

Lifelong Learning in HE: spheres of resilience

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Recent decades have witnessed significant changes in the university-based lifelong learning sector in the UK. The provision of lifelong learning for personal growth and active citizenship has been squeezed as learning for employability and skills has come to dominate. This has resulted in the restructuring of a number of lifelong learning departments and the refocusing of provision to skills-based courses. However, spheres of resilience exist. Space for a form of lifelong learning in its broadest sense has been able to maintain a presence, albeit in smaller form. These processes have not been without challenges as attempts to navigate the policy and funding contexts attest. This paper shares the results of research undertaken on the challenges, successes and experiences of continuing to deliver lifelong learning as a means of providing opportunities for 'learning for learning' and fostering democratic and civic participation within the context of the neoliberal model of higher education.

Full paper

Lifelong learning in higher education should embrace learning in its broadest sense, including the social, cultural and economic development of communities and the region (European Universities Continuing Education Network, 2021). This seems an inclusive standpoint that should strongly influence the way that learners learn and teachers teach. However, UNESCO's report on *Embracing a Culture of Lifelong Learning* (2020) argues that in many education systems, lifelong learning is an auxiliary system rather than a central concept for education and social policies. This has resulted in fragmented reforms and top-down procedures, effectively disconnecting lifelong learning from the core of education systems and policies.

Furthermore, the appreciation of the wider value of lifelong learning often falls short of the ambition to create a learning society in which learning for employability and skills is valued alongside learning for personal growth, community development, active citizenship and the 'common good'. As Biesta (2006) suggests, lifelong learning is 'increasingly understood in terms of the formation of human capital and as an investment in economic development.'

The adoption of this approach in higher education shifts lifelong learning further away from it being about a right, towards it being a responsibility, something which adults need to do to ensure they are work-ready throughout their career. This is further compounded by the neoliberal model of higher education that increases social inequality and in turn drives a more competitive society and

economy. Within this mentality the future is constantly changing, as so 'must' the individual. Thus, everyone is educable and needs to become a lifelong learner (Fejes, 2008).

As a result, recent decades have witnessed significant changes in the university-based lifelong learning sector in the UK. The space for providing lifelong learning in its broadest sense has been steadily squeezed, as can be seen through the restructuring/closing down of lifelong learning departments and the refocusing of provision in continuing departments to skills-based courses.

However, spheres of resilience to this narrowing focus of lifelong learning exist. Outside of the university space, groups have formed as a means of providing opportunities for 'learning for learning' and fostering democratic and civic participation. At the same time, a space for this form of lifelong learning has been able to maintain a presence in some universities, albeit often in smaller and/or restructured form. These processes have not been without challenges as attempts to navigate the policy and funding contexts, both at local and national levels, attest.

In this paper, we will share the results of research undertaken on the challenges, successes, trade-offs and experiences of continuing to provide lifelong learning in its broadest sense within the context of a model of higher education which views its purpose as primarily being to serve the neoliberal economy and the spheres of resilience that have emerged in challenging the current ethos of lifelong learning in university spaces. In this sense resilience has involved 'the process of building relationships and connections that strengthen each other rather than undermining and weakening all' (von Kotze, 2022: 13).

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