

# THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

## THREE QUESTIONS TO MARCELLA MILANA AND ZSUZSANNA GÉRING

**Kevin ORR**

University of Huddersfield, UK

**Marcella MILANA**

University of Verona, IT

**Zsuzsanna GÉRING**

Budapest Business School, University of Applied Sciences, HU

Emails: [marcella.milana@univr.it](mailto:marcella.milana@univr.it), [gering.zsuzsannamargit@uni-bge.hu](mailto:gering.zsuzsannamargit@uni-bge.hu)

*Following the eucen conference hosted by the Central European University in Budapest in June 2022, Kevin Orr on behalf of the editors of EJULL has asked two of the keynote speakers to discuss three questions that pertain to the theme of the conference “University Lifelong Learning Today and Tomorrow: HEIs for a Higher Quality and More Inclusive Knowledge Transfer”.*

*Marcella Milana is an associate professor in the Department of Human Sciences at the University of Verona and honorary professor of adult education in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. She is editor-in-chief of the International Journal of Lifelong Education. She researches the politics, policy and governance of adult education, from global and comparative perspectives, and in multi-scalar systems like the European Union.*

*Zsuzsanna Géring is a Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Future of Higher Education Research Centre at Budapest Business School, University of Applied Sciences, Hungary. She researches the future of higher education, corporate social responsibility, as well as the use of mixed methodological textual analysis and discourse analysis.*

**Kevin Orr:** What is the role of lifelong learning in universities in relation to sustainability, especially pertaining to social inclusion and the environment?

**Zsuzsanna Géring:** In my opinion, one of the key roles of universities related to lifelong learning is to help students acquire the self-learning, self-management skills. The last few years with the abrupt changes in our lives and the increasing level of uncertainty demonstrated that the ability to adjust and change our habits is crucial. This requires a general openness to new knowledge, new methods, and new ways of ‘operation’. Let’s

just remember the digital transformation of education and office-work from one day to the next during the pandemic. Of course, that was a crisis situation, and desperate times requires desperate measures, but lately it seems that the crisis is staying with us and becoming the new normal. We lost the illusion of safety and stability (i.e., no wars in Western societies, no pandemic which can reach us, etc.) and never-ending prosperity. This brought such a high level of uncertainty in our lives that without a heightened level of stress-management and flexibility we could not prevail. And this requires personal, institutional, and social level coping strategies. Autonomous learning and self-management skills could substantially enhance these coping mechanisms. Accordingly, this type of skill-development at the universities could lead not only to personal, but social resilience. In my opinion, this is the most important and at the same time the most challenging tasks of the universities in our times.

Furthermore, this is necessary to be able to change our general short-sighted attitude to a more responsible and sustainable perspective. To this, a shared understanding and common language is necessary, which can be and should be acquired in (higher) education. Without this collective knowledge, we cannot even start a meaningful conversation outside academia. We need the words and concepts to understand the world around us, we need the scientific thought-processes and methods to be able to select relevant and trustworthy information. Therefore, in my opinion the first task is a general level knowledge transfer to create a common understanding. But this should be complemented with those skill-development processes, which could enhance critical thinking, system-thinking and openness. It is very important to incorporate the institutional and social level viewpoints into the individual reasoning and actions, to reach socially and environmentally optimal (or at least not bad) outcomes.

**Marcella Milana:** Recent policy developments, for instance at European level, endorse lifelong learning in universities, thus universities can play an important role also in relation to sustainability. But sustainability can mean many things, especially at times of multiple crises, as we experience today, under the long wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reappearance of warfare in Europe, and the visible effects of global climate change.

In the broadest sense, sustainability implies the capacity of a system to maintain or support a process over time, so that meeting today's needs should not compromise the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs. This entails not exhausting available natural, economic and social resources.

But how does it translate in practice?

Let's take the university, as a physical site and organizational structure, and to be more concrete the university campus in Verona where I work, for instance. It is a site where people (staff and students) meet with each other and the environment, which is made of natural resources (i.e., a garden and the plants that inhabit it), material resources (i.e., the building architecture, its interiors and furnishings, and the city in which it is located), which are also (tangible and intangible) cultural resources. As such, the university is a site for informal lifelong learning for staff and students as much as an organization that supports it.

Several years ago, with two colleagues of mine (Palle Rasmussen and John Holford), we reflected on the need for an alternative ontology to support sustainable adult education

that, among others, considers the intrinsic (rather than the extrinsic) value of the natural environment and brings social justice concerns to the fore. This applies to lifelong learning in universities too.

Recognizing the intrinsic value of the natural environment was done on the Verona campus, for instance, when free water machines substituted bottled water vending machines. At the same time, the natural environment was still considered an extrinsic resource when green areas of the campus were refurbished to please the eyes rather than welcoming students and staff - and this in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when society had learned that meeting outdoors was safer!

Social inclusion through university lifelong learning is practiced in universities, including mine, by facilitating access to refugees with no proof of their university credentials, people whose prior learning is acknowledged or adults with special needs and learning disabilities, etc. This implies an increase in admission rates (and corresponding university fees!). But too often it does not correspond to an increase in university staff, so available human resources become exhausted and the quality of students' learning decreases. Also, adults with or without special needs and learning disabilities, independent of whether they study full or part-time, in Verona are admitted to the same study programs, many of which qualify for a profession (i.e., teacher, psychologist, etc.). So, there is a one-size-fits-all provision that does not account for people's different capabilities and aspirations, whereas to avoid a waste of human and cultural resources social inclusion should go hand in hand with a diversified learning provision.

#### **Kevin Orr:** What does successful lifelong learning look like in a university today?

**Marcella Milana:** This is a big question, whose answer depends on who is to judge "success", and against which criteria. If one endorses the view that lifelong learning benefits all - that is: people, institutions, and societies, as I do, success can be judged against two criteria, for instance, that common benefits prevail against partisan ones, and that social benefits are higher than strictly economic ones.

From this perspective, a successful lifelong learning in a university looks like several things that, taken together, brings the university – as an institution – to contribute to common and social benefits for people and societies.

This means, however, that universities should be recognised by students as much as university personnel, academic and non-academic, at all levels of the hierarchy, as microcosms that resemble societies at large; hence permeated by learning process at individual, group and institutional levels. Accordingly, every "citizen" of such microcosms should fight against the marketization of universities through lifelong learning by constantly questioning 'who is gaining what'?

Consequent with this, for instance, successful lifelong learning depends on supporting people, through guidance services, to build self-confidence and self-esteem so they can make satisfactory choices during transitions at any time along their lifespan, not only in education-to-education, education to work, or work-to-work transitions. Equally delicate transitions for people's active engagement with others and society are those involved with parenthood, retirement, relocation or migration.

Moreover, successful lifelong learning comes with acknowledgment by all those involved that the kind of knowledge recognised through assessment and recognition procedures do matter. This is because recognition of prior learning does not represent an end goal but a starting point for people's further learning and development.

Also, successful lifelong learning comes with better attention on the kind of rights educational credentials may allow for holders, as much as the institutional conditions that guarantee the exercise of such rights, to eschew rather than reinforcing credentialism and education inflation.

Finally, it shall come as no surprise that successful lifelong learning necessitates adequate funds for research and development, among others, to expand the knowledge base on the needs that diverse transitions bring about for people, and contribute to developing responsive guidance activities; advance critical research on the kind of knowledge – and to what effects - is (de)valued in recognition of prior learning procedures, and to innovate such procedures accordingly; and to establish a new line of research on the ontology of educational credentials, to inform further explorations of how to render credentials – including micro-credentials - valid objects to entitle their holders to exert the right to further learning.

**Zsuzsanna Géring:** For me this question is connected to two topics: reaching those who do not have the necessary agency about their education; and “opening the gates” of the universities.

As for the first point, I think that the question of agency is broader than the concept of social exclusion. Here, I mean the capability and the willingness to make decisions and choices, when I talk about agency. That is a deliberative attitude toward personal, institutional and social actions. Of course, there is a huge overlap between those who have no agency about their education and those who lack the necessary financial and social capital to join. However, when we talk about lifelong learning, we would like to reach those as well who have the money and the time to learn, even some willingness, but for some reason they think that universities are not for them. For example, those who would like to learn, but think that university is for the young people and so on. Therefore, successful lifelong learning in my opinion means a minimum level of agency, the feeling of capability and enthusiasm. And this can be enhanced at the typical basic university education of the young ones to ensure learning ‘appetite’ for later. And this can be enhanced by empowering those who are outside, but can be involved. For this, a general social conversation is needed, to reach the public showing that universities are not only high academic research fortresses but open and inclusive educational spaces.

And this leads to the second point: universities should be entry-points and open spaces to those who would like to learn. It is not an easy task to change the longstanding traditions of years-long, slow and mainly theory-based scientific education to a more flexible, more practice-oriented and more involving type of education. This requires not only new content, but new, more flexible forms of teaching and learning, new ways of operating, while maintaining high academic quality. This is a challenge, to which the answer is not evident. Should universities move toward micro-credentials and flexible networks with mentor-type teachers? Or, on the contrary, should they provide solid and longer programmes both with knowledge-transfer and skill-development in order to differentiate themselves from non-academic educators?

There is not a 'one-size-fits-all' solution to this. Although the global competition between universities, the rankings and the general isomorphism of the field push the institutions to copy each other (typically those at the top of the lists), every university is embedded in its local, national and regional environment. The requirements of their stakeholders are complex and always changing. Accordingly, they should scrutinise these expectations and try to find those scenarios, which help them to balance between their missions and their internal and external responsibilities.

**Kevin Orr:** What is the relationship between lifelong learning for personal development, social development, and economic development?

**Marcella Milana:** Hmm... this is another big question! In theory, the relationship should be the same that holds together different members of the same family. I mean that personal, social and economic development should not be seen as different, disconnected things. In practice, we live in a world where the mainstream narrative shared by politicians, the media, etc., depicts development as something that is primarily – when not exclusively – of an economic type, and for the benefit of the individual, where the social dimension tends to be forgotten if not openly contrasted.

We are strongly indebted to neoliberal globalization for this, as a framing of public policy that stimulates a raise of profits by minimizing the costs of investment, and a reduction of social security, while advocating individualism. As citizens, we are caught in what Foucault describes as “subjectification”, namely we observe, analyse, interpret and recognise ourselves in a domain of the possible that is of either/or personal, social, economic development. Accordingly, we have come to believe that to develop economically (i.e., getting a well-paid job), depends almost exclusively on ourselves (i.e., becoming employable), thus personal development is what really matters. But this is a false moral stance that emphasises the intrinsic worth of the individual and its agency, while dismissing the bounding effects of socio-economic and cultural structures.

Perhaps it is because I am Italian, and for me a family (good or bad) is a family, not a simple aggregate of individuals, that I cannot see how lifelong learning could be related to either/or personal, social, economic forms of development. This said, it is of course a shared experience that within an individual biography, at different stages of a person's life, learning may be more or less instrumental and supportive of personal, social or economic development. But, if lifelong learning is acknowledged as benefitting all (people, institutions, and societies) intentional and organised learning should at least not be designed to only target one developmental dimension.

**Zsuzsanna Géring:** When we talk about universities we should keep in mind that higher education is not only about knowledge transfer, grading and certification. It is also a place where students learn how to be an informed citizen, a prepared future employee with professional norms. Those who participate in learning during a lifetime enhance not only their intellectual, but also their social skills. They get to know new forms of collaboration, norms of the social and digital spaces, they learn to pay attention to others' opinions, values and interests. Furthermore, (hopefully) they learn about institutional and social effects of individual decisions. These are those effects which go beyond personal

development and could help to improve social well-being and long-term sustainability both in the economic and environmental sense.

Furthermore, universities are not only places of education, but at the same time, they are workplaces for thousands. The way of operating, the institutional culture, the approach to collaboration and partnership, the role of competition and creativity, the level of hierarchy and so on can all serve as a model for future workplaces. Students will spend a considerable time in this environment, which has strong effects even if not as formalised and structured as the courses themselves. That is why universities and their academic and non-academic employees should be aware that their role and responsibility exceed far beyond the classroom or the student office.

**Kevin Orr:** Thank you very much.