Lifelong learning: Mere mantra or achievable policy in Australia?

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Abstract: Lifelong learning was ignored initially and then given lip-service by federal governments in the Australian context. Seriously inadequate studies for lifelong learning policy formation and development have been undertaken. Because all efforts by the Australian federal government have lacked conviction no serious policies beyond the level of rhetoric have been established. This paper reviews recent literature on the effectiveness of lifelong learning policy in Australia and assesses the likelihood of serious policies being developed and implemented by the Australian federal government to promote effective lifelong learning in Australia.

Introduction

Lifelong learning re-emerged as a major international educational movement in the last decade of the twentieth century and this has continued into the new millennium. The first serious interest in lifelong learning emerged during the late 1960s-early 1970s (eg see Faure, 1972; Husen, 1974) when it was seen as a means of overcoming problems in an age of uncertainty where the two seeming constants were continuing change and growth in bodies of knowledge. The three pervasive revolutions, technical, economic and social in nature, experienced over the past twenty years (Cornford, 2002) have accentuated these problems. Two significant reports thus emerged in 1996, one from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Lifelong Learning for All, and the other from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Learning, the Treasure Within. Both reports from these highly influential bodies emphasized the need for continuing learning through the lifespan to ensure economic, social and personal welfare in an era of consistent, ongoing change. Consequently the concept of lifelong learning was generally accepted by governments, and became a policy mantra in most developed countries (Kearns, 2005; Watson, 2004). As Bagnall (2000, p.20) has stated: ‘It is now featured in practically every imaginable agenda for social change, education policy preamble and mission statement’.

The problem is that, despite its wide adoption as a mantra in Australia and the lip-service given because of the inherent logic underlying the need for lifelong learning, there is relatively little evidence that development of effective overarching lifelong learning policy frameworks and coherent individual policies has occurred. Nor is there evidence that, apart from isolated examples of good practice, that lifelong learning is being effectively encouraged more generally through federal government policies. Watson (2004), and Kearns (2005) have demonstrated how lifelong learning has been featured in numerous ministerial and policy statements. This paper will build upon this and examine the evidence from a number of very recent reports and a variety of other relevant sources as to what has been done to establish the policy frameworks and individual policies that would lead to successful lifelong learning in Australia. In order to do this it is necessary first to establish a number of criteria against which existing Australian government efforts can be evaluated.
It is argued here, as it has been by Kearns (2005), that overarching policy frameworks and other frameworks too are necessary. Only if these are constructed will it be possible to develop successfully policies that embrace a much wider spectrum of learning, citizenship, quality of personal life and satisfaction issues than conventionally have been seen as pertaining to adult and vocational educational policy. Through development of these overarching frameworks there is greater likelihood of establishing a coherent picture into which individual jigsaw puzzle pieces of policy can be meaningfully slotted. In this the writer is specifically adopting a policy perspective that considers implementation issues and evaluation of outcomes at the same time that more abstract, broader aims of policy are formulated (eg see Calista, 1994). Such a position is consistent with outcomes based policy and serious evaluation of policy that taxpayers fund.

The chief focus of interest will be policies of the Australian federal government that, generally under the Australian constitution, takes responsibility for national issues, and has increasing sought to control and dictate educational policy from school through to higher education levels. However relevant state government polices will also be considered if and where applicable.

**Explicit evaluation criteria for lifelong learning policy**

The lifelong learning literature is multidimensional in nature and characterized by confusion and conflicting ideals in terms of both desired ends in lifelong learning and analyses of what is involved in achieving these. Bagnall (2000) and Aspin and Chapman (2000) have provided the best analyses of the competing ideals to date. Close analysis of these indicates that all revolve around effective learning over the lifespan (Cornford, 2004). What is also apparent is that seldom have frameworks for government policy development of lifelong learning been considered as an essential factor in reconciling the competing ideals from a multiplicity of personal perspectives. For this reason work at UNESCO under Delors (1996) and at the OCED (1996, 2004) is of considerable importance, since the perspective adopted is a policy-oriented one.

Delors’ (1996) report, *Learning, the Treasure Within*, defined the goals of lifelong learning in terms or four ‘pillars’ (principles) that extended the definition beyond the traditional emphasis upon the formal acquisition of knowledge. These were: (i) Learning to know; (ii) Learning to do; (iii) Learning to live together; and (iv) Learning to be. The first two align to a degree with conventional attitudes to learning, but more especially developing levels of competence in terms of performance-based outcomes. The first also carries overtone of learning to learn, an important issue returned to below. Principles (iii) and (iv) implicitly consider the multicultural nature of many modern industrialized societies and the need for learning to be an essential part in the development of happiness and personal contentment. Documentation of these trends is beyond the scope of this paper, but increasingly in Australia and overseas economists have been considering issues of contentment and satisfaction within the context of increasingly pressured work lives.

Subsequent to the OECD (1996) report, an article in the 2004 *OECD Observer* further clarified that lifelong learning model. This established four factors for effective lifelong learning. The first of these was what the OECD called a ‘systemic view’ of education that required seeing the supply and demand of learning opportunities as part
of a connected system operating over the entire lifetime. (OECD, 2004, p.1). The second involved recognition of the centrality of the learner with emphasis upon meeting learner needs rather than focus upon the supply side (OCED, 2004, p.2). The third involves motivation, which, it is rightly concluded, is the basis for all lifelong learning, and all learning per se for that matter. The OECD indicates that special attention should be paid to ‘developing the capacity for ‘learning to learn’ through self-paced and self-directed learning’ (OECD, 2004, p.2). This factor goes well beyond the basic issues in motivation per se to echo Delors’ first principle. The fourth and last factor is that lifelong learning should recognize ‘multiple objectives of education policy’. What is involved here is ‘personal development, knowledge development, economic, social and cultural objectives – and (awareness) that the priorities among these objectives may change over the course of an individual’s lifetime’ (OECD, 2004, p.2). This set of factors goes beyond Delors principles in recognizing some of the very obvious variables that will operate in learning over a lifetime. By making explicit what the realities of lifelong learning involve, this firmly establishes variables that need to be taken into account in effective policy.

Wurzburg (1998), a Principal Administrator of the Education and Training Division at the OECD, has also made an important contribution to frameworks and understanding of criteria for judging lifelong learning policies. He identified three critical factors that he saw as necessary to support lifelong learning after the OECD-US Department of Education Conference in 1998 that examined factors common in countries that had effective cultures for promoting lifelong learning. These three factors he likened to the legs on a three-legged stool, where each leg is necessary to support the stool. The first of these he saw as a schooling system that provided a good education. The second leg was the culture of the community that valued education and learning, while the third was that employers encouraged and provided the opportunity to engage in further learning.

In broad terms, Wurzburg effectively summarized the conditions necessary for lifelong learning. However, central to Wurzburg’s, the OECD’s and Delors’ principles or factors is the assumption that individuals know how to learn effectively over the lifespan. Cornford (1999, 2002) has argued that the cognitive revolution in educational psychology, if nothing else, has revealed it should not be assumed that individuals know how to learn very effectively. He further has argued that knowledge has reached the point where it is possible to teach cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies to ensure effective learning through the lifespan. Basically these arguments see lifelong learning as involving effective learning over the lifespan only if the individual possesses the knowledge and skills to permit effective learning. After all it is lifelong learning, with ‘learning’ the noun and ‘lifelong’ an adjective describing the duration of the learning (Cornford, 2002). This position is not incompatible with Delors’ and Wurzburg’s first principles, or the OECD (2004) third factor of motivation in its expanded form involving learning to learn strategies.

Recent assessments of lifelong learning policy in Australia

There have been four very recent assessments of the effectiveness of lifelong learning policy in Australia. Of these, one by Chapman, Gaff, Toomey and Aspin (2005) has judged government policies to be successful. The other three, from different perspectives have judged that lifelong learning policies in Australia are failures
(Cornford, 2004; Kearns, 2005; Watson, 2004). This section critically reviews each of these assessments before undertaking a more in-depth analysis in selected areas.

**Chapman et al.’s (2005) assessment**

Chapman et al. (2005) have judged government (and other) policies on lifelong learning in Australia as successful. The basis for this assessment rests upon examination of policy documents of Australian federal and state governments and also the Catholic and Independent schooling sectors that revealed considerable rhetoric concerning the importance of lifelong learning. They also claim to have paid particular attention to policies pertaining to teacher education.

This overall assessment was based at least in part, as acknowledged at the end of the article, on a previous consultancy work undertaken by this group for the Australian federal government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), and reported as *Lifelong Learning and Teacher Education* (Chapman, Toomey, Gaff, McGilp, Walsh, Warren & Williams, 2003). This report highlighted the need for a more liberal interpretation of lifelong learning beyond narrow instrumental approaches directed solely at improvement of workplace productivity in the national interest. It also produced a series of ‘snapshots of best practice that indicated that there are genuine efforts being made to increase awareness about lifelong learning and to bring about involvement in this for at least some individuals. However a major omission was consideration of teaching cognitive and metacognitive skills to both teachers and students to improve learning (Cornford, 2004. Also see below.).

Instances or cases of effective practices by individuals, community groups, local government, teaching institutions and universities are not in doubt (eg see Kearns, 2005). However the conclusions drawn by Chapman et al (2005) of effective lifelong learning policy by Australian governments from stated intentions and rhetoric in policy documents is open to serious challenge. The existence of rhetoric in documents does not necessary indicate effective policy outcomes, although it is a necessary precursor. And, in opposition to Chapman et al’s conclusions, there are three other sources, each from a substantially different perspective, substantially challenging these conclusions.

**Kearns’ (2005) report**

Kearns’ (2005) report for Adult Learning Australia, *Achieving Australia as an inclusive learning society*, resulted from extensive consultations with adult education stakeholders in Australia. Kearns’ ‘key finding from the consultations and research was that lifelong learning is poorly understood in Australia, and that this acts as a barrier to concerted action by all stakeholders in progressing opportunities for learning throughout life for all Australians in many contexts.’ (Kearns, 2005, p.i). He is strongly critical of the failure for the Australian federal government to establish a coordinated knowledge base built from research and also a national framework for lifelong learning when many overseas countries, especially in Scandinavia, have adopted lifelong leaning and transformed rhetoric into effective policies.

He considered that there were five key dimensions needed to build an inclusive learning society in Australia. These include: empowering individuals as motivated
and capable lifelong learners; sustaining and transforming communities through learning; using technology to extend the learning environment and transform the way we learn; developing the workplace as a key learning environment to underpin economic objectives; and extending and connecting partnerships and networks to build Australia as an inclusive learning society. These key dimensions would appear to be heavily influenced by Delors’ (1996) and the OECD’s (2004) principles. In examining in considerable detail how these key dimensions have been addressed in Australia, Kearns makes the clear judgment that, while there are many instances of interesting projects, these do not rival more successful overseas examples, as there is generally lack of coordination and a framework to enable the various elements to be explicitly and clearly interrelated. Some projects directed by the Tasmanian state government and community projects are praised, but there has been lack of vision and leadership from the federal Australian government. These judgments by Kearns are supported by other, additional evidence on Australian vocational education policies and practices (see below).

Watson’s (2004) criticisms

Watson has been involved with lifelong learning research on policy since the late nineteen nineties. She has substantial credibility in the research community as she was instrumental in trying to establish a lifelong learning network across Australia. Although this was supported by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), the representative for the federal minister responsible for education present at the inaugural meeting subtly crippled the idea. It was made very clear at that meeting that the federal government did not consider that lifelong learning was viable in policy terms but more especially since it would cost money the federal government was not interested, despite being prepared to engage in appropriate rhetoric (see Cornford, 2004, p.7). In 2003 Watson was engaged on a consultancy project for DEST. Entitled *Lifelong learning in Australia* it was supposed to be a project reviewing omissions in research for policy purposes. Although Watson logically highlighted the need for help for lower level workers, the report never considered the learning to learn approaches that would be the only means of encouraging lower level workers and improving learning effectiveness (see Cornford, 2004). There is good reason to believe that Watson was hamstrung with DEST deliberately restricting the scope of the project to avoid recommendations for money to be allocated to teacher education, and that the less than subtle editing, that DEST engages in with commissioned projects, further limited her capacity to make more substantial recommendations (see Cornford, 2004).

Seemingly influenced by her research Watson presented a paper at the Australian Association for Research in Education in December 2004, entitled *Lifelong learning in Australia: a policy failure*. In this paper she emphasized the need for revolutionary approaches to enable the new visions encapsulated in lifelong learning to be realized. Her analyses saw the changing nature of student demand driving changes in cross sectoral demand involving the vocational education and training (VET), adult community education (ACE) and the higher education (university) sectors. What was needed for change, she argued, was clear policy frameworks that supported cross sectoral partnerships. Watson also argued that Commonwealth (federal)–state government relationships hindered any likelihood of successful policies developing since the financing of education in the different sectors was divided in complex ways between these bodies and that these relationships impeded the development of
effective national policy. Another factor she saw as contributing to failure was the emphasis upon performance assessment, with this especially limiting because of the nature of lifelong learning and the need for multiple goals for education and training programs. She argued that such outcomes are not adequately represented in currently used performance assessment models. It should be noted that the federal government has been especially successful in establishing performance-based assessment policy as a dominant mode across the educational sectors in the different states over which it has supposedly limited control. Its ability to do this via financial incentives indicates that, provided the federal government has conviction and determination, overarching, national policy frameworks can be established despite the powers of the states.

Cornford (2004) and learning to learn strategies

Cornford’s (1999, 2002) interests centre upon really effective teaching and learning with his chief argument being that without individuals knowing how to learn effectively there cannot be effective lifelong learning. He also maintains that there is enough theory and research to make the teaching of cognitive and metacognitive strategies a realistically achievable educational goal, but that a revolution in the conception of curriculum, learning and teaching along with policy action by governments is necessary for these aims to be achieved.

After an examination of failures in policy initiatives to address leaning to learn strategies in higher education and also in the vocational education and training sector, where students often enroll because of a lack of effective academic skills, Cornford (2004) concluded that lifelong learning policy was a failure in Australia. This was basically because a foundational element was not being addressed despite substantial policy rhetoric across higher education, schooling and VET sectors. Although the focus of his analysis has been more restricted than Watson (2004) or Kearns (2005), it is upon a critical central element that has consistently been recognized (eg see Kearns, 2005; Watson, 2003) but not subjected to proper in-depth analysis (or action) as a basis for effective lifelong learning policy.

Summary

Despite individual examples of effective policy and practice evidence would indicate that Chapman et al.’s (2005) judgment that lifelong learning policy in Australia is effective is based substantially upon government policy rhetoric. The more detailed and complementary analyses of Kearns (2005), Watson (2004) and Cornford (2004) indicate that essential individual and overarching framework policy elements are absent. It is also agreed by these last three researchers that the federal government needs to be the source of national policies. Although Watson would see the states-federal government relationship as an important stumbling block to effective policy development, the chief stumbling block is the lack of conviction by the federal government of the need for overarching, national lifelong learning policies.

Reasons for lack of effective federal government lifelong learning polices

Most educators see the need for effective policies on lifelong learning, however there is substantial evidence that the Australian federal government does not perceive that need. Karmel (2004), representing the Australian federal government and National
Centre for Vocational Education Research, in a paper presentation to a UNESCO TVET conference stated: ‘In a sense Australia does not have a policy (on lifelong learning) because it does not need one: their whole approach has encouraged lifelong learning’ (Karmel, 2004, p.2). There are three reasons that can account for lack of serious interest in lifelong learning policies by the Australian federal government. The first is that the Australian economy has performed very effectively over the past decade without any evidence that government policy relating to lifelong learning has contributed. An objective indicator of this has been Australia’s increase in the trade-weighted index as a measure of relative economic improvement in the international context over the past five years. Coupled with this there also has been a rise in the value of the Australian dollar. The second reason is that the Australian population has responded to the policy of the federal Labor governments of the early 1990s to acquire more formal qualifications. Karmel (2004, p.18) has argued that ‘the level of adult participation of very high, and Australia could claim to be at the forefront of lifelong learning, at least in terms of formal higher education and TVET.’ If the population is engaged in formal education it has been reasoned that there is little need for government intervention to encourage this.

A recent report by Karmel and Woods (2004), examining the interrelationships of qualifications, employment and an older Australian population, indicates that, while there is some evidence that lifelong learning ideals are important, that the actual trend is for a more highly educated workforce as the workforce ages, given current indicators of increased qualifications among younger workers. This trend exists without any additional government policy or intervention. Moreover Karmel (2004, p.2) further argued that ‘a policy is not needed because the Australian educational framework is very open and does not discriminate on the basis of age’.

A third reason that also needs to be taken into account is that there is competition for limited financial resources for health, welfare, etc. It also needs to be noted that the present federal government that continues to hold economic rationalist ideals of small government, or ideally the market forces determining what occurs. Under these circumstances, it appears that the government has decided to concentrate efforts into vocational education and later schooling as preparation for employment. If such judgments have been made to not actively implement lifelong learning policies but remain with existing policies, they appear to have been made on the assumption that the present external and internal forces are unlikely to change substantially, and that the ideals of learning to develop personally and in harmony in a very multicultural society, as reflected in OECD and UNESCO ideals are unnecessary. Both assumptions can be strongly challenged. They also appear to have been made on the basis that existing polices in vocational education and training will provide skills and learning for the future, with existing schooling systems serving as bases for effective further learning. Both these assumptions are also open to serious challenge and the following sections will critically examine these assumptions.

**Quality of the schooling base?**

Quality of school education is one of the basic ‘legs’ in Wurzburg’s (1998) model for judging lifelong learning. Judging the quality of a nation’s schooling systems is complex and substantial detail is beyond the scope of this paper. On the surface, the Australian government would appear to be on solid grounds in judging that the
present Australian schooling system is of high quality. In a very recent front page article, with a leader, ‘Australia: In your face, world’ that could credibly have been written by an Australian politician, results were reported for tests conducted as part of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). It was reported that ‘Australian 15 year olds performed well when compared with 41 OECD and other countries across both maths and science scores. Australia’s mean score of 524 in mathematical literacy and 525 in scientific literacy placed it above the OECD’s average of 500 for each skill, and in the top third of countries.’ (Dale & Irvine, 2005, p.1). However, as Kearns (2005) notes, Australia’s results in international league tables are not among the very best. Given the drastic shortage of maths and science teachers as result of the neglect of teacher education as a national priority, it is unlikely that these achievements will continue too far into the future.

There are also other data that, if examined closely, undermine any government complacency. Leigh (2005) has recently examined the literacy and numeracy standards of 15 year-olds across the period 1975-1998 from an economic perspective, using data from a Australian Educational Research Council longitudinal survey. It was found that literacy and numeracy standards were lower at the end of that period than the beginning of it. As Leigh argues literacy and numeracy scores affect students’ life outcomes. It should also be noted that Cornford’s (2004) research on lifelong learning policy and cognitive and metacognitive skills, which are the basis for adult reasoning, problem solving and effective adult work performance revealed little more currently than rhetoric, and little even of that being carried into practice. Recently, in NSW, a projected Cognitive Science Higher School Certificate subject had even been dropped just before its introduction (Cornford, 2004).

Any federal government assumptions about the high quality of initial schooling must be judged as in the ‘dubious’ category. Even Karmel (2004), despite his standard bearing for the Australian government, concedes that there are ‘challenges’, amongst which is the problem that ‘a sizeable proportion of the school population does not have a sound educational foundation’ (Karmel, 2004,p.17). Furthermore, the learning experiences encountered by the proportion of the Australian school population that enters vocational education are not likely to foster more than a very narrow set of vocational outcomes, and certainly nothing like the broad educational aims embodied in OECD and UNESCO ideals for lifelong learning.

**Narrow vocational education and training with limited employer support**

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) paid considerable lip service to lifelong learning as it documents and web site attest. However the reality was that ANTA presided over the implementation of competency-based training via training packages. Under federal government policies training packages are used by all registered training providers that offer a recognized national qualification. This embraces not only private registered training providers, but also all TAFEs and schools where VET programs aligning with national qualifications are offered.

Competency-based training (CBT) is not really compatible with the broader aspects of lifelong learning. At best it feeds into Delors’ (1996) ideal of ‘Learning to do’, but its almost universally behaviourist interpretation mean that any wider elements including teaching of substantial theory are not covered. There is also empirical evidence that
standards have fallen under CBT (Mills & Cornford, 2002). Training packages as the vehicle for CBT can consist of only three essential elements. These are the CBT outcomes, assessment to be used and the relationship of the qualification obtained to the qualification framework. In effect training packages lack requirements for essential curriculum/learning elements, and have been increasingly criticized as too inflexible and not meeting learners’, trainers’ or organizations’ needs. They have also been criticized for not permitting the more sophisticated training and learning that is required in technologically and socially changing workplaces (see Chappell, Hawke, Rhodes & Solomon, 2003). Having used training packages to either emasculate or destroy most conventional VET curriculum, the federal government has no option but to persist with them. Training packages and CBT do not promote effective learning processes with groups who move to vocational education because of usually limited or deficient academic and learning skills (Cornford, 1999). In essence these two elements of CBT and training packages in combination inhibit the development of skills and motivation necessary for truly effective lifelong learning in a changing society, with VET workers most in need of additional learning to learn skills to keep employment when technological changes occur (Cornford, 2002).

The third element of Wurzburg’s (1998) model, employers who encourage further learning, is also substantially missing from Australian VET. One of the reasons there are major skill shortages in conventional trades has been the unwillingness of employers to take on apprentices and train them. Many short-term traineeships, that have been used to create artificial statistics to disguise the extent of the skill shortages by calling these ‘new apprenticeships’, involve very limited training to suit limited employer needs and to gain subsidies for employers. Kearns (2005), who has worked extensively in vocational education research also, emphasizes the importance of employers and their need for continued learning of employees for economic reasons. Yet he states: ‘while a number of good practice examples exist, industry overall is not sufficiently engaged in vital investment in Australia’s future, and appears to be mainly focused on short-term issues of skill shortages’ (Kearns, 2005, p.v).

Conclusion

There is no coherent policy for lifelong learning emanating from the Australian federal government. Although it considers such a policy unnecessary, many educators do, and see this as a major policy failure given the nature of changes in knowledge and the society. Claims that there is no need for such a policy do not withstand critical scrutiny. The school base is not performing in any outstanding way as a foundation for later learning. Those who enter vocational education and training are subjected to narrow, vocational training through government policies, thus they are likely to experience the broader types of lifelong learning envisioned by the OECD (2004) and UNESCO (Delors, 1996) as necessary for truly effective lifelong learning. In terms of these factors, the evidence amounts to a negative assessment on Wurzburg’s (1998) criterion of a society that values learning. An effective lifelong learning policy does not appear to be possible in Australia at present.

References


