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Challenges of Researching Work and Learning in Changing Landscapes of Asia and Europe: Reflections of a Research Network Co-ordinator

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Abstract

The ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning (ASEMLLL Hub), established in 2005, is an official partnership of Asian and European higher education institutions, working and learning together to develop collaborative inquiries and mutual understanding between Asia and Europe. A Research Network on Workplace Learning (RN2 - WPL) was set up shortly after the launch of the Hub. The network focuses on learning in, for and through workplaces across Asia and Europe. Workplaces exist not simply in companies and public services, but across a wide range of organizational and social contexts. Non-profit-making NGOs, voluntary work, and diverse forms of self-employment, including under irregular and precarious conditions all offer and enable multifarious opportunities for learning in and through workplaces. Some contexts are learning-conducive, others are less so; some provide structured work-related education and training for employees, whereas in others, learning is integrated into the flow of working processes. The network operates through exchanges of information, workshops, webinars and joint studies of how workplace learning is provided, practiced and understood in Asian and European countries. Network members are aiming to build up a shared body of knowledge that is empirically based, contextualized and theoretically informed. This contribution is a personal reflection of the network chair on the ways in which the network has developed an extended dialogue between ideas and evidence, focusing on the decade 2014 – 2024. The search for common cause is contributing to a better understanding to the interrelationships between adult education, workplace learning and lifelong learning, beyond the discourses that have shaped their development in the past.

Keywords: *network development, workplace learning, Asia-Europe, lifelong learning, collaborative research*

1   Introduction and historical overview: the scope and development of the Asia-Europe workplace learning network

The Asia-Europe Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning (ASEMLLL Hub) provides a platform for dialogue between researchers, practitioners and policy makers. The purpose is to contribute to evidence-based educational reform and innovation, promoting lifelong learning as the 'essential paradigm' for co-creating fresh thinking and new approaches to practice. Organizationally, it has a Council of Research Network Coordinators composed of senior representatives from its seven research networks, which exchange knowledge, conduct research inquiries and produce coordinated publications and reports.

Over 20 years, the Research Network on Workplace Learning (RN2 – WPL) has exchanged information, conducted multiple workshops and collaborated in studies of how workplace learning is provided, practiced and understood in Asian and European countries. The network is dedicated to building up a shared body of knowledge that is empirically based, contextualized and theoretically informed. Building on the foundations laid by Prof. Lynne Chisholm, Professor of Education and Generations at the University of Innsbruck, I have been honoured and privileged to lead the network, as Chair and Coordinator, from 2015 to the present time. By 2024, the network's membership had expanded to partners from 23 countries: Austria, Australia, Brunei, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, India, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, Laos, Lithuania, Malaysia, China, Romania, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, United Kingdom, with Canada and Cuba as associate members. To the present day, and throughout this process, the network has continued to benefit from organizational support of the University of Innsbruck. Through the commitment of Annette Ostendorf to the network, we have been able to maximize, augment and make the most of the resources and support available from our partners in the central Hub Directorate, based in Cork, Ireland to 2025.

Between its inception and the present time, the work of the Research Network has revealed the depth of diversity in ways in which workplace learning at work is understood, practiced and provided in contrasting socio-cultural and economic contexts and organizational segments. Reflective of this diversity, and with the support of Innsbruck University Press, our published anthologies can be seen, in retrospect, as milestones on the development of the network. In the first network anthology, reviews of research on workplace learning in three Asian countries (China, Malaysia, Thailand) and five European countries (Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Hungary, United Kingdom) were brought together in an initial partial mapping of the field, edited by Chisholm et al. (2006).

Between 2009 and 2012, the network conducted a comparative study based on the use of survey questionnaires. The research explored questions such as: What do people interpret to be 'voluntary' and 'compulsory' with respect to workplace learning? What does their company/ organization offer in terms of formal and non-formal work-related learning? Which of these are 'voluntary' and which 'compulsory'? How do objective opportunities and subjective perceptions influence employees' motivation to learn at work and their satisfaction with the learning they have undertaken? The findings were published as part of the second anthology (Chisholm et al., 2012) on the theme 'Decoding the meanings of learning at work in Asia and Europe'.

The 'Workplaces as Learning Spaces' inquiry was initiated in 2013. The research complemented the 2009-2012 study by taking the qualitative exploration of learning spaces at work as its point of departure. Early in 2015, the Research Network played an active role in the ASEMLLL International Forum 'Renewing the Agenda for Lifelong Learning' held in Bali, Indonesia, sharing research insights with researchers, policy makers and practitioners. At this Forum, the network paid tribute to Lynne Chisholm's life and exceptional contributions as we learnt of her untimely passing.

As I took on the role of Coordinator, the network took its next steps towards the launch of an Annotated Bibliography 'Workplaces as Learning Spaces: Contextualizing Lifelong Learning

in Asia and Europe', edited by Elina Maslo and Katharine Lunardon (2015). This was a stepping stone in our 'Workplace as Learning Spaces' project. At an international symposium hosted by Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic (November 2015) Annette Ostendorf, Elina Maslo, and Katharina Lunardon facilitated the shared work of the project by leading a methodology workshop on: 'Decoding visual materials in the context of participatory photo interviews in ASEM research projects', sharing, with a wider audience, important aspects of the working methods used in the research.

In the meantime, a special issue of the *International Review of Education* on 'Workplace Learning, Subjectivity and Identity', guest edited by network members Valérie Cohen-Scali and Theo van Dellen (2015), was published and a second international symposium held in Glasgow, Scotland (June 2016) on 'Supporting Adult Education for a Sustainable Life Course: Asian and European perspectives on Education, Work and Citizenship' featured a keynote encapsulating fresh network thinking on this subject (Evans, 2016). In 2017, we were able to publish the third IUP anthology 'Workplaces as Learning Spaces', edited by Annette Ostendorf & Chompoonuh Permpoonwiwat. These were truly collaborative efforts to keep the network flourishing in changing times.

From 2017, the hub's administrative base moved from Aarhus University in Denmark, finally to land in Ireland in 2019, where University College Cork took on the role with support from Ministries and the ASEM Secretariat. During the extended transition period, small groups comprising European and Asian participants found ways to collaborate on specific research questions and tasks, leading, for example, to publications such as Toiviainen et al. (2022) 'Dimensions of Expansion for Configuring Learning Spaces in Global Work' in the *Journal of Workplace Learning*. A thematic issue of the *Hungarian Educational Research Journal* (HERJ) on 'Workplace Learning in Changing Contexts' (eds. Evans, Bound and Erdei, 2022) was also published, with the aim of stimulating further research into the theme in Eastern Central European countries.

During the pandemic, network collaboration went online, and creative ways had to found to advance our work. An inquiry into the resilience of vocational education and training systems was launched at the start of the global coronavirus pandemic COVID-19, immediately following an RN2 in-person seminar held in Innsbruck in November 2019. This proved to be the last in-person event possible until 2022, given Covid-related restrictions on international travel. In spring 2020, a new focus for our collaborative work was chosen as it became apparent that in many countries the learning and working conditions of students, trainees and adult workers would be severely affected by restrictions due to the Covid19 pandemic. Our aim was to capture this historically unique external shock in its impact on vocational skills production in the individual countries of the network. With the support of Annette Ostendorf and Innsbruck University press, we were able work together remotely and to publish our 4th anthology: 'Resilience of Vocational Education and Training in Phases of External Shock' (eds. Evans, Ostendorf and Permpoonwiwat, 2023).

Through our experiences of carrying out collaborative projects, we have been increasingly cognisant of the scale of the challenges faced by attempts to undertake comparative inquiries

into the realities of workplace learning between Asia and Europe. How spaces for learning are understood differs considerably between the countries represented in the network, or rather, between the societies and cultures that these countries represent. Some of these differences may turn out to belong to the defining features of 'Asian' as opposed to 'European' civilizations and their contemporary economic and political structures. Others reflect variations in cultural economic, political and social features within Europe and within Asia. Accounting for these undoubtedly complex patterns is a matter of ongoing debate in the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub.

Four guiding commitments continue to shape the network's approach to developing its activities, building on principles collectively established in the early days (see Chisholm et al., 2012). Firstly, empirical research remains the only way to interrogate and rethink underlying assumptions about patterns of differences and similarities between Europe and Asia. Secondly, the collaborative nature of the research ensures that different perspectives have initially equal claims to legitimacy and are open to interrogation from potentially divergent standpoints. Thirdly, the representation of variety takes priority over demands for consistency. Finally, the network favours methodological pluralism.

Our work on workplace learning is fundamentally connected with 'lifelong learning', the overarching theme of the ASEM Education and Research Hub of which the network is part. The process of building the knowledge base of the network, in evidence-based and theoretically informed ways, has thus had important connections with the Hub's reworking of ideas and discourses about the interrelationships between adult learning and education (ALE) and lifelong learning.

2 Building the knowledge base of lifelong learning: reflections on the contribution of Adult Education to network development

Competing visions and paradigms for lifelong learning co-exist at national as well as international levels. The fact that one 'official' discourse may be dominant at any one time does not mean that other ways of thinking about lifelong learning have disappeared. They are alive and well in a range of critical traditions and perspectives that retain their power to engage and persuade. Network contributors critically analyze issues in lifelong learning and workplace learning that have important implications for policy and practice development in different parts of the world. Evidence and ideas can mobilize political thinking in new directions, as policy makers search for the new 'big idea'. In turbulent times, the search for inclusive, equitable support for learning beyond initial schooling focuses compellingly on the dynamics of learning as a lifelong process which links, rather than separates, the older and younger generations and incorporates the realities of working lives.

The work of the research network on workplace learning has aimed, within the wider ASEMLLL organization, to explore the actualities of work and learning within and across contexts, keeping in view development over time and scales of activity from the micro to macro levels. The formation of the ASEMLLL Hub, now encompassing 7 interlinked research networks, has itself been part of the international cooperation that grew out of the surge of lifelong learning advocacy of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Across Europe, plans to create a European

lifelong learning area (European Commission 2001) had the aim to maximize opportunities for people of all ages to continue learning, to participate actively in working life and to contribute as members of their communities. UNESCO remodeled its *Institute for Education* as the *Institute for Lifelong Learning* in Hamburg, and CONFINTEA began to monitor developments around the world at five-yearly intervals.

Resistances to the lifelong learning movement came from several directions. For example, economists questioned the returns to the economy from investing in access for individuals to non-conventional modes of learning in adult life, compared to the returns from investing in, for example, early childhood education. International development specialists, who viewed lifelong learning discourses as rather utopian, with inadequate operational frameworks, tended to ascribe higher priority to more concrete and realistic goals. More significantly for the development of the network, resistance often came from adult educators themselves, who opposed the narrowness of the employability drivers that lay behind much of the policy rhetoric.

In the following decade, lifelong learning demonstrated its resilience and legitimacy, according to Schuetze and Casey (2006). While this might be considered an over-statement, it is true that the ASEMLLL Hub has been uniquely positioned in these debates. While it focuses on lifelong learning as an empirical fact, the origins of much of the thinking that initiated and energised the Hub had its roots in adult education. Its founding director, Arne Carlsen, was inspired by his work in Danish folk high schools, and Lynne Chisholm, of the WPL network, was a committed advocate and champion for adult and continuing education in CONFINTEA and, subsequently, the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (UIL) in Hamburg. Ideas and practices of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) have thus influenced the work of the network since its inception. As network members from the early years, I and the UCL Institute of Education team of researchers were attracted by the boundary crossing and connective possibilities, alongside the challenges of building a working programme that could productively explore the diversity of perspectives.

At Hub level, the process, over time, has led to a rapprochement between proponents of lifelong learning and adult education as both fields have matured and developed new contours (Carlsen, 2022). From the adult education standpoint, one important stimulus came from internationally significant advocates for the renewal of research into adult learning and education, Roger Hiemstra and Philippe Carré. In some hard-hitting truths about cross-cultural research in the field of adult education, they commented that published literature on how and why adults learn and how to foster their efforts in learning is 'too often impregnated with local tenets and culturally bound visions' (Hiemstra & Carré, 2013, p. 2). The argument was powerfully made for multiple renewed efforts in 'exchanging views, sharing theory and empirical evidence, defusing ethnocentric biases and laying the foundations for a shared body of knowledge on adult learning and its facilitation'. A small inter-continental group of researchers, gathering in the venue the *13th Century Abbey of Royaumont* in 2011 for an intensive residential period of reflection, focused on these ideas and the book that emerged from it in 2015 'A Feast of Learning' stimulated, for me, fresh thinking about how global networks of researchers can work

interdependently in building knowledge bases at the intersections of adult education and lifelong learning, recognising lifelong learning as an empirical fact and adult education as a specific, powerful configuration within it.

The process of interactive presentation and discussion between researchers coming together, even for a few days, has been familiar to all researchers involved in international collaborations that focus on common questions. We search for, and often quickly find, how our specific ways of thinking can be connected to the points being made. Just understanding each other's terminology and finding common ground entails the process observed and documented by Hiemstra and Carré (2013, p. 90) in Royaumont: we were actively 'reformulating, translating the knowledge of disparate experiences into reusable forms that fit within our own knowledge bases.' Every contributor is both teacher and learner, developing their own knowledge base while identifying scope for connection, cooperation and expansion of the epistemological base of understanding of the group. Disciplinary perspectives are brought to focus on co-disciplinary work, as educators, psychologists, sociologists, business management and technology experts commit to contributing to dialogue and decisions – a process described as an essential ingredient of forward-looking adult research.

The strong resonance of this thinking with the potentiality created by ASEM research networks has shaped my approach as Chair and Coordinator from 2015 to the present time. A priority has been to keep the principles and practices of adult learning and education close to the heart of the network yet open to dialogic processes and intersections with cognate fields.

3 Adult learning and education research in multidisciplinary networks: embracing connectivity

Embracing connectivity is not a simple matter. While the ideas and practices of lifelong learning are ages old and found in some form or another in East and West, the study of adult learning and education is a relatively young field in comparison with established disciplines. How is the contribution of 'adult learning and education' (ALE) to be positioned in building the knowledge base for lifelong learning development? There is a need to further develop the field with a body of accepted knowledge, progressively built on valid research results and shared expertise. Indeed, in the *Third International Handbook of Lifelong learning*, I and my co-editors made this a major theme, highlighting the potential generated by the increased volume of research in cognate fields (Evans et al., 2023).

Improving our shared understandings of how to encourage, facilitate and intensify adult learning in all the domains in which it has proved to make significant differences to life, work and well-being entails working dialogically with other fields. Yet this process itself has long proved controversial. Eclectic engagement with cognate fields has sometimes led to its dismissal by more conventional scholars and to some self-marginalizing preoccupations with identity and definition of boundaries among adult education academics. The literature of 50 years ago reveals the underlying fault lines; for example, in Brookfield's (1989) critique that for adult education to claim some generic characteristics for adults (e.g. self-directedness) as learning

ignores diversity and that separating 'adulthood' generically from other life stages is over-simplified: 'In place of the obsessive and exclusionary attempt to define adult learning and adult education, researchers and theorists would be better engaged in locating their activities within the broader framework of research into learning and education' (p. 165). According to Brookfield, the search for uniqueness was feeding a sense of marginalisation that permeated the field. That sense of marginalisation endures in the debate over the contribution of adult education to the lifelong learning dimension of *Sustainable Development Goals* (Benavot et al., 2022).

The field of adult education has not been alone in these kinds of preoccupations. Scholars working in related and overlapping subfields, notably workplace learning scholars and those working at the boundaries of comparative vocational education and international development have shared similar preoccupations. For example, a parallel debate in the subfield of workplace learning generated similar heat, leading to the view that self-referential silos of activity can produce deep generative work, but they do need to be accompanied by a dialogic approach (Sawchuk, 2010) for the field to advance.

When the opportunity to work with cognate sub-fields arises, it is wise to search for common cause (Colclough, 2010) and, when the desire to differentiate dies hard, to ask ourselves to whom these distinctions really matter and why? Too often they matter because of tribal academic affiliations and struggles for power and authority that contribute to the maintenance of territories and bounded spaces (Milana, 2018). For me, the case for mutual learning between and across domains and intellectual territories, perspectives and school of thought has been well articulated by Serres and Latour (1995, p. 178), who have argued that 'the best light is obtained in the mingled region of interferences between two sources'. According to Serres and Latour (1995, p. 178), if each 'claims to be the sole source of light outside of which there is nothing but obscurantism, then the only compass readings or pathways obtained are those of obedience'.

Through working in international networks connecting adult learning, vocational learning and youth transitions before and in parallel with my ASEM role, I have come to a strong belief in the search for common cause and have found scope for these approaches in the openness and relationships of the ASEM Hub. Extending beyond mutual learning, the search for common cause can also be approached through the identification of the shared practices of those who research aspects of adult learning, whether in vocational education, community education, health or citizenship education. What do scholars in each of these fields actually do in their day-to day work? International researchers focus on human learning and development in the entanglements and transitions of adult life, from young adulthood to later years of life. Practitioners in lifelong learning development come from many intersecting fields. They find common cause in valuing systematic and scholarly comparison. They engage in change and advocacy activities; and all participate in communicative practices in the pursuit of intercultural understanding. Another approach in the search for common cause is found in the identification of shared challenges, including the methodological challenges posed by the growing diversification of topics, the expanding scope of valid research questions and changing views of what count as valid answers. Most pronounced is a common drive towards addressing the meso-level (Carré, 2023), paying attention to the milieus that reflexively shape activity and learning, that is, to the interplay of distal as well as proximal influences.

The identification of common causes and shared challenges brings into focus the scope and promise for re-imagining and energizing future research. The dynamics of overlapping fields create trail-finders, rather than pathway followers. Within the ASEMLLL Hub, ALE brings its intellectual tools, advocacy for learner voice, theoretically informed approaches to practice development into the exploration of how best to facilitate approaches to practice.

4 The Workplace Learning Research Network's Major Projects

Our task as a network has been to strengthen theories, methods, ideas and evidence that are brought to bear on new questions and decisions that matter to users of research. Our research should be able more clearly to articulate theoretical frames of reference and traceable genealogies in previous work while also making connections between them. In meeting social scientific criteria for robustness (Sawchuk, 2010), our inquiries into changing scenarios should be informed by empirical evidence which offers challenges to mechanistic or partial views of reality, while recognizing the value-laden or political nature of education.

Furthermore, two analytical perspectives are pertinent in considering workplace learning issues. The first focuses on the social organization of learning. This perspective emphasizes adjustments to changed conditions in work and society and dysfunctionality in existing educational provision, emphasizing the need for flexibility and recognition of prior and informal learning. It recognizes the workplace and community as significant settings for learning, debating the characteristics of 'learning organizations' or 'communities of practice'. The second analytical perspective focuses on the socially positioned 'learning individual'. This perspective recognizes the heterogeneity of learning after the completion of initial schooling, the conditions and opportunities that shape learning, the social structuring of the life course and the accumulation of risk and inequalities. At the same time, it keeps in view the bounds of personal agency (Evans, 2017; 2021), reflexivity in learning, the significance of social networks and multiple forms of capital (Ò Tuama, 2022).

Two examples of projects from the Workplace Learning Research Network serve to illustrate this point. Both projects benefited from the expert inputs of Annette Ostendorf and were enabled by Innsbruck University. They were published as anthologies in the Innsbruck University Press Series that came to be associated with Research Network 2 through the efforts and commitment of Lynne Chisholm and subsequently Annette Ostendorf.

4.1 Workplaces as Learning Spaces – a Project of ASEM Research Network on Workplace learning

From 2013 the network's collaborative activities came to focus on the learning spaces rather than the boundaries between institutional settings. The question of what makes workplace learning spaces conducive to adult learning became our shared focus of inquiry.

The learning space at work can be perceived as a combination or interplay of a range of components of physical spaces and learning contexts of formal, informal and virtual learning. The review of educational applications by Brooks et al. (2012) suggested that spatial dimensions of

workplace learning play a significant role in facilitating or undermining adults' opportunities for professional development as well as their outcomes. Workplace environments and relationships generate motivations towards the development of social practices as well as competences, in ways that can, under the right conditions, facilitate (and be facilitated by) communication, cooperation and knowledge sharing.

There are methodological challenges in researching the ways in which workplaces are experienced as learning spaces. Annette Ostendorf proposed an innovative approach for our collectively designed project – the photo-participatory method, based on Kolb & Kolb (2005). Together with Katharina Lunardon and Elina Maslo she initiated a seminar and training session for network members on how the method could be used to realize project aims. The use of the method offered a means to enable practitioners to articulate what a learning space means for them, in ways that entail visualization and reflection. The approach readily engaged the participation of busy practitioners who might otherwise have declined a research interview about a seemingly abstract concept. The cases, presented and discussed in the edited anthology (Ostendorf & Permpoonwiwat, 2017) represented the participants' (tellers') voices. Researchers' analyses were dedicated to interpreting what the 'teller' meant, in the context of relationship between the teller, the photograph and the audience. The method enabled comparisons to be drawn between the learning spaces of practitioners who inhabited an institutional environment (e.g. information technology teachers in vocational colleges, hotel managers) and those who worked independently (e.g. free-lance web designers, 'bed and breakfast' owners). Another aim of the photo-participatory method was to facilitate the sharing of examples between teams, in the context of the Asia-Europe project, as part of inter-cultural discussions on the meanings and dimensions of learning spaces in contrasting cultural contexts.

Field work, including photo-participatory interviews was planned and facilitated by network members from Austria, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Singapore, Thailand and UK acting as experts in their own local social and economic landscapes and working together in an international team to identify broadly relatable learning spaces. Thirty-three cases were selected from environments in which learning spaces were being reconfigured through changing technologies and practices, with a focus on workers in hospitality, higher education colleges and public sector health and rescue services. Interviewees with 51 key informants in these sectors were selected to exemplify how the contrasting work environments of freelancers and small businesses as well as larger institutions were experienced and used by workers attempting reflexively to develop themselves, their practices and outcomes.

The narrative accounts of these professionals, enriched by photo participatory method, helped to illuminate how workplace spaces can provide continuous opportunities for learning, for all workers and not just 'trainees' and new entrants. Adults learn through a range of learning spaces in the working environment and learning spaces are often co-constructed. Different types of learning are interrelated, and this interrelation may facilitate or undermine learning processes and outcomes, with new technologies playing an increasingly significant role in enabling individuals to navigate a range of spaces. Different types of workplace learning spaces, (e.g. in institutional vs independent sector settings) can play a significant part in enhancing the learning processes and aspirations of adults. The data indicated that in both types of settings individuals

learn through a variety of spaces, including self-created learning spaces. However, the independent sector as opposed to the institutional sector, often offered more flexibility in terms of creating and developing less conventional learning and working spaces, which sometimes stretched beyond the boundaries of a single country. Therefore, in the context of independent sectors, in which the boundaries between institutional and environmental scales are blurry, workers could generate their own institutional environment. Institutional settings allow some flexibility for creating personal learning spaces; however, within the boundaries of the specific workplace (institution).

The international significance of this inquiry was recognized by the award of the Bernd Rode award of UNINET, the Asian-European Academic Research Network. This award for excellence was given for the project's innovative contribution towards cross-national understandings of how learning spaces at work can be expanded and developed in ways that facilitate communication, knowledge sharing and skills development. Exploring the conditions for this expansion and development to work requires a sustained focus on meso level of environment and milieu, while keeping structures and learners in view. A largely fallow field at the meso level requires inter-disciplinary efforts in learning space design, support systems and facilitation methods (Carré, 2023). At the meso level, where milieu appears as both a personal, subjective, embodied space, and an objective social and spatial reality, researchers should be delving into the how and where learning desire and capabilities are facilitated and learning readiness is fostered. In this way, Carré (2023) argues, we can better understand how learning can become a lifelong attitude.

So, what makes workplaces conducive to learning? Learning in and through the workplace, according to Evans et al. (2010), expands human capacities through purposeful activities that derive from the contexts of employment. Taken as a whole, network research has shown how learning conducive workplaces have structurally flexible environments in which high levels of engagement and participation are enabled. Affordances are created that recognize and use existing strengths, while enabling participants incrementally to stretch and develop their competences as they experience setbacks as well achievement and success. Communication, co-operation, knowledge sharing, feedback and critical reflection are key ingredients, enhanced by distributed mentoring.

4.2 Resilience of vocational education and training in phases of external shock – ASEM Workplace Learning Project 2020-2023

Since 2020, the ASEMLLL Hub has been highlighting the challenges of the so-called VUCA world characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity and explaining the role of lifelong learning as an 'essential paradigm' for co-creating fresh thinking and new practices. The Workplace Learning Network's VET resilience inquiry was launched at the start of the global coronavirus pandemic COVID-19, immediately following an in-person RN2 network conference, held in Innsbruck in November 2019. By spring 2020, it had become apparent that in many countries the learning and working conditions of young people entering work and adults in the workplace or in training for work re-entry would be severely affected by restrictions, estimated at approximately '1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all

continents' (Symeonidis et al., 2021, p. 91). Systems that involve workplace learning in various forms of vocational education and professional development were impacted under the conditions of external shock, and questions of institutional and systemic resilience came to the top of the agenda in all partner countries.

For our network, collaboration went online, and creative ways had to found to advance our work. The University of Innsbruck continued to provide an institutional anchor for network collaboration, enabled by Annette Ostendorf. Members of the ASEM Workplace Learning Network, who are all experts who research and teach at higher education institutions on topics of lifelong learning and vocational education and training, agreed to research and record the developments of vocational education and training structures as well as workplace learning developments and trends in the pandemic. The special opportunity was that through these experts, developments triggered by the pandemic could be recorded as they unfolded between March 2020 to August 2022. Specifically, the research questions focused on how resilient (in the sense of adaptable, flexible, resistant) the structures for vocational learning were in their reactions to the external shock and which conditions and measures contributed to positive coping. The term 'VET structures' refers to a very broad spectrum of phenomena, as different countries have different degrees of institutionalization and characteristics. This inquiry emphasized structural features at the meso- (curricula, organizational settings at company and school level) and their connections to the macro-level (overall architecture of the system, educational policy decision-making level).

During the pandemic, the learning venues of formal and informal vocational education, namely schools, companies and other educational institutions, were especially affected by closures or other restrictions. The Skills Ecosystem perspective of Buchanan et al. (2017) lent itself to the network study of impacts, as processes of vocational learning are not viewed in isolation from their environments. The Skill Ecosystem elements we focused on included institutional/political framework conditions; modes of engaging labour; business settings and associated business models; structures of jobs as well as skill levels and systems for their formation. These elements are connected in ecosystems that promote and produce vocational capabilities, emphasizing the meso-level of institutions and institutionalization.

The inquiry provided the basis for an extended dialogue between ideas and evidence, at the international level. We carried out our research through a qualitative-empirical design, employed by all partners. The data collection was conducted via a qualitative, co-designed open online questionnaire, with three waves over the period of the pandemic closures.

All research processes had to be negotiated online across several continents. Coordinating the survey from Innsbruck, Annette Ostendorf emphasized that the process was innovative in that the common tool was used to support the observations of the experts in the midst of the unprecedented and unpredictable change processes, accompanied by the collection of artifacts that describe an actual practice, such as newspaper reports, policy papers or reports from interest groups (grey literature).

Using these materials and written reflections, some chapters for the new anthology (Evans, Permpoonwiwat & Ostendorf, 2023) were written. And in a final stage, participants were invited, in an open way, to focus on the influences of Covid-19 of significance in their respective contexts. At this stage new participants were welcomed to contribute to this anthology, using ecosystem ideas to explain and explore responses to the coronavirus pandemic in selected contexts of VET and workplace learning.

From this shared eco-system starting point, the approaches to the analysis of changes induced by external shocks ranged from a humanistic, phenomenological focus on interaction in the contribution from France to an economic modelling approach in the Thai contribution. The contribution from the Latvian team focused on Latvia's challenge-oriented innovation policy and identify the innovation needs. From an Asian perspective, changes in work processes, triggered by digitalization and automation, have been driven forward strongly by reactions to the pandemic in ways that had some unintended consequences for highly qualified workers in Singapore and the surrounding region. The focus on workplace and lifelong learning policies in evolving skills ecosystems in contrasting institutional landscapes of Brunei, Germany and UK, showed how far pandemic-induced shifts in organizational practices were becoming embedded. One chapter, by Sergiy Melnyk and colleagues, provided very special insights into the developments in vocational education and training in Ukraine. Here, two external shocks immediately follow each other, the pandemic and the war, which have extreme effects on the structures of vocational education and training. Incredible adaptations are demanded from the system under such conditions, with a very high degree of pragmatic flexibility evident.

Overall, our findings showed different ways in which exogenous shocks can lead to institutional innovation and reconfigurations, particularly at the meso level. Examples included:

- Establishment of a Baltic Alliance for the joint promotion of Work-Based Learning practices in vocational training

- Digital Transformation Plan implications for professional development, e-training and industry-linked courses for vocational teachers, 2023-2027 in Brunei

- "Your Classroom": Creation of Latvian OECD-approved education platform

- Establishment of a National Jobs Council in Singapore to coordinate the efforts between government, business and labour unions

- Establishment of an Innovation Laboratory (InLab) for support of technical education (free online courses, panels, talks, funding initiatives, ...) with a 2025-strategy-plan in Singapore

- UK (England) "Covid-19 Apprenticeship Portal" to collect workable solutions for training and evaluation during the Corona crisis, to protect training

- Federation of Thai Industry (FTI) & Thai government: Establishment of the "FTI Academy" (Connection of lifelong learning and upskill/ reskill policy)

Through our experiences of carrying out these evidence-informed inquiries over many years, we have been increasingly cognisant of the scale of the challenges faced by research on workplace learning between Asia and Europe. Workplace learning policies and practices differ widely in their cultural economic, political and social features within Europe and within Asia as well as between the continents. So far as generalization is possible, there is further evidence of the opening of the door for more holistic thinking about the capabilities that are developed through the interplay of life, work and learning. The challenge now lies in developing the processes and associated methods by which these capabilities and forms of knowledge can be better recognized, facilitated and utilized in professional and community learning environments (Evans, 2015; Pilz & Li, 2020; Cairns & Malloch, 2024). The degree of acceptance of these processes and associated methods varies considerably between countries and changes over time. Accounting for the complex patterns of is a matter of continuing debate in the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub.

5 Guiding the future research agenda: discussion and conclusions

A dialogic approach means constructing extended dialogues between ideas and evidence in the intersections and overlaps of different approaches to shared research questions. It entails recognizing, respecting and learning from robust lines of inquiry where they conflict as well as where they converge. Our task as network researchers is to continuously re-appraise knowledge, reworking and recontextualizing ideas and practices in culturally sensitive ways.

The fields of workplace learning and, more broadly, adult learning and education research, borrow and recontextualize research from other fields in ways which undoubtedly enriches the knowledge base, but how can networks go beyond borrowing, in positively contributing to the development of the body of canonical work? One answer is to use the extended dialogue between ideas and evidence to create, refine or question normative statements of 'truth', according to the approaches advocated by Guenther & Falk (2018), who argue that the reluctance of many policy advisors to use qualitative research is explained at least in part by limitations that qualitative researchers impose on their own work. The iterative nature of qualitative research lends itself well to theory development, and confirmation or rejection of normative truth statements. The more we can connect our qualitative, case-study based inquiries with each other, connecting, exploring and building results iteratively, the greater the probability that we can form the next building blocks for the knowledge base.

In networks dedicated to lifelong learning, such as the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub we find that adult educators come together with active participants from the fields of vocational education, higher education, business education to find common cause in the practices of analysis of learning environments, advocacy of adult learning in changing life and work situations and innovative activity to achieve shared aims. As Little (2010) has observed, it is obviously desirable to celebrate differentiation in traditions and perspectives, while seeking a more dialogic approach in which mutually respected traditions and perspectives can enrich and illuminate each other and, ultimately, what educators do in practice.

At the level of research inquiry extended dialogues between ideas and evidence based on cases as well as variables can generate better interpretations of findings, when drawn on systematically as part of a dialogic approach. A dialogic approach recognizes that cultures, values and ways of learning are continuously evolving in relation to each other and in response to wider societal shifts.

For example, the field of Workplace Learning research focuses on the interplay of Normal Formal Education (NFE) and Formal Education at the point of practice in work environments. Through ASEMLLL Workplace Learning network it can and does explore aspects of 'life-work-learning interplay' transnationally, across Asia-Europe borders. In these respects, it moves, by its very processes, beyond the self-referential debates and embraces 'more whole' rather than 'less whole' models of education-society interactions.

Moreover, networks are advanced in forging intercultural communications, establishing relational ties and facilitating mutual learning. The challenges of the working language have to be addressed more robustly in the future. For example, Mazenod (2018) challenges language practices in academic knowledge production that limit visibility of non-Anglophone conceptual frameworks that are important in understanding differences in work-related learning and education. We should continually remind ourselves to question the uncritical export of western assumptions, a stance that also has strong implications for the languages in which we work.

The transnational investigation of educational phenomena associated with the interplay of life, work and learning in multiple contexts embraces three purposes that are interdependent (Evans, 2020). Networked projects always involve interlocking social relationships and are supported by mutual appreciation of different concepts and ways of seeing problems. They are more likely to be sustainable when they are informed by understandings of the social processes involved, and, as UNESCO and CONFINTEA processes have recognized, agenda-setting is strengthened when it engages at a deep level with educational priorities and development goals conceptualized by people in different parts of the globe. Fundamentally, networked projects rely on actors being able to take critical stances on what actually counts as 'improvement'.

Internationally networked studies of work and learning informed by ALE principles and practices can bring powerful combinations of intellectual tools to bear on mutually identified problems. I have already argued that networked projects stimulate dialogue between ideas and evidence, leading to mutual learning. When projects are connected through the development of long-term collaborative working, they start to tease out the ways in which the assumptions of dominant discourses become embedded not only in the development of work practices and the conditions of working life, but also through the international flows of reform ideas and change agendas over time. The capabilities of researchers to conduct these inquiries are considerably strengthened in networked, collaborative projects that connect detailed studies of the local to the global.

These observations have held true for the ASEMLLL Hub, in its 20 years of operation. From late 2016, when I took over as Coordinator and Chair of the Network dedicated to Workplace Learning, I came to appreciate the depth of commitment brought by Annette Ostendorf and the

Innsbruck team to anchoring the network in an institutional base for the longer term. This was crucial in keeping the network alive, when there was a hiatus in the central contract from the ASEM Hub Directorate, which meant all resources, human and material, had to be come from the local level. Innsbruck University, through Annette Ostendorf, hosted a 2019 meeting, during the hiatus and just before Coronavirus pandemic, allowing us to work productively at a time of difficulty.

The network's open access anthologies, published by Innsbruck University Press have been sustained long term through the efforts of Annette Ostendorf and her Innsbruck team in the Institute, with four volumes published and the fifth now in view. The fifth anthology, based on our new research network project ENRICH-WPL, will aim to capture the diversity of participants' inquiries into a shared and collectively generated research question 'How can the inclusive use of digital technologies and innovation enrich learning at work and empower workers?'

The field of lifelong learning is now explicitly committed to the development of holistic approaches. For me, holistic approaches need a well-developed critical sense of what can genuinely count as improvement; deep understanding what it is that constitutes the development of educated attributes in participants; alongside commitment to put theoretically informed, evidence-based knowledge to work in practice.

As part of the lifelong learning continuum, we can work with cognate disciplines to better understand the configurations of the life-work-learning from young adulthood to later life (Evans, 2021), how adults' learning can be enriched in the diverse spaces of everyday life, and what practices can encourage, facilitate and add to the transformative qualities of learning.

Networks contribute to the iterative and recursive sketching of contours in the field of lifelong learning that takes the field beyond the discourses that have shaped it in the past. The Springer Third International Handbook of Lifelong Learning (eds. Evans et al., 2023) is itself a product of dialogue and cross network cooperation, as contributors from networks such as EPALE, ILP, UNESCO, ASEMLLL come together in the search for common cause. It is to this process of redrawing the contours that the Workplace Learning Network of the Asia-European Hub for Lifelong Learning continues to contribute, in its coming phases of work.

Acknowledgement

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