

CHAPTER 13

Facilitating Lifelong Education

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CHANGING DEMAND

Lifelong education has become an increasing feature of the work of universities over the past decade. The reasons for the increased demand for lifelong education have been well documented. They are essentially the interlinked forces of technological and other change, increasing professional standards, globalization and growing personal responsibility for career development (Fryer, 1997; CIHE, 1998; Salmi, 2001).

Scientific and technological change seems to be increasing at an exponential rate. It is being created both in university research departments and through government and corporate research and development. Changes in information and communication technology (ICT) are the most prominent, but there are significant breakthroughs in many other areas, such as bio-sciences, biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and medicine. The postgraduate and even the undergraduate curriculum in these subjects is seriously out-of-date within a few years. Those researching in these areas, even if they themselves are contributing to the change, must keep abreast of what others are doing. Companies also need to maintain the understanding of leading-edge developments by their scientific and technological and managerial staff in areas in which they operate.

An often neglected driver of lifelong learning is legislative change. This is sometimes stimulated by technological change (e.g., data protection or the use of embryos), but also by changing norms in society (e.g., health and safety or pollution issues). Clearly, lawyers need regular updating of their knowledge, but so do many other professionals and managers. There is hardly any area of professional or commercial activity which is not affected by regular legislative change. In addition, notions of professional competence change and standards that were accepted previously are more regularly chal-

lenged. As a result of all these factors, continuing professional development (CPD) has become an integral part of professional activity and many professions now require a minimum annual level of CPD activity from their members to enable them to maintain their license to continue professional practice.

This concern to achieve higher standards and remain up-to-date goes beyond the professions to the general area of management. Legislative change impacts broadly across this area, most notably on health and safety issues and employee relations. More generally, the competence of managers at all levels in an increasingly competitive environment puts performance under greater scrutiny and updating of skills, attitudes and competencies at a premium.

Increasing globalization of economic activity is fuelled not just by technological change, but also by other forces, and this in turn has an impact on the need for greater lifelong learning. The huge investments in research and development needed to create major technological change in pharmaceuticals, for example, require world markets for commercial exploitation and thereby reduce the number of firms able to compete in those markets. Capital is mobile, labor less so, and large groups of the population can find themselves without employment by corporate decisions to move manufacturing or headquarter activities across the globe. Increased globalization can mean that when a company is in commercial difficulties the impact across many communities is much larger. For all these reasons, people pursue lifelong learning not just to update their knowledge and skills but to re-orient their careers through new skills and qualifications. This more radical re-direction of careers is also fuelled by technological change making previous skills and qualifications obsolete and redundant.

All these forces are making the notion of the lifelong loyal company employee a thing of the past—even in Japan. A job is no longer for life. It may not even be for this year! One of the consequences is that employees are increasingly taking responsibility for their own career development and not relying entirely on their employer. They may seek employer support for their program of learning, and enlightened and far-sighted employers will provide it. But the drive for identifying the program comes from individuals anticipating their future career needs.

CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE

This wide range of forces has resulted in large and varied demand for lifelong learning provision ranging from three or more years of PhD study to a one-day updating course on recent legislation. The first example is most obviously provided by a university. Indeed in most countries it cannot be provided in

any other way and it offers no challenge or threat to university tradition. At the other end of the spectrum, there will be many private organizations better able than a university to offer cost-effective one-day updating courses. It is between these two extremes that the battleground between universities and other providers lies. The greater challenge, however, is within universities themselves and it is one of culture and values. Only when that is resolved will universities be able successfully to meet the challenge from other providers. Or, more precisely, only then will they be able to decide which challenges from other providers they wish to meet.

The traditional university through the 20th century saw itself, and continues to see itself, essentially as a place of scholarship, research and the development of the highest possible intellectual standards. Certainly these are the norms and values of the individual academic. Students, it is argued, need to be exposed to this culture if they are to develop their intellectual potential and proceed on graduation to contribute most usefully to research, the economy and wider society. Students are important for all sorts of reasons (not least financial), but the needs of the subject and the discipline come before the needs of the student.

Even for the purists, however, continuing education has a legitimate place in higher education where it is related to the core value of research. Indeed the university is often the only place where exposure to leading-edge technological change can be experienced. Moreover, the purist approach has long been diluted by higher education's central role in preparing people for the leading professions, such as medicine and law. Over time, many other professions from architecture to teaching have become subjects of study in universities. It follows naturally that continuing education and development in these professions is also seen as a function of universities.

There is also the curious case of business education, largely neglected for much of the 20th century at undergraduate level in the traditional universities but increasingly sought as a mark of excellence at postgraduate and specifically post experience level. In the most traditional of universities, business education is seen exclusively as a form of continuing education linked to research.

The picture would not be complete without reference to another form of continuing education which has typified the traditional universities, certainly in the United Kingdom, and whose objectives are in complete contrast to technological and professional updating: extra-mural or adult education. Its focus is largely the humanities and social sciences and its purpose is to educate and stimulate the general population. Often uncertificated, its values are those of liberal humanitarianism, of making the scholarly resources in the university available to the wider population.

All these well-established forms of continuing or lifelong education have been increasingly challenged from a variety of sources in recent years. Universities are not the only source of scientific and technological discovery and leading-edge activity. Indeed, the closer the discovery is to the market place the more likely it is to be found in the laboratories of the corporate sector. And the more likely it is that commercial confidentiality will lead to corporations organizing their own updating for their staff. Increasing research partnerships between universities and corporations does not change this drive for technological updating to be more Individual Corporation focused.

The challenge to universities on professional updating comes both from the professions themselves and from private providers. And the issues here are ones of competence and attitude. A professional body may believe it is more in touch with the issues of professional updating than a university department and thus better able to provide what the individual professional is seeking. A private provider dedicated to updating courses and depending for its livelihood on performing well is likely to be more alert, flexible and focused than a university department for which this is not its central activity.

Business education is a more complex area. On the one hand, the most prestigious of the traditional universities are able to flourish in the MBA and other post-experience areas relying on their research expertise and elite status. On the other hand, the price insensitivity of the market allows a high-quality, private, non-university based sector to flourish in competition with the elite universities. And, below this level, much rougher forms of competition exist with a range of providers, including universities, colleges, corporations and private entities.

In the U.K., even the liberal humanitarianism activity of continuing education is under challenge, but less from competitive predators and more from the difficulties of funding. In the current instrumentalist culture, in which higher education and certainly continuing education is expected to lead to economic return, the utility of spending public money on learning for pleasure is increasingly questioned.

The Role of Technology

Much has been made of the increasing role of information and communication technology in challenging the role of higher education in lifelong learning. The discussion is much confused and some clarity is required.

As has been argued, higher education's role in lifelong learning is under challenge, without any influence from technology. The challenge has arisen from questions about higher education's competence in and attitude towards lifelong learning and ambivalence about whether it is a legitimate function of the academy.

The use of information and communication technology in learning has existed for a long time. Audio and visual technology has been available for over forty years and computer-managed instruction almost as long. The introduction of web-based technology has created a step change in the opportunities available. But the key point is that technology only provides the opportunity. It does not by itself provide the change. That is stimulated by educational and market opportunity. The best example of this is perhaps the UK Open University.

The Open University was established over thirty years ago and has gained a worldwide reputation for its use of information and communication technology. It began in 1971 entirely with an undergraduate program, widened this to post-graduate, and now has one of the most extensive post-experience programs in the country, if not wider afield. It is the lifelong learning university *par excellence*. Most observers praise its technological innovation, but in doing so they miss the point.

When the Open University was being established in the late 1960's, its founders did not survey the most advanced technology available and ask themselves how they should use it. They began with their educational objectives and asked how they could best achieve them. The cornerstone of the Open University's work is not technology, but access. Its core initial objective was to offer the opportunity of a second chance for undergraduate education to adults who had not been able for a variety of reasons—educational, personal, financial—to go to university at the traditional age of 18 or 19. Contemplating how that opportunity might be provided across the country to people who had many other commitments, the obvious answer was distance education.

When the components of this distance education were considered, educational and cost effectiveness were the overriding factors rather than technology. So the printed word, a technology first invented in the 15th century became the dominant feature of the Open University's instructional package, and remains so to this day. Of course, other more advanced technologies are also used, including radio, television, cd-rom, web and email, but the criteria remain the same: educational and cost-effectiveness, not technological determinism.

This simple but powerful lesson of the Open University's experience is vitally important for understanding how technology may shape the role of lifelong learning in the universities. There are too many examples of technological solutions searching for an educational problem rather than the other way round. Yet the lifelong learning challenge today is the same as that faced by the Open University over thirty years ago. How can educational opportunities for continuing learning best be provided to people who are time, locationally and possibly financially constrained and whose needs are likely to be

highly focused? In many cases, advanced technology may be the answer through, for example, the Internet, use of email and other electronic media. In other cases, it might be distance education using the postal service or radio. And in yet others, it might be a network of real not virtual study centers based on existing educational facilities in a range of locations. The Open University uses all these approaches. For its core undergraduate provision, the most used and popular forms of instruction are the written text distributed through the postal system and face-to-face tutoring in real study centers! (Wagner, 1982).

LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE UNIVERSITIES

The key question is not how best universities can meet the outside challenges to their role in lifelong learning but whether they wish to do so. The challenges are ones of culture and values not technology. And language is also important. So far the words continuing education and lifelong education or learning have been interchanged as if they mean the same thing. It is time to question this assumption and to ask “What’s in a name?”.

“Lifelong Education” is an elastic phrase capable of being stretched to cover a variety of meanings. It is the latest in a long line of expressions covering broadly the same activity. Veteran students of higher education policy will remember the arcane debates of the 1970s about the differences between recurrent education, continuing education and “*éducation permanente*” (OECD, 1973). In that sense, lifelong education, or lifelong learning as it is increasingly called in the UK, is just the latest variant on the same theme.

Or perhaps not, for different words should imply different meanings. The word “continuing” implies a continuation of something which has already started. Its conceptual framework is of an initial phase of full-time study to bachelor, masters or doctoral level. Continuing education is then what follows, after a break from study. It can involve, for some students, following courses from the “initial” phase, but for most students it involves shorter more ad hoc more flexible study leading to non-traditional qualifications, or even to no qualifications. The motive for such study is usually occupational or professional need, but it can occasionally be driven by personal needs.

This typical model of continuing education does not challenge the basic values and structure of the traditional system. It accepts its essential foundations of an initial phase of full-time study which changes slowly according to traditional academic norms. Whilst some “continuing education” students will study these “initial” courses, they will be a minority alongside those pursuing “initial” higher education and the courses will not be changed nor adapted to their special needs. The majority of continuing education students will be taking different shorter courses outside the core provision.

However large such continuing education might be in volume, it is, in cultural terms, peripheral to the life of the universities and makes little impact on the lowering, let alone the tumbling, of the walls of academia.

For some, the word “lifelong” means the same as “continuing”. Its difference, if any, is to inject freshness into an old concept amounting to nothing more than old wine in new bottles. It implies no change in the traditional model of initial and continuing higher education as two distinct and separate phases and therefore poses no serious challenge to the walls of academia.

For others, “lifelong” means something very different to “continuing”. It offers the opportunity for radical change. Lifelong is an all embracing concept. It does not follow anything. Lifelong covers the beginning, middle and end of the higher education experience. There may be still different phases or stages, but no one phase inherently has hegemony over the others. More fundamentally, the phases must be integrated and a holistic approach to the process adopted. The lifelong higher education needs of students require all phases to be subject to interrogation and the initial phase perhaps most of all. Here, embracing the concept of lifelong education creates fundamental challenges to the walls of academia.

An even more radical challenge is created by the use of the word “learning” rather than “education”. Both are nouns, but one views the process from the provider’s perspective and the other from the student’s perspective. Education is what universities provide. Learning is what students experience. Using the word education from the student’s perspective requires the use of the phrase “being educated”. Using the word learning from the university’s perspective requires the use of the phrase “providing learning opportunities”. The words “education” and “learning” on their own fall naturally on either side of the divide. Education is a supplier’s word—it is what is provided. Learning is a consumer’s word—it is what is experienced.

So the terms higher education or continuing education or even lifelong education betray a, perhaps, sub-conscious, value system focused on a provider’s perspective. However sincere the claim to be responsive to students, the value assumption in such a phrase is that provider’s needs and judgments come first. The walls of academia take precedence. The term learning, on the other hand, heralds a radically different approach. Learning means that student needs are paramount. So the phrase “lifelong learning” provides a double challenge to the walls of academia. It means changing continuing to lifelong and education to learning. This implies abandoning the notion of an initial higher education experience largely unchallenged in its core structures and processes, followed by a spasmodic continuing experience in a system organised from the provider’s perspective and to their convenience. In its place comes a holistic approach to higher education, responsive to student needs (Wagner, 1998).

If continuing education, as defined above, is to be the underlying value, then the walls of academia will barely shudder, let alone be lowered. Research and associated teaching focused on traditional undergraduate and postgraduate work will remain the core activity and source of funding. If this is undertaken successfully, there will be few financial pressures for change to create other sources of income. Continuing education will exist as an adjunct to the core activity and will continue to be regarded by the guardians of tradition as a pimple or abscess on the smooth face of academia. The most telling proof of this is that, in many universities, continuing education is provided in a separate department and the academics involved are not regarded as members of the department that covers their discipline. Even where continuing education and updating are provided in the same department as the core research and teaching activity, they are often undertaken by different staff and have a lower status.

It is one of the great paradoxes of innovation, particularly in higher education, that, in order to enable innovation to occur, it often has to be nurtured in a separate organizational entity. With careful tending the innovation will take root, blossom and be successful. In its own terms, it will have achieved its objectives. However, the very fact that it is separate prevents its lessons being disseminated to the wider organization or system. Indeed, its very separation legitimises the traditional activity. The forces of inertia and conservatism, which required the creation of a separate organization or structure to produce reform in the first place, in due course, prevent that reform from permeating the rest of the organization. This is one of the lessons of the Open University's impact on the rest of the UK higher education system and it applies also to how continuing education is organized inside an individual university. Separation may be the only way success can be achieved but its very introduction is itself an admission of failure (Wagner, 1985).

An important cultural issue at the heart of continuing education or lifelong learning for the traditional university is the supposed distinction between education and training. The term continuing education not only implies a restrictive attitude to what is included in that term, but very specifically excludes "training". This supposedly lower-level activity, traditionalists argue, is not for universities and should be left to others such as colleges or private providers. It ignores of, course, instruction in for example, medicine, law or architecture, which explicitly requires "training" to ensure competence for professional practice. The lifelong learning university has no such pretensions. It recognizes that learning is not only student centered but embodies a wide variety of learning, including skills learning which is the function of training.

A comprehensive lifelong learning approach will shake the academic walls. Lifelong learning requires scrutiny of the initial phase of higher educa-

tion as well as the continuing phase. It requires scrutiny of curriculum and pedagogy from the student's perspective as well as the tutor's. It requires flexibility as to entry requirements, mode and method of instruction, and to the structure of qualifications. The lifelong learning university still values research and the highest intellectual standards, but balances these objectives with those of meeting student needs. Moreover, its definition of students is much wider than simply undergraduate and postgraduate. It encompasses all those seeking updating, upskilling, retraining and the attainment of the qualifications needed for career change. In the lifelong learning university, the relationship between the initial and the continuing phases of higher learning is seamless, both culturally and organizationally. In such a university, the academic walls certainly come tumbling down, but they are rebuilt with more transparent and user-friendly materials.

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