

## **RESEARCH REPORT**

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### **Propensity to lifelong learning: Reflections of a research student**

Robert D. White  
PhD candidate  
Faculty of Education  
University of Southern Queensland

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My tertiary learning journey began as a research assistant reviewing educational literature. I wondered why, among the mountain of lifelong learning literature, I could find nothing that explained why people are or are not lifelong learners. It appeared to be taken for granted by policy-makers, decision-makers and researchers that everyone either is, can or will be a lifelong learner. It appeared that no one had asked the question “What makes a lifelong learner?” So I asked the question and began a masters degree.

Eventually I found the British work of Gorard and Selwyn (2005). They had asked the question in the British context and, after

conducting 1001 interviews, put forward an answer which included seven determinants. As five of their determinants were located in early childhood and two in adult life, I began to contemplate the implications for early childhood education and for adult learning. Mindful of Osborne's (2002) caution about making international comparisons, I conducted a pilot study investigating whether there might be a *prima facie* case for the proposition that the British findings are, or may be, either generalisable or transferable to the Australian context. Asking "What makes an Australian lifelong learner?" became the topic of my masters research project and now my doctoral study.

From the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2004) to Education Queensland (Moran 2000), lifelong learning for all has been advocated as both an economic and a social and individual good. There has been little discussion of the questions 'Who says?' and 'How do we know?' These questions suggest interesting implications for educational equity and policy. I am drawing out these implications by asking whether everyone can in fact be a lifelong learner, whether everyone wishes to be a lifelong learner, and what influences or determines propensity to lifelong learning.

It is fundamental to the equity of lifelong learning policy that answers to such questions be known, and the literature indicates that, with the exception of Britain, the questions are not being asked. It is arguably of concern that 'the determinants of participation are so widely misunderstood' (Gorard & Selwyn, 2003: Background section, para. 1). Laver (1996:5) made a similar observation about the Australian context: 'Some of the causal connections between students and lifelong learning are not easily understood'.

The Adult Learning @ Home research project (<http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/ict/>) is arguably the seminal work on the determinants of lifelong learning. This British work was conducted by researchers Stephen Gorard, Neil Selwyn, John Furlong and Louise Madden between 2002 and 2004. Seven determinants of lifelong learning were identified, none of which in terms of lifespan are located

between early childhood and adult life. The key social determinants were found to be time (of birth), place (of birth), gender, family (influence) and initial schooling (influence). It was found that experience of initial schooling is the key influence of post-compulsory learning; experience of work and adult family life are the key influences of later-life learning.

Gorard and Selwyn (2005:1205) claimed that 'the vast majority of variation in patterns of participation that can be explained is explained by variables that we could have known when each person was born'. Their discussion of learning trajectories also indicates that whilst trajectories are predictable they are not set for life. They also found that over a third of the adult British population do not participate in any post-compulsory learning, and that the usual barriers to access were not the explanation. Watson (2003) has found similar rates of non-participation in Australia. Using an adaptation of Gorard and Selwyn's instrument with a small local sample, I found a *prima facie* case that the British findings may indeed be generalisable or transferable to the Australian context (White 2006).

As a typical type one personality I love a cause, something that matters, something that makes a difference. The fundamental question of what makes a lifelong learner has provoked my curiosity about an issue which is increasingly significant to society generally and individuals particularly; its answer matters and may make a difference. My work so far has suggested some particularly interesting answers to the questions I am posing. As is typical of research, one thing leads to another and researchers' curiosity draws them ever onwards towards outcomes which add to knowledge, contribute to society, and provide personal satisfaction for the researcher. I am no exception and I love it.

## **References**

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### **About the author**

**Robert White** lives in Toowoomba, South East Queensland, and is currently a doctoral candidate with the Faculty of Education, University of Southern Queensland. Whilst his doctoral study and main area of interest lies in lifelong learning, he is also involved in teaching international students and researching transnational learning and teaching.

### **Contact details**

Faculty of Education, University of Southern Queensland, West Street, Toowoomba, Queensland 4350

Tel: (07) 4631 5407

Email: [whiter@usq.edu.au](mailto:whiter@usq.edu.au)