

## **What's the Point of Lifelong Learning if Lifelong Learning Has No Point? On the Democratic Deficit of Policies for Lifelong Learning**

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**ABSTRACT** This article provides an analysis of shifts that have taken place in policy discourses on lifelong learning by organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the European Union. The article documents the shifts in these discourses over time, analyses the changes in content of these discourses (both in terms of what is included and what is excluded in the discussion), and explores the intended and unintended consequences that follow from these ways of thinking about (policy for) lifelong learning. The article documents a shift towards understanding the point and purpose of lifelong learning primarily in economic terms and far less in relation to the personal and the democratic function of lifelong learning. It is argued that under the conditions of the learning economy lifelong learning itself has become understood as an individual task rather than as a collective project and that this has transformed lifelong learning from a right to a duty. This raises important questions about who has the democratic right to set the agenda for lifelong learning. It also raises important issues about the motivation for lifelong learning and points particularly towards the predicament of the lifelong learner who has to engage in forms of learning without being able to control his or her own 'agenda' for learning. The rise of the learning economy has also put a stress on the democratic potential of lifelong learning, which is one of the most worrying consequences of the rise of the discourse of the learning economy. Since transnational policy documents have a strong 'agenda-setting' function for the development of national policies and practices, it is important at a national level to be aware of the assumptions, implications and intended and unintended consequences of such policy discourses.

### **Introduction**

Over the past decades there have been important shifts in policies for adult education and lifelong learning in many countries around the world. Whereas in the past lifelong learning was seen as a personal good and as an inherent aspect of democratic life, today lifelong learning is increasingly understood in terms of the formation of human capital and as an investment in economic development. This transformation is not only visible at the level of policy; it also has had a strong impact on the learning opportunities made available to adults, partly through a redefinition of what counts as legitimate or 'useful' learning and partly as a result of the reduction of funding for those forms of learning that are considered not to be of any economic value. The trend towards a 'learning economy' can be discerned in many countries and is particularly prominent in the countries of the European Union. It is also a central plank in European policy on lifelong learning (see European Commission, 2001a, b; see also Fredriksson, 2003). Although there are important differences between the policies and practices of lifelong learning in these countries, most commentators agree that there is indeed a clear trend towards what might be called a 'learning economy' (see, for example, Edwards, 1997; Ranson, 1998; Boshier, 1998; Field, 2000; Grace, 2004; Biesta, 2004a, 2005; Jackson, 2005).

One reason for the existence of similar trends in the development of policy and practice in many countries lies in the fact that governments and policy makers are responding to the same challenges, most notably the globalisation of the economy and the need to remain competitive in the global marketplace, increasing levels of migration and mobility, and the globalisation of information, communication and the entertainment industry. In principle this would still allow for a wide variety of unique, national responses. There can be no doubt, however, that the strong convergence in policy and practice can at least partly be attributed to the discourses and policy frameworks generated by trans- or supra-national organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (and to a lesser extent in the European context, the World Bank). Whereas it would be too simple to assume a direct impact of such overarching discourses upon national policy and practice, there can be no doubt that the ideas generated by such organisations have a strong ‘agenda-setting’ impact and provide crucial reference points and yardsticks for the formation of policy and practice at national levels. As Fredriksson (2003) has made clear, there has traditionally been a ‘widespread hesitation among European Union member states to transfer any power over education to a European level’ (Fredriksson, 2003, p. 524). At the same time, particularly since the turn of the century, new working methods have been introduced – particularly the open method of coordination (see Fredriksson, 2003, p. 526) and so-called ‘processes’ such as the Bologna process (Fredriksson, 2003, p. 533), which have generated important benchmarks and yardsticks for the development of national policies and, despite the hesitations at official level, have even led to something that in practice actually functions as a European education policy (see Fredriksson, 2003, p. 536).

Given these developments and, more specifically, given the influence of these discourses and documents on national policy and practice, one important task for understanding the interactions between the supra-national and the national level lies in the critical analysis of these discourses themselves in order to document transformations over time and, most importantly, to bring to light the intended and unintended consequences of particular ways of thinking about lifelong learning, and to identify both what is included in the discussion and what is accidentally or deliberately left out – and it is this that I aim to do in this article. My analysis will be based on a critical reading of policy documents from several supra-national organisations (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], the OECD, the European Union). In the first section of the article I document the transformation that has taken place over the past decades into the direction of a ‘learning economy’. I then provide a more detailed analysis of this shift in which I not only show what has been included in the current configuration of lifelong learning but also make clear what has been left out of the discussion. I argue that the shift towards a ‘learning economy’ has resulted in a much more individualistic understanding of lifelong learning and has transformed lifelong learning from a right into a duty. Not to be engaged in some form of useful learning is increasingly seen as a problem. As I discuss in the third section of this article, this raises important questions about who has the (democratic) right to define the ‘agenda’ for lifelong learning – is it the learner, the government, (global) industry? It also raises important issues about the motivation for learning. After all, why should adults be motivated to engage in lifelong learning if they have no say in the content, purpose or direction of such learning? Although it is a question for further discussion whether we label these implications as intended or unintended consequences, it is at least clear, as I argue in the concluding section of this article, that the rise of the learning economy has put a stress on the potential democratic function of lifelong learning, that is, on those forms of collective learning – learning with others and from otherness and difference – which are linked to empowerment, collective action and social change and to the translation of our private troubles into collective and shared concerns.

### **From ‘Learning to Be’ to ‘Learning to Be Productive and Employable’**

In 1972 UNESCO published a report written by the International Commission on the Development of Education under the chairmanship of Edgar Faure. Faure described the remit of his commission as ‘a critical reflection by men [1] of different origins and background, seeking, in complete independence and objectivity, for over-all solutions to the major problems involved in the development of education in a changing universe’ (Faure et al, 1972, p. v). The report was titled

*Learning to Be: the world of education today and tomorrow*, and was hailed by the chairman of UNESCO, René Maheu, as 'a global conception of education for tomorrow that [is] without doubt more complete than any formulated hitherto' (Faure et al, 1972, p. ix).

*Learning to Be* made a strong case for lifelong education and the development of a learning society. The report argued that in the world of today 'studies can no longer constitute a definitive "whole," handed out to and received by the student before he embarks on adult life' since all that has to be learned 'must be continually re-invented and renewed' (Faure et al, 1972, p. xxxiii). If, therefore, learning involves 'all of one's life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society', then, so the report concluded, we must go further than an overhaul of educational systems 'until we reach the stage of a learning society' (Faure et al, 1972, p. xxxiii).

*Learning to Be* is a remarkable document for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it is remarkable for the strength and breadth of its vision about the role of education in the world – or, as Faure would have it: in the universe. On the other hand, *Learning to Be* is remarkable as a historical document. This it not only because it reflects the world of the late 1960s and early 1970s so well, both in terms of its concerns and in terms of its optimism that change for the better was possible. But it is also because the views expressed in *Learning to Be* about education and, more specifically, about lifelong education and the learning society, stand in such sharp contrast to the policies and practices that make up the world of lifelong learning today. Here, for example, is how Faure summarises the four basic assumptions of the report:

The first ... is that of the existence of an international community which, amidst the variety of nations and cultures, of political options and degrees of development, is reflected in common aspirations, problems and trends, and in its movement towards one and the same destiny. The corollary to this is the fundamental *solidarity* of governments and of people, despite transitory differences and conflicts. The second is belief in *democracy*, conceived of as implying each man's right to realize his own potential and to share in the building of his own future. The keystone of democracy, so conceived, is education – not only education that is accessible to all, but education whose aims and methods have been thought out afresh. The third assumption is that the aim of development is *the complete fulfilment of man*, in all the richness of his personality, the complexity of his forms of expression and his various commitments – as individual, member of a family and a community, citizen and producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer. Our last assumption is that only an *over-all, lifelong education* can produce the kind of complete man the need for whom is increasing with the continually more stringent constraints tearing the individual asunder. We should no longer assiduously acquire knowledge once and for all, but learn how to build up a continually evolving body of knowledge all through life – 'learn to be'. (Faure et al, 1972, pp. v-vi, emphasis added)

To configure lifelong education in terms of solidarity, democracy and 'the complete fulfilment of man,' to contend that the aim of education is 'to enable man to be himself, to "become himself"' (Faure et al, 1972, p. xxxi, emphasis in original), to argue that '[w]ays of broadening and strengthening solidarity must be found' (p. xxxviii, emphasis in original), and even to suggest in a report on education the need for 'the renunciation of nuclear weapons' (p. xxv), seems to be a far cry from the discourses, policies and practices of lifelong learning today.

I am not the first to comment on the fact that over the past two decades lifelong learning has increasingly come under the spell of an economic imperative, both at the level of policy and at the level of practice (see, for example, Edwards, 1997; Ranson, 1998; Boshier, 1998; Field, 2000; Fredriksson, 2003; Grace, 2004; Biesta, 2004a, 2005; Jackson, 2005). A telling example at the level of European policy can be found in a speech by the Director-General of the General Directorate for Education and Culture of the European Commission (Van der Pas, 2001). After reminding his audience of the strategic goal of the European Union to make Europe 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (p. 11; see also Lisbon European Council: Presidency Conclusions, paragraph 5), Van der Pas positioned the European Union's views on lifelong learning in the following way:

Lifelong learning is not a new subject. ... What is new is the nature of the challenges and the support for action, at the highest political level. On the one hand, European countries are undergoing a *transition towards knowledge-based economies and societies*. Knowledge, competence

and the ability to use information intelligently are now important elements – both *to allow individual citizens to participate fully in society and to strengthen European competitiveness and economic growth*. ... On the other hand, there is a broad understanding and support, at the highest political level, that much needs to be done to make lifelong learning a reality for all citizens – not just to promote learning per se but also to help Europe to reach the ambitious objectives set at Lisbon. Although progress has been made ... *lifelong learning is still far from being a reality for all citizens. 14 million people are still unemployed in Europe*. There are growing *skills gaps* in some sectors of the economy, in particular in the ICT sector. There are also *skills mismatches* right across the board of sectors where people's qualifications and competence, on the one hand, and employers' demands, on the other, do not match. All this hampers the creation of new jobs and *slows down economic growth*. According to one estimate, *the mismatches between the supply and demand of labour cost the European Union 100 billion Euro each year*. Therefore, more needs to be done to implement lifelong learning. We need to raise the levels of *investment in human resources*. ... We need to develop a European strategy for lifelong learning to face the challenges. This is an opportunity that we cannot afford to miss. (Van der Pas, 2001, pp. 11-12)

The idea that lifelong learning is first and foremost about the development of human capital – an 'investment in human resources' – so as to secure competitiveness and economic growth for Europe clearly echoes a central tenet of an influential document published in 1997 by the OECD, called *Lifelong Learning for All* (OECD, 1997). *Lifelong Learning for All* also puts a strong emphasis on the economic rationale for lifelong learning understood as learning 'throughout life' (OECD, 1997, p. 15). It presents the idea of 'lifelong learning for all' as 'the guiding principle for policy strategies that will respond directly to the need to improve the capacity of individuals, families, workplaces and communities to continuously adapt and renew' (p. 13). Adaptation and renewal are considered to be necessary in the face of changes in the global economy and the world of work, including the 'large and continuing shift in employment from manufacturing industry to services, the gathering momentum of globalisation, the wide diffusion of information and communications technologies, and the increasing importance of knowledge and skills in production and services' (p. 13). According to *Lifelong Learning for All* the disappearance of many unskilled jobs, the more rapid turnover of products and services, and the fact that people change jobs more often than previously, all point to the need for 'more frequent renewal of knowledge and skills' (p. 13). Lifelong learning 'from early childhood education to active learning in retirement' will thus be 'an important factor in promoting employment and economic development' [2] (p. 13).

In about three decades, then, the discourse of lifelong learning seems to have shifted from 'learning to be' to 'learning to be productive and employable'. Or, as Peter Jarvis has put it:

The lifelong learning society has become part of the current economic and political discourse of global capitalism, which positions people as human resources to be developed through lifelong learning, or discarded and retrained if their job is redundant. (Jarvis, 2000, quoted in Grace, 2004, p. 398)

So what has happened?

### **The Rise of the Learning Economy**

At one level the trajectory seems to be perfectly clear. Whereas in the past the field of lifelong learning was predominantly informed by a social justice agenda – the 'social purpose' tradition in which adult learning is seen as a lever for empowerment and emancipation (see Fieldhouse et al, 1996) – the current emphasis is on 'learning for earning' in which adult learning is seen as a lever for economic growth and global competitiveness. As British Prime Minister Tony Blair allegedly has put it, 'Education is the best economic policy we have' (Blair, 1998, quoted in Martin, 2002, p. 567).

Although at one level this is indeed an adequate depiction of what has happened with lifelong learning in many countries around the world, it is important to look at these developments in a bit more detail so as not to get stuck in unproductive stereotypes. In what follows I wish to make two observations about recent transformations of the field of lifelong learning. I will do this on the basis of a simple conceptual model called the 'triangle of lifelong learning', which I will introduce first.

The 'Triangle' of Lifelong Learning

'Lifelong learning' is an elusive concept. It means many things to many people and often means more than one thing at the same time (see, for example, Young, 2000, p. 97). While the slipperiness of the term does allow for political play and ideological delusion – who, for example, would want to argue that lifelong learning is not a good thing? (see Biesta, 2004a) – it is important to keep in mind that lifelong learning has probably never meant only one thing but has always been a 'composite' concept. Aspin & Chapman (2001) have argued that that lifelong learning represents three different 'agendas' and hence can serve three different functions or purposes, which, in their words, are: (1) lifelong learning for *economic progress and development*; (2) lifelong learning for *personal development and fulfilment*; and (3) lifelong learning for *social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity* (Aspin & Chapman, 2001, pp. 39-40).

If we think of lifelong learning as the learning that goes on throughout one's life, i.e. the learning that is connected to one's life and the learning that takes place beyond the initial phase of formal education, then there is indeed an aspect of lifelong learning that has to do with the acquisition of new skills and knowledge in relation to the world of work, something that is important both for one's own employability and financial well-being and for the well-being of the economy as a whole. This can be called the *economic* function of lifelong learning. There is also a dimension of lifelong learning that has to do with personal development and fulfilment, not only in terms of developing one's potential and talents, but also in terms of learning from the encounters and experiences that make up one's life, finding the 'meaning' of one's life, and maybe even learning to live one's life in a better way. This is the *personal* dimension of lifelong learning. Thirdly, there is a dimension of lifelong learning that has to do with democracy and social justice, with the empowerment and emancipation of individuals so that they become able to live their lives with others in more democratic, just and inclusive ways – which, again, is not only important for the well-being of individuals but for the quality of democratic life itself as well (see Biesta, 2005). I will refer to this as the *democratic* dimension of lifelong learning.

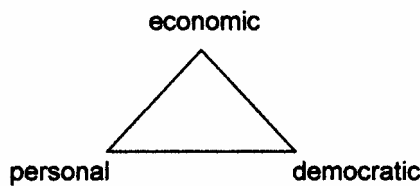


Figure 1. The three functions of lifelong learning.

*From the Learning Democracy to the Learning Economy?*

When we look more closely at the policies and practices of lifelong learning from this angle, it becomes clear that in most cases there is an acknowledgement of the multidimensional nature of lifelong learning. This means that differences between positions are more to be understood as differences in emphasis and, more importantly, differences in priorities than that different positions represent only one of the functions of the triangle of lifelong learning.

The authors of the Faure report, for example, are not oblivious to the importance of education for work and economic development. Yet for Faure and his colleagues questions about the economic function of lifelong learning are always subordinate to questions about its democratic function. Whereas the report acknowledges that with respect to 'the economy, welfare and standards of living' people in underdeveloped countries 'no longer resign themselves so easily to inequality dividing class from class ... as in the days when all was seen as an arrangement by the Almighty', nor that they resign themselves 'any more readily to educational underdevelopment, particularly since they have been led to believe that the universalization of education was to become their absolute weapon for the achievement of an economic "take-off"', the report hastens to add that 'the peoples now aspire to democracy quite independently of their GNP and their rates of school enrolment' (Faure et al, 1972, p. xxiv, emphasis added). Similarly, the report acknowledges

that although it is the case that motivation for learning largely depends on the search for employment and the desire for learning, the authors do argue that motivation deriving from employment ‘seems unable to ensure true democratization’ (p. xxix). The Faure report thus presents us with a vision of lifelong learning in which democratisation is the main driver, and where the basic function of lifelong learning lies in the combination of the personal and the democratic dimension. For Faure the aim of education is ‘to enable man to be himself’, yet learning-to-be always has to be understood in democratic terms, i.e. as learning-to-be-with-others. This is why the report concludes that uniting ‘*homo sapiens*’ and ‘*Homo faber*’ – the knowing human being and the producing human being – is not enough. What is needed instead is the ‘*homo concors*’, the human being ‘in harmony with himself and others’ (p. xxxix).

In the OECD report we can also see an acknowledgement of the composite character of lifelong learning. The mantra throughout the report is that lifelong learning is an important factor in promoting ‘employment, economic development, democracy and social cohesion’ (OECD, 1997, p. 13). The report states, for example, that ‘a new focus for education and training policies is needed now, to develop capacities to realise the potential of the “global information economy” and to contribute to employment, culture, democracy and, above all, social cohesion’ (p. 15). In the ‘Ministers’ Communiqué’ attached to the report we can read that the OECD Education Ministers ‘are all convinced of the crucial importance of learning throughout life for enriching personal lives, fostering economic growth and maintaining social cohesion’ (p. 21) and that ‘[f]uture economic prosperity, social and political cohesion, and the achievement of genuinely democratic societies with full participation – all depend on a well-educated population’ (p. 24). Even the Director General of the General Directorate for Education and Culture of the European Commission devotes 6 of the 300 or so lines of his speech to the theme of ‘social inclusion’, arguing that ‘lifelong learning is not only about employment and adaptability ... [but] is also a means to personal fulfilment, active citizenship and social inclusion’ – although in his view these objectives must be addressed ‘through policies and processes outside the employment field’ (Van der Pas, 2001, p. 16).

While in all cases, therefore, there is a recognition of the triadic nature of lifelong learning, the more recent documents do present us with a vision of lifelong learning in which economic considerations have become the main driver of lifelong learning and in which the main function of lifelong learning seems to be ‘learning for earning’, learning to remain employable and productive in the face of the demands of the new, global economy. The view from the European Union is unashamedly explicit about the priority of the economic imperative. The mentioning of the other functions of lifelong learning seems to be hardly more than lip-service, and the Director General – or his text-writer – seems to be unable to even imagine possible relationships between the world of work on the one hand and the world of personal fulfilment, active citizenship and social inclusion on the other.

The OECD document is more interesting, not only because it makes mention of the democratic function of lifelong learning, but also because it puts a strong emphasis on the relationships between lifelong learning, social inclusion and ‘above all, social cohesion’. The attention to social inclusion and cohesion could be read as a ‘thin’ definition of democracy, in which case it might be concluded that the OECD position suffers less from economic reductionism than the view from the European Union does. This would fit rather well with recent interest in the United Kingdom in the so-called ‘wider benefits of learning’ (such as inclusion and cohesion, but also health; see Schuller et al, 2004). While this seems to suggest a turn away from a narrow, economic approach to lifelong learning, we should not forget, as Schuller (2001, p. 94) has pointed out, that this interest is itself often fuelled by assumptions about the importance of such wider benefits for economic performance. And we should not forget that social inclusion is not the same as democracy, particularly not because the discourse of inclusion has the tendency to think of inclusion as including others into one’s own definition of inclusion rather than allowing people to set their own terms for inclusion (see Biesta, in press(a)).

What the triangle of lifelong learning thus helps us to see is how the relationship between the functions of lifelong learning differs in different configurations of lifelong learning, and also how this relationship has changed over time. For Faure democracy was the main driver for lifelong learning and although there was a clear emphasis on the personal dimension of lifelong learning as well, personal development and fulfilment is always considered in the light of democratisation, social justice and international solidarity. For Faure, *democracy* thus represents an *intrinsic value*

whereas personal fulfilment and development occupies a more instrumental position. The economic dimension is rather separate. For Faure it is not even a necessary condition for the development of democracy. We can see that in more recent approaches the economic function of lifelong learning has taken central position, and we might even say that in the current scheme *economic growth* has become an *intrinsic value*: it is desired for its own sake, not in order to achieve something else. (The idea that economic development is an aim in itself is, of course, one of the defining characteristics of capitalism.) The position of social inclusion and cohesion in this scheme is ambivalent, but it is more likely that they represent instrumental rather than intrinsic values. And we shouldn't forget that social inclusion and cohesion are not necessarily democratic. This brings me to my second observation.

*The Individualisation of Lifelong Learning and the Reversal of Rights and Duties*

The other thing that has happened in the field of lifelong learning over the past two decades is the increased *individualisation* of lifelong learning. Perhaps the first thing to note is the way in which this individualisation is expressed and has in a sense also changed the very language we use to talk about all this. The fact that we now so easily use the phrase 'lifelong learning' already suggests something about the individualisation of the field. Earlier generations, after all, spoke about adult education (see, for example, Lindeman, 1926) or lifelong education (Yeaxlee, 1929) – which is also the phrase used in the Faure report. Whereas 'education' is a relational concept that, in most cases, refers to the interaction between an educator and a student, 'learning' denotes something that one can do alone and by oneself (see Biesta, 2004a). To use a phrase like 'the adult learner' or even 'the learner', therefore, already indicates a choice for a particular way to configure and conceptualise the field.

The individualisation of lifelong learning is, however, not only a conceptual issue. In his book on the new 'educational order' of lifelong learning, Field (2000) has argued, for example, that the actual nature of the learning activities that many adults are engaged in has changed as well. He argues that more and more people are spending more and more of their time and money on all kinds of different forms of learning, both inside and increasingly also outside and disconnected from the traditional educational institutions. There is not only conclusive evidence that the volume and level of participation in formal adult learning are increasing. There is also a rapidly growing market for non-formal forms of learning, such as in fitness centres and sport clubs, but also the learning related to self-help therapy manuals, Internet learning, self-instructional videos, DVDs and CDs. One of the most significant characteristics of what Field has called the 'silent explosion of learning' is not only that the new learning is more individualistic – i.e. people learning alone and by themselves – but also that the content and purpose of these forms of learning has become more focused on individual issues such as one's body, one's relationships and one's identity (see Field, 2000, pp.35ff.) The point is nicely summarised by Boshier when he observes that '[t]hese days lifelong learning ... denotes the savvy consumer surfing the Internet selecting from a smorgasbord of educational offerings. Learning is an individual activity' (Boshier, 2001, p. 368).

Yet the point is not only that learning has become increasingly an individual *activity*. Under the influence of the learning economy learning has also increasingly become an individual *issue* and an individual *responsibility* (see, for example, Grace, 2004; Fejes, 2004). It is not only that under the imperatives of the learning economy only the economic function of lifelong learning seems to count as 'good' or desirable learning. There is also a clear tendency to shift the responsibility for learning to the individual – or, at a larger scale, to shift this responsibility away from the state towards the private sector. In the learning economy learning ceases to be a collective good and increasingly becomes an individual good. In this scenario the state is less and less a provider and promoter of lifelong learning and increasingly becomes the regulator and auditor of the 'learning market' (see Biesta, 2004b).

One way to summarise the individualisation of lifelong learning is to say that it has brought about a *reversal of rights and duties*. Whereas in the past lifelong learning was an individual's right which corresponded to the state's duty to provide resources and opportunities for lifelong learning, it seems that lifelong learning has increasingly become a duty for which individuals need to take responsibility, while it has become the right of the state to demand of all its citizens that they

continuously engage in learning so as to keep up with the demands of the global economy. Not to be engaged in some form of 'useful' learning no longer seems to be an option, as can, for example, be seen from the recent concern of policy makers with so-called hard-to-reach learners – learners who, for some reason, are not able or not willing to engage in 'learning' and, more specifically, in the kinds of learning demanded by the state and the economy.

### **What's the Point of Lifelong Learning If Lifelong Learning Has No Point?**

The individualisation of lifelong learning, and particularly the fact that lifelong learning has become both the individual's responsibility *and* the individual's duty, has several important consequences. The most important one, I wish to suggest, has to do with the motivation for lifelong learning. The predicament here is that while individuals are being made responsible for their own lifelong learning, the 'agenda' for their learning is mainly set by others. This then raises the question why one should be motivated to learn throughout one's life; why one should be motivated to learn 'forever' (Halliday, 2004) if decisions about the content, purpose and direction of one's learning are beyond one's own control. What is the point of lifelong learning, we might ask, if the purpose of lifelong learning cannot be defined by the individual learner; if, in other words, lifelong learning has no point for the individual who has to 'do' the learning? Should the lifelong learner be motivated, for example, by the idea that if he or she trains for the right job this might reduce the current annual loss of 100 billion euros in the European Union? Should the lifelong learner be motivated by the idea that if he or she gains the right information and communications technology skills, he or she will contribute to making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world?

These are, of course, first and foremost empirical questions which require further investigation.[3] In the context of this article I can only suggest that the odd combination of lifelong learning as both the individual's *responsibility* and the individual's *duty* may well have a negative impact on the motivation of adults to engage in lifelong learning. This can at least help us to better understand the particular predicament of lifelong learners in the 'learning economy'. There are three observations that I wish to make in relation to this.

The first point brings us back to the triangle of lifelong learning. If it makes sense to distinguish between the economic, the democratic and the personal function of lifelong learning, then we might also be able to say something about how motivation works differently in each of these areas. The point I wish to make here is that whereas the motivation for the economic function of lifelong learning is predominantly indirect – work is more likely to be valued because of the other things it makes possible, for example, through the generation of income, than that it is valued for its own sake (which does not mean, of course, that people cannot gain a sense of satisfaction from their working lives) – the motivation related to the personal and democratic function of lifelong learning is much more direct and intrinsic (see also Biesta, 2005). If the rise of the learning economy puts the motivation for lifelong learning under pressure we should therefore not forget that the motivation for 'learning for earning' is likely to be already more fragile than the motivation for the personal and democratic dimensions of lifelong learning.

The second thing to keep in mind is that the extent to which lifelong learners will actually experience a contradiction between lifelong learning as a responsibility and lifelong learning as a duty also depends on their perception and appreciation of the rationale for the development of the learning economy. If adults find the arguments for the learning economy convincing, they may well be very happy to take responsibility for their duty to 'upskill' and retrain throughout their lives. But how strong is this rationale? The official story is that in order to remain competitive in a rapidly changing global economy we need a higher skilled workforce, particularly to serve the knowledge economy, and a more flexible workforce. This, so we are told, is why we need more, better, higher and lifelong education and training, which will eventually bring economic prosperity to nations and individuals. But there are important questions to be asked here. Is it really the case that more and 'better' and higher education leads to economic prosperity? Or is the explanation for the fact that more prosperous economies generally have a better educated workforce to be found in the fact that such economies are able to invest more in education? Is it the case that the workforce as a whole needs higher skills and that we are indeed living in or moving towards a



knowledge economy? Or might it be the case that are we experiencing a *polarisation* of work, both within and between societies, where there are pockets of work that require high skills but where the majority of jobs only require a low-skilled, flexible workforce (see, for example, the rise of the call centre industry; Frenkel et al, 1999; Holtgrewe et al, 2002)? There are also more fundamental questions to ask about the wider picture, particularly about the claim that the global economy is simply a fact to which we, as individuals, as nations and as European Union need to adapt. Could it be the case that economic globalisation is not so much a 'fact' as that it is something that is actively being pursued by some so as to serve the interests of particular nations, groups, classes or companies? Is economic growth itself a necessity or is it possible to envisage a different future, one based on a different set of values? There is also the question as to whether the learning economy does indeed create prosperity *for all*, or whether it simply reproduces existing economic inequalities, for example, between the so-called developed and the so-called developing nations or between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' within societies. So what is the point of lifelong learning in the learning economy, if ultimately lifelong learning continues to benefit *others*?

The third point I wish to make is that the possible contradiction between lifelong learning as an individual's responsibility and a duty may not be a predicament that is only confined to the field of lifelong learning. In his book *Liquid Modernity* (Bauman, 2001), the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman suggests that such contradictions are part of a wider trend in contemporary society. In his book Bauman makes a distinction between two 'phases' of modernity: the old 'solid and heavy' stage of modernity and the contemporary 'liquid and fluid' stage. Bauman argues that modernisation has always implied individualisation, that is, the overcoming of the all-encompassing influence of social, cultural and religious traditions. Individualisation, so he writes, 'consists of transforming human "identity" from a "given" into a "task" and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task' (2001, p. 31). Individualisation thus entails the establishment of what Bauman calls *de jure* autonomy (p. 32). What distinguishes solid from fluid modernity is not the process of individualisation as such, but the 'yawning gap' between the right of self-assertion on the one hand, and the capacity 'to control the social settings which render such self-assertion feasible' on the other (p. 38). For Bauman this is 'the main contradiction of fluid modernity' (p. 38), and it is this contradiction, I wish to suggest, that we can clearly see in the situation of lifelong learners in the learning economy, the situation in which lifelong learners are responsible for their own learning but seem to have little influence on the content, purpose and 'point' of their learning. They have, to use Bauman's words, *de jure* autonomy, but what they seem lacking is *de facto* autonomy.

So where do we go from here?

### **Conclusion: towards the learning democracy**

In this article I have analysed recent transformations in the field of lifelong learning. My focus has been on the consequences of these transformations for the individual lifelong learner and my main claim is that the rise of the learning economy has resulted in a situation where lifelong learning has ceased to be a right and has instead become the individual's duty *and* responsibility. I have suggested that this predicament may well have a negative impact on the individual's motivation for engaging in lifelong learning, particularly the 'learning for earning' that is demanded by the learning economy. I have also suggested that this predicament may not be an exclusive issue for the field of lifelong learning, but may well be characteristic of more general developments in contemporary (post)modern societies.

If we look at these developments from a slight distance, we might say that the lifelong learner is caught up in a struggle over the definition of lifelong learning, a struggle over what counts as 'real' or 'worthwhile' learning. This struggle is not simply conceptual since it impacts directly upon the resources that are made available for lifelong learning. By making lifelong learning a *private* good – something that is considered to be first and foremost valuable in relation to the economic function of lifelong learning and therefore something that is first of all of value to individuals and other players in the economic sector – it becomes increasingly difficult to claim *collective* resources for lifelong learning, particularly resources for supporting the other two dimensions of lifelong learning: the personal and the democratic.

Discussions about the need for the development of a learning economy are often quite critical of the personal dimension of lifelong learning. Some proponents of the learning economy have argued that it was about time that adult education ‘got real’, and courses in flower arranging and basket weaving are often quoted as examples of the alleged irrelevance of the field. While proponents of the learning economy may not object to the existence of such learning opportunities as such, they cannot see why collective resources should be made available for the funding of what in their view are strictly private issues. It is here that the interest in the wider benefits of lifelong learning – in this case the wider benefits of *personal* lifelong learning – has a place, since it could be claimed that collective resources should be made available if it was the case that learning for personal fulfilment has a positive impact on such aspects as the individual’s health or the development of social capital. While this might positively impact on the availability of resources for the personal function of lifelong learning, it does not mean, of course, that this would imply a recognition of the personal dimension as a collective good. The interest in the wider benefits of lifelong is, after all, first and foremost fuelled by a simple cost–benefit analysis.

What we shouldn’t lose sight of in all of this is that lifelong learning is not exhausted by its economic and personal function. The key question to ask in the light of the recent rise of the learning economy is precisely the question about the relationship between lifelong learning and democracy. Does a democracy need lifelong learning? If so, what kind of lifelong learning does it need? Should we define a democracy as a society that has the capacity and the will to learn about itself? Should we define a democracy as a society that has the ability and the will to learn from the encounter with difference and otherness? Might it be the case that a democracy can only exist as a learning democracy? Should we therefore be worried about the current configuration of lifelong learning in economic terms?

These are not simply rhetorical questions. I believe that we should indeed be concerned about the near-hegemony of the learning economy and that for precisely this reason there is an urgent need to reclaim the democratic dimension of lifelong learning (see also Biesta, 2005). This is not only in order to bring about a more balanced approach to lifelong learning, one which acknowledges that lifelong learning is a concept with at least three equally important dimensions. The need to reclaim the democratic dimension of lifelong learning also follows from Bauman’s observation that the individualisation which is characteristic of fluid modernity – the individualisation that is characterised by a gap between *de jure* autonomy and *de facto* autonomy – signifies a disappearance of the public realm, a disappearance of the realm of democratic politics itself. For Bauman, as we have seen, the main contradiction of fluid modernity lies in the ‘wide and growing gap between the condition of individuals *de jure* and their chances ... to gain control over their fate and make the choices they truly desire’ (Bauman, 2001, p. 39). Bauman argues that this gap ‘cannot be bridged by individual effort alone’ (p. 39). The gap has emerged and grown precisely ‘because of the emptying of public space, and particularly the “agora”, that intermediary, public/private site ... where private problems are translated into the language of public issues and public solutions are sought, negotiated and agreed for private troubles’ (p. 39). This is why Bauman argues that in contemporary individualised society we need ‘*more, not less, of the “public sphere”*’ (p. 51; original italics); we need the ability to congeal and condense ‘private troubles into public interests that are larger than the sum of their individual ingredients ... so that they can acquire once more the shape of the visions of the “good society” and the “just society”’ (p. 51). What we need, therefore, is more democracy (Biesta, 2005). But democracy is not something that can be produced in the same way as proponents of the learning economy assume that economic growth and competitiveness will follow if people acquire the right skills and qualifications. There is no such thing as a certificate or a diploma in democracy. Democracy, in its shortest formula, is about learning from difference and learning to live with others who are not like us (see Säfström & Biesta, 2001; Biesta, 2006; in press(b)). For this very reason democracy can only be learned *from* life. And this kind of democratic learning is truly a lifelong task.

## Notes

- [1] The Commission did indeed only consist of men, but had an interesting international ‘make up’: Edgar Faure (France), former Prime Minister and Minister of Education; Professor Felipe Herrera (Chile), former President of the Inter-American Development Bank; Professor Abdul-Razzak

Kaddoura (Syria), Professor of Nuclear Physics at the University of Damascus; Henri Lopes (People's Republic of Congo), Minister of Foreign Affairs, former Minister of Education; Professor Arthur V. Petrovsky (USSR), Member of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of the USSR; Majid Rahnema (Iran), former Minister of Higher Education and Sciences; and Frederick Champion Ward (USA), Adviser on International Education, the Fort Foundation (see Faure et al, p. xi).

[2] The sentence continues with 'democracy and social cohesion' – I will return to this below.

[3] The 'Learning Lives' project, a longitudinal study of the learning biographies of adults which we are currently conducting in the United Kingdom (see [www.learninglives.org](http://www.learninglives.org)), has the potential to shed more light on these issues, particularly on the question of the impact of the learning economy on the motivation of adults to engage in forms of lifelong learning.

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