifelong education has been embedded in a consumer market where most of those taking part do so from motives of individual fulfilment and self-actualisation. Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this – indeed such motivations are the hallmarks of a democratic society – it should not mask the needs of disadvantaged sections of the population.

Why are older adults under-represented in lifelong learning? Analysis of non-participation of adults in education has drawn significantly on research findings which identify three major forms of barriers: attitudinal, situational and institutional (Cross, 1981; Woodley *et al.*, 1987). In recent years, this framework has continued to be used to examine the relevance and significance of barriers to learning across different age cohorts and contexts. (Formosa, 2000, 2007; Yenerall, 2003; Kim and Merriman, 2004; Findsen, 2005; Boulton-Lewis *et al.*, 2006; Jamieson, 2007). *Attitudinal barriers* identified in these studies include perceptions about a lack of ability to learn in older people – ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’ – embarrassment, lack of education when younger, lack of confidence, interest and motivation, wanting to rest, or avoiding new commitments after a lifetime of work, and fear of technological failure. *Situational barriers* highlight personal factors which are beyond the learner’s control and are related to the individual’s life situation at a particular time. These include issues such as time scheduling, illness, hearing, vision, fatigue, impaired memory, fear of leaving home, language problems, financial costs and lack of time due to child care or elder care. *Institutional barriers* consist of various organisational practices and procedures which discourage adults from participation in adult education. These can be divided into organisational and pedagogical issues. The former include the physical and social

environment of educational providers, a lack of flexibility of provision, location, financial cost, and inadequate provision of information and guidance about opportunities. Pedagogical issues include factors such as perceived relevance of subjects offered, lack of experience in working with learners from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, inadequate teaching skills, and difficulties due to mixed abilities in a learning group.

## Older people and lifelong learning

There is no doubt that the notion of lifelong learning has brought an improved impetus to educational policy and its implementation. The dramatic and rapid socio-economic changes associated with the coming of late modernity imply that traditional 'schooling' is no longer an adequate preparation for the challenges that individuals will face during their lifecourse. Lifelong learning provides an opportunity to develop an active and engaged citizenship, as it has the potential to establish what Habermas (2000) terms 'deliberative democracy'. Its potential to enable the development of logical arguments and participation in dialogue with others imply that lifelong learning is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of an active and engaged citizenship (Gouthro, 2007). However, a conceptualisation that emphasises a 'cradle-to-grave' culture of lifelong learning but in reality focuses on those of working age – however disadvantaged – is clearly inadequate. There can also be a tendency in current policies of lifelong learning to adopt a rather traditional view of the role of older people in western societies, for example, focusing on the grandparent role in supporting children to read rather than the individual's own learning interests (Withnall, 2000). In contrast, some analyses of the changing experience of growing older in a period of late modernity suggest that later life is being reconstructed as a period of potential choice and opportunity, albeit also as an arena of risk and danger (Tulle, 2005):

... the old have moved into a new 'zone of indeterminacy' which is marginal to work and welfare ... Growing old is itself becoming a more social, reflexive and managed process, notably in the relationship between the individual, the state and a range of public as well as private services ...

Phillipson and Powell, 2004, pp.21–22

In today's world, it is important that older people are not regarded as passive consumers of learning cultures, but are supported to make active decisions about which educational courses to undertake in both formal and informal contexts, and for what purposes (Gilleard, 1996). In this respect, lifelong learning policies should, as a minimum, address the following types of questions (Withnall, 2000, p.95):

- How do older people themselves define and understand learning post work?
- What value do older people place on learning? What are the contexts and discourses over the lifecourse that have shaped their perceptions?
- How do they construct and develop ideas and attitudes

to learning and education?

- What outcomes do formal/informal and other types of learning have for older people in the context of their own lives? How are these outcomes experienced and described?

Research on later life learning demonstrates interesting data on older learners (e.g. Lamdin, 1997; Formosa, 2000; Alfageme, 2007). Older people take part in lifelong learning as an end in itself, for the joy of learning, to pursue a long-standing interest or hobby, or to engage in a creative activity, or for a combination of these reasons. Many also participate to socialise and to meet people, especially after their spouse has died or they retire from full-time work. They engage in a variety of learning projects ranging across music, art, literature, drama, politics, health and nutrition, philosophy, and religion. Their preferences of learning styles are varied and range from reading classes, travel, class-based learning, workshops, seminars, and discussion meetings, although an increasing number of people also show a preference for distance and internet-based learning. Many wish to study at home, in senior centres, through travel, and in libraries, museums, and galleries.

As discussed above, many older people are hindered from participating in lifelong learning by barriers such as time, distance, money, and lack of information on what is available. Formal learning tends to take place in Universities of the Third Age [U3A], Elderhostels, and Institutes for Learning in Retirement. An unprecedented number of adults have also started to appear on university campuses. The motivations underlying this trend require further research, but appear to include a desire to fill perceived gaps in earlier education, embarking on degree courses deferred by factors such as early marriage, employment and rearing a family, and simply enriching their lives through further learning. Although the first wave of such students tends to be largely female and middle class, more recent statistics show more participation by men, including men from working class backgrounds. However, there is also a significant percentage of older people who engage in self-directed informal learning projects, they typically begin with a question, a problem, a need to know, or simply curiosity. Subjects in self-directed learning may be practical or skills-oriented such as crafts and income tax preparation; or creative and intellectual, such as memoir writing or philosophy.

Such evidence demonstrates clearly that education in later life has both overlaps with, yet differences from, initial and adult education. Consequently, it is a mistake to implement lifelong learning projects for older people by simply taking inspiration from characteristics generally associated with people of a relatively advanced age – 'old age' exists largely as a cultural concept (Gullette, 2004). There clearly is a complex balance to be struck between the specific and the targeted as outlined in Bytheway's (2005, p.344) advice for gerontological scholarship:

- to steer away from a focus on ‘the elderly’, and towards (i) ageing in general, and (ii) extreme age in particular;
- to steer away from the planning, management and delivery of age-specific services, and towards the detail and routines of everyday and ‘every-year’ life; and
- to steer away from idealised models and processes of ageing, and concentrating instead on how people talk about and act in relation to their age.

This implies strongly, as others have already documented (Withnall, 2000; Slowey and Watson, 2003; Merrill, 2004), the necessity of lifelong learning policies to embrace the lifecourse approach. This entails a concern with development, ageing, maturation, and status passages, with an explicit attempt to link individual biography to the context of society, as well as taking into account a historical perspective on both the individual and society (Settersten, 2006). The principles advocated by Elder (1985) some three decades ago remain a good general guide.

- *Ageing as a lifelong process*: Development does not stop at adulthood but extends from birth to death.
- *Historical time and place*: The life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experienced over their lifetime.
- *Timing of lives*: This principle refers to the social timings of transitions over the life course.
- *Linked lives*: Lives are lived interdependently through the network of shared relationships.
- *Human agency*: Despite limitations people are good strategists and make choices that allow them to take more control of their lives.

The lifecourse perspective reinforces educationists’ claim that older adult education should take into account the individual and collective experiences of older learners during the course of their lifetime. It is by being sensitive towards such experiences that lifelong learning policy can take account of the factors which might influence older people to continue or take up learning activities. Moreover, the lifecourse perspective provides “a way of investigating the relationship between learning undertaken in formal or in informal contexts and encourages reflection on that learning which is unintentional or unanticipated” (Withnall, 2000, p.95). The final section outlines a framework for understanding the planning and carrying out of lifelong education in the context of later life based upon the lifecourse perspective.

## An Alternative Agenda

The EU is no exception to the demographic shift in the developed world. It is therefore important that the structures, priorities, and goals of social policies, including those relating to lifelong learning, are reconceptualised according to both the quantitative and qualitative effects brought

on by population ageing. The lifecourse has ceased to be a fixed set of stages occupied by people of specific age groups, with life development becoming increasingly marked by a blurring of what appeared previously to be the typical behaviour at each age. Hence, lifelong learning policy must be developed around the recognition that society is experiencing a surge in the number and proportions of older people, and this continued growth and development should be nurtured by new forms of formal and non-formal learning opportunities. EU policy must ensure that older people have real opportunities for learning so that they are able to maintain their mental and physical health and their ability to function independently, as well as having the opportunity to transform their social lives. The analysis in this paper the following as amongst the main changes needed for the transformation of lifelong learning policy if current demographic shifts are to be addressed in more equitable and appropriate ways:

- *Access to Learning*. The value of lifelong education should not be treated only as an end in itself but also as a means to end. While the ‘grand narrative’ of class may well have given way to diverse circles of inequality in which race, gender, and sexuality create new, more variegated, more complex structures of social and economic power, access to education remains unequally distributed. It is therefore quite erroneous to embed lifelong learning in a new public policy rationale where the responsibility for lifelong learning lies entirely with the individual rather than with civil society.
- *Intergenerational Learning*. Few of our modern educational institutions are structured to cater for learners from the whole of the lifecourse. Education across the spectrum is largely structured by age groups. At the same time, retirement villages and homes are deliberately designed to keep older people segregated, social groups tend to emerge on age lines, and elements of mass media programming focus on separating age cohorts. Policies must therefore seek to provide incentives for older people to enter higher education institutions and colleges which, despite some growth in mature and part-time students, remain highly ‘age-oriented’. Policies should also be developed to motivate younger tutors to work, for example, in residential and nursing homes with older people.
- *Fourth Age Learning*. The personal development and educational needs of frail and dependent older people, especially the physically dependent and those living in residential/nursing homes, are being neglected. There is no doubt of the potential that distance learning techniques have for education with those older adults who, because of distance or infirmity, cannot access the conventional classes. Moreover, lifelong learning should really be *lifelong* so that it also caters for those others suffering from confusion or dementia – with, for example, encouragement for educators to make use of specialised strategies.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that the achievement of such goals is only possible if all the different sectors of civil society work together. A balance has to be achieved between, on the one hand, widening access for people of all ages to participate in the forms of learning which best suit their interests and needs at any point over the lifecourse and, on the other, a recognition – particularly in relation to ‘fourth age learning’ – of the particular role, and forms of support required for elder-learning projects. Schools and colleges can also contribute to this agenda by emphasising learning as a

continuous lifelong process, which includes both formal and informal elements, and is open to everybody irrespective of age. Only in this way will the traditional culture change and develop in relation to lifelong learning; and age indeed, become just a number.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to express appreciation for invaluable exchanges with Dr Marvin Formosa, Lecturer in Social Gerontology, European Centre of Gerontology, University of Malta, which were most helpful in producing this paper.

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