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Chapter Author(s): Joop Schippers

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On the need for universities to engage in lifelong learning

Joop Schippers

Even though economists have little reason to be very proud of the accomplishments of their discipline over the last decades, one economic concept that was developed already in the 1960s has stood the test of time, and that is the concept of human capital. Just as a firm needs physical capital such as buildings, machines, and raw materials to realize its production, human individuals can only be productive in the labour market if they have adequate knowledge and skills at their disposal. By investing time and money on education, people can enhance their human capital and become more productive. In addition to preferences for different types of work, innate ability determines how much each individual invests in her/his human capital. After entering the labour market, workers will acquire additional human capital in the form of experience and on-the-job learning. However, this is not the whole story. Existing human capital — just like the machines in the factory — is subject to wear and tear and consequently to depreciation. One of the explanatory factors is a person's ageing, which may result in a slower pace of pushing the buttons, less endurance, or what has come to be known as 'senior moments' ('I remember her face, but I cannot reproduce her name at this moment'). Another major factor is technological development. The higher the pace of technological innovation, the sooner individuals' knowledge and skills become obsolete and the higher the need for maintenance of existing knowledge and skills and investing in new forms of human capital. Some knowledge and skills depreciate more rapidly than others.

In the past, universities — as one of the major suppliers of human capital — could argue that a master's degree obtained at the age of 25, for example, would largely satisfy a career of 30 to 35

years. Some additional investment might be necessary (depending on the job, branch of industry, and discipline), but many alumni could do very well with their master's degree as 'a ticket to the labour market' that remained valid throughout their career. In recent years, two things have happened that challenge this validity. First, demographic challenges have obliged governments in several countries to raise the official retirement age in the future. One of the implications is that young people entering the labour market in their early twenties will have to be productive in that labour market for about half a century. Given the dynamics of the economy, this also implies that they will have to 'survive' more economic downturns, the risk of their employer going bankrupt, or the possibility that consumers will turn their attention to some other branch or product. Second, rapid technological innovation has increased the speed of depreciation of human capital, which in itself implies that the human capital acquired during one's initial education is less likely to be sufficient for a productive career than it used to be in the past.

So, if universities ever had the idea that they provided young people with a more or less 'complete' education — to use the language used when talking about human capital — this idea has rapidly become obsolete. Universities provide their students with enough knowledge and skills for a proper start in life and in the labour market — and this can be either at the bachelor's or the master's level — but from a life course perspective their job is not yet finished. Just as sustainable construction increasingly includes not only designing and realizing a building but also maintaining and finally dismantling the building, university education should not stop with a bachelor's or a master's degree but should also include maintenance in the form of post-initial learning opportunities. One could say that this is part of the social responsibility of the university. Then, of course, the question comes up how these post-initial learning opportunities should actually be shaped. The logical thing to do here seems to me to link the post-initial initiatives to the nature of the specific university. This way, all universities together (including those for

applied sciences) can provide 'the market for lifelong learning' in higher education with a proper supply that matches all the needs, desires, and preferences of their potential 'customers'. To be more concrete, a university with a strong orientation towards teaching could develop a broad spectrum of courses that allow participants to become acquainted with recent developments in a particular discipline or regarding a specific topic.

For a research university, this approach may be less attractive from a what's-in-it-for-us perspective: even though teaching staff may find it refreshing to work with an older group of participants every now and then, for many professors it may also mean 'just another task' on top of all the other tasks that divert from their main goal in (professional) life — conducting (preferably ground-breaking) research. Therefore, research universities might prefer to link their post-initial educational initiatives more to their own already existing research activities. This probably implies a small-scale approach at a relatively high level. Consequently, from a strictly financial perspective, post-initial education is hardly likely to ever be a cash cow for typical research universities, while more teaching-oriented universities may find it an interesting source of additional financial means. Talking about financial means brings us back to the dismal science of economics. Who is going to pay for all these wonderful initiatives in the field of lifelong learning? Especially in an ever more flexible labour market, it is unlikely that either employers or individual workers would be willing to initiate major investments in lifelong learning. Both parties have strong incentives to wait until 'the other party moves'. So, without government interventions creating a proper institutional framework for lifelong learning and maybe some additional financial means (but that is not the most important government contribution; the major contribution is the breakthrough of the 'hold up' problem), there is a serious risk of too little investment in the maintenance and development of (new) human capital.

But if employers and individual workers are going to pay together, they will certainly demand that they have a proper say

in what kind of activities universities are going to develop in the field of lifelong learning. So, contrary to bachelor's programmes that are primarily supply-driven (i.e., the university staff decides what knowledge and skills are relevant for students) and master's programmes that are partly supply-driven but also take into account students' labour market opportunities, lifelong learning programmes should be primarily demand-driven. This would push universities to engage in serious market research to take stock of societal and organizational needs, sometimes resulting in courses on topics relevant for a broad group of participants, sometimes resulting in specialized, in-company courses. Another strategy is to engage in more lasting and broader relations with a group of dedicated organizations. This strategy is especially suitable for research universities because they offer a broad spectrum of cooperation ranging from the use of organizational data to committed studies, joint research, and development activities, including activities primarily aimed at enlarging the knowledge and skills of the staff of the organizations. Set in a research context, activities in the field of lifelong learning may and should take the form of co-creation instead of a one-sided transfer of knowledge. Yes, indeed, the university's staff has much knowledge to offer, but the participants from the organizations are much more experienced when it comes to the utilization of this knowledge within an often multidisciplinary organizational context. So they are the ones who can challenge the learned scientists to descend from their ivory towers and check what their theories can accomplish in practice. Organized this way, lifelong learning will be fun for both scientists and participants. Instead of becoming a stand-alone activity fighting all usual bureaucratic fights within the university organization, it will develop into an integrated part of a traditional research university's core tasks.