



Towards sustainable learning

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We mainly associate education with young people. Children go to school at an early age and leave as young adults. Formal education is common and even obligatory. And although the level may differ, the education of all children follows a similar pattern. This is common practice in the Netherlands, in Europe and a wish for the whole world. Education at an early age is important, since what you learn as a child you may use during your whole life.

The pattern of education for young people is clear, after that it becomes diffuse. It is clear though that in this rapidly changing world, in which the value of knowledge is at the same time both huge and volatile, continuous education is important.

The more so since the period during which we have to work is increasing. Let's assume this period is fifty years. Then look back say thirty years. What did the world look like then? What did we know then? And what do we know now that was unknown at the time. Think for instance of the internet, of laptops, smartphones. All products that were unknown thirty years back. At that time television was considered as a medium for education, also at our university. It is clear that knowledge acquired during initial education will not be sufficient in future as it is not now. We all learned a lot during the past decades. It looks like everything is going fine. Companies have programmes for schooling, educational institutions offer part-time programmes, people use informal learning, on their own, by experience and from others.

Is there a reason to change this now? I think so. Fifty years on the labour market is a very long time. When you choose your study at an early age, you set out a path for the future. Of course, you will learn more and after some years a lot of people will do something completely different than what they have originally been trained for. Yet work can become routine and will then lose attraction. That may cause a loss of talent as people will no longer be challenged. Also people often have an implicit wish to do something else. After having been on the labour market for some time, and getting older, people may find out what really motivates them, where their real talents lie and what they want to do for the rest of their working life. Sometimes that is very close to what they already do, sometimes it is something completely different.

To keep people motivated during their fifty years of working life it will help if it is generally accepted, and even seen as a necessity, that continuous education is common, also after initial education. Back to university! We also see that lifelong learning is back on the political agenda. It is recognized that in a society where knowledge rapidly changes and becomes outdated, in which jobs disappear and new jobs arise, continuous education is necessary. I completely agree, but at the same time I find it curious

that we mainly shape education as we have done for a long time. Our society is different from the society of thirty years ago. Education has become more common, especially higher education. The number of people who have had access to higher education has grown tremendously. The need for adult education seems to have diminished but other groups of Dutch adults want to start studying part-time. And anyone who has completed a higher educational program should be able to learn what is deemed necessary and take the appropriate steps. The assumption is that once you have been educated at an academic level you are capable to know what to learn next and where to find it. But is this assumption correct, now and even more in the future? Do we give people sufficient options to continue their education or to reorient themselves? And do we offer appropriate educational programs? My answer to these questions is: no, we don't.

I learned a lot during my eight years at this university. By informal learning, though. I have seen how enthusiastically our students started their studies. But I also saw how difficult it is to complete a study programme. Even the most enthusiastic students have to sacrifice a lot. The investment in time is huge and this is in a stage of life in which already high demands are put on people. The costs are often high, both socially and financially. The contribution of employers is mostly limited, if they contribute at all. Learning, especially in educational programmes, requires enormous persistency, especially next to a job, family and social obligations. At this moment the choice to do so is a personal one, often initiated by ambition, sometimes it is obligatory. Sometimes there is financial compensation, but more often that is not the case. The risk of failure is big.

And also students cannot always find what they are looking for in educational programmes for adults. The number of adult students that completes a full bachelor programme is limited. The students at our university often follow and complete one or a few courses. They do that because they are interested in a topic, or to improve their work situation. After those first courses only a few students continue to complete a bachelor degree. We see the same pattern in other countries. And currently the same pattern exists with students following MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses).

To summarize the above, we see that today's pattern of continuous education is like it has been for decades: it consists of informal learning, educational programmes by employers, and by institutions for higher education, both public and private. This may not be sufficient for the future, for a working period for fifty years in a society changing every decade, or faster and a labour market that is very volatile. What is offered for continuous education and the way in which it is offered is not very innovative.

Yet in this changing society innovative education for this type of students is necessary. Through life people need to obtain new knowledge and learn new skills. This asks for a different type of education, especially for people who already followed extensive education in an earlier stage of life. This requires for innovative education, also and especially for this group.

Yet most innovation of education is directed towards young students. Of course that is the largest group of formal learners, but at the same time it shows little concern for the future. Moreover innovation of education is often identified with the use of technology in education. For continuous education that is, however, not the most important factor. Technology gives more possibilities to offer education than before, to make it flexible and to personalize it. That is very valuable for lifelong learners, who very often want to study part-time. But a more important problem is that programmes for adults are very similar to programmes initiated for young students. Especially when you want to be educated in a different discipline than you studied before. There is hardly an alternative for grade based programmes, developed for initial students. Those are the basis for an accreditation. And when a grade is needed to qualify for a profession, or to convince the employer, there is hardly an alternative.

It is time we start looking at lifelong learning in a new and innovative way. We have to take into account fifty years of working life after initial education as well as the rapid change and evolution of knowledge and society, as well as the fact that large groups already had access to higher education. This brings me to a number of questions that have to be asked, and discussed. This discussion should of course involve all stakeholders, and also consider a long term angle.

How important are diplomas? How can we compose interesting programmes? How can we value and recognize such programs? Or: how can we show that level and quality of the educational programmes are guaranteed and meet the conditions expected, and that these programmes provide the expected knowledge and skills? For bachelor, master and Phd degrees this was arranged in the Bologna cycle. It provides clarity, but it only concerns the initial phase. We need more. We need formal Short learning programs that are recognized.

Presently adult students who want to follow a study in a different discipline than they have a degree in already, have as main option to follow a bachelor or master programme. However, many students already showed that they can study at an academic level. They have proven to master the academic skills of the programmes, as shown in the Dublin indicators. Still they are obliged to follow the complete programme or an important part of it. It is time to develop specific programmes that are tailored for students with previous higher education and work experience at an academic level. What do we need in such programmes? How can we ensure the academic character of this form of education? What is the minimum level to be able to award an academic degree? The time that these students can and have to spend on education for a degree should be better balanced with the level of new knowledge and skills they need to be effective in their jobs.

So how can we develop and acknowledge programmes that can be created quickly, that are interdisciplinary and compliant with the changing needs of society? Flexible programmes that do justice to knowledge and experience of adult students and at the same time offer the possibility to learn individually and with and from other students. These new programmes need to be developed speedily. We already see a sudden and urgent need for people who have been educated in a specific domain.

Additionally we should develop dedicated pedagogics for experienced students. After all this is a different group than young campus students, with more experience and a different life pattern.

The main thing is that it is broadly understood that a sustainable knowledge society asks for sustainable education. And that implies continuous education should become normal. This asks for support, financially and concerning time, but continuous education should also be accepted in social life. It is too easy to put full responsibility for that with employees and employers. Not all employers are able to educate their employees or have them educated. Not all people who work are employees or have a permanent position. Yet it is important that anyone, without exception, has access to continuous education to increase or improve their knowledge. This asks for social and political choices. It also asks for willingness of higher education institutions to consider this specific student group.

I have tried to show that we have reached a moment in which we have to look critically at how we are going to deal with continuous education. What do we need, what needs to change, how are we going to shape that and how can we formulate the conditions? I hope my plea triggers a discussion that I think is needed. We need to understand that continuous education cannot only be an individual choice. The future of our knowledge society is too important to leave it up to the persistence of individuals.