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# THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING

Jin Yang, Chripa Schneller, and Stephen Roche (Eds.). UIL Publication Series on Lifelong Learning Policies and Strategies: No. 3. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Hamburg, 2015, 199 pages.

How lifelong learning is construed, promoted, and responded to in higher education continues to be debated in the scholarly literature and within and across university contexts. In 2012, the University of Hamburg hosted a seminar to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. At this seminar, titled *The Role of the University in Promoting Lifelong Learning*, scholars and practitioners convened with intention to engage in dialogue across a broad array of lifelong learning topics. Of paramount importance were the provision of germane learning opportunities spanning diverse ages, genders, and socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts. The rich exchange served as the impetus for the illuminating and engaging work, *The Role of Higher Education in Promoting Lifelong Learning*. Additional authors, invited subsequently, also shared their perspectives.

This thought-provoking volume informs a deeper understanding of “the theoretical frameworks and practical implementation of lifelong learning in higher education” (p. 5) from regional, national, and global contexts. Advancing UNESCO’s vision that lifelong learning extends beyond formal to non-formal and informal contexts, contributing authors from Canada, Australia, Belgium, Spain, Scotland, England, Italy, Switzerland, Denmark, South Africa, and Japan encourage deeper understandings and approaches to lifelong learning between and across countries and sub-sectors of education systems. In response to a rapidly aging demographic, universities *must* respond ethically, responsibly, and inclusively to the lifelong learning needs of a diverse array of adult learners and recognize the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired *along the way*. Authors assert that it is imperative for universities to embrace the learning needs of diverse adult learners, beyond the needs and mandates dictated by economic needs and agendas, and that this response also recognize the “growing demand for the personal development and cultural enrichment opportunities that higher education offers” (p. 9). Issues of equity warranting reframing and reform include power and privilege, flexibility of programs, and valuing and validating multiple ways of learning and knowing throughout a lifespan.

The volume begins with an international overview of adults’ access to higher education. Authors Michael Osborne, Russell Rimmer, and Muir Houston challenge the premise that focusing primarily on access is insufficient. Highlighting issues of equity and privilege, this chapter concludes with a call for deeper collaboration across societies and higher education

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institutes to address inequitable issues related to access in support of an escalating knowledge-driven society.

A European perspective follows as Françoise de Viron and Pat Davies address some of the challenges of articulating and advancing a universal, European definition for university lifelong learning. Focusing on development trends and applications from 2005 to 2012, the authors highlight diverse approaches in response to lifelong learning needs and agendas and explore and proffer diverse, proactive, and responsive implementation strategies. The authors argue that proactive and responsive approaches will transform a university that *has* lifelong learning into a lifelong learning university.

Tertiary lifelong learning is the focus of Chapter 3. Karsten Krüger, Nestor Duch, Marti Parellada, Michael Osborne, Michele Mariani, and Laureano Jiménez discuss the Tertiary Higher Education for People in Mid-Life (THEMP) project, citing research that analyzed how universities provided tertiary lifelong learning in seven EU member states. THEMP, a conceptual framework for analyzing social efficiencies of tertiary lifelong learning, extends beyond employability and labour market access issues to include “the wider impact of learning provided by HE [higher education] on the overall quality of life of the learners” (p. 61).

Shifting the lens to South Africa, a middle-income country, Shirley Walters explores the challenges and imperative of successfully implementing lifelong learning agendas and initiatives. Fifty-one percent of the population in South Africa is under the age of 25; most are Black and living in poverty. South Africans who are older than 20 are lacking secondary schooling, constituting 70% of the population. Although the number of adult learners accessing higher education is on the rise, deep disparities related to access, equity, power and privilege, and knowledge validation warrant transformational change at all levels.

Japan’s aging population, the demands of a new knowledge-based society, and the challenges of “cop[ing] with the massification of higher education caused by declining numbers of 18-year-olds in Japan’s ageing population” (p. 106) are discussed by author Yukiko Sawano. In spite of numerous reforms over the past 20 years, the lack of collaboration between institutions of higher education and workplaces is cited. Diversity of program offerings, mediums, support services, entry requirements, and duration of programs will facilitate a more pervasive approach to lifelong learning in higher education institutions.

Minxuan Zhang and Jinjie Xu also refer to a rapidly aging, elder demographic in China and to Shanghai as “the first Chinese metropolis to become an ageing society” (p. 129). Centring on the challenges of an aging population and the role of universities in promoting elder education, the authors build a tenable case for the interrelationship between improved, more diverse lifelong learning policies and approaches and securing a deeper appreciation of the social conditions that impact elder adults.

A vignette (lesson case) designed to engage adult learners enrolled in an undergraduate adult education course in a process of discovery and appreciation of the meaning of lifelong learning is taken up by Allie Clemans. Recognizing the complexities and dissonance within the Australian context “to articulate a standpoint around lifelong learning” (p. 161), the author speaks to the critical importance of declaring shared values to inform and advance an agenda of learning *through* life and *for* life.

Advancing the discourse on how lifelong learning can be situated and inform the experience of graduate students in university contexts, Bjarne Wahlgren from Denmark continues the conversation in support of a learner-centred approach. Recognizing the

potential to bridge and inform research-based knowledge with prior learning acquired in vocational contexts, Wahlgren addresses challenges with traditional measurement models in reliably measuring relevant prior learning.

Linking future directions with past practices, Roger Boshier focuses on Yangpu, an older industrial district in Shanghai. Striving for modernization within the China context, Yangpu competes with other districts to innovate and transition from industrial-era factory practices to cleaner and greener conventions and observances. China's Plan 2011 is referenced, where universities were funded to study foreign models (e.g., Silicon Valley, p. 13) as a pathway to establishing vital alliances with communities and business. Boshier encourages a deeper, more thoughtful exploration of older contexts such as Yangpu to uncover insights and innovations embedded within the crevices of historical practices and processes.

There is much to be learned by making meaning of and responding to lifelong learning through a more comprehensive and permeable lens. Learning *in life*, learning *through life*, and learning *for life* take on multiple forms and need to be responded to in ways that are culturally and contextually sensitive, sensible, and integrated. Universities can play a significant role in establishing this tenor, tone, and direction.

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