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Flexibility in higher education: an Irish perspective

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Irish public policy strongly promotes greater flexibility in higher education. This review paper examines Irish policy conceptualisations of flexible learning. The review finds that the promotion of flexible learning is positioned within strongly economic discourses of lifelong learning, and primarily in human capital terms of meeting the skills needs of the workforce. Irish policy largely presents flexible learning approaches unproblematically as positive and beneficial. This paper demonstrates that flexible learning is not an unproblematic concept and reveals some problems and tensions relating to Irish flexible learning policy.

Keywords: higher education; flexible provision; flexible learning; lifelong learning

1. Introduction

In recent years, discourses of flexibility have become embedded within arguments for reform in Ireland's higher education sector, with greater flexibility offered both as the rationale for reform and as the means to reform. The Irish Government's (2011) *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* calls for a more flexible system that includes more flexible learning programmes, more flexible routes of progression and transfer, and more flexible working arrangements. This paper aims to problematise the first of these aspects of flexibility, that is, flexible learning. There is no doubt that flexible learning can make a significant contribution to access and openness in higher education, making higher education more accessible for individuals who need to combine study with work or other responsibilities, or for individuals who cannot attend full-time on campus for reasons of distance from an institution, disability or other circumstances (e.g. Bennington, Tallantyre, and Le Cornu 2013). This paper does not argue against the need for greater flexibility in provision of higher education in Ireland. Irish policy discourses that promote flexibility and flexible learning, however, largely present these unproblematically as beneficial and straightforward concepts. In the context of national proposals for 'mainstreaming flexible learning' (Higher Education Authority, HEA 2009, 8), this paper aims to prompt timely reflection on the meanings and implications of discourses of flexible learning in Irish higher education. In doing so, it will attempt to demonstrate that flexible learning is not an unproblematic concept.

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2. The international context

Discourses of flexible learning are tightly bound up with discourses of lifelong learning. For example, Ireland's HEA¹ closely links the expansion of flexible learning to a lifelong learning agenda in its goal 'to progress the lifelong learning agenda in Ireland through the expansion of part-time/flexible courses' (HEA 2012, 8). It has been argued that 'any examination of the term 'flexible' will inevitably involve consideration of the concept of lifelong learning' (Nunan 2000, 55). Accordingly, this section first looks at conceptualisations of lifelong learning in international (particularly European) policy, and addresses the relationship between lifelong learning and flexible learning. It then considers how policy discourses of flexible learning impact on educational practice.

2.1. Flexibility in educational policy

Rubenson (2004) argues for three distinct phases of policy interest in lifelong learning from its emergence as an educational policy in the 1970s. Rubenson situates the landmark Faure report, *Learning to Be* (UNESCO 1972), in a humanistic discourse that was dominant in the 1970s, outlining as it did a holistic vision of lifelong education in terms of solidarity, democracy and 'the complete fulfilment of man, in all the richness of his personality, the complexity of his forms of expression and his various commitments – as individual, member of a family and a community' (1972, vi). Rubenson contends that there was a shift in the late 1980s and early 1990s to a strong economic discourse as the debate around lifelong learning became increasingly driven by economic interests, and that this has since been replaced by a softer economic discourse which promotes active citizenship alongside the dominant economic discourse.

Biesta (2006) offers a multidimensional conceptualisation of lifelong learning, drawing on Aspin and Chapman's (2001) framework of three underlying orientations to lifelong learning in policy: social inclusiveness and democratic understanding; economic progress and development; and personal development and fulfilment. Biesta refers to these as the democratic, economic and personal dimensions of lifelong learning, and conceives the Faure vision of lifelong education as a combination of democratic and personal dimensions, with personal fulfilment instrumental to achieving social inclusion and democracy. Biesta concurs with Rubenson's basic contention that there has been a significant priority shift so that democratic and personal functions are currently subordinate to a dominant economic focus. Biesta describes this shift as being from 'learning democracy' to 'learning economy', and from 'learning to be' to 'learning to be productive and employable' (2006).

The 2009 report from the independent Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL) in the UK proposes another framework for lifelong learning consisting of three 'capitals': human capital, social capital and identity capital. In this framework, human capital consists of the skills and qualifications that individuals can deploy in the workplace; social capital refers to participation in thriving social networks involving shared values and common goals; and identity capital involves healthy self-esteem and a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Schuller and Watson 2009). This framework for lifelong learning has clear parallels with Biesta's three dimensions of lifelong learning, and an IFLL paper on the implications of lifelong learning for higher education echoes Biesta's argument about a shift to a dominant economic discourse:

Globally, we are going through a neo-liberal phase at the moment where human capital and personal economic returns apparently rule: essentially 'learn to earn'. (Watson 2009, 9)

Since the early 1990s, organisations such as the OECD and the European Union (EU) have broadcast a consistent message that lifelong learning is a necessary response to 'rapidly changing economic circumstances (globalisation of markets, speed and cost of technological change)' (European Commission 1993, 49). An OECD (2006) policy brief on the 'economics of education' contends that 'Europe's capacity to compete in the global knowledge economy will depend on whether its higher education institutions can meet the fast growing demand for high-level skills' and that 'promoting lifelong learning therefore has become a goal of European education policies' (2006, 16). To that end, EU policy has become increasingly focused on linking the expansion of education and training opportunities to increases in productivity and economic growth, to the extent that the on-going *New Skills for New Jobs* initiative aims to 'fundamentally change the way Europeans think about 'education and training', about 'work' and about the relation between them so that "education and training" and "work" will no longer be two separate worlds, but will be much more integrated into a single lifelong learning process' (Expert Group on New Skills for New Jobs 2010, 5).

How is flexibility relevant to these conceptualisations of lifelong learning? Discourses of flexibility and lifelong learning depend on one another in two significant ways. Firstly, flexibility acts as 'a policy driver for lifelong learning' (Edwards, Nicoll, and Tait 1999). Participation in lifelong learning is represented as preparing individuals for the flexibility and adaptability that will be required of them in the labour market. Discourses of globalisation and increased economic competition imply 'an acceleration in the de-skilling and re-skilling required to meet new labour needs' (Harvey 1991, 284–285) and require a flexible workforce: 'workers willing to acquire new skills and work practices so firms can cut costs and respond to the market and consumer demand' (Crowther 2004, 127). Such economic discourses are underpinned by a human capital rationale so that investment in education produces a skilled workforce which in turn generates competitiveness, economic growth and employment (e.g. Schultz 1961). Secondly, the need for greater participation in lifelong learning demands greater flexibility in the provision of learning so that flexible learning becomes a policy response to lifelong learning:

If Europe wants to retain its competitive edge at the top of the global value-added chain, the education system must be made more flexible, more effective and more easily accessible to a wider range of people. (OECD 2006, 2)

Returning to Rubenson's contention that a soft economic discourse currently promotes active citizenship alongside a dominant economic rationale, Field (2006) suggests that many European policy-makers believe that lifelong learning can be both 'an achievable strategy for competing in a fast-moving world market place' and 'a sensible way of tackling social inequality' (2006, 45). Brine (2006) contends, however, that the interrelated discourses of economic growth and social cohesion have resulted in 'absolute consistency' in the construction of two categories of learner in EU policy: high knowledge-skilled learners (graduates/postgraduates) for the knowledge *economy*, and low knowledge-skilled learners located in (or beyond) the knowledge *society*. High knowledge-skilled learners are privileged, while low knowledge-skilled learners are seen not only as 'at risk' but also as 'the risk' so that 'they stand accused of weakening the

country's ability to compete in the global economy' (Appleby and Bathmaker 2006, 709). Appleby and Bathmaker (2006) argue that lifelong learning policy has moved from a socially inclusive discourse of widening access to lifelong learning to a discourse of widening participation in higher education in order to enhance employability – a discourse which seems to be 'exclusive' in terms of both 'excluding or shutting out' and 'creating a privileged minority'. In a knowledge-based economy, 'those who have the lowest levels of skill and the weakest capacity for constant updating are less and less likely to find paid employment, particularly of a sustainable and reasonably secure type' (Field 2006, 5). Appleby and Bathmaker warn that lifelong learning policies that emphasise the high-order skills' needs of the knowledge economy act towards excluding low knowledge-skilled learners and make it even more difficult for them to access the education and the jobs that they need.

2.2. Flexibility in local educational settings

Policy discourses constitute lifelong learning and flexibility as objects that are knowable and known (Nicoll 1998), and thus these themes are carried into institutional contexts. This section considers how discourses of flexible learning impact on educational practice.

Examination of the literature reveals two common discourses of flexible learning within educational settings, those of *increasing access and accessibility*, and of *providing students with increased choice and control* (e.g. Collis and Moonen 2001; Willems 2005). Collis and Margaryan (2007; cited in Willems 2011) categorise these two conceptualisations as *logistical flexibility* and *pedagogical flexibility*. Logistical flexibility relates to practical aspects of educational provision and is typically operationalised as education that is provided out-of-hours, available off-campus, accessible 24/7 (Willems 2011). There are, however, limitations to logistical flexibility, with hidden inflexibilities that belie the popular 'anytime, anyplace, any pace' rhetoric. Selwyn (2011), for example, reports that distance learning students at a UK university typically chose to study at a distance because they anticipated a better 'fit' of learning into already busy lives and in order to 'free them up' to engage with learning in flexible ways as and when their changing circumstances allowed, but instead many students spent the duration of their course attempting to fit themselves around the demands of the course. Part-time/flexible programmes, which vary considerably across and between institutions in how they are structured and in the demands they place on students, are typically working within rigid institutional systems and rhythms with defined temporal structures and deadlines to be met. 'The label "flexible" cannot be applied to all non-face-to-face, off-campus, online, or out-of-hours educational practices and products' (Willems 2005, 433). Rather, 'for some, what is offered is indeed flexible and meets their needs and/or expectations. For others, however, what is offered is perceived to be inflexible, despite the espoused name' (Willems 2011, 37).

Pedagogical flexibility relates to greater personalisation of learning and the provision of increased choice and control to students in aspects of a programme such as learning content, organisation of learning, and formats and types of assessment (Willems 2011). In the UK, pedagogical flexibility has been offered as a means to avert 'a danger that flexible learning is restricted to a debate about effective means, and very little about ends' (Ryan and Tilbury 2013) so that flexible learning encompasses flexibility in pedagogical thinking and practice (incorporating ideas such as transformative capabilities and social learning), aimed at fostering adaptability and inclusivity in learners and educators.

A discourse that overlaps or interweaves with both logistical and pedagogical conceptualisations of flexibility is that of using technology to support learning. Bridgland and Blanchard (2001) make the point that ‘technology features prominently [in flexible learning], but it is not all about technology. It is about learning. It is just that technology has increased the opportunities and tools that may be taken and used in the pursuit of quality, flexible and lifelong learning’ (2001, 179). Advocates of technology-enhanced learning promote the use of approaches such as e-learning, virtual learning environments and blended learning to increase both logistical and pedagogical flexibility for all students so that students both full-time and part-time, on-campus and off-campus, may become flexible learners (e.g. Gordon 2014).

Meanings of flexible learning that focus on pedagogy point to a tension between learning effectiveness and cost-effectiveness (Chen 2003). At strategic level, flexible learning is typically viewed as a way of reducing costs and improving efficiency (Normand and Littlejohn 2006). There is little evidence, however, for the cost-effectiveness of flexible learning. In a review of studies on flexible learning, Chen (2003) reports that while many studies claim cost-effectiveness, very few of them are backed up by research or cost analysis. Chen found that where studies did offer cost analysis, they reported that in order to make learning more flexible, they had to put more resources and supports in place; these studies also reported that the people costs of flexible learning were typically underestimated, particularly in terms of additional demands on academic staff time. Gunn (2011) reports that anticipating increases in productivity through the use of flexible learning without considering pedagogy commonly leads to learning management systems being used mainly as repositories for course materials and administration. Gunn argues that in order to use flexible learning as a means to reducing teaching contact time and catering for increased student numbers but without compromising learning quality, it is necessary to engage students in alternatives to traditional face-to-face activities, such as online tutorials and simulations, online discussions, and online assessments – all of which require time and resources.

3. The Irish context

In the UK, ‘flexibility became one of the buzz words of 1990s academe’ as ‘the rise of new forms of flexibility coincided with the rise of lifelong learning as the dominant paradigm of post-compulsory education’ (Cloonan 2004, 176–188). It seems that the ‘policy epidemic’ (Levin 1998) has now spread to Ireland too. This section looks at Irish policy conceptualisations of flexible learning, and discusses the problematic implications of these conceptualisations.

3.1. Flexibility in Irish educational policy

The EU designated 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning, as a means to raising awareness across member states of the importance of developing lifelong learning opportunities for adults as a strategy for ‘raising the stock of human capital’ and addressing ‘the inadequacy of present education and training systems in meeting the challenge of long-term competitiveness’ (European Commission 1993). In 1996, during the Irish presidency of the EU, the then Minister of Education, Niamh Breathnach, speaking at the launch of the Irish contribution to the European Year of Lifelong Learning, urged that ‘we must seek to change the mindset surrounding traditional

education and training approaches and to encourage the provision and use of more open and flexible learning methods on an ongoing basis by all' (Cullen 1996, 4). Ireland's first white paper on adult education, *Learning for Life* (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2000), promised that 'flexible education and training options will be progressed, allied with a focus on addressing barriers to participation of those in the workplace in ongoing education and training' and confirmed that the Irish Government has 'elevated lifelong learning to a pivotal role in labour market policy' (2000, 17). More recently, the HEA continues to strongly promote a flexible learning agenda (e.g. HEA 2009, 2012), while the Irish Government's *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* calls for flexible learning in the context of a need for lifelong learning and upskilling among the workforce:

Higher education is the key to economic recovery in the short term and to longer-term prosperity ... The implications are clear: the educational level of the Irish population has to be raised ... People who are already employed need to raise their level of qualification and broaden their educational base. Unemployed people need new educational opportunities that are attuned to the demands of the new economy. (Ireland, Department of Education and Skills 2011, 29)

It appears that from its initial mobilisation in Irish public policy, lifelong learning has largely been framed in human capital terms of meeting the skills needs of the workforce, echoing the strongly economic discourses identified in the international literature. In this regard, flexibility takes a logistical emphasis, focusing on practical aspects of access, convenience and delivery, in order to 'substantially increase mature adult participation through flexible options which can be combined with family and work responsibilities' (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2000, 145). It could be argued that Irish public policy conceptualises lifelong learning and flexibility in this way simply because this was the prevailing discourse at the time that these topics began their migration into Irish public policy. This might be explained by Rubenson's (2004) contention that the early 1990s saw a shift from a humanistic to a strong economic policy interest in lifelong learning.

An alternative argument might be that economic discourses were taken up in Irish public policy because they aligned closely with Ireland's long-standing orientation to education. The Irish state has long regarded education as a form of investment, largely influenced by the Programmes for Economic Expansion of the 1960s, a succession of post-independence Ministers in the Department of Education who were 'in tune' with the dominance of economic considerations in political discourse, and an OECD report on education in Ireland, *Investment in Education*, published in 1965, which firmly established a link between increased investment in education and economic growth (White 2001). An economic boom in the late 1990s resulted in low unemployment rates, but produced a problem of skills shortages (White 2001). It appears that Ireland looked to the growing lifelong learning agenda in Europe for the solution to this problem. In 1998, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs² reported on skills gaps in engineering and computer science, and recommended the use of interventions such as modular and part-time courses, flexible course delivery arrangements and distance learning methods in order to rapidly increase the number of graduates in these areas. Later in 1998, Ireland's first green paper on adult education noted the 'serious mismatch between the available skill pool and the demand' (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 1998, 12) and

began the process of re-framing adult education within a broader agenda of lifelong learning.

Another alternative argument for why economic discourses of lifelong learning and flexibility are dominant might be that their focus on economic competitiveness resonates with Ireland's political economy model which focuses on 'winning high levels of foreign investment in cutting-edge high-tech sectors' (Kirby and Murphy 2011, 74). For many years, Ireland's growth has not come from capabilities developed within the economy, but rather has depended on the growth and innovation generated by multinationals attracted to Ireland:

Instead of generating a wealth-building strategy for the Irish nation, the state simply adapted to the needs of the firms in the global corporate environment. (Bradley, cited in Kirby and Murphy 2011, 75)

The mobilisation of lifelong learning and flexibility in the 1990s appears to have worked to reposition higher education in light of Ireland's heavy dependence on foreign investment. While higher education remained largely disconnected from other policy considerations until the 1990s (Hazelkorn and Massaro 2010), it seems that a new direction was brought about by Ireland's concern to 'serve the logic of competition and the needs of the external political economy' (Kirby and Murphy 2011, 61). This new direction would become even more important in the early 2000s, with the prospect of competing with lower-cost economies in Central and Eastern Europe as the EU gained new member states. Echoing the discourse of 'risk' encountered in the international literature, perhaps Ireland's mobilisation of discourses of lifelong learning and flexibility has been a form of 'risk management' in efforts to offset threats to its productivity and competitiveness? Evidence of this might be the framing of flexible higher education as serving the needs of business, with resources focused on the areas of particular importance to the foreign multinational companies operating in Ireland:

Globalisation is continuing apace, human capital has become highly mobile and competition for high level skills internationally in areas such as ICT and Life Sciences remains intense ... As skills needs change, the education and training system needs to respond and adapt accordingly. (Ireland, Department of Jobs, Enterprise, and Innovation 2012, 29)

Side-by-side with this human capital rationale is a knowledge economy discourse that also links education to the labour market:

The knowledge economy needs people who can renew and refresh their skills and competencies over the course of their lives. (Ireland, Department of Education and Skills 2011, 46)

Here, we see evidence of Appleby and Bathmaker's (2006) category of the valuable and privileged high knowledge-skilled learners working for the knowledge economy. The National Strategy proposes that 'knowledge' must meet Ireland's economic objectives (Ireland, Department of Education and Skills 2011). Irish public policy constitutes flexible learning as catering largely for 'working adults', that is adult learners who require up-skilling, re-skilling, re-employment or career progression:

Adults who become unemployed will require opportunities to re-engage with learning and to advance and update their knowledge and skills; while those in employment will also require up-skilling and retraining opportunities ... Over the coming years, the demand for higher education opportunities from the adult population will increase. Their needs can be met only by an increase in flexible learning opportunities, part-time provision, work-based learning and short, intensive skills programmes. (Ireland, Department of Education and Skills 2011, 46–47)

The Irish state does not seek to be identified as promoting a neo-liberal agenda (Finnegan 2008). In Irish politics, the rhetoric of employability and competitiveness continues to be combined with welfare and social justice (Finnegan 2008). Extending Brine's identification of two categories of learner in EU lifelong learning policy, it seems that Irish public policy constructs two categories of flexible learner: high knowledge-skilled learners who are employed (or have been employed) in the knowledge economy and who need flexible provision of higher education to up-skill and re-skill in order to maintain or improve their employability; and low knowledge-skilled learners from under-represented groups – which include 'learners with a disability, mature students, disadvantaged school-leavers and members of the Traveller community and ethnic minorities' (HEA 2004, 5) – who are targeted by the widening participation agenda in efforts to move them into the valuable high knowledge-skilled group. Irish public policy does not make it clear, however, how flexible learning will serve those who do not have the financial or personal resources to move into the high knowledge-skilled category.

For examples of how Irish flexible learning policy works to exclude under-represented groups, we can look at the current funding model for Irish higher education. The HEA differentiates between full-time on-campus enrolments and 'flexible learners', a category that includes all students involved in 'part-time, distance, e-learning, and in-service' education (HEA 2013a). The Free Fees Initiative covers tuition fees for full-time on-campus students, but part-time/flexible students are not eligible to apply. The Student Grant Scheme assists full-time on-campus students with maintenance costs while attending higher education, but part-time/flexible students are not eligible to apply. The Student Assistance Fund, funded by the Irish Government and part-funded by the European Social Fund, provides financial assistance for full-time higher education students who are experiencing financial difficulties, but part-time/flexible students are not eligible to apply. The Fund for Students with Disabilities allocates funding to higher education colleges for the provision of services and supports to full-time students with disabilities, but part-time/flexible students are not eligible to apply. There are further discrepancies between funding for full-time on-campus students and that for part-time/flexible students. While part-time/flexible students are not eligible for the Free Fees Initiative and must pay course fees, it could be argued that these fees are of a similar amount to the 'student contribution' which full-time students must pay despite their 'free fees' so that course fees create no real barrier to part-time/flexible participation. Full-time students, however, may apply for a full or part (50%) grant towards the student contribution fee under the Student Grant Scheme, for which part-time/flexible students are not eligible to apply. More significantly, part-time/flexible course fees cover tuition only, while the full-time student contribution fee contributes directly to the costs of providing student support services (HEA 2010a). A consequence of this funding model is that part-time/flexible students typically do not have full access to the range of student support services (academic, health and counselling, disability services, career services, chaplaincy and other supports) that full-time students can avail of. While most institutions

do provide some support services to part-time/flexible students, this is typically on a discretionary and limited basis. A related issue is that the HEA funding model does not take part-time/flexible students into account in the allocation of access funding to support and incentivise participation in higher education by under-represented groups so that while the HEA is setting new national and local targets for part-time/flexible learning, there are no targets or specific funding to incentivise equal access by under-represented groups in part-time/flexible education (HEA 2010b, 2012).

It seems clear that the HEA funding model undermines policy statements that offer flexibility and lifelong learning as strategies for enabling individuals from under-represented groups 'to enter and successfully participate in higher education, regardless of social, economic or cultural background' (HEA 2004, 5) and for 'transforming our present education system into one that values all members of our society equally' (HEA 2004, 10). While such statements claim to create equality of opportunity, 'this equality of opportunity seems to refer to those individuals who have the economic, personal and time resources to access educational services' (Grummell 2007, 189). The HEA does recognise the need for equality of provision and support for all students, without a part-time/full-time divide (e.g. HEA 2012), but this equality has yet to be realised in practice. In the meantime, it seems that flexible provision will best serve high knowledge-skilled learners who are likely to be least vulnerable to the lack of financial and other supports.

For another example of how Irish flexible learning policy has problematic implications in practice, we can look at the Irish Government's *Springboard* initiative, which aims to contribute to lifelong learning and flexible provision by offering free, part-time places in higher education to unemployed people who are actively seeking employment. While few would argue against enabling individuals to return to employment, the initiative seems to offer greater opportunities for some than for others. Programmes on offer are limited to qualifications in areas described as 'enterprise sectors ... tailored to labour-market needs' (HEA 2013a), ensuring that employers achieve 'the throughput of skilled, job-ready personnel that they need' (Springboard 2013). These areas currently include information and communications technology (ICT), international financial services, manufacturing, and skills for enterprise to trade internationally. Given the high-skill nature of the programmes on offer and the promise of employment in high-value sectors, it is likely that the initiative 'creams off' those most likely to succeed while the most disadvantaged are least able to participate, thus 'powerfully reinforcing their disadvantage' (Field 2006). Most of the programmes on offer look for participants with previous relevant qualifications and/or work experience so that the Springboard initiative offers no opportunities for the most disadvantaged groups. It also offers no real opportunities for individuals who meet the eligibility criteria but wish to up-skill in social studies, nursing or any other area outside of the narrow specified range.

The marketing content on the Springboard website promises 'to equip jobseekers with new skills in sectors with good employment prospects', while assuring applicants that 'up-skilling and cross-skilling for an employment growth areas has never been easier' (HEA 2013a; Springboard 2013). It seems likely that some individuals will take up Springboard courses in these 'enterprise sectors' to which they are not suited, in order to increase their chances of returning to work or perhaps to retain their income support payments for a longer period of time. The marketing content, however, makes no mention of the challenges of developing expertise in new specialisations or of the ensuing challenges of competing for jobs with graduates of full-time programmes who may have been immersed in the discipline for three or four years. The marketing content does not

address the nature of employment arrangements in the ICT and related high-tech industries which have ‘made stable long-term employment a rarity ... and consigned even the most highly skilled workers to a constant scramble to maintain their employability’ (Brown 2007, 6). Despite the popular discourse of the need for graduates to be adaptable and equipped with transferable or employability skills, Brown (2007) reports that employers in the software industry practise a high degree of selectivity in hiring, focusing on finding candidates with a precise combination of technical skills which have ‘fleeting rather than long-term usefulness’, with continuous technological innovation creating ‘a constant demand for new cutting edge skills while rendering older skills obsolete’ (2007, 102–103). So while completing an ‘accelerated’ one-year course may increase an individual’s employment opportunities for as long as the latest technology remains current, it does not preclude future risks to employment when the next big trend requires a different set of skills.

Irish flexible learning policy largely drives the strategic objectives of flexible learning within institutions. The system of core government funding for higher education is currently changing to phase in a new approach that will release up to 10% of the core grant on a performance-related basis, contingent on meeting agreed performance targets (HEA 2013b), based on national objectives which include ‘Increased numbers and proportions of entrants into flexible learning opportunities in higher education, into part-time or flexible/Springboard programmes’ (HEA 2013c). While it might be expected that flexible provision will expand in response to these targets, the fore-mentioned problems relating to flexible provision will apply again here. Most Irish institutions currently work on a selective ‘flexible differentiation’ model of part-time/flexible learning (Schuller et al. 1999), with an emphasis on responding to local demand, particularly the local labour market, and responding to external funding streams (e.g. for delivering Springboard courses). Flexible learning in Irish higher education is largely focused on provision at postgraduate level, for continuing professional development, up-skilling and re-skilling, typically in high-skill areas, and often in very narrow specialisations. In recent years, the drive for student numbers in Irish higher education has focused increasingly on the ‘value added’ of each student, resulting in the growing of postgraduate enrolments at a faster pace than undergraduate enrolments (e.g. Khoo, Healy, and Coate 2007). Harnessing flexible learning to this end ‘runs the risk of simply appealing to the already “education-rich” groups who wish to continue studying (having, no doubt, done very well out of the process already) and continuing to exclude the very people to whom we should be reaching out’ (Marks 2002, 5). There is little evidence of a ‘flexible integration’ model that would work towards creating a ‘seamless environment’ of full-time and part-time/flexible study on a ‘part-time friendly basis’, which might include block timetabling or a single timetable for full-time and part-time students based on an extension of the ‘normal’ day; formal access of all students to *all* course offerings on either a full-time or part-time/flexible basis; and longer opening hours for facilities, administrative and student support services (Schuller et al. 1999). Public policy that incentivised such enduring part-time/flexible access throughout institutions might help to accomplish Irish policy aspirations to increase access to under-represented groups.

3.2. Flexibility in Irish educational settings

The review of Irish flexible learning policy has revealed problematic implications of Irish flexible learning policy particularly relating to funding and at strategic level. There is

evidence, however, that in Ireland, just as internationally, the focus of flexibility for many educators is largely on how flexible learning might improve educational practice for all students. While there is a scarcity of research on flexibility in higher education in Ireland, content analysis on the proceedings of the NAIRTL³ 'Flexible Learning' conference in 2010 suggests some meanings of flexible learning in Irish educational settings. One meaning evident in the NAIRTL conference contributions focuses on student-centred learning, with flexible learning characterised as the use of problem-based learning, self-directed learning, student inquiry, individualised learning, self- and peer-assessment or other student-centred approaches. Running through this discourse is a theme of increasing student choice, for example, using learning contracts to enable students to negotiate module content or portfolios to enable students to select the evidence that best demonstrated their achievement of learning outcomes. A second discourse evident in the NAIRTL conference contributions is that of technology-mediated learning, characterised as the use of strategies such as virtual learning environments, e-learning, multimedia, blended learning, podcasting, screen-casting, webinars and open educational resources (NAIRTL 2010). A third discourse is that of access and participation, with flexible learning characterised as approaches such as catering for mature students, provision of continuing professional development and in-service learning, distance learning, open learning, work-based learning and web-based student services (NAIRTL 2010).

While one conference does not provide conclusive evidence of current thinking on flexible learning, it is interesting that the meanings emerging from its proceedings are similar to those identified in the international literature. It is significant that while for many educators within institutions, flexible learning is driven by pedagogical interests that focus on greater personalisation of learning and enhancing the educational experience for all students, such pedagogical considerations are missing from Irish flexible learning policy. Instead, a divide between part-time/flexible students and full-time on-campus students seems to work, if not to constitute full-time on-campus education as inflexible, then at least to ignore the opportunities offered by flexible learning to the entire student body. Irish policy constitutes part-time and flexible learning as beneficial and straightforward approaches and, significantly, as cost-effective means of expanding access and supporting mass participation (HEA 2012). As the review of international literature has already shown, estimating the cost-effectiveness of flexible learning is not a simple or straightforward task. Similarly, implementing flexible learning in a systematic way is not a simple or straightforward task. For example, while Irish policy acknowledges that a more flexible system requires 'more flexible working practices' (Ireland, Department of Education and Skills 2011, 118), there is no elaboration on how the significant culture shift might be negotiated in order to implement the flexible employment contracts that would facilitate new ways of teaching and more open-ended availability of staff.

4. Final thoughts and conclusions

This paper maintains that Irish flexible learning policy is problematic because it is underpinned mainly by a human capital rationale. This is not to argue against the value and benefits of increasing human capital, both in terms of economic development for Irish society, and in terms of employment and standard of living for individuals. However, Irish flexible learning policy implies, at least implicitly, that investment in human capital in the form of increased participation in higher education guarantees

economic improvement for society. Schuller (2001) warns against making such simplistic assumptions about the relationship between human capital and economic performance:

Technological innovation and human capital are both very powerful in their own terms, and essential features of prosperity, but they cannot be taken out of their contexts of social relationships ... For policy-makers it means that merely increasing the stock of human capital in any given society will not ensure social or economic progress. It may even impede it, by further isolating some groups who do not have access to it, and whose position is relatively further weakened by the fact that most others are gaining skills and qualifications. Their isolation in turn may have a long-term negative impact on the benefit of human capital growth even to the skilled and qualified. (Schuller 2001)

Irish flexible learning policy seems to ignore the importance of other types of capital, such as the identity capital and social capital identified by the UK IFLL, without which 'people will find it hard both to build up the skills and qualifications which make up human capital, and to apply them productively' (Schuller and Watson 2009).

Irish policy positions Irish adults as 'wishing to engage with higher education' but obstructed by the 'major bottleneck' of 'very limited provision and choice of part-time, flexible learning opportunities' (HEA 2009, 4). The Irish Government's National Strategy for Higher Education positions individuals in a similar way:

People want to study from home or from their workplace. People want to – and need to – move between employment and education several times during their lives. People want to pursue education in parallel with employment. (Ireland, Department of Education and Skills 2011, 35–36)

A growing body of literature, however, conceptualises lifelong learning as a form of neo-liberal 'governmentality' (Foucault, cited in Biesta 2008), which acts to shape human conduct 'by working through the desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs of various actors' (Dean 2009, 18). Lifelong learning is 'the discourse of autonomous and independent individuals who are responsible for updating their skills in order to achieve their place in society' (Olssen 2006, 223). Taking responsibility for their own individual futures presents ideas of choice and individual freedom as empowering (Gosme 2002), and may allow for more subjective decision-making and choice in life planning, but it also involves negotiating uncertainty and risk (Field 2006, 70). Individuals who invest in continued up-skilling and re-skilling are likely to expect financial and occupational returns on their investments so that increasing their employability should lead to employment or career progression. What is the impact if those expectations are not met? In a UK study involving part-time students, Schuller et al. (1999) report that most students entering part-time higher education expected some 'occupational advantage' from their studies, either with their current employer or through a change of jobs, but that these were typically non-specific and uncertain so that they rarely knew how or when this might occur. They also report that many students entered part-time courses in efforts to hold on to existing jobs rather than to promote career development, and some entered as a 'desperate' response to unemployment (Schuller et al. 1999). While lifelong and flexible learning policies largely construct learners as motivated and willing volunteers, a significant proportion of adults regard learning 'as something they have to do if they are to survive and thrive in the risk society' (Field 2006, 131).

Conceptualisations of lifelong and flexible learning that focus solely or predominantly on human capital do not acknowledge the many reasons why people do not or cannot participate, including the gaps in funding and support discussed in this paper. Such conceptualisations also do not acknowledge that many people participate in higher education for reasons that have nothing to do with raising personal or national stocks of human capital. In their study involving part-time students, Schuller et al. (1999) found that while most students hoped for occupational returns from their studies, most of them also sought personal returns – indeed for many students, personal motives were at least as important for the very reason that the occupational returns were so uncertain.

This paper has revealed some problems and tensions relating to Irish flexible learning policy, including the possibility that programmes labelled as ‘flexible’ may come with limitations and hidden inflexibilities; a divide between full-time on-campus students and part-time/flexible learners, which tends to ignore the opportunities offered by flexible learning to the entire student body; a tension between learning effectiveness and cost-effectiveness; gaps in funding and support for part-time/flexible students, which works against the participation of disadvantaged groups; a selective rather than integrated approach to part-time/flexible learning; and an emphasis on logistical flexibility with little attention to pedagogical concerns and learning quality. It remains to be seen how Irish flexible learning policy will address such problems and tensions. It remains to be seen whether the predicted expansion of flexible higher education in Ireland truly works to ‘transform our present education system into one that values all members of our society equally’ (HEA 2004, 10). The aim of this paper has been to encourage reflection, rather than to provide answers. In the context of the growing flexible learning agenda in Ireland, it is imperative that we interrogate how discourses of flexibility and flexible learning are mobilised in Irish higher education, and to what purposes.

Notes

1. The HEA is the statutory planning and development body for higher education and research in Ireland. The HEA is the funding authority for the universities, institutes of technology and other designated higher education institutions. Website: <http://www.heai.ie/>.
2. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) advises the Irish government on future skills needs and other issues impacting on Ireland’s enterprise and economic growth. Website: <http://www.skillsireland.ie/>.
3. NAIRTL is Ireland’s National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning. Website: <http://www.nairtl.ie/>.

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