



8th ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARC8)

Outlook 2030: Inclusive and Diverse Higher Education in Asia and Europe

ARC8 EG2 Inclusive and Flexible Lifelong Learning Pathways

Session 1 | Monday, 14 December 2020

Summary

Presentation by Prof Séamus Ó TUAMA, Director, Adult continuing Education, University College Cork; Chair of the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub

Seamus was asked to focus on the following questions in a 10-minute presentation to provide food for thought for the expert group:

1. What is your take, how inclusive are the national, institutional LLL policies and practices currently, what is the status quo? Do you have any numbers to show?
2. What potential risks do you foresee that could jeopardize greater inclusion in LLL in the next 10 years?
3. What opportunities, leverage points do you see to promote inclusion in LLL the next 10 years?

Seamus started his presentation using Ireland as an example. First, he defined that inclusivity in lifelong learning, which is ultimately about access and progression. By access he means the extent to which people are able to access lifelong learning services, and by progression he means that they can move relatively seamlessly to the next level of their education.

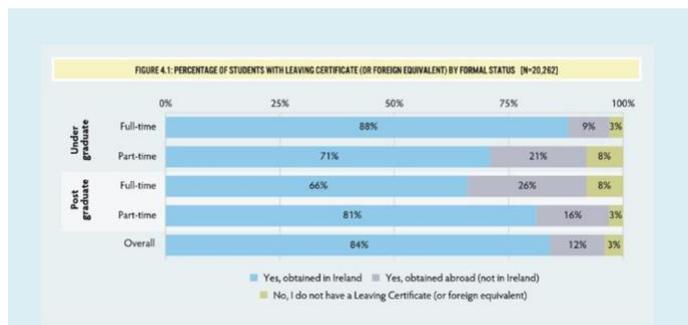
What is your take, how inclusive are lifelong learning policies and teaching **practices currently**? Do you have any numbers to show or any story to tell?

- Inclusivity is ultimately about both access and progression
- In Ireland the educational sectors largely operate in silos
- There are not enough clear pathways for learners to move between different types of providers
 - Traditional routes via formal education are still the best resourced
 - Learners who fall behind or deviate find it harder to navigate through the process
 - There are not enough financial and other supports

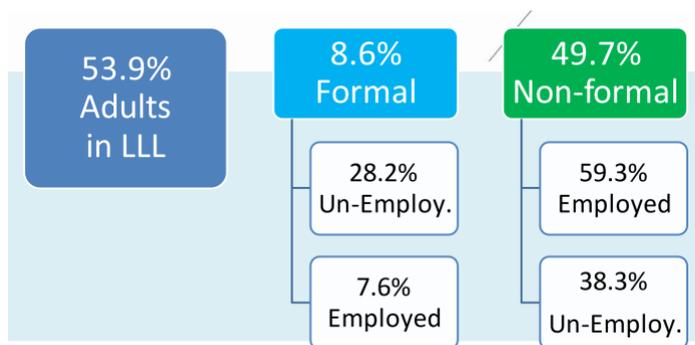
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In Ireland the educational sectors largely operate in silos, which is a barrier to life-long and life-wide learning. There is an assumption that it is easy enough for people to navigate the various educational opportunities that are available to them, but in fact it is particularly problematic for people who have poor outcomes in their early years of education e.g. primary education and second level education.

Ireland is reasonably successful in catering to their needs, but it could improve significantly by breaking down the silos and provide clearer pathways for learners to move between different types of providers. Traditional routes via formal education are still the best resourced, but learners who fall behind or deviate find it harder to navigate through the process and advance to the highest level. For instance, learners coming from a socioeconomically challenged background, failing a year in higher education, lose all their grants and have to repeat that particular year. This leads to potential exclusion from university graduation. There could be more financial and non-financial support available for these groups of students, especially for part-time learners and non-traditional learners.

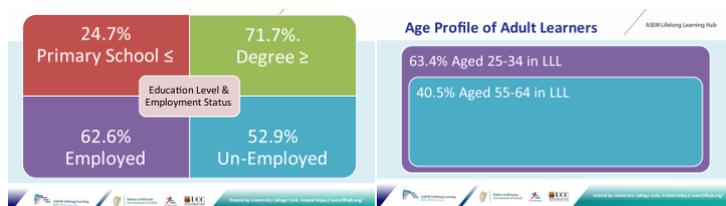


In Ireland 88% of full-time students obtain their leaving certificate from the high school to enter undergraduate university education (and a further 9% earns this abroad). Clearly, the education system is designed to support this route into third level education, very much fixed around the leaving certificate. (Eurostudent Survey 2018, available [here](#).)



According to the figures of the Central Statistics Office in Ireland, on average 53.9% of adults are involved in lifelong learning (in the age group of 24-64). We see that 8.6% of them are in formal lifelong learning education, and the proportion of unemployed are higher (28.2%) than of those employed (7.6%) (Source: Central Statistics Office, 2017, available [here](#)). The reason for the

relatively high share of unemployed people participating in formal education could be a national program called “Springboard” which offers special benefits for unemployed, e.g. free courses. But majority of lifelong learners (49.7%) are participating in non-formal education, where the ratio is the opposite, higher percentage of employed than unemployed. This may be to do with continuous professional development, CPD points, etc.



These statistics are here to give us a sense who is involved in lifelong learning. People with higher qualifications are more likely to participate in lifelong learning than those with only a primary level

education for example. Almost 2/3 of lifelong learners are aged between 25-34, while only 40% belong to the older age group between 55-64. Overall when we are looking at participation in lifelong learning in Ireland, we can conclude that professionals are the most involved (81.4%), while low skilled people have the lowest level of participation (41%).

In terms of **potential risks that could jeopardize greater inclusion in the field of lifelong learning**, one of the critical issues is an overemphasis on skills. Part of the problem is that skills are seen



in a very narrow way. Skills should be categorized in a broader way, such as (1) Human capital (2) Social capital (3) Identity capital (4) Cultural capital. Education should aim at accumulating some of all of these different types of capitals, which eventually serve the employability of the individual. People need human capital to engage in the labour market, social capital to actually gain access to jobs, social capital to create their stand in society and contribute, relate to their peers; and cultural capital enabling them

to fully participate in society (esp. for migrants). This is a key challenge: we need to be pressing all of these buttons and not overemphasizing the idea of skills.

Regarding the **leverage points to promote inclusion in lifelong learning**, there are mechanisms that we can use to enhance inclusion. In Ireland, the use of the national framework of qualifications

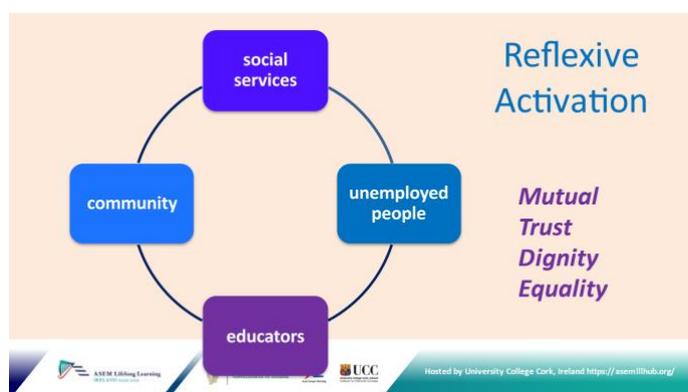
What **leverage points** do you see to promote inclusion in lifelong learning?

- Use of Mechanisms for Inclusion
 - NFQ allows for validation of formal learning
 - RPL/VNIL allows for validation of Non-Formal & In-Formal learning
 - ECTS allow for credit accumulation at HE
 - Micro-Credentials
 - Universal Education credits
 - Positive measures for excluded populations
- Reflexive Activation for Unemployed

is a very useful mechanism, and it works relatively well in terms of validating formal learning. There are different kinds of mechanisms for recognition of qualifications, non-formal and informal learning, even though the latter is slightly behind the curve. In 2020 there has been a lot of emphasis on this sector, and it is a critical area that needs to open up and develop more in Europe. The ECTS system is extremely useful as a



common currency around credit accumulation at third level. Micro-Credentials are going to become extremely important at all levels of the education, but especially in higher education and going to play a huge role in terms of continuing professional development. Universal education credits are a new concept, that we need to explore. There should be a stage where everybody has some kind of credits that they can avail of throughout their lives in terms of access to education. Especially for those that have had poor outcomes, there needs to be a redressing of the balance in favour of them, there need to be positive measures for excluded populations. We need to find ways to make sure that they are included.



Reflexive activation of unemployed people is another leverage point, in that sense giving them a little bit more control and voice over how they engage. The learner has to be at the center. All kind of social partners including the unemployed people themselves need to be engaged in a co-design process, where the unemployed person has a real say in terms of deciding and shaping the direction of their learning. This has to

happen in the context of mutual trust, dignity, and equality. This could be one of the big challenges for us into the future.

[\(link to full presentation to be inserted here\)](#)

Comments on the Status Quo from members of the group:

- Regarding the **status quo, in case of Brunei Darussalam**, lifelong learning has become a strategic policy priority recently. Silos are an issue as well, therefore it is important to have a multi-stakeholder, whole-of-nation approach. L3C is in fact a platform with the mission to facilitate consultation with private sector, public sector, training providers; initiate policies and regulations; assess prior learning and issue certificates of recognition, etc.
- Previous research has established the so-called Matthew ethic meaning that **educational inequalities perpetuate over the lifespan**. It is more or less true in case of every country, that people with a higher education attainment tend to participate more in lifelong learning,

and people working in occupations that are more knowledge intensive, participate in LLL more.

- Reflecting on the **status quo on educational inequalities**: Germany for instance has high educational inequalities, influenced by different factors. One of them is the educational attainment of the parents of learners, people whose parents have a higher education degree are five times more likely to attend higher education than people whose parents only have secondary education degree. In Canada for example, the same likelihood is only two times higher, not five, which indicates a much more accessible and inclusive system. Therefore, opening HE to non-traditional students is a great opportunity.
- If we are thinking about inclusive and flexible learning pathways and opening up higher education for non-traditional groups of learners, we should also decide which groups do we wish to address beyond those entering the system via central examination and admission systems, what are their needs and what kind of teaching and learning, instructional design do they need.
- There is more in the lifelong learning space than higher education is concerned. It is absolutely critical that we do not see higher education as the only place for lifelong learning. The Irish system has become problematic in a sense that people only see higher education as the top of the ladder and losing sight of the broader spectrum lifelong learning.

Comments on Risks from members of the group:

- **The risk of overemphasising skills** in lifelong learning instead of taking a more holistic approach is real and applicable in Europe. When discussing soft or transversal skills e.g. democratic values, it is done in the context of employment. Currently, labour market needs are driving education strategies and reforms, which is a potential risk. This approach commodifies human capital, meaning that learners become basically a product, their skills are only developed to put into use on the labour market. This is a very dangerous approach.
- Another perspective on the **risk of overemphasising skills**: the emphasis shall stay on the skills when it comes to lifelong learning, after all, this is what gives a push, an incentive to develop LLL. The fast-changing world of work requires constant upskilling, reskilling, and this is where lifelong learning can play a vital role. This is the unique selling point of LLL initiatives. Having said that, it is acknowledged that there is a difference between emphasis and overemphasis.

Comments on Opportunities from members of the group:

- Another great **opportunity to raise the educational level of the population** is through validation and recognition of qualifications and prior learning. In Europe, the European Qualification Framework is the instrument for this, but it is designed for formal education only. Very few countries have linked their formal education system to lifelong learning and have recognized non-formal and informal modalities of learning, e.g. Scandinavian countries.
- There is an **opportunity in putting inclusion related mechanisms in the (national) qualification frameworks**. They most often focus on formal education, in Brunei for example discussions going on with the accreditation council to include another pillar for non-formal and lifelong learning skills area. The ASEAN Qualification Regional Framework (AQR) and the AUN Quality Assurance Framework (AUN-QF) are both only focusing on formal education and credit mobility.

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