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Forty years of the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*: reflections on a changing field

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With this volume, our journal begins its fifth decade. A year ago, we announced the start of ‘a two-year project to mark the completion of this anniversary, and to launch us into our fifth decade’. This would involve ‘looking back and peering forward’, and was to comprise two elements, with the results of each being published in a special issue. This is the first. Its aims are to

explore key themes in the development of adult lifelong education over the past four decades, reflect on how the field has changed and is changing, and discuss priorities for research, policy and practice to ensure lifelong education plays a full and effective part in addressing human concerns for the next decade and beyond. (Holford et al., 2021)

We have been fortunate that members of our editorial advisory board were so willing to take up the challenge, and the contents of this special issue offer rich insight into the nature of lifelong education, its development over the lifetime of our journal (and indeed longer), and what challenges it will be called upon to address in the future. We are also grateful to colleagues from beyond the advisory board who have volunteered their services; the special issue is stronger as a result.

In the first article, Scott McLean writes about global trends, which provide the context for lifelong education. He reaches back to 1950, well before the journal began. We should think of lifelong education, he says, as comprising four broad categories of activity. As well as adult education, we need to consider education in early childhood, primary and secondary schooling, and tertiary education. While individual countries’ experiences have varied enormously, he notes a ‘dramatic global expansion of formal schooling’, linked to demographic, social, and economic changes, and ‘persistent inequalities between and within countries’. The article documents the history of such global trends, using national-level quantitative indicators compiled by international organisations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and the ILO. The focus is on enabling lifelong education scholars and practitioners to understand how their field has evolved in relation to global social change.

The second article focusses more narrowly on the shape of the field as reflected in publications in the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* over 40 years. Erik Nylander and Andreas Fejes – who have written this with editor Marcella Milana – are leading exponents of the quantitative analysis of journal content; their work (e.g. Fejes and Nylander 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019) has contributed to a deeper understanding of how the field has developed. The contribution uses large-scale textual analysis of the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* drawing on metadata (abstracts, keywords and titles) from 1,185 articles published between 1982 and 2021. Using topic modelling techniques, they identify the main themes covered by the journal’s authors, and how

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these have changed character over time. The article finds – perhaps surprisingly – that, over the decades, research practices have become more descriptive, micro-oriented and work-related; it offers a critical discussion of the political and scientific currents that may explain this.

One of the adult education's central concerns has been with the future of humanity, generally spiced with a sense that while our species has often shown its ability to bring harm – through war, exploitation of people and resources, racial and gender inequality, and much else – we nevertheless have the potential, acting collectively, to improve our situation. During the lifetime of our journal, however, Promethean confidence in 'man's' ability to 'conquer nature' has rapidly subsided: rather we realise that we conquer nature at our, and our planet's, peril. We need to find ways of living in harmony with the natural environment, and indeed with the diversity of human cultures – as contributors to our recent special issue on indigenous voices and decolonising lifelong education argued (Prete & Lange, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored this (Waller et al., 2021). Shirley Walters suggests reasons for thinking that a long connection with utopian and radical social movements justifies continuing optimism in adult education's capacity to contribute to a better world. In 'Learning about climate justice in times of drought and Covid-19' she uses her experience as an embedded activist-researcher, 'living and learning through two recent "crises" in Cape Town', South Africa, to deepen her understandings of 'climate justice'. Cape Town is, she says, 'a micro-cosm of the inequalities and socio-economic injustices in the world'. She argues that ecofeminism provides a valuable way of understanding what climate justice might be and how we might get there. It is, she writes, about 'foregrounding those people who have contributed least to climate catastrophes and are most affected by them' – in this case, marginalised poor, Indigenous, Black, peasant women. Social movements, social movement learning, and confronting class-based hierarchies of knowledge in responding to crisis are central to what she calls 'deep transformation'.

Richard Bagnall, Steven Hodge and Paddy O'Regan take a more philosophical approach to examining the nature of adult education as an '*ethical* enterprise'. They argue that ethical practice and being in adult lifelong learning are best understood in terms of competing epistemologies that inform practice and engagement. The conceptions of ethics immanent in the epistemologies should not, they suggest, be identified with normative theories of modernist ethics. They see five epistemologies and conceptions of ethics as important in the field. Disciplinary, developmental and emancipatory epistemologies and ethics have been prominent across the field's history, though 'design' epistemology and ethics – instrumental and technical approaches to lifelong education – are now generally dominant. Responding to changes in cultural context, however, the last is now changing into 'a reflexive epistemology and ethic of authenticity', which they argue raise 'the prospect of . . . morally disabling tendencies': recognising and avoiding these is, they say, 'imperative' for the future of our field.

In recent editorials, we have expressed concern about the rise of authoritarianism and 'populism' across the world (Holford et al., 2020; Waller et al., 2017). 'Demagogues,' Farhan Ali and Seng Chee Tan comment in their contribution to this special issue, 'ride on waves of emotions to exacerbate divisions'. More broadly, emotions are important in 'learning to navigate and cope with life', while emotions also affect adults' motivation to learn and their educational experiences. Ali and Tan throw light on this, drawing on recent neuroscience-informed research on emotions and lifelong learning. They focus on transformative learning theory, one of the most influential theoretical approaches to adult learning throughout the lifetime of this journal – introduced shortly before our first issue appeared (Mezirow, 1978, 1981), and reflect on how combining neuroscience research with transformative learning theory might prove fruitful.

Deepening international understanding has long been a theme of adult education. The organisations of the international order have shaped the field in many ways, certainly since the Second World War – as adult education played a role in shaping them. Understanding international organisations' role and contribution has been the subject of many articles in the journal over the years. Anne Larson and Pia Cort explore the purposes of the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD), and the European Union (EU) have attributed to adult education and learning, and how international adult education and learning policies have changed since the 1970s. These three organisations have pressed for particular views of what adult education and learning are ‘good for’. Drawing on Biesta’s domains of educational purpose (Biesta, 2020), they demonstrate how the functions of adult education and learning have changed as the welfare state has transformed into a neoliberal competition state. Investigating key policy documents, the article shows how each organisation has tried to set an agenda in line with its founding visions. UNESCO has pushed for an agenda centred on subjectification and empowering the individual, though with strong elements of qualification and socialisation. The OECD has adopted a narrower understanding, focusing on qualification for the labour market, informed by an ideology of growth. Finally, the EU has pressed both socialisation of European citizens and labour market qualifications. Over the decades, the focus of adult education and learning policy has, they argue, narrowed to primarily instrumental purposes, creating new meaning for socialisation and subjectification.

In the final article, Patti Gouthro – not only a valued member of the *International Journal of Lifelong Education’s* editorial advisory board, but a former editor – argues that adult and lifelong education needs critical social theory. In a globalised world, she argues, it helps us to ‘think deeply’ about such global crises as the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, gender equity, citizenship and migration. Critical social theory, she believes, takes social structural factors as well as the needs of the individual learner into account, and enables us to consider social purpose, equity, and ‘how power permeates lifelong learning contexts’. She explores the evolution of debates relating to critical social theory in adult education since the 1960s, noting the influence of a range of thinkers including Gramsci, Freire, Habermas, the Frankfurt School, Mezirow, and our own founding editor, Peter Jarvis. She suggests critical social theory helps in understanding issues of sexuality, culture, race, and global crises such as migration and the environment. Current lifelong learning discourses, she argues, should draw on critical social theory to explore social justice, citizenship, diversity and similar topics.

In this light, it is appropriate that our special issue concludes with an extended review by Timothy Ireland of Carlos Alberto Torres’ large (606-page) and important handbook on the work of Paulo Freire (Torres, 2019). (Torres and Ireland are both valued members of our editorial advisory board.) The centenary of Freire’s birth has been widely marked: Ireland refers in particular to ‘an impressively wide-ranging and highly diverse programme of “live” (virtual) events promoted by civil society organisations and universities in Brazil and Latin America in general’. He writes, however, not as a neutral observer or bystander, but as an adult educator who has ‘lived and taught in Brazil since 1979 in a city not far from Freire’s birthplace in Recife’. Timothy Ireland finishes his review by quoting Torres: ‘when discussing pedagogical practice or theory one can be *with Freire or against Freire but not without Freire*’. The *International Journal of Lifelong Education* has never been a journal of Freire studies, but we are confident that all our 40 volumes show the profound influence of his ideas.

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