Lifelong learning in Europe: Equity and efficiency in the balance

By Sheila Riddell, Jörg Markowitsch and Elisabet Weedon. The Policy Press, Bristol, 2012. 224 pp. ISBN 978-1-44730-013-7 (hbk)

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Under the current circumstances of fast economic and political changes, *Lifelong learning in Europe: Equity and efficiency in the balance* is a timely addition to literature concerning education and higher education in Europe. Prior to launching deeper into writing this book review it is important to note that the topic of lifelong learning does not have one quick definition, nor would one single book on the topic be enough to explain the main trajectories of how to deal with the challenges lifelong learning is facing in Europe. Therefore, we ought to all agree that this contribution is part of a significant ongoing dialogue that needs to take place to better identify surrounding challenges and introduce various ways of overcoming some of them, or at least come up with proposals of alternative policies from different experts in the area.

Lifelong learning in Europe is structured in a way that takes the reader on a journey of understanding the main aspects of lifelong learning. Beginning with human and social capital, it moves on to the current socioeconomic context, the “integration” of neoliberal policies, the current European sociodemographic picture, access to higher education, and policies leading to social inequality reduction in a time of crisis which Europe/the European Union (EU) is currently facing.

Many characteristics of the structure of this book are helpful in contextualising lifelong learning in Europe, more particularly in the EU, because they examine the national and global issues surrounding it. Chapter 2, by Sheila Riddell and Elisabet Weedon, investigates lifelong learning in broad economic and social contexts and identifies that the social inequality evident in many European countries is linked to generating human and social capital as means of individual intellectual development.

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Other chapters offer very thorough evidence on aspects of lifelong learning in European contexts. Chapter 3, by John Holford and Vida Andreja Mohorčič Špolar, focuses on the period since 1995 and ends up investigating – through an open question worth following up – the extent to which EU policy has maintained, expanded or creatively reframed the social dimension of education and lifelong learning. One of the greatest sources of evidence is the data collection which emerged from their survey which covered 12,000 adult learners in 12 European countries. One of the interesting findings in this survey which could be the most driving element to introducing newly framed policies is that “an individual’s decision to participate in adult learning is not simply a reflection of their individual motivation, but also of the social and economic structures which frame their lives” (p. 13).

Further analysis on the issue of adult education is presented in chapter 5 by Péter Róbert. He used the European Commission’s Adult Education Survey (AES) of 2007¹ to examine patterns of participation in lifelong learning and the socio-economic and demographic variables that influence those outcomes.

The main purpose of this discussion of the structure of the book is not to provide the summary of the book, which is too rich to summarise it in a few sentences or paragraphs. Rather, the purpose is to show how the book has strongly contributed to dealing with the concept of lifelong learning and its policies in the context of Europe, not only through providing conceptual and theoretical evidence, but also by digging into the empirical evidence to show the enactment of lifelong learning in different national and wider global economy contexts.

Lifelong learning in Europe addresses issues of lifelong learning very clearly. Theoretical evidence and literature reviews included in most chapters are very effective in driving the information home. Moreover, empirical data include very valid and reliable methods of analysis that easily convince the reader about trends of lifelong learning in Europe. There is no doubt that this is the book needed, not only to inform policies born in the Lisbon Strategy² which, by 2013, already prove to have fallen short, but also leading (we hope) to the creation of new policies informing current social, economic, demographic and global trends in Europe with the European Commission’s Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) Strategy.³ Hence, this research work is suitable for informing, or even enlightening the Strategy 2020.

Still, it is worth noting that the aspect of immigration to the EU, particularly from developing countries in Africa, non-EU countries and Asia, is a very important dynamic when we discuss lifelong learning in Europe. It can, and even should, have been seen as one aspect worth examining in one or two chapters. Perhaps the intention of the book was not to draw on this specific social aspect, even though enough was discussed in the first chapters under human and social capital as well as

¹ More information is available on the European Commission’s Eurostat website http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/microdata/adult_education_survey.

² The Lisbon strategy for the development of the economy of the European Union, set out by the European Council in Lisbon in 2000, aimed (but in most cases failed) to achieve its objectives by 2010.

³ More information on the Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) strategy is available on the European Commission’s Education website http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/policy-framework_en.htm.

socioeconomic context. However, the the immigration issue, especially the recent part of it, is certain to have direct impact on lifelong learning. While it may merit separate research, its inclusion in this work would have been appreciated.

All in all, *Lifelong learning in Europe* is a very significant study in investigating such an important topic in Europe. Among the challenge(s) current educational, economic and social trends in Europe are facing, lifelong learning is one of the foremost elements that require investigation and this volume has greatly contributed in completing a profound theoretical and empirical study on this.