






What's in a name – lifelong education or development?

Elizabeth Knight ^a, Ulrik Brandi ^b, Steven Hodge ^c, Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert ^d
and Marcella Milana ^e

^aVictoria University, Australia; ^bAarhus University, Denmark; ^cGriffith University, Australia; ^dUniversity of Augsburg, Germany; ^eUniversity of Verona, Italy

The *International Journal of Lifelong Education* regularly draws attention to shifts in the delivery modes of education and changes that need to be addressed to reshape the future of the planet and human experience (Milana et al., 2023). These reflections continue in this editorial, which considers the underlying purposes of adult education in a climate where the link between education and the rhetoric of human capital grows ever closer. The argument that human capital development is the central purpose of education (Becker, 2009) is mobilised particularly for adults in a proliferation of short courses which purport to deliver skills, in some cases with support by governments around the world. Many of these short courses promise much in terms of human capital gains, are nominally awarded on completion automatically, and can be provided as self-service, any-time autonomous, online activities. Autonomous adult learning is being reified with wide-scale organisational licencing of programmes such as LinkedIn Learning and Coursera, and we have previously traced this growth of micro-credentials as ‘edu-tainment’ (Knight et al., 2023). Micro credentials and ‘short-course’ autonomous learning irrespective of their astonishing non-completion rates are often badged as ‘(self-)development’ rather than learning or education. To understand better how the term ‘development’ fits into the field of adult education, this editorial considers the different provenances of these ideas.

We have covered this ground before in the journal. Tennant (1990) wrote on just this topic over 30 years ago, in that case specifically to understand the difference between adult learning and adult development. Yet the issue seems, more than thirty years on, to be unresolved and it remains important in terms of understanding where adult education and lifelong learning sit, in both policy, research, and practice. In an era when *development of human capital* is often the lens through which governments consider educational policy, where does lifelong education research and theory stand?

The question of how development fits into lifelong education is also prompted by the introduction into the discourse of a seemingly new term namely, ‘lifelong development’. Lifelong development appeared as a term relatively recently (De Grip, 2021) and is presented as a broader conception of lifelong learning that draws on career guidance theory (International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance [IAEVG], 2023). The similarities and differences between the fields of career guidance (which is widely understood to be ‘lifelong’) and lifelong education is an informative one to better understand the discourse of ‘development’ and their mutual entanglements and future engagements. If lifelong education should be thought of as part of a larger concept of lifelong development, does this weaken key tenets of the adult education field? Definitions and usages of terms may seem minor matters but they should be traced as such minor changes can lead to major shifts in policy, practice and social perceptions. Whereas this journal refers to ‘lifelong education’ and others in the field use ‘lifelong learning’ in their title, the emerging term ‘lifelong development’ requires interrogation.

In considering whether lifelong development points specifically to self-development or self-directed learning, it is useful to consider De Grip's (2021) exploration of lifelong development by drawing on data from a large scale study which investigates the kinds of work you can learn from. In this research, she identifies the importance of reflection-on-work and links it to lifelong development. However, De Grip does not suggest that work-based learning is undertaken alone without input, knowledge transfer nor instruction, it is just within a different setting of engagement. Reflection within the workplace is undoubtedly an important facet of learning and reflection on action is a critical part of growth, but autonomous learning does not and should not encompass the whole nature of post-compulsory education.

Returning to Tennant's (1990) contribution: he identified that ideas of continuing engagement with learning throughout adult years such as 'self-directed learning' and 'autonomous learning' (drawing on Knowles, Brookfield and Mezirow) were important to the field of adult education, and that these were associated with concepts of adult development. According to Tennant (1990), such conceptions of adult development were critical to the construction of the field. Ideas about adult development accordingly drew on research that looked variously at self-directed learning (e.g. Tough, 1967); the influence of psychology (e.g. Rogers, 1983); personality development theory (e.g. Erikson, 1959) and sociological observations on adult learning (e.g. Freire, 1974).

Many of these themes that Tennant (1990) relates to adult development also align with current formulations of career development. Core concepts of career development also lack a common understanding (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2014) and draw from multiple disciplinary bases. Career development is an intersecting discipline which increasingly turns its interest on *lifelong* perspectives. How do such policy efforts map to the intersection between lifelong education and career development, particularly with the introduction of this term, lifelong development, and concomitant policy shifts that it may portend? Career development appears as a recurrent topic in this journal, and the fields' intersections are further evidenced by international career guidance bodies such as the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) having a particular focus on lifelong development.

It has long been recognised that career guidance has a role across the lifespan, but far more focus has been on transitions into and out of formal, certificated education. The bulk of effort within the field has beneficiaries who are below the age of 25, with limited attention to lifelong career guidance (Hooley et al., 2023). There is consensus that pathways are no longer linear and are unpredictable and frequently precarious. There remain significant gaps in practice and research about career guidance outside formal educational settings. This includes limited recognition for career guidance provision in adult education, community or place-based settings.

The idea of career guidance for adults has been hitherto a somewhat niche area within the wider career guidance field, with few people concentrating on it in research, while policy and practice have been mainly for specific cohorts or government funded employment-related activities. There is an increased focus on the development of careers as life long and worthy of consideration throughout the life course; important for economic growth of the nation in all ages and stages. This emphasis has been recently exemplified by the Australian government efforts to make career development stages explicitly age-agnostic rather than age-linked (Australian Government, 2022).

While the research focus on career development is still concentrated on compulsory education and linked to transition stages, there are increased national efforts to address the needs of adults. This may not be widespread but it is worthy of consideration to differentiate the fields of lifelong education and career development. Career guidance is known to support wellbeing and has been shown to enhance positive engagement in work and learning (Robertson, 2013), progression within adult education and learning (Fejes & Nylander, 2019), and particularly supporting entry into secure and decent work (Blustein et al., 2016). Within this post-pandemic landscape with uncertain futures, issues of wellbeing and transition into decent work are of critical importance and the availability of quality career guidance within the community may increase in focus. As discussed in

a previous editorial (Brandi et al., 2023), it is important, however, that skill development opportunities are not narrowly defined and do not focus on immediate job and productivity.

Career development is, however, particularly subject to the forces of human capital theory given its tight association with the world of work. But despite career development being more obviously linked to human capital development, there are elements within the field that focus on flourishing and wellbeing (e.g. Robertson, 2013) as an object of career development, not just on human capital acquisition and economic position-maintenance.

It is important to reflect on adult learning theories and how they impact on the field of career guidance and move us away from the usual focus of career guidance on young people. There is a need for substantial global discussion about the place of adult guidance that goes beyond traditional public employment services. Therefore, there are not only reasons to seek to contribute to research on adult guidance to envision future shifts for the practice but also to consider integration with lifelong education.

Does lifelong development fit purely within the realm of adult education or is it a very different concept with some similarities, a neighbouring concern as it were? The focus of policy construction, mobilisation of activity by state actors and deployment of resources is often dependent on such questions. There is little available that specifically defines lifelong development, but more that engages with career guidance and links the two together. The European Union sees career guidance as ‘an important means of facilitating the implementation of lifelong learning strategies’ (Bergmo-Prvulovic 2014, p.378) and that career development is a nested part of lifelong learning.

Looking from the other perspective of adult education, Milana (2016) draws on Torres’ work identifying policy models for adult education. One of these models, the ‘therapeutic’ or welfare state model (Torres, 2013) acts in the provision of adult education to as benefactor ‘helping adults overcome individual deficits’ (Milana, 2016, p. 13) which resonates with some aims of career guidance. Career guidance is also distinguished in policy documents as supporting self-management according to Bengtsson (2014). In this journal, Bengtsson (2014) wrote of the drive to promote policy discourse of career management to facilitate a move towards individual responsibility and a state of ‘permanent self-assessment of their needs’ and nods to Foucault’s ideas of self-surveillance to understand some of the operations of these discourses.

The similarities between this constant work on the self and the human capital model are obvious. Human capital theories have colonised adult education discourse since the 1990s at least (Milana, 2016). However, this is not a homogenous discourse and there are many voices which speak of other purposes and benefits for adult education relating to social-democratic visions of education. We have written recently (Hoggan-Kloubert et al., 2023) on the concerns about too great a focus on business aspects and individual success and what that might mean for the aspect of adult education that supports the cultivation of crucial citizenry.

There is a distinct difference in the deployment of knowledge within the fields of adult education and career guidance. However, both fields have a place for and interest in the scholarship of adult learning. Ideas that align lifelong development with autonomous learning may invoke doctrines of self-direction, but if they fail to recognise the place of educational institutions and associated knowledge then they do not support key tenets in the career guidance field. There is a danger that by focusing on the economic outcomes of ‘development’, rather than the activities of learning and teaching which explicitly include those who are ‘teaching’ and the curriculum ‘being taught’, then the promise of education for adults withers and ‘skills’ threaten to lose their connections with knowledge and become free-floating techniques devoid of significance for adult lives.

While there are some useful purposes for micro-credentials, and deep learning that can result from engagements with them, the shallowness of some delivery of these short courses that provide minimal information decoupled from context and deep engagement is worrying. Thus, there is a major concern in subsuming the differences between learning and (self-)development. The foregrounding of human capital thinking in the discourse of lifelong learning may contribute to the provision of thin and formulaic educational ‘delivery’. The idea of self-directed learning which

can be autonomously conducted such as some micro-credentials without any engagement with educators nor fellow learners negates the relational aspect in the educator-learner engagement and debrides knowledge into utilitarian information packages that can be purchased. Too much focus on skills transfer has concerned us before for ‘reducing educators to rent-seeking merchants and lifelong education and learning to a marketplace’ (Brandi et al., 2023, p. 226). There must be a recognition of the place of teaching and the importance of curriculum in supporting development. When learning is tied so tightly to concepts like human capital, there is little about human flourishing and community engagement that is visible, and this is the important front in terms of policy debate. If capitalistic notions of development pervade the logics of lifelong learning, then we should be concerned about what constitutes the purposes and promise of adult education.

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ORCID

Elizabeth Knight  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6596-6525>
 Ulrik Brandi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7361-8432>
 Steven Hodge  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1194-5208>
 Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3316-6491>
 Marcella Milana  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3068-3530>

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