

‘Knowledge Nuggets’ – Unhealthy for Education, or Pure Gold?

Report from the LUTL-2022 Panel Discussion

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Dialogue, inspiration, and critical discussion. On November 17, more than 50 presenters and 170 participants assembled at the 2022 Lund University Conference on Teaching and Learning, in the LUX building at Lund university. This forum on higher education was held for the 8th time and after a day filled with presentations a distinguished panel came together to discuss the theme of the day: Lifelong learning in higher Education: New (and Old) Perspectives. Maybe not in order to reach a consensus, but to examine and problematize the concept of lifelong learning and look at it from various perspectives.

In July 2021, a new obligation was placed on Swedish universities: “In their operations, higher education institutions must promote lifelong learning” (Swedish Higher Education Act, 5th section). It might seem like a brief addition, but it allows for many interpretations and clashing agendas. And after a whole conference day of exchanging perspectives and taking part of presentations, the concept of lifelong learning was scrutinized even further in a final panel discussion. Sara Håkansson (Dean of Undergraduate Studies at the Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology, Lund University) led the dialogue with keynote speakers Cecilia Bjursell (National Centre for Lifelong Learning, Jönköping university) and Johan Östling (Centre for the History of Knowledge Lund University) together with Björn Fagerström (Research, Collaboration and Innovation, Lund University), Mikael Sundström (Edulab, Lund University) and Alva Söderbäck (Lund University Student Union Association).

Lifelong learning through time

Moderator Sara Håkansson, from the conference hosting HT-faculties, opens the discussion by inviting the panel to go back to the roots, and explore the history of lifelong learning. They all concede that there is no single definition of the concept today, and that the interpretation of the term differs from person to person. But has it always been like that? Or has our understanding of lifelong learning looked different through the years?

Johan Östling, from the Centre for the History of Knowledge at Lund University, jokes that as a historian, it would be very easy to go far back in time and use medieval universities as a starting point, but then states that especially the 1900s were central when it came to the emergence of the so called “Knowledge society” - when knowledge became a key asset in the postindustrial society that people were faced with.

“Since then, universities have continued to expand, both in terms of what we should do here, and in the number of institutions, the number of students and the number of staff. But I think we are still part of this discourse of the knowledge society, and lifelong learning should be related to that” he says.

The panel continues to discuss how the educational system is not isolated from the rest of society, evolving through the years as different phenomena trickle into it. In the 1990s, the Swedish government invested in adult education through “Kunskapslyftet”, a project intended to reduce unemployment and to give more people the opportunity to continue learning. The project aimed primarily at unemployed adults who lacked a three-year upper secondary education. In 2015, when the migration to Sweden increased, the focus was on newly arrived students. And now, for the last few years the emphasis has been on developing courses in higher education for the working population, and to continuously learn throughout working life. But if there is more promotion of lifelong learning in higher education today, are there any challenges that universities have in meeting this demand?

Challenges and opportunities with lifelong learning

Mikael Sundström works at the newly established EduLab, an experimental platform at Lund University dedicated to being a testbed for new courses aimed at professionals, where course ideas are evaluated with the intention of making it easier to realise them.

He highlights three different challenges for universities connected to integrating lifelong learning into the organization: Pace, format and target audiences. He says that the university is used to a fairly languid pace, where developing new courses, normally takes years - and the pace needs to increase. New target groups have to be found and understood. And the development of new courses, programs and ways to teach, has to be done in a format that suits those new target groups. But he also relates this to a discussion around wisdom versus skills.

“I think one thing to consider would be if we are imparting wisdom or skills. Universities seem to be moving towards teaching skills rather than building wisdom these days, which is sort of sad. Because skills should be subservient to wisdom. At least that would be my idea” he says.

Alva Söderbäck, representing the Lund University Student Union Association, agrees, but highlights that the two do not have to cancel each other out.

“I believe that the pace can be unhurried in the educational segments. But the administrative systems need to be more efficiently serving the development of new courses, and quality reassurance of existing ones. We have seen examples that when we have to, it is possible to develop courses quicker, like in Edulab for instance. So why aren't we doing that all the time?”

Healthy education for future citizens

As the panel discussion continues, moderator Sara Håkansson mentions that in public debates on lifelong learning it is often stated that our society needs independent and flexible citizens, ready to adapt to new challenges and situations quickly. She then follows up with the question “Do you think that we as a university can help foster that type of citizen?”

Björn Fagerström from Research, Collaboration and Innovation at Lund University, thinks so. He says that if you look at the demand side of commissioned education the customer in the system requests high levels of flexibility, both in terms of what content the courses contain, but also how they are executed.

“To meet the need for flexibility, you need to break down all the courses into smaller pieces, like knowledge nuggets that are possible to combine into new courses. But it's not that easy to achieve. Some knowledge nuggets might fit with some, but not all, so it's a quite inflexible system that you start building even though that is the way forward” he says.

As the panel discussion begins to conclude, the audience are invited in with their questions. One person comments that “The word ‘knowledge nugget’ really makes me shiver”.

Cecilia Bjursell from National Centre for Lifelong Learning, Jönköping university, answers that it could also be interpreted as innovative education.

“The word nugget makes me think about McDonalds, and then I agree, it's not a very healthy education. But there is something in the knowledge nuggets discussion that is interesting: Could we work with education in other ways? And package it in other ways? In Jönköping we have talked about modularization, and discussed if we should have modules that we can have across programs, and also offer as a component for those who

return to the university and continue their lifelong learning journey. Maybe the word nugget in itself is creating the wrong associations, but we need innovation in education. To think about it in new formats, work in other ways, and share knowledge across disciplines. We might be able to do that, we might not – but there is something to explore there.”

As moderator Sara Håkansson concludes when the panel discussion comes to an end “As we know, a nugget is made of gold in its original meaning. So, there could be some symbolism in that.”