Lifelong Learning and Higher Education

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Those of us who work in higher education have an important task to fulfil, namely, to promote lifelong learning. Consequently, it can be of benefit to understand the concept of 'lifelong learning' and the various dimensions it encompasses. Lifelong learning does not merely entail that we can or should engage in learning throughout our lives – it also involves continuously learning new knowledge and skills whether we actively choose to do so or not. As a result, those of us who work in the field of education and learning are tasked with an additional responsibility: to ensure that such learning is rewarding for the individual and contributes to the long-term development of society.

When lifelong learning is demanded in the context of higher education, this signifies a shift from viewing oneself as a post-secondary institution catering to young adults to acting as a partner in the individual's lifelong learning journey. Establishing a lifelong relationship with an individual who is constantly evolving naturally entails increased complexity but also additional opportunities. As early as twenty years ago, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education noted that lifelong learning was politically, organizationally, and attitudinally embedded in the Swedish higher education system. Notwithstanding this, the agency also noted that it was perhaps time for a deeper understanding of what lifelong learning truly entails. The difference now compared to then is the increase in the proportion of the population who hold higher education degrees, the

increased demand in the job market for skilled labour, and changes in work methods based on technological advancements. While we can learn from past events, we must also be prepared to observe what is happening in society right now.

This essay introduces the concept of 'lifelong learning' and highlights different ways how the concept can be considered. To this end, I pose the following questions: *What has lifelong learning entailed in different time periods? What ideologies guide the direction of learning?* and *How do different perspectives regarding learning relate to each other?* Taken together, answers to these questions can contribute to deepening our understanding of lifelong learning in higher education and thereby enhancing our work with lifelong learning.

Half a Century of Lifelong Learning

'Lifelong learning' is a concept that is used in many contexts and in various ways. As a concept, it has existed for over 50 years but remains relevant today. Lifelong learning can be described as taking place:

- throughout a person's life
- in every context
- in an organized and unorganized manner
- for personal development, for one's professional life, and enabling one to function as a democratic citizen

In addition to the above general definition, there are more specific ways by which we can discuss lifelong learning. One common approach is to consider lifelong learning as consisting of formal learning (teacher and document-directed), non-formal learning (freely organized), and informal learning (learning that continuously occurs in everyday life). In the context of academic research, lifelong learning is a field that addresses topics such as adult learning and education, intergenerational relationships, older adults learning, citizenship, and learning at the workplace. At the global policy level, personal development, work life, and citizenship are often seen as three pillars of lifelong learning.

In contrast to a general definition of lifelong learning in terms of learning throughout one's life, the concept of 'lifelong learning' is used to inform adult learning in policy and education systems. This is because when the concept of 'lifelong learning' was initially introduced, it aimed to broaden the (somewhat narrow) perspective that education be provided only for *children in a classroom*. Only later did the idea of providing education to adults gain global prominence with the UNESCO report *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow* (Faure, et al., 1972). The group that authored the report comprised world-leading experts in the field of education who argued that the concept of 'lifelong learning' should not merely refer to an educational system but should incorporate an educational philosophy. As early as the 1960s in Sweden, Torsten Husén advocated the idea that, in a rapidly changing society, educational planning must acknowledge the significance of lifelong learning (Husén, 1969). At that time, Sweden held a strong position in the field of education in general and adult education specifically. Subsequent initiatives have therefore been able to take place within a context where established structures for adult learning in various forms have existed.

In discussions of lifelong learning in Swedish national education initiatives, the focus has shifted over time based on (perceived) societal needs. Many may recall the so-called 'kunskapslyftet' [lift in knowledge], which, between 1997 and 2002, was a state initiative for municipal adult education institutions (including Komvux) to allow unemployed adults who lacked the third year of high school to supplement their level of educational attainment so that they could enroll in further studies or gain employment. It was also common during that period for people to study individual school subjects to improve their grades in order to gain admission to desired higher education programs. During the significant influx of refugees in the early 2000s, adult education was primarily focused on educating people who came to Sweden from other countries, ranging from those who were illiterate to those who had already undergone a university education. What was common to these immigrants was their need for Swedish language training. In recent years, technological advancements have created increased competence needs and requirements linked to the ongoing digitalization of society and the workplace. Well-

educated professionals will need upskilling and reskilling if they are to remain relevant in the job market, which, in turn, has placed a focus on lifelong learning in the context of higher education. In higher education, lifelong learning primarily involves creating opportunities for professionals to participate in courses and programs as part of their lifelong learning, but new forms of course delivery are also being discussed.

This brief historical overview situates lifelong learning in a context and demonstrates how current societal developments build upon ideas that have existed for several decades while simultaneously evolving in response to contemporary issues. Scholars and other professionals who lack this background information might approach the issue of lifelong learning as something simple and limited (perhaps merely assuming that it is synonymous with enrolling in an educational course or engaging in professional development), without understanding the associated ideologies, purposes, and relationships to other areas within educational institutions and society at large.

Three Perspectives on Lifelong Learning

Understanding a phenomenon as it develops over time is one way to gain insight into it. Another approach to deepening one's understanding of lifelong learning is to study it from different perspectives. In this section, I present three perspectives on lifelong learning: lifelong learning as (i) policy, (ii) a theoretical framework, and (iii) an educational system (Bjursell, 2020). The meanings attributed to the concept of 'lifelong learning' in social discourse can be distinguished through these three perspectives. However, there is also an evident interplay between political intentions (expressed in policy), pedagogical philosophy (expressed in theoretical frameworks), and practical arrangements (expressed as an educational system). Of these three, it is primarily *lifelong learning as a pedagogical philosophy* that provides us essential insights into the development of individual lifelong learning in the workplace and society.

Lifelong Learning as Policy

Lifelong learning as policy sheds light on how political intentions regarding education have been expressed and how meanings have changed over time. A comprehensive consideration of the individual, the workplace, and citizenship has always been present over the past fifty years, but there has been a shift in policy documents from a humanistic approach with the individual as a person and citizen in the foreground to a capitalist approach where the individual is primarily seen as labour.

It is crucial to understand ideologies because they influence the design of systems and structures, as well as norms and values in society. When global and national institutions adopt concepts and make them their own, the meanings of those concepts can vary depending on the sender. Four global institutions that have been significant in shaping the perception of lifelong learning are the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU), and the World Bank (Lee & Friedrich, 2011). These policy actors work with visions for human freedom, but human freedom is interpreted in different ways. According to Lee and Friedrich (2011), two overarching ways of understanding human freedom have emerged in lifelong learning policy, and the global institutions mentioned above tend to lean more towards one or the other in their policy formulation, although they do embrace both. One view of human freedom emphasizes the notion that individuals can earn a living by accepting the rule of capital and its goals for daily being. With regard to education, this perspective could imply that individuals have the opportunity to participate in educational courses that provide the skills demanded by the labour market. The other view regarding human freedom emphasizes the freedom that community members can enjoy as they grow in pursuit of their own goals by promoting popular rule. In the context of education, this may involve developing basic skills to contribute as a democratic citizen to the development of one's community and society.

These two parallel yet conflicting ideologies have been previously described by Kjell Rubenson, a professor specializing in adult education. He argues that the concept of 'lifelong learning' gained prominence to

address challenges arising during the oil crisis, but it also later came to be used as a way to address societal problems (Rubenson, 1996). Rubenson's conclusion is that lifelong learning is framed by two different ways of thinking that are in total conflict with each other. One is the utopian approach that focuses on each individual's development and emancipation (liberation and self-determination), while the other approach is focused on economics (adult education as a tool for the economy).

> The utopian perspective elicited a great deal of rhetoric but had no effect on educational planning. This is understandable, as it questioned not only the education system but also the broader social structure and especially the division of labour. (Rubenson, 1996: 43) [translated from the original Swedish]

When the concept of 'lifelong learning' appears in social debates, it is expressed as relating to an individual's potential for change throughout life (the utopian approach). However, the solutions that are often demanded are based on challenges in the workforce (economic rationality). Rubenson also points out that there is a lack of discussion about the varying conditions individuals have to participate in regarding what the education system offers. Factors like a disadvantaged childhood, limited formal education, monotonous jobs, and limited opportunities for political engagement result in an uneven distribution of opportunities to participate in education across the population (Rubenson, 1996: 37). Consequently, the education system reinforces existing social classes and patterns and can thus be seen as a mechanism for dominance and reproduction of power structures. It is problematic that people enjoy widely differing prerequisites for participating in education in a democratic society, and Rubenson concludes by arguing that if stable change and societal development are to be achieved, lifelong learning must be discussed in terms of democracy and agency.

Lifelong Learning as a Theoretical Framework

Viewing lifelong learning as a theoretical framework emphasizes the role of pedagogical philosophy. Talking about *learning* rather than *education* shifts the focus from formal education to how an individual transforms experiences into knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values at all ages throughout their life (Jarvis, 2014). Theories of adult and lifelong learning typically build upon a pedagogical philosophy that places the individual at the centre and argue that this must be the starting point for understanding learning (Illeris, 2017). At the same time, pedagogical theories point out that learning always occurs in relation to a context-specific environment. A recurring theme in many theories is that (i) individuals learn in interaction with their environment, and (ii) the individual's identity process is the core and starting point of learning (Bjursell, 2020). Thus:

1. Learning must be understood holistically and as an interaction between the individual and the environment. In discussions about lifelong learning, there is much talk about what individuals must learn in terms of specific competencies. However, according to theories of lifelong learning, there is a lack of discussion about what engages individuals in learning. Unlike motivation, which often represents external pressure, a discussion of incentives involves a discussion about what creates genuine engagement and interest in the individual.
2. The individual's identity process is central to learning. Theories of lifelong learning suggest that it involves a new understanding of oneself, meaning that learning entails a renegotiation of a person's identity. Learning about, for instance, the digital world is a significant shift for many and is tied to the individual's identity. To understand learning in practice, it is essential to ask what effect participation in learning has on an individual's perception of themselves and how this supports or hinders learning.

These two points can provide insights into why achieving the competency shift that the workforce demands can be challenging. This analysis captures that which creates genuine engagement in people, and, as educators, we

come to understand the internal impact learning has on the individuals who participate in education.

Andragogy, a theory of adult learning, is based on several principles aimed at engaging adults in intentional learning (Knowles, et al., 2005). One of these principles states that adults should be given responsibility for and involvement in the planning of the instruction and the design of the education that they receive. This can occur in various ways, even in higher education settings where a great deal of what is done is governed by regulations and policy documents. The purpose of the course should be clear, but when working with adults in the workforce, there might be much to gain from connecting the education they receive to their broader life tasks. Finally, we note that working adults prefer problem-oriented learning because it allows them to be active and build upon, and perhaps question, their prior experiences.

So, what should the adult individual learn? We live in a so-called 'knowledge society', but paradoxically, there is no room or acceptance for all forms of knowledge. Creating space for wisdom and holistic thinking can be challenging. Wisdom comes from the courage to contemplate life's big questions. These could be questions about the meaning of life or how to live one's life to the fullest. These questions may not necessarily be answered, but we often develop some form of understanding from pondering such questions throughout our life. A relevant question in a knowledge society is: *What happens if we exclude wisdom from our lives?* Wisdom is larger and more complex than a collection of facts, skills, and good judgment. Wisdom involves exploring the meaning of life and understanding what makes us human. If we wish to highlight the human aspect in our world and workplaces, various forms of wisdom are needed. Higher education is a natural arena for such questions and conversations.

Lifelong Learning as an Educational System

Lifelong learning as an educational system can be exemplified by the Swedish system for adult education. The system is a practical arrangement where different institutions provide content at various levels according to a linear model, where one level prepares the student for the next. The

formal education system is currently oriented towards working life and often serves as a tool for individuals who want or need to move within or between professions. In addition to the state-funded education system, numerous actors in the market offer competence development opportunities.

Sweden's state system for adult education includes municipal adult education (Komvux), vocational higher education, universities and colleges, and popular education [folkbildningen]. Komvux provides education at the basic and upper secondary levels, Swedish for immigrants (SFI), and municipal adult education as special education (formerly Särvux). Vocational higher education offers post-secondary vocational training that meets the needs of the workforce and is conducted in close collaboration with employers. Universities and colleges provide education at the post-secondary level and can confer research degrees. Popular education, folk high schools, and study associations adapt their educational offerings to their participants' needs. Folk high schools and study associations play an important role as an alternative to Komvux, but also as institutions for lifelong learning that occurs during and even after the workforce.

In surveys of adult participation in education, Sweden usually ranks high. For example, 35 percent of the adult population aged 25 to 64 indicated that they participated in some form of education in 2021 (Eurostat, 2023). However, this includes not only what takes place in the state-funded system but also all forms of education and competence development for adults. Sweden also has a high level of education in the population. Among individuals aged 25 to 64, 45 percent have pursued further education after upper secondary school, and 30 percent have an education of three years or more after upper secondary school (Statistics Sweden, 2023). The proportion of highly educated individuals has increased from 16 percent in 2000 to 30 percent in 2021 (ibid.).

Universities and colleges are indeed a central institution in many adults' lifelong learning, and if this trend continues, interest in higher education will likely increase. The apparent solution to contribute to lifelong learning in the higher education sector is to offer courses and advanced programs for further education to those with a degree. However, it is worth discussing

how those adults who do not hold a degree from an institution can enter a university or college at a foundational level. It is known that individuals with a high level of education are those who usually seek and take advantage of further education opportunities. But suppose educational institutions only respond to these needs. In that case, they will reinforce a pattern that can contribute to increased societal disparities and a reduced recruitment base for employers in terms of qualified labour.

The Link between the Three Perspectives

Depending on the perspective one adopts, 'lifelong learning' can invoke partially different meanings. While theoretical frameworks and education systems are relatively stable over time, meanings within the domain of *policy* change more frequently since its [policy's] purpose is to address current societal challenges. There has been criticism that policy has resulted in a shift from humanistic ideals to economic maximization, which has led to the idea of lifelong learning being pruned and stripped of its full potential when it is solely focused on 'individuals as a workforce' (Biesta, 2006). If it is true that today's policy is less comprehensive than it was 50 years ago, we may well ask why this is the case. Is it because we lack the capacity for complex and visionary thinking? Or is it naive to believe that a society should rest on the shoulders of democratically competent and responsible citizens? Could it be that the rapid pace of development has created a form of tunnel vision that diminishes our ability to make long-term commitments? One thing that might be more important than finding definitive answers to these questions is to discuss, and even twist and turn, the question of education's role in social development as a whole. Lifelong learning can refer to both individual learning and the institutions that offer educational opportunities. Still, it is unfortunate when lifelong learning is solely equated with a form of education since this merely focuses on the institution rather than on individual learning (Jarvis, 2014). However, the educational institutions that provide education to adults in Sweden have, in various ways, based their approach on contributing to individual personal development and democratic competence. The reason for this may be found in the tradition of adult learning that has existed in Sweden

and is tied to the emergence of lifelong learning and adult learning as ideas and practices due to interest from both politicians and researchers.

By discussing 'lifelong learning' as political intentions (expressed in policy), pedagogical philosophy (expressed in theoretical frameworks), and practical arrangements (expressed as an education system), we can gain insight into how the concept is used in different contexts. It is worth noting that while *lifelong learning as a pedagogical philosophy* invokes a holistic view and focuses on the individual's being and becoming, we cannot ignore the fact that political intentions and practical arrangements are influenced by compromises related to other factors. Nevertheless, it is entirely possible for the theoretical idea to have a stronger connection to policy and the education system. Thus, to understand how lifelong learning can become a reality and have an impact, I argue that it is primarily *lifelong learning as a pedagogical philosophy* that can provide us with important insights. In other words, if we genuinely want to support lifelong learning in society and in the workforce, we must understand each individual's approach to learning and their motivation to engage in learning.

Lifelong Learning in Higher Education Policy

In the previous sections of this essay, I have demonstrated how the meaning of 'lifelong learning' changes over time and how our understanding of the concept depends on the perspective that is applied. This section presents examples of lifelong learning in higher education policy. For a number of years now, there has been significant interest in how institutions of higher learning contribute to an individual's lifelong learning. This interest has led to the inclusion, among other things, of a provision in the Higher Education Act in 2021 that mandates universities to promote lifelong learning. The background of this interest lies in global policy trends and the skills gap that exists in many industries. This has resulted in national reforms focused on skills supply, including the 'transition study support' initiative [omställningsstudiestöd]. This support aims to provide better conditions for adults with work experience to invest in transitioning (into another job) or skills development that is aligned with the job market's needs. Note that this support provides higher levels of compensation than regular student financial aid.

To promote lifelong learning, the government tasked state-run educational institutions with reviewing their educational offerings in terms of content and delivery methods. The results of the review process have been compiled in a report by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ), where it is highlighted that the educational offerings considered relevant include short program courses, parts of programs that can be made accessible, standalone courses designed for professionals, and commissioned education (Bengtsson, Bergenfeldt, & Dahlberg, 2023). The most common examples of short program courses are supplementary pedagogical education (KPU) and various specialized nursing degrees. Master's degrees and master's programs are also emphasized by educational institutions as relevant for professionals. The possibility of making parts of such programs available as standalone courses for professionals was discussed at the majority of institutions, and some have already opened up program courses for professionals. One approach to opening parts of programs is to offer course packages targeted at professionals. The most common form of professional skills development is through standalone courses, and the ongoing development and adaptation of such courses are taking place concerning both their format and content. The discussion around 'microcredentials' has also influenced thoughts on how standalone courses can and should be designed.

In addition to shorter programs, parts of programs, and standalone courses, commissioned education is another option for the education of professionals. The advantage is that they can be tailored to the employer's needs and have their own funding. In UKÄ's report, some institutions have highlighted that commissioned education does not grant the right to transition study support if a transition organization does not order the education. They view further discussion about collaborations with these organizations to develop commissioned education specifically to address their identified needs within their mandate as something positive. At the same time, they point out that educational offerings must continue to be planned for the long term and be built upon the research conducted at the universities. It is also the case that university institutions hold differing views on what is meant by lifelong learning:

> Some institutions make a clear distinction between lifelong learning and transition. For example, lifelong learning is interpreted as a deepening or broadening within an existing profession, while transition is more about changing careers. Other institutions use the terms more or less synonymously. (Bengtsson, Bergenfeldt, & Dahlberg, 2023: 39) [translated from the original Swedish]

As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the concept of 'lifelong learning' is not new in the context of higher education. In the report titled *Lifelong Learning as an Idea and Practice in Higher Education*, published by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (predecessor to the Swedish Higher Education Authority and the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education), the importance of the university's role in promoting lifelong learning is discussed. Sigbrit Franke, the former Vice-Chancellor, writes in the report's preface:

> Lifelong learning is a way of approaching education that differs from related concepts such as recurrent education, further education, and continuing education. Lifelong learning places the individual's learning process throughout their lifetime and in all environments at the centre. The various educational programs offered by universities and colleges already play a role in lifelong learning. People utilize higher education for different purposes at various stages of life. From an international perspective, the Swedish higher education system is unique in combining youth education with lifelong learning. (Askling, Christiansson & Foss-Fridlizius, 2001) [translated from the original Swedish]

The report from the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (UKÄ) in 2001 builds upon knowledge from an EU project, which was reported on in the form of a themed issue in a scholarly journal. A similarity with the UKÄ 2023 report (mentioned previously) is that both were developed to provide insights and analyses for changes in higher education based on new demands and societal expectations. In the 2001 report, the authors suggest that in order to truly live up to the ideas represented by lifelong learning, more radical changes to the higher education system may be required. Such changes involve opportunities for various categories of

applicants to study at university, a variety of educational offerings, good access to information and guidance, new ways to structure knowledge and experiences, an active pedagogy for critical knowledge-seeking, validation, and collaboration between different educational actors, as well as flexibility in financing (Askling, Christiansson, & Foss-Fridlizius, 2001). It is a comprehensive and thorough report that, in some cases, still provides insights into the issues being addressed at educational institutions today.

A central question concerns the relationship between learning and education and how the separation between the learning process and the educational institution highlights the need to shift from (a) an institutional focus to (b) viewing the education system as a support for individual learning. The 2023 report emphasizes the balance between a long-term institutional focus on research and education and adaptations to changes and societal needs. An example of current developments building upon ideas initially expressed over twenty years ago is the above-mentioned reform regarding transition study support, which offers increased flexibility through financing studies for adult professionals seeking further education.

When the two official reports are juxtaposed with each other, it adds depth to the issues that must be addressed by today's educational institution leaders. Not least, it raises thoughts about the importance of having an organizational history, both locally and nationally, thus allowing us to move beyond processes where the wheel is reinvented and, instead, enabling us to critically examine and address the challenges of the present time while letting previous knowledge serve as a stable foundation for this work.

Summary and Tips for Higher Education

So, what can individuals working at universities apply in their efforts to promote lifelong learning for students of all ages? By looking back to the time when lifelong learning was introduced, we see that, for some time, there has been tension between (a) the idea of learning for personal development for the betterment of individuals (humanity) and (b) education for the needs of the workforce. These two perspectives need not (and probably *should not* in today's work-life) be understood as opposites.

A well-educated, independently thinking individual who is capable of analysis and judgment is what many professions require today. However, the fact that these ideas are still presented as opposites could be due to the ideologies underlying global policies that inform lifelong learning, where the function of education varies depending on what is perceived as the overarching goal for societal development.

Approaching lifelong learning from the three perspectives discussed in this essay, namely, in terms of policy, theoretical framework, and educational system, is one way to highlight different aspects of lifelong learning. However, note that these perspectives remain interconnected. Policies stem from international and national policy actors and are materialized in terms of regulations and the structure of educational systems. Sometimes, there are connections to a scientifically developed understanding of adult lifelong learning; and when scientifically developed theories about adult learning align with policy and educational design, there is a greater likelihood that education and learning will yield the desired effects.

Each individual's learning must be at the centre, instead of us viewing education solely as the acquisition of facts and the university solely as a supplier of a workforce. By empowering each student across various dimensions, higher education can continue to be an independent social institution that provides students with a broad platform to build upon. This is how the institution may best contribute to a sustainable, innovative, and democratic society.

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