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Whatever happened to lifelong learning? And does it matter?

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Abstract: While adult education has a long history in Britain going back to the Workers Education Association of the 19th century, the term 'lifelong learning' does not extend much further back than the 1970s. The paper considers the accelerating technological changes that lay behind the idea of cradle to grave learning in a global context and the life-enhancing and economic returns to be expected. The longitudinal British birth cohort studies that have charted people's changing lives since the Second World War display the benefits to be gained from learning. A policy shift is revealed towards dominance of the 'economic' over the 'wider' (social and well-being) learning goals and from analysis of basic skills data a trajectory of disadvantage and growing 'learning divide'. What halted lifelong learning's progress? Where does the programme go next?

Keywords: lifelong learning, wider benefits, basic skills, longitudinal, adult education, trajectory.

The title of this paper is intentionally provocative, implying something valuable has gone that should continue to be here. The reason for approaching the topic of lifelong learning this way is to show that after a slow start, the era of lifelong learning, and the crucial role of adult education within it, has truly arrived. And as I hope to show, in the digital age their relevance to sustaining a cohesive, healthy and prosperous society could hardly be stronger.

The paper starts with a brief overview of the development of the idea of lifelong learning in which the focus is particularly on the British story. What historical context gave birth to it and what are its achievements to date? I then turn to what seems like a significant disjunction in lifelong learning's inevitable upwards path: the move towards a narrowing of curricula based on work-related skills enhancement as opposed to the broader *life-wide* capabilities approach. The reasons for this switch

are then considered, why at least temporarily, progress might have stalled, and then why such a reversal should be a matter for concern.

The empirical part of the argument relies on research in a 15-year programme carried out using data from the 1958 and 1970 *British Birth Cohort Studies.* These two studies are from the internationally renowned longitudinal series of cohort studies starting respectively in 1946, 1958, 1970, 1992/1993 (county of Avon) and 2000. With the exception of the 1946 study, which took a one-third sample for follow-up, and the 'Avon longitudinal study of parents and children (ALSPAC)', which began during pregnancy, each study is derived from a representative sample of over 16,000 individuals in the specified birth year and followed up subsequently through their lives.[1] Data were also collected for one third of the 1958 cohort members' children when the cohort mother or father had reached age 33 and for half of the 1970 cohort members' children when the cohort mother or father had reached age 34 [2].

The two selected studies lend themselves particularly well to understanding the role and progress of lifelong learning in individual lives, each collecting data on experience in the intersecting domains of life—family, community, education, employment, health and so on—as the developing individual passes through them on the route to adulthood. The life-course perspective first formulated by Glen Elder in his study of US children and families living through the 1930s, *Children of the Great Depression*, offers a widely accepted conceptual framework for the individual development observed—(Elder 1974/1999; Heinz 1991; Schoon 2006; Blossfeld *et al.* 2014). The life-course 'trajectories', including that of lifelong learning starting from birth, are shaped in accordance with four principles:

> *human agency* (i.e. individual adaptation to the social, economic and physical environment),
> *linked lives* (i.e. social relations),
> *timing of events* (i.e. intersection of age, period and cohort),
> *location in space and time* (i.e. geography, history, culture, and social structure).

Guided by this framework, the paper draws on research, using the 1958 and 1970 cohort studies data. The work was located in two government-funded research centres in what is now the Department of Social Sciences in UCL Institute of Education: 'Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL)' and 'National Research and Development Centre

[1] Data collection for the 1958 cohort began at birth followed by ages 7, 11, 16, 23, 33, 37, 42, 44 (biomedical survey), 46, 50, 55, 60, and for the 1970 birth cohort at birth followed by ages 5, 10, 16, 21, 26, 10, 34, 38, 42, 46. Both studies have maintained active samples of over 10,000 responding individuals. Full details of the two studies are available at http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/

[2] Because of the significantly later child bearing of the more recent 1970 cohort, to achieve comparable numbers of children for the two cohorts, it was necessary to expand the 1970 cohort member parents sample to 50% compared with the 1958 study's 33%.

for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC)'. The first of these centres was established following the publication of the Government White Paper the *Learning Age* (Blunkett 1998), making the case for a 'modern' approach to lifelong learning. The second arose from the 'Skills for Life' policy that followed in 1999, the Moser Committee's report (1999) *A Fresh Start*, devoted to improving adult literacy and numeracy—one of the 1997 newly elected Blair Government's top seven policy priorities.

As will be clear from this brief synopsis, the birth cohort studies' long reach in relation to individual development from childhood through to adulthood makes them a particularly powerful tool for understanding the role of lifelong learning in the UK life course—as a simple example shows (Bynner & Parsons 2009). Using data from the 1958 birth cohort study, we analyse the extent to which individual differences in literacy and numeracy scores, as measured by the scores' 'variance' at different ages, was predictable and consequently in principle 'explainable' from prior circumstances and experience, including educational attainment. Literacy acquisition was measured by simple literacy tests for adults, covering reading comprehension and spelling at different levels of difficulty. Similarly, for numeracy, tests were used involving simple calculations and numerical understanding of such concepts as percentages. We find rapidly rising percentages of variance explained up to age 10 and a levelling off at around 40% by age 34—larger for literacy (42%) than for numeracy (35%).

Notably, although 40% of the variance in adult literacy and numeracy scores was predictable from what we know about the cohort members' lives up to age 34, when the most recent assessment was made, even taking account of measurement error and missing variables, a significant proportion of the remaining variance (60%) cannot be explained away in these terms. Learning goes on outside formal educational institutions in a variety of contexts, such as the family, the community and the workplace and through the exercise of individual agency by means of self-instruction, much of it through adulthood. The message is that in understanding basic skills inequalities[3], even at the age of 34, there is much known and much still to be explained in terms of individual, largely unpredictable, experience. Both formal and informal methods of learning are the means of acquiring each skill—the foundation of lifelong learning.

DEVELOPMENT OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Although lifelong learning is a cradle to grave phenomenon, its foundations, as generally understood, lie in post-compulsory part-time adult education (Hodgson 2000). But

[3] The variance of a set of scores reflects a rank order of individual differences, an indicator of basic skills inequality.

what characterises such adult education's goals and practice? A good place to start is Winston Churchill speaking in 1954:

> There is, perhaps, no branch of our vast educational system which should more attract within its particular sphere the aid and encouragement of the State than adult education. How many must there be in Britain after the disturbance of two destructive wars, who thirst in later life to learn about the humanities, the history of their country, the philosophies of the human race, and the arts and letters which sustain and are borne forward by the ever-conquering English language? … The appetite of adults to be shown the foundations and processes of thought will never be denied by a British Administration cherishing the continuity of our Island life. (Ministry of Education 1954: 95–6)

Now, a young adult student interviewed in 2005:

> The lecturer helps coordinate the group. They're like the pinpoint, the pivot the balance, the centre they are in the middle. So you start off by learning—the lecturer throwing an idea at them—and then by the end of two years, the lecturer is no longer so pivotal because the group has gained all the information he or she can give them. All of a sudden the questions start flowing among the group. It's amazing that everybody has so many different ideas and you learn not to be so biased, to be more objective, not to take things personally. (Schuller *et al.* 2004:175)

Finally, a leading commentator on adult education, Alan Tuckett writing in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2007:

> A distinguished Maori educationalist recently told me he was impressed by the way colleges in the UK help people to learn how to do things. He was, though, puzzled by the things that they didn't teach: how to be a good family member; how to relate to your community; what stories to tell your children. With an education like this, he wondered, 'who would want to come to your funeral?' The question stuck in my mind as I was reading the Leitch review, with its ambitious targets for making the UK economy more competitive. (Tuckett 2007)

These extracts supply something of the substance and scope of adult learning, expressing complementary facets of the learning experience that could apply at any age and at any time. There is imparting of knowledge, understanding, skills and cultural continuity; there is the dynamics of the effective adult classroom comprising the expert with knowledge to impart and adults interacting over their desire to learn and use it. In contrast, there is the beginnings of critique in the questioning of whether curriculum content, in this case vocational skills directed exclusively at employment, is not missing out on some of the other components of education that the truly educated individual needs to have. The importance of skills in the economy is undeniable, but the broader societal context of well-being has a central place as well.

So what transformed the optimism about the value of adult education in Churchill's day, into a global mission to transform the human life course into a continual educational experience? Adult education has a long history going back to the work of Toynbee Hall founded at the end of the 19th century; the establishment in 1903 of the Workers Educational Association; and the post-First World War boost from the Adult Education Committee Report produced by the Ministry of Reconstruction (1919). But the idea of cradle to grave lifelong learning is of much more recent origin, coinciding with the technological transformation of industry and the labour market upheavals of the late 1970s and 1980s. UNESCO was the first major international organisation to put the concept of what was then referred to as *lifelong education* on the map with Edgar Faure's 1972 report *Learning to Be*, also coining the term 'Learning Society'. In the report's words:

> Tomorrow's education must form a co-ordinated totality in which all sectors of society are structurally integrated. It will be universalized and continual. From the point of view of individual people, it will be total and creative, and consequently individualised and self-directed. It will be the bulwark and the driving force in culture, as well as in promoting professional activity. This movement is irresistible and irreversible. It is the cultural revolution of our time. (Faure 1972: 164)

Closer to the language of present priorities, but still couched in the idealism of the time, was Harold Wilson's speech in 1964 devoted eight years earlier to the 'White Heat of Science' and the technological revolution occurring as a result of it. He made the telling point that: 'Our way of life is likely to be more fundamentally transformed in the next several decades than in the previous one thousand years' (Wilson 1964).

The manifestation of Wilson's vision came, though not in quite the totally positive terms he saw it, in the transformation of industry through the 1970s and early 1980s brought about by information and communications technology (ICT) and the *globalisation* that came in its wake. That is to say, the skills underpinning industrial production were increasingly becoming obsolete and the increasingly ICT-driven components of distribution, consumption and the finance behind them were now operating globally (Ashton & Bynner 2011: 122–47). The consequence for most Western countries was losing out competitively to the long-term planning and cheaper production methods and manpower of competitors across the world, especially in the Far East; though the full implications of these changes were barely recognised much before the 1990s.

The main response was the establishment in 1974 of the Manpower Services Commission with the brief of building the workforce that the labour market was going to need in responding to the replacement of traditional industries, such as coalmining and shipbuilding, and the massive expansion of service industry. There was

increasing talk of creating a 'knowledge economy' underpinned by lifelong learning. The human cost, as set out later by such writers as Charles Handy (*The Future of Work*) (1984), Aronowitz and Di Fazio (*The Jobless Future*) (1994) and Jeremy Rifkin (*The End of Work*) (1995), pointed to a steady decline in employment as the need for men and women in manufacturing and much of service industry dried up through digitalisation and, prospectively, robotics. Jeremy Rifkin's third industrial revolution—already adopted as a blueprint by the European Union—predicts not only this latter feature but the 'internet of everything' ranging from energy to warfare (Rifkin 1995; 1998). His *Biotech Century* sets out an even more transformational vision of 'new life forms', a 'second genesis' and 'eugenic civilisation', with implications for every area of human existence. The point to make is that, whether proved right or wrong in any particular predicted instance, technological change in what is now becoming the *digital age* is already far ahead of expectation.

Apart from the newly established MSC, innovative adult education was also on the agenda through the establishment of such path-breaking institutions as the *Open University* in 1969 (over 200,000 adult students). The OU offered not only second-chance higher education, but by deploying an advanced distance teaching model—comprising television, radio and more recently, digital technology, coupled with summer schools—set new curriculum standards for further and higher education generally. In parallel, through the establishment of the 'new universities' (24 in the 1960s alone), there was a major expansion across the country of university extramural studies programmes. Outside the formal system, other institutions emerged a bit later such as the *University of the Third Age*[4] established in the UK in the early 1980s (following a 1973 start in France) and catering for the learning of thousands of adults classed as 'no longer in full-time employment'. The core structural feature is a nationwide network of self-managing learning cooperatives comprising 36,000 courses for 350,000 adult learners in 2015.

At the same time the traditional systems for face-to-face adult learning came into their own. The Inner London Education Authority (1965–90), for example, offered, through the 1970s and 1980s, a network of provision, 'Education for the Whole Community', via a mix of polytechnics (five in all), further education colleges and adult education institutes for different learning purposes. By the end of its life in 1990, ILEA was laying on 20,000 classes with 240,000 enrolments—14% of the non-vocational adult education in England and Wales for 5% of the population, in which adult education was described as the 'jewel in the crown' (Jupp 2010). Although there had been traditional separation between the provision and location of vocational and non-vocational courses, the barrier became increasingly more permeable, spearheaded

[4] http://u3a.org.uk/

by the highly successful 'Access Courses', supplying a bridge from early school leaving to higher education (Tuckett 2015). The popular worldwide idea of 'Learning Cities' as concentrations of learning resources linked globally and promoted widely by UNESCO (2015),[5] was epitomised by London through the 1990s.

More widely, as Leisha Fullick (2010) records, the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE)—established in 1998 and brilliantly led to become a major national institution by Alan Tuckett—not only pursued the permeability goal on a national scale but internationally. NIACE also supplied the steering, monitoring and policy development framework (e.g. the National Adult Learning Surveys) for ensuring coherence of the whole system, together with the consultative machinery for those who worked and studied through it.[6]

The 1988 Education Reform Act and the 1992 (DFES) Further and Higher Education Act changed irrevocably these arrangements with the incorporation by central government of first the polytechnics and then the further education colleges—to be followed in London's case by the winding up of ILEA in 1990. The adult education institutes were mostly taken over by the colleges, with funding only of non-qualification-bearing provision remaining as the responsibility of the local authorities—now designated as 'clients' of the colleges and other third sector and private providers.

DIGITAL REVOLUTION

In his forward to *The Learning Age* consultative 'Green Paper', David Blunkett (1998) updated Churchill's and Wilson's visions, laying the foundations for the second stage of technological transformation in Britain: the 'digital revolution'. Blunkett also brought more centre stage the economic drivers of the educational change to follow, signalling where a key tension in further education planning had lain from the 1973 Russell Report on Adult Education onwards (DES 1973) and to which I return—the competing claims of skills for the *economy* versus *learning for individual and community well-being.* In Blunkett's memorable words:

> We stand on the brink of a new age. Familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing. Jobs are changing and with them the skills needed for the world of tomorrow. In our hearts we know we have no choice but to prepare for this new age in which the key to success will be the education, knowledge and skills of our people.

[5] http://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/learning-cities

[6] The collection of Alan Tuckett's influential *Times Higher Education* commentaries is reproduced in Nash (2014).

> To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated well-equipped and adaptable labour force. To cope with rapid change, we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives, we cannot rely on a small elite. We will need creativity, enterprise and scholarship for all our people …
>
> Learning enables people to play a full part in the community and strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us to fulfil our potential and open doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake and are encouraging adults to enter and re-enter learning at every point of their lives as parents at work and as citizens. (Blunkett 1998: 2–3)

Added to the priority of 'developing a well-equipped and adaptable labour force', towards the end of the 1990s growing concern was directed towards the phenomenon of demographic shift. Increased immigration brought attention to cultural assimilation and English as a foreign language, issues in which gender and class inequalities also played a central part. In addition, the rapidly extending lifespan was producing an ageing population in which a third of working life could now be spent in retirement. Here was another open door for lifelong, or even more appropriately for this age group, life-wide learning!

The Learning Age was published following the appearance in 1997 of three key reports reflecting something of a culmination of the golden age of lifelong learning programmes preceding it and also the first signs of major policy shifts: Dearing on further and higher education (Dearing 1997); Kennedy on disadvantaged access to further education (Kennedy 1997); Fryer on continuing education and lifelong learning (Fryer 1997). The Moser Report (1999), *A Fresh Start*, concerned with upgrading adult basic skills, followed, leading to the 'Skills for Life' policy that began in 2001. All heralded, in varying degrees, not only a changing lifelong learning agenda in favour of economic priorities but new means of resourcing it, including, in the case of Dearing, recommending for the first time, the charging of fees for undergraduate higher education.

However, change was not all in one direction. Another major milestone, developing further the theme of UNESCO's *Learning to Be* (Faure 1972), was the inspirational report, *The Treasure Within*, presented in the fifth UNESCO (CONFINTEA) adult education conference in Hamburg (1997) by ex-president of the European Union, Jacque Delors (1996). The paper set out the mission of lifelong learning for contemporary times and the means of achieving it. The UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning was established in Hamburg and a programme of work began, including the four-yearly series of Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) (UNESCO 1997) to review progress in its development across the world (Schuller 2016).

As Delors (1996: 11–12) had said in describing what he now called 'life-wide' as well as 'lifelong' learning:

> An indispensable asset to attain ideals of peace, freedom and social justice … one of the principle means available to foster a deeper and more harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression and war. … While education is an ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills it is also perhaps primarily an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations.

He proposed four 'pillars' of lifelong learning:

> *learning to know,* (knowledge and understanding),
> *learning to do* (skills and capabilities),
> *learning to live together* (social cohesion),
> *learning to be* (self-realisation and fulfilment). (Delors 1996)

Coupled with the Faure Report's idea of untapped human capability, i.e. *'learning to be'*, (Faure 1972), this four-way structure was directed at strengthening the twin well-being goals of advanced democratic societies: social cohesion and eliminating demographically defined educational inequality—in contemporary UK parlance the 'skills gap'. As Helena Kennedy's famous maxim from her report on further education, *Learning Works*, puts it: 'If at first you don't succeed … you don't succeed' (Kennedy 1997: 21).

The mission also confronts paradoxically the other form of inequality and perhaps the major challenge to be faced in the new era—usually referred to as the 'Matthew effect', as Stanovitch (1986: 381) describes it in relation to learning to read: 'The richer you are the more you get. The poorer you are the poorer you become.' A striking example comes from the NRDC Report *Illuminating Disadvantage* (Parsons & Bynner 2007) in the form of the distribution across literacy levels from below the age 16 school leaving standard (Level 2)[7] of three key features of achievement in the modern economy: full-time employment, work-based training, and using a computer at work. The likelihood of being in employment rose substantially with literacy level, with the gradient for women steeper than for men; work-based training, though relatively rare, was most common among those with the best literacy. But the most striking relationship was for using a computer at work: 83% of women and 78% of men at literacy Level 1 or above did so compared with 37% of women and 23% of men at pre-qualification standard Entry Level 2 or below. The task of lifelong learning policy is not only to support ever-more of it but to reverse what can be its polarising effects.

[7] Educational attainment age 16 leaving standards—basic skills assessment equivalence. Level 2, General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades A–C; Level 1, GCSE grades D–G; No certification other than basic skills assessment: Entry Level 3; Entry Level 2; Entry Level 1.

THE NEW AGENDA

The Delors pillars have a distinctly different feel about them from those that underpin most adult and continuing education today. In fact, the EU 'Memorandum on Lifelong Learning' prepared for the Lisbon conference of ministers (EC 2000) and the policy conclusions drawn from it (European Council of Ministers, 2000), though recognising the twin aims of economic returns and social inclusion, already gave major emphasis to the former. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports in this period — for example, *Lifelong Learning for All* (OECD 1996) —also tended to be exclusively devoted to the economic value of lifelong learning, with a special focus on improvement of basic skills for economic development. The top priority for OECD was the worldwide problem of illiteracy involving 95 million people of whom over 60% were women.

As signalled in the report by NIACE as the UK contribution to the sixth CONFINTIA conference in Belém Brazil, 2009 (McNair & Quintero-Re 2008), the period following 1998 was one of further retrenchment, with the shift in government interest away from the life-wide conception towards vocational programmes. A major influence was the 2005 Leitch Report, 'Skills in the UK' (Leitch 2006), which reported that one third of adults did not have the equivalent of a basic school leaving qualification (5 GCSE grades A–C). Almost half (17 million) had difficulty with numbers and one seventh (5 million) were not functionally literate. Deficiencies were also evident in technical and intermediate skills, which is where another national requirement needed subsequently to be met. Completion of a course at one level should be followed by one at a higher level to mark 'progress'. That is to say, no diversions to explore other curriculum options on the way were allowable free of cost, effectively ruling out the defining feature of life-wide learning.

The Leitch Report and others from OECD (e.g. OECD 2013)—the last as recent as 2016—placed the UK on the bottom rank of European and OECD league tables for skills and work-based training (OECD 2016). The solution Leitch offered was a national commitment to raise skills levels to the point where the UK would become a 'world leader in skills'. The shift was further driven by government intent, of whatever political complexion, to strengthen the distinction between the public and the private benefits of education. The former were identified with the skills that the nation needed, as defined principally by employers—most obviously the basic skills (literacy and numeracy) up to Level 2 (GCSE grade A–C equivalent). The others were primarily, if not exclusively, of personal value by either boosting personal earnings, as in the case of higher education, or simply engaging in out of non-vocational personal interest.

As Alan Johnson, successor to David Blunkett as Minister of Education famously said in 2006 promoting the skills agenda:

> We need plumbers, less Pilates; to subsidize precision engineering not over-subsidized flower arranging, except of course where flower arranging is necessary for a vocational purpose! …Tai chi may be hugely valuable to people studying it, but it's of little value to the economy. There must be a fairer apportionment between those who gain from education and those who pay for it—state, employer or individual. Surveys show that adults agree they should pay more for courses where they can. [8]

The introduction of fees for higher education in September 1998 was soon accompanied by increased charges on commercial lines for non-vocational adult education courses.

As another response to Leitch in 2006 the 'Train to Gain'[9] scheme was launched, which enabled employers to seek government support for training. This pushed the responsibly for deciding what state-funded skills were going to be needed onto employers, with learning brokers interfacing between them and the local providers. In many cases the employers approached were already buying the courses they needed or were providing them 'in-house'. Hence, as Alan Tuckett (2015) points out, the scheme was effectively draining learning resources from one section of the population, disadvantaged adults, to another section, employees, who were already getting them.

At the same time, as local authority budgets were continually being squeezed, the adult education sector was becoming more impoverished. The winding up in 2011 of the 'Lifelong Learning Sector Skills Council' may be seen as a further signal of AE's downgrading. In fact, with the economic shocks arising from further technological transformation, interspersed with periodic recessions and the collapse of the banking system in 2007/8, sustaining the wider range of (non-vocational) learning outcomes from health to civic participation, as we shall see, could not have been more important.

Participation

With the massive promotion of lifelong learning since the launch of *The Learning Age* and the idea that every member of the labour force needed to gain or upgrade their qualifications to obtain, or sustain, employment in any kind of job, we might have expected the numbers signing up for part-time courses to be continually expanding. In opening the January 2016 House of Lords debate devoted to adult learning, Baroness Sharp reports evidence telling the opposite story.[10] Open University recruitment had been steadily dropping from 260,000 in 2009/10 to 187,000 in 2013/14. In universities

[8] Speech, delivered at the first *Quality Improvement Agency* conference on 7 June 2006 at the Birmingham International Conference Centre.

[9] Funded by the Department for Education and Skills and delivered by the Learning and Skills Council https://www.skillsforlifenetwork.com/article/train-gain-employer-training-scheme/1689

[10] *Hansard* 28 January 2016.

more widely 2 million part-time adult learners had been lost since 2007. Since the fees increase for university degree courses, while full-time undergraduate numbers had increased, part-time student numbers had decreased by 58%. Moreover, over the same period, adult participation in further education was down from 50% to 15%, a drop of over 500,000 aged 24 or more. This was paralleled by a fall in the adult skills budget of 35%. NIACE annual adult learning surveys show much the same pattern of declining participation in non-award-bearing part-time courses from a peak in 2010.

In view of the many ways in which part-time adult education supplies the foundations for extended learning through adulthood that the economy is said to need, the retreat from it is therefore significant. The collapse coincides with a number of shifts in bipartisan government policy towards adult education including:

- making students bear the costs of adult education rather than the state;
- prioritising the Leitch skills agenda against the wider mission of, for example, NIACE;
- raising the price of engaging in non-award-bearing courses coupled with ever-rising university fees for both full-time and part-time study;
- restricting support for students taking award-bearing courses below degree level if not demonstrating progression in qualification terms.

All these factors add up to a powerful disincentive for adults to sign up for learning, as critics had been arguing for some time on a number of fronts (see, for example, Coffield 1999; Tight 1998; Field 2005).

Rising costs

Where does the boundary between the private and public value of adult learning lie? There were good grounds from cohort study analysis to believe that achieving the Moser targets of 10% improvement in literacy and numeracy scores by 2012 would produce substantial financial returns to government. A collaborative study shared between the Wider Benefits of Learning, the Centre for Economics of Education and the Institute of Fiscal Studies was able to demonstrate, from modelling 1958 and 1970 birth cohort study data, potential gains of £2.54 billion for numeracy and £0.44 billion for Literacy (Bynner *et al.* 2001). But what claims could be made of such returns from non-vocational adult education courses?

Award-bearing courses below university level, even if signifying progression above the level of basic skills, are no longer available free of charge. The rising cost to students of part-time adult education courses, at one time no more than 15% of provision costs or free, is a reflection of the policy thinking that depends on distinguishing what is seen as a public benefit from a private one. In a penetrating analysis of the issues involved,

Smethurst (1995) identifies three types of skill. The first is of clear value to the state, such as the Level 2 skills (GCSE A–C equivalent) that supply the entry requirement for a wide range of jobs. The second is what he calls 'merit skills' that have only indirect vocational value such as team working, willingness to learn and so on; while the third, which it is difficult to prove exists, comprises skills that benefit nobody but the individual who has them, such as the much-derided Pilates and flower arranging. Smethurst rejects the distinction in public value terms because it ignores the worth of *externalities*, such as improvements in health and well-being contributing to social cohesion, reduction in working hours lost and so on, to which all learning contributes. As we shall see, the work of the Wider Benefits of Learning research centre has been critically important in demonstrating the public value of such forms of learning.

Skills agenda

Other criticism was directed at the principles leading to the post-2006 Leitch strategy. As writers such as John Field (2005) argue, there was downgrading of social cohesion and well-being goals in favour of economic priorities. The Leitch committee was wedded to the view that the country's economic problems arise from individuals lacking the skills to make a productive contribution to the economy, as reflected in the report's general emphasis on vocational education at the expense of non-vocational courses.

This whole approach had already been challenged by such writers as Frank Coffield (1999; 2010; 2012) director of the Economic and Social Research Council's 'Learning Society' research programme (1994–2001). Coffield argued that vocational (work-based) skills presented at whatever level of education as the means to employability and productivity, without jobs to deploy them in, have dubious labour market or motivational value. As NRDC research shows, even performance on the essential adult basic skill courses was much enhanced when embedded in a vocationally relevant and employment-integrated programme rather than as stand-alone provision (Casey *et al.* 2006). To quote the late David Raffe, 'Education for education's sake is a defensible concept, but training for training's sake is a contradiction in terms' (Raffe 1985: 92).

Form and content of adult education

With the skills agenda of target setting and tightly controlled progression rules on which funding for award-bearing courses is based, there is disregard for the style, quality and relational value of adult part-time courses. Such attributes not only have

intrinsic worth in the development of generic ('soft') skills but can be the main attraction for adults engaging in them. The most powerful corrective, however, comes from NIACE with the report of their commission on lifelong learning authored by Tom Schuller and the late David Watson (Schuller & Watson 2009). Economic value specifically described as 'Prosperity, Employment and Work', is only one of the nine themes of the report to which the report's needs-based programme for lifelong learning relate. What follows in the list is first: 'Changing Demography and Social Structure', then 'Wellbeing and Happiness'; 'Migration and Communities' follow. Social inclusion and inequality issues are addressed through 'Technological Change', 'Poverty Reduction', 'Citizenship and Belonging' and 'Crime and Social Exclusion'. 'Sustainable Development', on which the rest depend, makes up the list.

A ten-point policy implementation framework is also offered, at the centre of which is an argument for the rebalancing of the financial resources allocated to lifelong learning across the whole lifespan[11] towards the adult population in terms of a four-stage model:

1. up to 25 years (from 86% to 80%),
2. 25 to 50 years (from 11% to 15%),
3. 50 to 75 years (from 2.5% to 4%),
4. 75 + years (from 0.5% to 1%).

The proposed redistribution would nearly double proportionately the allocation of financial resources to the third and fourth lifelong learning stage from its current (dwindling) 3%. Other proposals include accreditation of prior learning and a credit transfer system for recognising achievement across the whole system.

THE PROPER PLACE FOR SKILLS

So where should skills fit into the new lifelong learning agenda? Defining the term 'skill' and distinguishing it from other overlapping constructs is problematic, as economist Francis Green argues in his book devoted to the subject. He settles on 'personal qualities that can produce value at work' (Green 2013: 9–25), thus focusing on the economic benefit end of the returns to education spectrum. For the purpose here of locating skills in life-wide learning, the scope needs to be broader, embracing the other domains of life besides the economic as a simple four-level model suggests.

[11] £54.8 billion in 2007/8 of which £25.5 billion was state provision.

1. At the first (input) level there are the different kinds of courses available: formal (linked to certification), non-formal (without certification), and informal (day-to-day learning in the family, the community and the workplace).
2. At the next level are the broad outcomes of the learning: knowledge, understanding and skills. Skills, however, take different forms depending on the learning's purpose:

   Basic skills (comprising, literacy, numeracy, oracy and most recently digital competence) supply the foundations of subsequent skills development in all life-course domains.

   Generic work-related skills (such as teamwork, leadership and creativity), depending on application context, supply the key components of adult functioning in the family, the community and increasingly the workplace.

   Work-based skills (ranging from plumbing to dentistry), in large part acquired in the workplace are not generally transferable from one work situation to the next.

   The three types of skill are acquired in different learning contexts, with the basic skills as a given for all of them. Further associated spin-offs from the learning involved in acquiring the skills may include values and identity shifts as well as behavioural change. At every stage, learning the skill is likely to motivate further learning.
3. The common thread of all these outcomes occurs at the next level, *capability*, or as development economist Amartya Sen (1992) defines it, 'freedom to achieve wellbeing'.
4. In Sen's terms, capability drives the outcomes of learning in education, the labour market and the community, supplying the potential through which effective functioning and consequently well-being, the *fourth level,* will be achieved. In other words, skills and the goals to which they are directed in the capability approach are bound to the context in which they will be exercised and the freedom to gain them.

The retreat from life-wide learning thus needs to be resisted because it underpins the decline of the means of acquiring capability that the coming population of adults are going to need. In summary, the tensions that need to be resolved are between:

- World-class skills (Leitch) versus Freedom to achieve well-being (Sen)
- Education as a positional good versus Education as a democratic right
- Education for the economy versus Education for democracy

Clearly both elements of each tension are in play when any given education policy is to be decided. What matters is that any one of each pair does not run roughshod over the other one or, in the opposite scenario through shifting priorities, disappears

without trace. Two issues alluded to earlier therefore arise here: (1) the role of adult learning in matching the broadest range of individual and community needs—i.e. the '*wider benefits of learning*' (Schuller 2004: 3–11); (2) the role of learning in resisting social exclusion and widening inequality—i.e. reversing the '*trajectory of disadvantage*' (Bynner 2007; Parsons & Bynner 2007: 10, 78–81) in which, in Peter Blossfeld and colleagues' words, 'structures of inequality are enshrined' (Kilpi-Jakonen *et al*. 2014: 7–12).

The wider benefits of learning

To assemble the evidence I turn first to analysis of the non-economic returns to learning in the 1958 cohort study gained between the ages of 33 to 42 (Feinstein *et al.* 2003; Bynner & Hammond 2004).[12] Over this age period, 58% of all cohort members, for whom data had been collected at both age points, had taken part in one or more courses offered through further education colleges, community provision or at work. Women were in the majority for leisure courses and courses leading to qualifications (academic and vocational). Men were in the majority for work-related, generally short, courses, which accounted for 58% of the total. The returns were in terms of the percentage of total change over the period in the whole sample that could be attributed to the learning engaged in, taking account of other factors such as prior educational attainment and social background that could also have influenced them.

The results pointed to improvements in psychological and physical well-being from taking two or more courses over the nine-year period assessed: smoking declined; exercise increased. For other well-being outcomes, though the learning effect was not statistically significant at the level set,[13] the same positive tendency was evident, including reduced drinking and resistance to and exit from, depression. Life satisfaction showed the interesting result of an average decline for the sample as a whole that was significantly less among adult learners. Life satisfaction was also the only effect that differed significantly for men and women, with more men than women likely to have remained satisfied.

The Social Cohesion benefits were even more evident from the cohort data, as reflected in the larger learning effect sizes: race tolerance increased; association

[12] Carried out for the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre, Institute of Education, London.

[13] Probability $P < .05$ level (i.e. odds of more than 20 to 1 against a chance result). The statistical change estimates were based on sample sizes averaging 9,000 for all change outcomes except giving up smoking, voting in 1997 having abstained in 1987 and recovery from depression. For smoking and voting the sample sizes reduced to between 2,000 and 3,000, demanding a larger change in outcome to achieve statistical significance at the same probability level as for the other outcomes, $P < .05$—and even more so for depression recovery where the sample size reduced to 616.

memberships expanded; political interest and participation in elections increased (voted in 1997 having abstained in 1987); while political cynicism and authoritarian attitudes declined. Moreover, these effects varied across the different kinds of learning context. Leisure courses showed positive effects for all but one of the six outcomes, political cynicism, and academic courses for all but association memberships. Work-based and vocational courses showed statistically significant improvement only for race tolerance (up) and authoritarian attitudes (down). The overall results were much the same for men and women.

Apart from the quantitative analysis, case studies were also conducted of the learning experiences and outcomes for individual learners. The complexity of the relation between the learning and the social context in which it takes place is illustrated by the case of a Pakistani young woman. As a first-generation English speaker in her immigrant family she was the key family resource for communicating with the wider society. She married and had children and in the course of her interactions with the local infants' school started helping out with the reception class. She then did basic skills courses, finally graduating to teaching assistant. Her learning career moved on to a certificate in child care taken at the local college, increasing her involvement with fellow students and the wider community. Further learning and a job followed. Apart from the positive effects of her educational achievement, another less anticipated outcome was a weakening of bonds within the family as the time and the resources she had always supplied were eroded. Finding her own identity outside the family had clearly been at the expense of one part of her identity within it.

What emerges from this example is a picture of learning leading to life changes, which themselves lead to positive outcomes while moderated in some cases by problematic consequences. More learning may follow and further life-course changes and benefits and the establishment of a learning career. There may sometimes be conflicting pressures between work and family, where additional support is needed to alleviate feelings of identity conflict and, in some cases depression, and to maintain the sense of progress and fulfilment. Such experiences and reactions may be present in any adult learning pathway (Raffe 2003), but are completely disregarded in progression rules, thus risking the halting of a learning career before it has properly begun. Courses need to be seen as learning resources rather than shackles if they are to meet the full spectrum of learning needs that adults have.

Such findings thus point to significant gains from participation in adult education classes in a number of government priority areas, ranging from physical and psychological well-being to civic engagement and social cohesion. Moreover, the latter appear to be most strongly boosted by leisure classes, the traditional staple of adult education provision.

Trajectory of disadvantage

> Something like one adult in five in this country is not functionally literate and far more people have problems with numeracy. This is a shocking situation and a sad reflection on past decades of schooling. It is one of the reasons for relatively low productivity in our economy, and it cramps the lives of millions of people. We owe it to them to remedy at public expense the shortcomings of the past. To do so should be a priority for Government, and for all those, in the business world or elsewhere, who can help. (Moser Report 1999: 8)

As part of the age-34 follow-up survey in the 1970 cohort study, a data module funded by the Moser-inspired 'Skills for Life' programme was devoted to basic skills, including a literacy and numeracy assessment. The aim was to build on a programme of earlier work for the Basics Skills Agency on identifying difficulties with achieving literacy and numeracy proficiency and to profile individuals with them in terms of origins and consequences at different stages of their lives (Bynner & Parsons 2005; Parsons & Bynner 2007; Bynner 2010).

Poor basic skills in adulthood were typically associated with a disadvantaged family background and poor educational progress early on in a school career that teachers, though often aware of the problem, had achieved little success in correcting. The general lack of interest in and engagement with adult education among this group contributed further to what Sargent *et al.* (1997) describe as the '*learning divide*'[14] and the challenge of bringing about its reversal.

These problems were accentuated in the more recent (1970) cohort where literacy and numeracy competence and subsequently digital skills were becoming increasingly mandatory for employability, independent of the qualification level reached (Bynner 1997; 2004). It was possible to identify a '*trajectory of disadvantage*' (Parsons & Bynner, 2007: 78–81), whereby in accordance with the 'Kennedy maxim' and the 'Matthew effect', the gap between those performing adequately on literacy and numeracy tasks and those unable to do them, steadily widened throughout the school career and subsequently.

As children, cohort members in the lowest adult basic skills category showed from an early age all the signs of such a developing trajectory. Even by the age of five those whose skills were poor as adults, revealed a poor grasp of the visual motor skills that supply crucial preparation for later literacy learning. It was not surprising that these children entering primary school would start falling behind the others, not least because it was clear from teachers' reports that their parents had very little idea how to support their children educationally.

[14] The widening gap in learning participation between the socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged population.

It is understandable that these parents soon became resigned to the fact that, despite high hopes for their children when they first entered school, the experience of failure would continue to build disappointment coupled with loss of interest. Their children rapidly fell behind, many failing to learn to read or gain the rudiments of numeracy. However, although many of the poorly skilled adults had spent time in remedial classes, over half of those with literacy problems and two thirds with numeracy problems in adulthood had not been identified by teachers as having difficulties when they were children.

The consequence was that the whole educational career through primary and secondary school could be stunted, becoming little more than a route to early leaving and restricted opportunities in the labour market. At age 34 in 2004, the full effect of poverty in childhood was revealed, not only in the constraints on everyday living that this experience reflected, but in many cases also in the reinforcement of the transmission within families of poor educational achievement and lack of preparation for learning from one generation to the next.

Those whose literacy and numeracy skills were poor as adults typically had children whose measured skills were also poor—a pattern repeated from the parents of the cohort members to the cohort members themselves. The relationship across the generations was substantially stronger for literacy than for numeracy, as revealed by the steeper gradient of children's scores for the former. Notably these relationships were sustained when the cohort members' highest qualification was controlled. Hence the vicious circle of downward mobility and poor performance was continually being reproduced. Such a circle underlines the importance of family learning programmes to help parents and their children bridge the gap together. As we shall see in the final section, it also underlines the importance of investment in adult education in a life-course scenario based on provision matched to need and embedded in a truly motivating teaching context. Because of parents' desire to help their children, family learning programmes provide such a context and are generally effective (Brooks *et al*. 1996; 1997).

The poor acquisition of the basic skills in childhood carried through to a chequered educational career, followed by poor progress in the labour market. At age 30 in 2004 adults with Entry Level basic skills[15] were more likely than others with higher level skills to be unemployed, and when they were in jobs, were far less likely to receive any work-based training. But perhaps the most striking result was revealed by the lack of a key learning resource in modern adult life—access to the internet.

[15] Below the level of GCSE grade G.

Digital divide

The expectation of exposure to computers and the internet is growing, especially as children enter school. Lack of family access to digital technology and the digital skills to go with it are therefore becoming key indicators of disadvantage, as reported, for example, by the Oxford Internet Institute (Helsper 2008). Data from the 1970 cohort study at age 34 showed such a 'digital divide' between groups defined at the different adult literacy levels [16]: 62% of age-34 adults (men and women equally) at Entry Level 2 or below had *no* access to the internet, compared with 20% of those at Level 1 and above. Moreover, 48% of men and 40% of women in the former group had no computer at home and 16% of men and 17% of women never used one. Not only were those Entry Level 2 adults failing to participate in the now digitalised learning society, but those with families were likely to be similarly passing this disadvantage to their children.

As an extension to the Skills for Life programme, a comparative study between London and Portland, Oregon modelled the way the relationships worked between literacy proficiency, computer use and employment for disadvantaged adults in the two areas, and produced surprises (Bynner *et al.* 2010). This was at the time of a booming labour market in London and a depressed labour market in Portland. The disadvantaged adult learners in Portland were ahead of their counterparts in England with respect to their use of computers. This exposure was related to employability for men and women in Portland, but only for the women in London, many of whom were returning to employment after child bearing. For men in London, progression in employment rather than getting a job was associated with computer use. Counter-intuitively, the direction of causation implied that improved digital competence boosted literacy proficiency rather than the other way round: that is, the influence of exercising digital competence on literacy proficiency, usually at work, exceeded the influence of literacy proficiency on digital competence.

CONCLUSION

The work of the Wider Benefits of Learning Centre and the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy demonstrates the value of longitudinal research in gaining understanding of lifelong learners' needs and offer pointers to the means of meeting them. The formidable obstacles that many adults face in engaging with learning underline the continual need for support to bring about the 'turning

[16] Educational attainment age 16 leaving standards: Level 2, General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades A–C; Level 1, GCSE grades D–G; Entry Level 3; Entry Level 2; Entry Level 1.

points' in individual lives that can establish a learning career. The life-course conception embraces the shaping influences on the process including:

- policy and practice operating at different times and in different places in which consistency to aid perseverance is at a premium;
- social relations, in different interactional settings, the home, the family, the workplace and the community, which aid rather than inhibit learning;
- the timing of critical experiences and events that foster rather than obstruct learning;
- motivational learning contexts that stimulate individual agency and drive the critical steps towards success rather than stand-alone provision detached from everyday experience at home and in the workplace.

This may be seen as the point where the programme set out in NIACE's *Learning Through Life* through the 'nine themes' shows the way. Long-term entitlement to life-wide adult learning needs to be a policy priority. As Smethurst (1992) shows, it is a mistake, in relying on cost–benefit kinds of consideration of skills acquisition, to focus on the *economic* outcome alone as there is a need to recognise externalities. That is to say, policy needs to embrace, as well, learning effects that impact on economic returns indirectly. It is important, therefore, to focus attention on equity in access to opportunity and the means of realising it across the range of capabilities that are enhanced through it. Every individual should have the right to enhance their learning potential as the means of boosting not only their own capabilities but that of the succeeding generations to whom these capabilities are transferred. This principle applies not only in relation to prioritising the Leitch-defined core skills but to the wider range of learning opportunities and their outcomes where motivation may be fostered and a learning career begun.

The cohort study analyses help identify the *wider benefits* to be gained from adult learning and the *trajectory of disadvantage* that restricts access to them among those who start off from the lowest educational base. Literacy and numeracy, and increasingly ICT competence, supply the foundations of the capability that is needed. The rising incidence of depression, which has increased in the more recent cohort (Ferri *et al.* 2003) is only one of many poor well-being indicators that adult learning can help to ameliorate as general practitioners are already coming to recognise through the growing use of 'social prescribing'.[17]

As futurologists like Jeremy Rifkin (1995) tell us, society is faced with an ever-contracting pool of employment for an ever-widening section of the population

[17] http://www.ageconcernyorkshireandhumber.org.uk/uploads/files/Social%20Prescribing%20Report%20new.pdf

resigned to zero-hour contracts and short-term jobs or no jobs at all and increasingly called the '*precariat'* (Standing 2011). The provision of lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities in this critical area of basic skills and capability development therefore merits the highest priority. The disregard of the skills agenda for the wider context of learning and the multiple benefits to be obtained from both its inputs and outputs therefore needs to be resisted.

The challenge is to create learning conditions in which motivation is triggered and social relations are strong. Family learning devoted to literacy development provides one of the most effective examples in which the motivation of adults comes from the desire to help their children while enhancing their own skills in the process. The model involves additional literacy and numeracy teaching provided for parents and primary schoolchildren learning together (Brooks *et al.* 1996; 1997). Further examples come from embedding basic skills provision in routine tasks in motivating contexts such as vocational training courses (Casey *et al.* 2006) or other less obvious venues such as antenatal classes, for example (Bynner & Parsons 2005).

The golden days of adult education, when all courses available to adults were seen as valuable in their own right and virtually free of charge if individuals wanted to undertake them, are unlikely to be restored in the foreseeable future. Though many countries such as the Nordic five still hold to this principle that education in whatever form it takes should be available to all citizens as a democratic right, the general trend under austerity-driven policy thinking is towards marketisation of post-compulsory education rather than offering it as a public good. Moocs (Massive Open Online Courses) are another free or very cheap option relying exclusively on digital rather than face-to-face instruction. But the evidence of very low certification rates, widely quoted as 7% on average, suggests that the early hopes for them may well evaporate.[18]

What is indisputable is that, as society transforms digitally at an accelerating rate, a wide range of capabilities is critical to adult functioning, individually, in the family, the community and the workplace. The argument here is that lifelong learning in the broadest sense underpins not only the capabilities of the individual who gains them but contributes to the well-being of all. Without it, as the NIACE surveys show (Tuckett & Aldridge 2010), from an earlier peak in 2010 there are strong signs of what Sargent *et al.* (1997) described as a growing learning divide [19].

Such initiatives as learning cities with rural as well as urban catchment areas, as promoted by UNESCO (2015), is one way of realising such a goal and cities are places where the resources for learning, such as libraries and educational institutions and the

[18] http://er.educause.edu/articles/2014/12/mooc-completion-and-retention-in-the-context-of-student-intent

[19] The widening gap in learning participation between the socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged population.

expert teachers to deploy them, can in principle be fairly easily consolidated, that is serving as *learning hubs*. But in Britain the idea extends further than this. The incorporation into state provision of vocational education through further education colleges and what were polytechnics, leaving a residue of adult education with local authorities and the voluntary sector, cuts across the principles of localism—institutional networks, local engagement, and progression—horizontally as well as vertically. This is the message of the Delors Report and the NIACE review. All providers from national down to local level, need to supply the core of a restored system of all-embracing lifelong learning provision.

But these forms of lifelong learning provision should not be seen in isolation. Employment itself is often inadvertently the other major provider, or should be, as Lorna Unwin and Alison Fuller (2003; Unwin 2010) argue, particularly for young people entering their first jobs. The workplace is a core source of learning and raising the status of this function as in Germany and Scandinavia, for example, should be seen as an inevitable development for the digital age. Trade unions with learning representativeness across the whole country are another source of such educational infrastructure, together with charitable foundations directly concerned with particular groups, ranging from ethnicity to disability. Prison education, rather than being used for filling the gaps in time-serving in a shattered occupational career, should be a central part of the rehabilitation (Schuller & Watson 2009). Coupled with such a development, the continuing collection of monitoring data (the NIACE surveys) and longitudinal data of the cohort studies kind, becomes the critical counterpart of provision in assessing and gaining understanding of lifelong learning's effects.

Overall the picture has both discouraging and encouraging aspects for the importance of adult learning and is why '*Whatever Happened to Lifelong Learning*' matters. Clearly the significance of early-life factors could lead to the conclusion that investment in the skills of the next generation, rather than the current adult one, is likely to produce the best pay-off (e.g. Choudry & Fitzsimmons 2016). However, our analysis clearly indicates in two ways that this approach would be an over-simplification.

First, certain influences emerge as significant in boosting basic skills through post-16 experience, especially exposure to ICT provision as originating in the University for Industry at its peak and often run in local libraries, such as 'Learn Direct'.[20] Secondly, although age-34 basic skills are predictable from the demographic, experience and achievement variables included in the analysis presented at the beginning of this paper, over 60% of the inequality between people in relation to these skills measures could not be predicted and consequently 'explained' in terms of them.

[20] Set up in 1998 in response to the 'Learning Age' http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000654.htm

Individual life-course patterns of the kind revealed qualitatively through biographical analysis, as in the case study reported, can point to the combinations of salient experiences that give rise to 'turning points'.

In the case of literacy and numeracy acquisition, as David Mallows and Jennifer Litster (2016) argue, drawing on Steve Reder's work on motivating disadvantaged adult learners (Reder 1994) repeated and sustained practice integrated into everyday activity in the workplace, at home and in the community offers the best prospects of success. Their example of basic skills education for new recruits to the British Army (Mallows & Litster 2016: 22) is just one of many where all the ingredients of an effective programme can be put in place.

Thus given the right learning opportunities, adequate learning provision and support in the right form at the right time and, crucially, a realisable goal to motivate the desire to 'transform' or 'sustain' (under threat) the quality of life (Schuller *et al.* 2004, 24–9), the prospect of acquiring, at any stage of life, the basic skills and the capabilities to follow is always attainable. Finally, the intergenerational continuities in basic skills transfer make the point that enhancing parents' basic skills can be the critical factor in raising the educational level of their children—the foundation of capability in the next generation.

There is a long way to go before Britain achieves the levels of equality of educational outcomes as achieved, for example, in Scandinavian countries, and they themselves are always trying to improve them. Moreover, the nature of inequality has itself shifted in industrial countries—including the most economically successful like Germany—towards polarisation between 'insiders' with secure employment prospects and 'outsiders', who have failed to get on the employment ladder for demographic or educational reasons (Blossfeld in press). Such young people are subsequently 'scarred' in the eyes of employers because of their perceived lack of qualifications and continuing work experience: that is, they are short of the 'human capital' on which employability is considered to depend.

Nevertheless, the goal of bridging irreversibly the *learning divide* is realisable given the recognition of *lifelong* and *life-wide* learning as the means of achieving it. Apart from individual fulfilment, society will always benefit from the resulting contribution to the enhanced quality of life, social cohesion and productivity that learning brings. It is therefore still a matter of 'never too early never too late' but reconfigured now for the digital world.

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