

Policy Review: UK Strategy for Transforming Later Lives

REVIEWED BY BRIAN DOONEY

The Centre for Ageing Better, an independent charitable foundation in the UK, launched its *Strategy for Transforming Later Lives* in July 2018. It highlighted the fact that we are living longer than ever before: ‘Someone aged 65 today can expect to live to 85, nearly ten years longer than their parents’ generation’. The challenge facing society today is how ‘to add life to those years’. To meet this challenge, the *Strategy* specifies four priority goals: Healthy Ageing, Fulfilling Work, Connected Communities, Safe and Accessible Housing.

Health is fundamental to quality of life, enabling us to remain independent, to work or be engaged in our local community, to maintain social connections, relationships with family and friends that give meaning and purpose to our lives.

Fulfilling work also affects quality of life, particularly in terms of confidence, health, wellbeing, sense of meaning and purpose. However, as the Centre for Ageing Better points out, employment rates fall off rapidly from the age of 55 onwards, emphasising the need to improve workplace practices and challenge ageism in ‘recruitment, development and progression’¹.

Connected communities help to establish social connections, build strong and supportive relationships across generations, encouraging people to remain active and engaged. They are a vital resource in health and wellbeing, countering poverty, loneliness, alienation or disconnection.

Safe and Accessible Housing has a bearing on health, work and community, as it serves to maintain and improve physical and mental health, wellbeing and social connections.

1 Centre for Ageing Better, *Transforming Later Lives* (2018, p.7).

The significance of the *Strategy for Transforming Later Lives* for adult education is clear in the context of those priority goals, in particular health, work and community. It enforces the value of lifelong learning and the crucial role it plays in *adding quality of life* to later years. As David Mallows pointed out in *The Adult Learner* (2018), the wider benefits of adult education are critical. Citing Tom Schuller's review of these benefits, both in terms of direct and indirect impacts, he noted:

Schuller also suggests that adult education has an impact at various different levels: individual, household, community, society. And that these levels overlap – what benefits the community will also potentially benefit the individual. He presents evidence of the impact of participation in adult education, in three specific domains: health, work, and community.

Mallows suggests that adult learning can have a positive impact on physical health (smoking cessation, amount of exercise taken, nutrition, lower risk of coronary heart disease, reduction in drug abuse); and mental health (identity, coping, a sense of purpose in life, wellbeing, life satisfaction, onset and management of dementia)².

This view corresponds with that of Sabrina Brennan who, in the recent HELLIN Conference 2018, argued that:

Lifelong learning results in a range of positive outcomes including: improvements to quality of life and wellbeing, an overall increase in mental activity, acquisition of new skills and reduced risk of social isolation which, in turn, is associated with cognitive decline and increased risk of morbidity and mortality. Lifelong learning also benefits brain health, reducing dementia risk and increasing chances of living independently in later life. Education is the most broadly and consistently successful cognitive enhancer, better even than drugs or sophisticated technology³.

Adult education clearly adds life to all age groups, including children ('it also has an impact on children's health and wellbeing as adult learners are more likely to engage in their children's education, leading to better outcomes for the

2 Mallows, D. 2018. Adult learning, Upskilling Pathways, and the Adult Learner. *The Adult Learner*, p. 11.

3 Brennan, S. 2018. *Transitions: Lifelong Learning and Higher Education Conference* Programme. HELLIN, 7 December, Maynooth.

child⁴). For Age and Opportunity its benefit for later life cannot be understated as its impact registers on a whole range of levels, including hopes and dreams. Which is why I often think that Yeats's well-known poem, often read in a romantic context, speaks even more eloquently for those who choose, in later life, to return to education. It is never too late to dream.

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

4 Yeats, W.B. n.d. *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*.

Policy Review: A Review of ‘Digital Transformation: Assessing the Impact of Digitalisation on Ireland’s Workforce’

REVIEWED BY KATHERINE GRIFFIN

Overview

Digital Transformation: Assessing the Impact of Digitalisation on Ireland’s Workforce is a recent study from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs on the impacts of the adoption of digital technologies over the years 2018 to 2023. This study provides insights on the impacts that the adoption of digital technologies will have on workers by sector, occupation and region. It also identifies five key areas of focus for Ireland to continue to thrive in an increasingly digitalised landscape.

Digital Transformation is an in-depth yet accessible study based on a large volume of desk research and a sectoral occupational quantitative model. The study opens by mapping out each of the key technologies (referred to as ‘innovation accelerators’) that are transforming enterprises today. The study incorporates practical examples of how they are applied, which ensures that a potentially abstract subject matter is accessible to the uninitiated reader. Interviews with policymakers and key informants from industry and engagement with the Regional Skills Fora ensure that perspectives from across sectors and regions are voiced. Several employee interviews form a snapshot of how people in the here and now are responding to change within their jobs. These elements form a thorough, comprehensible assessment of the impacts of digitalisation in Ireland over the next five years.

Key Findings

Digital Transformation forecasts strong overall employment growth for the economy over the next five years. The majority of sectors in the Irish economy are expected to be employing more people in 2023 than in 2018, with overall employment at levels never witnessed before in Ireland. However, the growing

adoption of technologies is disrupting traditional job roles and transforming the world of work, with one in three jobs in Ireland at high risk of being disrupted by digitalisation¹. Therefore, despite a strong overall increase in employment to 2023, the study predicts that digitalisation will lead to a slow in this growth, generating a net hypothetical loss of 46,000 jobs. In this context, it will be important for public bodies to work with employers to identify where job losses are likely to occur and, thereafter, to support employees to retrain and reskill for new environments. As a result, the topic of lifelong learning becomes a focal point within this study.

Digital Transformation acknowledges that there is much work underway to respond to the impacts of increased digitalisation. The study outlines a number of programmes and initiatives in operation which promote lifelong learning. This includes EXPLORE, Springboard+, Skillnet Ireland and Skills to Advance, all of which are detailed further throughout the report. Nevertheless, a strong emphasis is placed on ensuring that the systems in place have the capacity to meet the ongoing and future challenges of digitalisation.

Key Implications

Following its analysis, *Digital Transformation* identified the following five key areas of focus for Ireland moving forward:

- **Vision.** Clear goals should be set by Government that cover common enablers that are necessary to ensure a sound infrastructure is available for enterprises to build on.
- **Collaboration.** Close collaboration between state and non-state bodies will help Ireland respond to change.
- **Data.** Information is becoming increasingly important to enterprises. Government agencies should continue to focus on working with industry to identify where data can help drive business development.
- **Technology.** The success of enterprise will result from how they interpret and use the data provided to them by new technologies and how they respond to the emergence of disruptive technologies.

1 'High risk' is defined as a probability greater than 70%.

- **Skills.** Enterprises have recognised that to be successful in their adoption of digital technologies, they will need a diverse set of skills, in addition to technical skills and high levels of IT literacy. Transversal skills such as leadership, interpersonal skills and business skills were identified as particularly important throughout the study.

The central message of *Digital Transformation* is that, while Ireland is currently at the early stages of digitalisation, its impacts will become more pronounced over the next decade. The study concludes by addressing the Government to identify the opportunities ahead and to ensure that its existing systems and policies are scaled up and ambitious enough to respond to the challenges that will accompany a rapidly changing world of work. This is not to imply that this study is for policymakers only. *Digital Transformation* is a worthwhile read for multiple audiences, providing academia, enterprise and workers across Ireland with important signs of change ahead.

Book Review: Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education

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ISBN: 978-1-137-56973-8

REVIEWED BY BAIRBRE FLEMING

Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education is a welcome and important contribution to our understanding of access and participation issues. The book identifies the key themes and paradoxes implicit in the policy and practice of access in the Irish sector. It interrogates the ‘access agenda’ in relation to policy, pedagogy and practice over the last two decades in Ireland. The authors evoke ‘the idea of a university’ in the context of widening participation (WP) and weave a compelling and engaging range of research and policy reviews to interrogate access and WP in Ireland. This is achieved through critiquing the development and evolution of access initiatives in the sector. The authors draw on a range of theorists to frame their work, including Freire, Habermas and Bourdieu. The outcome is an accessible resource which helps expand our understanding and interrogate our views of access to Higher Education. The book fills a void, as it is the first book of its kind that offers an expansive and coherent study across a range of literature and research.

The book is written in three sections. The first of these tells the story of access, against a historical, policy and theoretical backdrop. The trends and theories are set in the context of international trends. The writers demonstrate their impressive range of scholarship and expertise in their capacity to position access in a range of contexts. The writer(s) argue that that ‘Irish public policy is formulated with a not very explicit (but real) neoliberal framework’ (p. 12).

The second section focuses on the student, with an exploration of the various experiences of different under-represented groups in Irish higher education – students from low income households, students with disabilities, mature and part-time students, women and ethnic groups whether travellers or migrants. These various chapters are significant contributions in their own right, offering

the reader new and alternative data and understanding of the discrete groups and their challenges in accessing higher education. The various challenges students face, either through disability, invisibility or inequity are all elaborated in these chapters. The writers utilise an expansive body of literature and data to support and contextualise access, generously acknowledging the positives, while highlighting the various paradoxes and assumptions that relate to the access agenda.

The third and final section captures the stories and themes from the first two sections and discusses the implications of these, with a particular emphasis on learning and teaching and student retention.

This book is both provocative and instructive. There is a helpful range of cross-referencing which brings a coherence to the piece which is often missing from an edited collection. The editors challenge the reader to critique various access initiatives – reframing the familiar access stories to offer a contrarian view, for example, ‘the extent to which HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] are relying on individual students’ resilience to overcome the biographical pressure that accompany [the] transition into a middle-class space is remarkable but hardly praiseworthy’ (p. 157). The writer of this piece on working classes access to HE reiterates the importance of engaging directly with students to ‘counter deficit discourses and enhance student agency’.

Each writer takes the opportunity to challenge complacency and to test those assumptions that we all have in relation to access initiatives. For example in the chapter on the mechanics of access categories and routes the writers argue that ‘the very need for targeted access programmes is symbolic, as well as symptomatic, of more entrenched structural problems regarding the unequal distribution of educational life chances more generally’ (p. 91). The writers cover some familiar ground in their various treatments, but typically with an alternative twist. For example, in discussing *Access and Widening Participation – stories from the policy domain*, the writer evokes a ‘Dear John’ letter to explore policy prerogatives. The elaboration of the Minister of Education’s letter in 2013 to the Chairman of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) is a memorable and inventive way to capture and consider policy prerogatives, and to highlight the absence of social justice of cultural enrichment as critical.

In spite of its dense and nuanced content, the various writers and editors succeed in conveying a compelling and fluent account of access and widening

participation. The editors carry the story well throughout and use some of the conventions of a story teller to draw the various strands and themes together. The introduction and conclusion are beautifully crafted, with the writers evoking visual and dramatic analogies to convey and provoke access as a Cinderella and 'with access we have been mainly occupied with the stage directions' (p. 90).

This book should be required reading for anyone involved in policy, access practice or educational research. The editors have created a compelling tale, with several familiar actors but with an alternative view of the potential plot.