Special issue: Lifelong learning and sustainable development
From the guest editors’ desk
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Introduction

In 2015, two remarkable decisions were made under the auspices of the United Nations. The first was the adoption of the Global Agenda to 2030, a plan for addressing many challenges shared across nations (see United Nations, 2015a). The second was the ‘Paris Agreement’, designed to halt global warming and address the threat of climate change (see United Nations, 2015b).

These were unanimous decisions made together by more than 190 nations. Each nation was expected to then implement its own legislation, its own roadmap for making its contribution to addressing these global challenges. The assumption is that governments would commit to legally binding action which fulfilled the obligations made in New York and Paris.

Government action is essential, of course, but is this how the planet will be saved? Of course, there is widespread recognition also that change will have to involve business, research institutes and civil society as well as government. Yes, the threat of legal sanctions and access to
public resources will combine to offer important incentives to change behaviour, but they are unlikely to be sufficient by themselves.

Hence, underpinning so much of the ambition is the assumption that voluntary action will be crucial. In this respect, education, not only formal but also in non-accredited and informal settings, across the lifespan, will be necessary. How will we engage people with the scale of the challenges which we face? How can we inspire them to become part of the solution, rather than obstacles which prolong the threat?

These are fundamental questions which have a degree of urgency about them, given the scale of transformation that will be required. After all, 2030 is only 11 harvests away.

Clearly, schools, universities, technical institutes all have a role to play. However, the vast majority of citizens who make up civil society are not enrolled in any formal educational programs. The work necessary to mobilise people to comprehend the scale of global challenges and then be able to make their own individual and collective contribution will inevitably find lifelong learning at its heart. Of course, lifelong learning, specifically adult learning, varies enormously across the world, even within OECD countries, let alone the developing world. Formal provision counts for only part of the story, and indeed, in many national settings irrespective of wealth and circumstance, informal, self-directed learning counts most in terms of people’s experience of lifelong learning.

How might policy to promote lifelong learning develop? Are there particular outcomes which should be anticipated from a year focussed on lifelong learning? How can we mobilise the various stakeholders for formal, non-formal (planned learning without accreditation) and informal learning (as occurs in all kinds of settings whether explicitly or implicitly) across various age levels to work together to promote a more coherent and engaged framework for all people to see themselves on a lifelong learning journey? It is a journey not only for individual benefit, but one that is necessary for a sustainable future for our planet. How do we make sense of it?

These questions set the scene for this special issue of the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*. What kinds of initiatives contribute to our knowledge about the importance of lifelong learning, and its role in shaping and supporting sustainable development?
The challenge of the sustainable development goals (SDGs)

The adoption of the SDGs by the United Nations in September 2015 was the outcome of a very extensive process of debate and consultation over several years. The agreement on 17 Goals, each of which was linked with up to a dozen targets and a raft of indicators, was an extraordinary achievement. The SDGs follow on from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and from Education for All (EFA).

The MDGs were adopted by the United Nations in 2000 and had also outlined a program of action to address major global challenges, specifically the halving of extreme poverty. By the end of the target period, to 2015, the substance of several of the Goals had been achieved.

...[T]he MDGs have made a profound difference in people’s lives. Global poverty has been halved five years ahead of the 2015 timeframe. Ninety per cent of children in developing regions now enjoy primary education, and disparities between boys and girls in enrolment have narrowed. Remarkable gains have also been made in the fight against malaria and tuberculosis, along with improvements in all health indicators. (UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, in a Forward to UN 2014).

It was not all good news, as progress across nations was uneven, and limited in relation to some Goals, especially mortality rates. Many issues have confounded the hope for the MDGs, including:

- limitations in the design of the Goals, including in Education, which made no mention of lifelong learning
- the structuring of the Goals as a kind of ‘one size fits all’ shopping list process, failing to take account of diverse circumstances, governance or cultural perspectives
- insufficient attention to inequality and the principles of equity, partly because of a primary focus on aggregated frameworks
- limitations in implementation and evaluation (see Fehling et al, 2013).

The process of formulating the SDGs learned from the experience with the MDGs. An Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals was established following the UN Conference on
Sustainable Development (Rio + 20) in June 2012. This prompted a very extensive process of consultation involving governments, international organisations and civil society. It led to the OWG’s release of a ‘zero draft’ in July 2014, with 17 Goals and an associated 169 targets. The final statement of the SDGs was adopted by all 193 members of the UN in September 2015.

By comparison with the MDGs, the SDGs are considerably more ambitious in scope and in the depth of ambition represented in the targets and indicators associated with each Goal. They encompass a comprehensive view of sustainable development, economic, social and environmental, much more extensive than the focus on poverty. Even more significantly, the SDGs apply to all nations whereas the MDGs and EFA were specifically concerned with developing nations. The urgency of the 2030 Agenda has meant that the UN itself has committed considerable resources, not least through each of its agencies, such as UNESCO and the Global Compact (see the UN’s online platform, supporting the overall framework for implementation: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/).

**SDG 4: Education**

One Goal, SDG4, recognises Education specifically: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*. The Goal itself is accompanied by a set of targets as shown below, acknowledging the importance of education as an underpinning for effective participation in local, national and global affairs.

**SDG 4 targets:**

4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes

4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education

4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.

4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.

4.8 Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

4.9 By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries.

4.10 By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States.

Unlike in the MDGs, promotion of lifelong learning included as part of the Goal in its own right, adding to people’s opportunities and quality of life. However, Target 4.7 points to its real importance: it is central to the achievement of the whole 2030 Agenda, as a means of enabling citizens in all countries to understand the context and issues of all Goals, and to develop their capacity to act, if we collectively are to achieve sustainable
development. This is illustrated specifically in articles within this issue. This draws attention to the collective dimension of lifelong learning. While much of the historical debate has concerned itself with individual circumstances and possibilities for fulfilment, it has become increasingly important to consider the city and community context and resources for learning, reflected in the learning cities/communities movement. Collective learning circumstances often lead to much greater outcomes than those represented by the individual parts.

Learning at any age might not be sufficient to galvanise action, but without the insights into the nature of specific issues, their processes, and how changed individual and shared behaviour can make a difference, constructive change becomes very difficult, if not impossible. Too often in many different kinds of initiatives that seek to foster significant change in the world, learning is low on the list of priorities and in some cases entirely absent in policy rhetoric. Attention has been drawn to this phenomenon in the case of Smart Cities, in a recent article by Borkowska and Osborne (2017). Somehow it seems there are those who think we will become smart without learning.

**The contributions**

The articles which comprise the special issue are diverse, ranging from specific case studies of adult education initiatives, to broader project-based reports on particular programmes and issues, to more general discussions of the theme. Taken together, they provide evidence and analysis which adds to understanding about the design and implementation of a lifelong learning policy that aims to contribute to achieving sustainable development.

**Tony Brown** leads the special issue with an article commissioned by Adult Learning Australia (ALA) to mark their Year of Lifelong Learning. It provides a brief history of the idea of lifelong learning, and an overview of international and Australian writing on lifelong learning policy. He examines the various threads in thinking about why this is important and sets out to clarify the important elements of a policy strategy to implement a more comprehensive and effective lifelong learning policy. This develops an approach for ALA to campaign for a policy, identifying its key elements, in the face of the challenges to be addressed. He concludes that while voluntary efforts will remain
important, government action and public investment is more important than ever, not least to support participation by under-represented groups. This must support a broader concept of learning, albeit one that includes a skills strategy.

Jo Neary and Mike Osborne write about a project undertaken with partners in the global south which studies the role of university engagement in achieving the sustainable development goals. While initial discussions of the third mission of universities focussed on market-orientated behaviours of universities, more recently it has been connected to activities that focus on social justice and promoting sustainability. It has been suggested that the third mission of universities in the Global South may be particularly significant in addressing acutely felt issues such as climate change, economic inequalities, food insecurity and urban sprawl. The current paper explores this, and asks whether the quadruple helix (collaboration amongst business, government, education and researchers, and civil society) is visible in their engagement activities. Using a synthesis of case studies developed as part of the ‘Strengthening Urban Engagement of Universities in Africa and Asia’ (SUEUAA) project, a collaborative research project spanning seven cities (Glasgow; Harare; Dar-es-Salaam; Johannesburg; Duhok; Sanandaj; and Manila), they explore ongoing engagement activities where Universities respond to city demands related to the SDGs. While the universities were seen to address city demands, they often reacted without a network of other influential actors (i.e. industry, local government or NGO partners). This suggests that currently, the quadruple helix is underdeveloped in these cities, and more work should be done in creating closer links.

At a more grounded level, Karly Kole explores ways in which fairy tales can be used as means of enhancing literacy and affective learning skills with a focus on adult literacy learners in further education. Using the underpinning theory of New Literacy Studies, the efficacy of fairy tales is demonstrated through oral storytelling, creative writing, role-play and drama (Author, 2017, pp. 11–13). A programme of work was designed and delivered to included written assignments, questionnaires and case study interviews where participants progress from a literal understanding of narrative text, to symbolic understanding of plot, character, metaphor and figurative language and to a final creative writing piece on a fairy tale of choice.
Kole, like our next contributor, Veronica McKay, focusses on Target 4.6 which identifies the priority of ensuring that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults of both genders achieve literacy and numeracy (United Nations, 2015, p. 21). McKay specifically provides a good example of the way in which education underpins other Goals, specifically those relating to health and wellbeing, gender equality, active citizenship, income generation, and responsible consumption and production. Her article describes how the Kha Ri Gude Literacy Campaign in South Africa extended its literacy curriculum to engender agency and empowerment among adult learners who, as a result of the legacy of apartheid in South Africa, had little or no education. The article shows that by embedding the teaching of reading, writing and numeracy into themes framed by (local, national and international) development agendas, it is possible to impact on the social, economic and developmental opportunities afforded by literacy acquisition. To determine what adult learners considered to be important benefits of literacy, and the extent to which these benefits correlated with the intent of the literacy curriculum inspired by the sustainable development goals, a mixed methods approach was used. The article draws on the responses obtained from a sample 485,941 literacy learners and an analysis of 2,032 educators’ monthly journals. The findings reflect a range of impacts including improved self-perceptions and agency, increased community participation, enhanced understanding of health issues, improved income generation and technological abilities, as well as an increased appetite for lifelong learning. It is believed that the findings from the large-scale study will allow for a closer tailoring of basic education programmes in order to connect learning with development agendas.

The world of informal learning is more pertinent to the contribution by Tajudeen Ade Akinsooto and Paul Young Akpomuje. They examine how people acquire knowledge and skills about informal economic activities and set out to explain why people prefer informal economic activities to other types of economic activities in making a living in the Hausa community in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. This research was undertaken with a view to providing information on how adult informal learning is being used as a means of achieving sustainable livelihood, and, consequently, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of ending poverty in all its forms everywhere. The study concluded that despite the fact that the majority of respondents do not possess
the competencies required to participate in today’s knowledge and technological driven labour markets, they are still able to use the knowledge and skills they acquired through informal means to take care of themselves and their families. In this way, informal learning becomes a means of livelihood, thereby contributing to eradicating poverty, the first of the SDGs.

The article by Trace Ollis and her colleagues shifts the focus to the role of community resources in facilitating lifelong learning, and the implications for supporting the SDGs. Neighbourhood houses in Australia are spaces of education and learning that cater to and work with adult learners across a lifespan. They are known as fourth sector education providers in the adult and community education (ACE) sector. With a history spanning nearly 45 years, neighbourhood houses provide vital education opportunities for adult learners. They report on research set against the backdrop of the current project of lifelong learning, which has dominated adult education discourses for more than 30 years. Neighbourhood houses are learning organisations and sites of social inclusion that embody adult learning practices. This empirical research of learners’ experiences in neighbourhood houses reveals the complex and varying reasons for participating in ACE that are beyond the realms of formal adult education and include reasons such as decreasing social isolation, fostering friendships and new networks, increased well-being, raising income capacity and further learning to improve employment prospects. The outcomes for participants vary but include greater mastery of English language, improved foundational literacy, numeracy and computer skills, increased understanding of civics and citizenship and Australian history culture and society, while reconstructing previously held negative views of themselves as learners.

Chunlin Yao shares an interest in learning environments in his study of a blended learning environment in adult education in promoting sustainable development. The study analyses the development of blended learning environments in China, and some challenges that the country faces in sustainable development. Based on the analysis of results, the study deduces that a blended learning environment could promote adult education development, reduce the development inequality between genders and geographically, as well as protect nature environments. A survey of adult learners verifies the aforementioned deductions. Adult learners believe that a blended learning environment
is an eco-friendly learning environment; it increases the opportunities for female and those living in rural areas and promotes their sustainable development. The study hopes the research will be beneficial for education policy makers and practitioners interested in sustainable development.

The concluding article, by Chris Duke, returns to Adult Learning Australia’s advocacy for lifelong learning, and its ambition to see a national policy adopted. He asks whether ALA’s Policy Paper adheres to a mainly economic focus, or whether it favours the emergent ‘third generation LLL’ vision which reverts to a wider socio-cultural ambition for a healthier society in a healthier environment: that is, something that matches the fine add-on feel-good words of many LLL statements, and rebalances the economic with the social. This means treating what education has to offer in all its forms to support learning in all its forms for the many critical issues, ecological and environmental as well as social, civic and political, that run alongside technological change and the need to equip people for new skills and new employment. Putting it another way: will ALA hitch its wagon to the SDGs and lobby for LLL in Australia to work for all seventeen of these?

Conclusion

These articles have highlighted how lifelong learning within the context of the SDGs begins with the need to recognise that there are urgent problems that we experience and need to contribute to solving. This recognition is itself evidence of learning; however, this is not sufficient. It is more important for us to learn how to shift this recognition into a commitment to contributing to finding a way to address these identified problems, often very complex and multi-layered in nature. This complexity underpins the importance of a new literacy, beyond basic literacy (read, write and arithmetic) plus IT literacy, which is very much what Paulo Freire has argued for, a literacy that allows us to learn not just to read the word but to read the world.

Reading the world requires that we are able to not just recognise the problems, but that we are able to examine the underlying causes of these problems and a vision for how to address these problems guided by a vision for achieving sustainable development. The SDGs provide us with a framework to guide the learning and the action needed. While there is
a need to learn about the different issues addressed by the SDGs, such as poverty, gender inequality, climate change, and pollution, the articles have shed light on the need for these actions to be supported by the range of sectors, including the government, the private sector, education and civil society. In particular, the articles have identified the roles of the range of academic institutions in supporting learning and advancing the values of lifelong learning, to include the formal educational institutions, such as universities, to the non-formal learning centres such as neighbourhood houses.

While there is a recognition of the role that a strong policy framework is necessary to advance the practice of lifelong learning, at the heart of the practice is the need for individuals to recognise their capacity for ongoing learning at different stages of life. This is not just across age but across the roles that we play, such as students, parents, workers, employers and in a variety of civil society roles.

In the end, the SDGs are an opportunity for us to have a global conversation not merely about understanding global problems, but also about acting at the local level, and learning to work together more effectively. At the core, lifelong learning highlights the need for us to become active citizens. After all, the SDGs will not just be achieved, we all have to make the SDGs come alive as guides for collective learning and action.

References


Call for papers for a special issue on:
Adult learning, social movements, popular education and the power of knowledge

Guest editors: Dr Cassie Earl (Bath Spa University, UK); Dr Kai Heidemann (University College Maastricht, The Netherlands); & Dr Ravi Kumar (South Asian University, India).

In this special edition we seek contributions from scholars at any level of their career who are working on the interrelated topics of social movements and popular education. We are especially interested in work that speaks to the question of the power that knowledge can hold for social change in the current age.

We invite explorations, thoughts and provocations on the following, and other, questions:

Does engagement in social movements empower groups and individuals to continue to act locally and globally on issues of social justice?

What is unique about the educational spaces that emerge from within social movements?
What can comparative studies tell us about the place of popular education in social movements in different parts of the world?

What counts as popular education and where is it being practiced?

How effective are popular education projects in empowering the popular imagination to act on controversial issues? What is the ‘pedagogical turn’ in social movement studies?

How can knowledge itself be a tool of social change?

What can the study of social movements and popular education reveal about prevailing political systems and institutional structures?

Can knowledge be considered a social movement in and of itself and what might such a conceptualisation achieve?

How can we best theorise the intersection of social movements, popular education and questions of knowledge?

We invite papers on these and related themes from international contexts, and from activists as well as scholars. We would like the special edition to showcase the work of emerging scholarship from around the globe, encompassing different approaches and perspectives on these topics and alternative ways of theorising them. We would particularly encourage partnership work between activists/popular educators and theorists in order to really understand the terrain of movements for change and their theorisation in order to further and robustly connect activist and popular educators with academics to create a vision of praxis for future movements and projects.

Academic papers (approx. 6500 words) will be blind double peer reviewed. Practice based papers from activists and popular educators (these may be shorter than the peer reviewed articles) will be reviewed by the special editorial group of this special edition.

Please refer to the submission guidelines on the AJAL web site: https://www.ajal.net.au/peerreview/index.php/ajal/about/submission