

Employability and lifelong learning

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I. Introduction

The theme of this conference indicates the need for educational systems to provide quality education particularly for those referred to as ‘unconventional students’ in a context in which the global economic and financial crisis has meant that workers may be required to extend their years of employment in order to survive with some degree of comfort in later years. The adverse economic situation has also been viewed as providing an opportunity for educational systems and universities in particular to find innovative and creative ways of “making accessible and mobilising knowledge for society, and expanding the boundaries of our knowledge”.¹ The current climate is also viewed as providing universities with the opportunity for making strategic changes that will augur well for the future well-being of society through the provision of quality education which is needed for economic sustainability.

Globalisation and trade liberalisation have led in recent times to an increase in the number of students enrolled in higher education, primarily through the proliferation of universities in many regions of the world, particularly in the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, and in several Arab countries and in Europe.² While this trend has increased access to higher education for many, it has also led to a high level of competitiveness and, in the Caribbean, the area with which I am most familiar, it has also led to issues related to the quality of programmes offered by some of these institutions. McIntosh (2004:5) refers to challenges that have emerged with globalization, including the erosion of the traditional role of governments in “regulatory mechanisms and recognition of qualifications for certification.” He cites Van der Wende (1998) who wrote: “Often national governments are not in a position to steer initiatives, nor can they always monitor the quality of a particular programme or the trustworthiness of certain non-accredited providers.” He goes on to quote Van der Wende as saying, “This leads to uncertainty by students and, in a later stage, their employers...about the value of degrees and certificates” (p.5).

In developing countries like those in Latin America and the Caribbean in which economic development is dependent upon the employability of the populace and their acquisition of skills and competences that are

¹ ICDE/SCOP Workshop Themes Document, September 2009.

² UNESCO, (2004). *Higher Education in a Globalized Society*. UNESCO Education Position Paper, Paris, UNESCO.

needed in the workplace, the issue of quality education is an important one and the traditional public universities which have tended to allow entry on the basis of specific matriculation requirements for higher degrees are now challenged to find innovative ways to attract students and to augment the traditional Faculty-driven offerings with more demand-driven programmes in the face of changing needs of learners and the job market. McIntosh (2005:3) makes another point that “With the explosion of knowledge and the breaking down of the old fixed patterns of employment, learners are increasingly demanding a type of education that allows them to update their knowledge whenever necessary and to go on doing so throughout their working lives.” He says “It is less and less realistic to imagine that one can take a degree as a badge of employability, go into a career and never return to education.”

Changing patterns in the workplace, which may be exacerbated by the current economic situation, exert pressure upon individuals to maximise opportunities for employment. This brings into sharp focus – once again – the importance of lifelong learning as a means of enabling workers to cope with rapidly changing demands and to survive in the labour market. The concept of *lifelong learning* has become more critical as a factor which influences the *employability* of individuals. This paper will briefly explore interpretations for both terms and discuss trends reported in the findings of studies on the subject. The use of e-learning for promoting lifelong learning and employability will be explored and some comments on the role that universities can play in fostering lifelong learning and employability will be made.

II. Lifelong learning and employability: definitions and trends

Since the publication of the Faure Report *Learning to Be* in 1972, *lifelong education* or the alternative more frequently used term *lifelong learning* has been promoted as a critical concept in the formulation of education policies and has influenced the direction of educational development in many countries.

Lifelong education was viewed as the means by which societies could be transformed through the development of human resources. Harris³ identifies three characteristics that represent the changing focus of lifelong learning since the 1970's. The first relates to “rationale” which he says permeated discourse on lifelong learning during the 70s. The focus in that period was on “social capital” and the idea of “individual development” for “citizenship and the good of society” was considered to be of primary importance (p.2).

³ Roger Harris. *Lifelong Learning in Work Contexts*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Lifelong Learning: Policy, practice and possibility. University College of Worcester. Retrieved [http:// googlemail.com](http://googlemail.com), 9/9/2009.

The second characteristic relates to what he calls “focus” and which involved a “pre-occupation with formal education contexts.” According to Dave (1973) whom he cites, lifelong learning was considered to be “a corrective measure for the existing system of education” which provided “direction for the development and total system of education”. The third characteristic relates to the point to which I referred earlier, namely, the use of the terminology used to refer to the concept and the alternation between *lifelong education* and *lifelong learning*, with the former also occurring synonymously with terms such as ‘*recurrent education*’, and ‘*permanent education*’ (p.2). The terms *continuing education* and *adult education* are also used synonymously with lifelong education but at a glance the term *permanent education* will be seen to bear connotations of a restrictive nature that do not normally apply to a broad understanding of the concept. During the 1990s, the discourse on lifelong learning focused primarily on the economic more than the social aspects of learning and Harris cites a 1995 report by himself and others in which they had commented that “Economic factors are increasingly becoming the rationale for educational policy decisions and the means of measuring their success” (p.3). The discussion focused on the context of learning, for example, calling for technical and vocational training at secondary levels, incorporation of cooperative education in universities, and “integrated training” in institutes of further education. According to Harris, in that period learning was seen “as continuous, embedded in work and other experiences and as including both formal and informal learning” (p.3). The third characteristic which referred to the use of terminology seems to focus on the preferred term for reference and Harris reports that *lifelong learning* gained precedence over *lifelong education* because of “realisation that learning is the key attribute and that it occurs in a much wider theatre than simply the educational domain of life” (p.3). While *Lifelong learning* is commonly used in the literature, others point out that *lifelong education* is also used, particularly in policy documents and some consider it to be preferred because “it implies a more explicitly intentional learning than the casual, unintended learning implied by lifelong learning” (Educational Encyclopaedia).

The merits of using one or other term can be weighed in the context and purpose of the particular discourse. In the context for which this paper is being presented, the former term has been adopted but the other is used in other instances where it is more appropriate; one finds several definitions for *lifelong learning* in the literature. One that is commonly cited is Smith and Spurling’s (1999) reference to it as associated with consistent learning by people throughout their lifespan and covering all of life from the “cradle to the grave.”⁴ In that conceptualisation learning can begin at any age. Longworth and Davies (1996) defined lifelong learning as “the development of human potential through a continually supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and

⁴ See information in Note #3.

understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments” (p.22). Gvaramadze (2007:1)⁵ refers to the definition given by the European Commission’s (2000) *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* as “An essential policy for the development of citizenship, social cohesion and employment.” Common to these definitions are the following essential points that are of relevance to the discussion in this paper. (1) That learning can take place throughout one’s life and that an individual can continue to develop skills, competences and refine behaviours as a result of that learning. (2) That educational systems can play an important role in the learning and development of individuals and influence their response and actions throughout life. (3) That as a result of learning, individuals can adapt to changing circumstances and contexts in such a way that they can be productive in and derive satisfaction from the different circumstances and situations in which they find themselves.

The second concept of interest, namely that of *employability* is strongly implied in all the points listed in the foregoing paragraph. As with the term *lifelong learning*, several definitions are presented in the literature for *employability*. I consider a few. The easily available Wikipedia – the free encyclopaedia cites a definition of employability given by Hillage and Pollard (1998) as “a person’s capability of gaining initial employment, maintaining employment, and obtaining new employment if required.” A special issue of LLinE: Lifelong Learning in Europe⁶ summarises definitions of employability culled from several sources in this way: “The employees’ ability to survive on the labour market in spite of the turbulence” (p.1). The article goes on to note that “Full participation in society requires a fair amount of intellectual, social-emotional and technological competences that are susceptible for obsolescence” and that the citizen competences are “the absolute minimum for getting a job, even at a relatively low level” (p.1).

Strivens and Grant (2000) refer to the more specific use of the term “employability skills in a 1998 publication by Coopers & Lybrand which present employability skills as including “traditional intellectual skills (e.g. analysis, critical evaluation, logical argument, reasoning from evidence); ‘the new core or key skills (communication, application of number, information technology, teamwork, learning how to learn; personal attributes deemed to have market value (e.g. self-reliance, adaptability, drive) and a knowledge of organisations and how they work” (p.41). Strivens and Grant point out that people from all walks of life need to develop their employability skills and the needs of learners both inside and

⁵ Gvaramadze, Irakli – AEGEE (July 2007) *Lifelong Learning (LLL)*: “It is never too soon or too late for learning” Education Working Group Expert on Lifelong Learning (LLL).

⁶ Editorial- *Lifelong Learning and employability: Lifelong learning in the Low Countries*. LLinE: Lifelong Learning in Europe Government communication and citizen activity 2/2005.

outside institutions need to be addressed. They suggest that this support to learners is “best provided by an information and communication technology (ICT) framework which is coherent and accessible” (p.41). Yorke (2004:9) defines employability as “a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.” This is the ‘working definition’ used by the ESECT group and the authors writing for *Learning and Employability Series* published by ESECT are concerned with higher education and work opportunities for graduates and postgraduates. The role of universities in promoting lifelong learning will be considered in the following section within the context of discussing *the university system as agent for innovation, and for economic and social progress* which is a focussed theme of this conference. In countries in which university education is available still to only a relatively small percentage of the population, governments have sought to find alternative ways of providing opportunities for learning and lifelong learning.

A search for world trends in lifelong learning and employability yielded a comprehensive document by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on the situation in the OECD member countries.⁷ The publication *Education at a Glance :OECD Indicators* presents statistics and research on “economic social and environmental issues” (p.2) as well as the analysis of performance on several key indicators of which this paper will present a summary of selected findings of Indicator A6: *How does participation in education affect participation in the labour market*. The information provided on this presents several implications for lifelong learning and employability. A few critical findings will be presented subsequently in this section. It is worth noting that a similar search for information on countries outside the OECD did not yield comparable information. The International Labour Office Report (2008) commented on the difficulty of getting information, noting the difficulty of “reviewing the relationships between trends in education, productivity and employment for even a handful of countries in this group⁸ (because of) the lack of up to date comparable data” (p.36). The report compared productivity levels by country groups for the years 1996 and 2006 and indicated that productivity levels in OECD countries were significantly higher than in developing countries in both years and in 2006 “productivity in high-income OECD countries was four times higher than productivity in developing countries and nearly 18 times higher than in Least developed countries” (LDCs) (p.16).

⁷ OECD member countries are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.

⁸ Those referred to in the report as the developing countries

Using literacy which was the education indicator which was the most widely available across countries and reported “as the share of the population above the age of 15 years able to read and write” (p.17), the finding was that “literacy is nearly universal in the OECD and CEE (the countries of Central Europe).” However, in the LDCs “only half of the population is literate, and literacy rates are even lower for women: nearly six out of ten women over the age of 15 years cannot read and write” (p.17). One notes the difference between *employment* and *employability*, the latter being concerned with an individual’s readiness for employment, having the skills and competences needed to do the job and being able “to survive on the labour market” (LLinE, 2005:1). It is important to keep that distinction in mind in the discussion. The following summary points represent some of the main findings presented in the report which have direct implications for education, lifelong learning and employability.

- “Across all countries, women are over-represented in jobs and tasks that require fewer and lower value skills, are lower paid and offer restricted career prospects. In the informal economy, which implies greater job insecurity, as well as lack of access to training, social protection and other resources, making them comparatively more vulnerable to poverty and marginalization” (p.6).

The report noted that a difference in the types of training for men and women resulted in a “skills gap”. It observed that “more often than not training of girls and young women is limited to traditional occupation areas rather than being geared to new demands in the labour market”, and it proposed that “Overcoming barriers that deter women from training – at and outside the workplace – serves the twin objectives of reducing inequality and meeting labour market needs” (p.40).

- In developing countries in Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, the Arab States and Africa, two main challenges are “meeting the demand for higher skills in the growing higher-technology, often export-oriented sectors, ... and using skills development to improve productivity and support formalization of economic activities in the still largely impoverished informal economy” (p.35).
- “In Latin America there is a general concern that while coverage of education and training has increased, the quality of that education has not adequately equipped young people for the labour market. This has led to calls to increase the vocational content of secondary education” (p. 37).

The report also noted that the least developed countries, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Asia and small island countries face a vicious circle of low education and skills, low productivity and poverty.”

(p.x). It further claims more generally that “Inadequate education and skills development keep economies trapped in a vicious circle of low education, low productivity and low income” (p.v).

Two specific recommendations made in respect of the developing and less developed countries are worth noting. They are presented in the following statements from the report.

- “*Improving coordination between prospective employers and education and training providers* is an effective and feasible way to reduce the mismatch between education and training outcomes and employment opportunities” (p.38).
- “*Encouraging workplace learning* is one form of increasing private sector investment in skills development – targeting workers already in the workforce” (p.39).

The report presents three important reasons for employer involvement in training. The first indicates involvement in the “management of training institutions” which strongly implies a collaborative relationship between employers and educational institutions. Such a relationship would “keep institutions abreast of changing technologies, the kind of technical and ICT equipment used at the workplace...(and) the development of competency-based standards in close cooperation with industry can help training become more relevant so that the skills acquired improve trainees’ employability”. The second reason is that employers “can provide experiential learning by accepting interns or apprentices... that enhance the systematic and classroom-based knowledge learning through practical application.” The third reason is that “feedback mechanisms through which employers and the trainees they hire can systematically inform training providers of whether the quality of training matches on-job expectations” (p.38).

In the case of most developing countries, systems have been established for technical and vocational training by governmental and non-governmental agencies and policies have been adopted in most countries for the implementation of national qualifications frameworks (NQF) which recognise all the learning achievements of an individual “whether they were attained in the educational system or outside it, and whether they were learned formally or informally” (Zúñiga (2005:12). Zúñiga notes that “One of the greatest benefits of an NQF is that it facilitates a reference for lifelong learning and for progress in work and social life” (p. 12). Competency levels which are used by countries with NQF “correspond to a particular stage in formal education, and they show that a person has a certain collection of knowledge, skills and labour capacities obtained at this educational level or recognised through a process of certification which acknowledges experience as a source of competencies” (Zúñiga, p.12). Countries in

Latin America and the English-speaking Caribbean have established Vocational Training Institutes (VTI) and, according to Zúñiga, the institutional structure in Latin America in particular has contributed to the development of the competencies approach. In the Caribbean the National Training Agencies (NTA) were established “for making technical and vocational training more effective and for closing the gap in skills” (p.65). Collaboration among the NTAs and with Unions and employers has promoted the formulation of the national qualifications framework.

The Zúñiga study notes that possession of key competencies makes it easier for individuals to “obtain employment, to remain in it, and to easily adapt to the changing demands of the labour market” (p.84). In countries with low levels of schooling this becomes difficult. In Latin America and the Caribbean the coordination of “education and work” as well as the establishment of “an institutional design for lifelong learning” (p.77) remains an imperative. One might argue that better articulation between technical and vocational institutions and universities and collaboration between employers and the institutions for higher learning is one way in which a design for skill development and lifelong learning might be achieved.

The findings of the studies done in OECD countries are instructive. The ILO (2008) report noted that “The systematic application of knowledge and science to producing goods and services has greatly increased the value of education and training for women and men.” It cited a comparative study of selected OECD countries done by van Ark et al. (2007) which reported “the general downward trend in the share of low-skilled workers and the increase in the share of highly skilled workers in industry” (p.19). In addition, the report found that “Productivity growth and rising education levels in the labour force have been associated with faster employment growth” (p.19) and it noted more generally that “Education, training, and lifelong learning foster a virtuous circle of higher productivity, more employment of better quality, income growth, and development”(p. 1). This observation appears to be borne out in the OECD countries as the findings in the report *Education at a Glance 2009* seems to indicate. The key findings on indicator A6: *How does participation in education affect participation in the labour market* point to the positive relationship between educational attainment and employment.. The indicator A6 examined *the relationship between educational attainment and labour force status for both males and females for the period 1997 – 2007*). The following are a few summary statements of the key findings.

- “Employment rates rise for both males and females with higher levels of educational attainment. With few exceptions, the employment rate for tertiary graduates is markedly higher than for

upper secondary graduates. For males and females, the gap between upper secondary graduates and those without an upper secondary qualification is particularly wide” (p.119).

- *“Those with low educational attainment are both less likely to be labour force participants and more likely to be unemployed. Differences in employment rates between males and females are also wider among less educational groups” (p.119).*
- *“Differences in unemployment rates for males and females generally decrease with higher levels of educational attainment” (p.124).*
- *“The most vulnerable group of individuals are thus the lower educated and it is likely that unemployment rates for those with below upper secondary education will once again increase sharply as the economic downturn starts to affect the labour force” (p.125).*
- *“Once an individual is outside the labour force for an extended period it is, in many instances, difficult to reverse this situation because of skill obsolescence, deteriorating incentives to seek employment and other barriers to labour market re-entry” (p.125).*

Among the pertinent deductions one might make are (i) the strong positive relationship between educational attainment and employment and (ii) the importance of ongoing training for continued employability. The findings which show a strong relationship between successively higher levels of education and employment rates suggest that universities have an important role to play in lifelong learning, and fostering the employability of individuals. This paper takes the position that the latter can be effectively achieved through the implementation of ICT and e-learning approaches.

III. The role of universities in fostering employability and skills development through e-learning

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) at its meetings in 2003 and later in 2005 made several statements regarding the use of ICTs and developing a global information society. Some of the statements made with reference to education are relevant to the concerns being addressed at this meeting. Commenting specifically on capacity building (p.4)⁹ it was noted that the building of institutional capacity was important in the context of the “wide range of ICT and information specialists required at all levels” (p.4). The WSIS also called for the promotion of the use of ICTs “in all stages of education, training and human resource development” and noted an essential contribution that could be made to

⁹ World Summit on the information society, Geneva 2003- Tunis 2005. Declaration of Principles: Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new millennium. Document WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/4-E.

employability by “continuous and adult education, re-training, life-long learning, distance-learning and other special services.” In their view, people would benefit “from the new opportunities offered by ICTs for traditional jobs, self-employment and new professions.” The statement ended with the assertion that “Awareness and literacy in ICTs are an essential foundation in this regard” (p.4). Noting the potential for ICTs to contribute to the achievement of universal education worldwide “through delivery of education and training of teachers, and offering improved conditions for lifelong learning”, the WSIS called for the development and promotion of “programmes to eradicate illiteracy using ICTs at national, regional and international levels ... (and) to promote e-literacy skills for all... with the cooperation of all stakeholders (and with the need to eradicate adult illiteracy, ensure that young people are equipped with knowledge and skills to use ICTs, including the capacity to analyse and treat information in creative and innovative ways...” (p.5).

Simmons (2006:2) argues that the flexibility and availability of E-learning makes it “an ideal vehicle for organisations (including universities, one might add) to promote learning opportunities to employees (and to students” (p. 2). Accessibility of programmes online facilitates the use of e-learning for educational purposes. Given the need for a wide range of materials, courses and programmes for training individuals for the labour market and to help them maintain their employability within the market, universities can make a contribution in this area, maximising on delivery of services by the training of trainers in the use of e-learning approaches and other modalities that can facilitate delivery and independent learning. Strivens and Grant (2000), referring to the educational policy for lifelong learning in Britain observe that independent and self-directed learning are necessary requirements for lifelong learning, particularly the requirement for “the early development of skills to plan and improve one’s own learning” (p.41). Attention has focussed on bundles of skills, generally referred to as “employability skills” and the need for understanding those skills that are in demand in the labour market and the specific ones for which the learner has to prepare in order to fill in an adequate way the need for the specific job. This implies that institutions will need to tailor selected programmes to address learner needs for employability. Strivens and Gant also suggest that “if learners have an accurate awareness of their levels of achievement in employability skills, in conjunction with a desirable skill profile for a job or a range of jobs, they will be able to recognise when and where they need to improve their level of skill” (p.42). The ability to engage in critical self-assessment is therefore a meta-skill which learners would find useful.

A study on the *Impact of E-learning on Employability skills Development* conducted by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations in Australia (2009) reported that VET practitioners who had participated in the consultations for the study had indicated that “an explicit focus on

employability skills using active learning strategies drives learner engagement with VET”; the learners were said to be “more motivated (a factor which) aids learner achievement and retention” (p.26). The study also reported four best uses of e-learning and concluded that “The skill of ‘learning’ underpins all the other employability skills and thus there is an advantage in focusing on ‘learning to learn’ as a foundation for addressing the other employability skills and to equip learners with the skills to maintain vocational competence over time” (p.27). A suggestion made by Yorke and Knight (2004) and cited in the ESECT Series 2 paper was the embedding of the employability into the curriculum as a means of helping “learners to construct understandings of the subject matter and maintain the more recent interest in developing a number of skilful practices...” although it is acknowledged that there is no “single, ideal prescription for embedding employability” (Little et al 2006, p.6). Focusing on part-time students and employability, Little et al suggest that “engaging with part-time students’ pre-university experiences ... (and with) their concurrent workplace experiences’ are strategies that may help them “consider opportunities for advancement” (p.15).

The literature emphasises the point that new learning technologies can provide a means through which people can improve core lifelong learning skills and acquire additional competences that they may require for purposes of employability. The point has been made that in these uncertain times in which information and communications technology is rapidly developing, universities need to “re-consider the development and assessment of graduate attributes from the perspective of lifelong learning” (Su Ya-hui, and Feng Li-yia 2008:1) but the authors cite Barnett’s (2006:61) caution that these attributes should not be considered as skills but as “certain kinds of human dispositions and qualities” (p.2). In the context of the latter, Su and Feng propose a holistic approach to the assessment of graduate attributes. The suggestion is made in the literature that recognition of prior learning (RPL) should be taken into consideration as this is likely to “open formal economy jobs to those who have not had the advantage of formal vocational training” (ILO Report 5, p. 45); this presents the question as to whether universities, particularly in developing countries, can create a collaborative niche with TVET institutions to develop a system that can facilitate development for employability without lowering standards. The development distance between OECD countries and the rest which leads, among other things, to what is called the digital divide, calls for institutions of higher learning in developing countries particularly to find innovative ways of building valuable human resources. The ‘how’ is an important question to which we must turn our attention and the network of institutions represented at this meeting will provide opportunities for learning about best practices and for forging collaborative links that might narrow that divide.

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