Foreword

Future work and learning in a disrupted world: 'The Best Chance for All'

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A global grand challenge

This Special Issue, devoted to micro-credentials and qualifications for future work and learning in a disrupted world, is a welcome and critically timed contribution to educational theorising and practice internationally. COVID-19 has accelerated Industry 4.0's pervasive labour market disruption. Digitisation's efficiencies have been rapidly embraced and broadly up-scaled as a matter of necessity. Many industries and professions have fast tracked digitalisation to transform pre-pandemic business models for current and future sustainability. We have seen all education sectors – Kindergarten to Year 12 (K-12), vocational education and training/ further education (VET/FE) and higher education (HE) – digitise and digitalise to varying degrees in their rapid move to emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020). Robust evaluation will be needed to assess the efficacy of that pedagogical triaging – our well-intentioned 'panic-gogy' (Kamenetz, 2020) – to inform the quality and fitness-for-future-purpose of that online pivot. In the meantime, HE's students and graduates emerge from 2020 wanting to support and apply their studies in a challenging job market that was already weakening pre-pandemic and has now worsened (for example in the Australian context, Social Research Centre, 2020), especially for young people. If that was not enough, significant and underlying issues of climate change, reconciliation with First Nations, demographic change and globalisation continue to have implications for equal and equitable participation in the full range of life opportunities, including in meaningful paid work. In brief, the context for this Special Issue is an international grand challenge writ very large.

Given the enormity of the challenge, this introductory piece will focus primarily on Australian examples as a mechanism to identify issues central to evolving post-secondary/ post-18 education and training responses. It will suggest that addressing the future of learning and its credentialing requires policy coherence and holism for nation (re)building. As an agentic collective, actors across a range of political, social and economic institutions and systems must agree and articulate an overarching vision and strategy for inclusive 'learning in a disrupted world', built on two new educational entitlements. First, that *Lifelong learning must become a practical reality for [all]* (Noonan et al., 2019, p. 8; AlphaBeta, 2019; United Nations, 2020) and, secondly, that future economic productivity is grounded in a universal entitlement to tertiary education as foundational to workforce entry (Business Council of Australia, 2017; Monash Commission, 2018; Noonan et al., 2019). This latter picks up consistent advice from government that more than 90% of new jobs expected to be created in Australia by 2024 will require a post-secondary qualification (Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, 2020).

If we are to assure coherence, diversity and flexibility in learning provision, its sites and types (formal, non-formal, informal, macro, micro or other), learners' needs over their lifespans must be central to the joining-up of currently disparate policy forays. Continuing fragmentation of the education and training agenda is not in the national interest for recovery and levelling-up, nor will it realise individual learner potential for active citizenship in a fair and enterprising democracy. Employers and workers, young and adult alike, must have *a well-informed appreciation of the purpose of different qualifications and the relationship between [them]* as they proceed to post-secondary education and training and go on to up- and/or re-skill as necessary (Noonan et al., 2019, p. 8). Particularly, *Qualification outcomes [must] be relevant, understood, and trusted* (Noonan et al., 2019, p. 8). Australia is not even close to such policy coherence. Nonetheless, how we re-imagine our educational infrastructure for a more effective and equitable lifelong learning ecosystem is now the pressing social and economic imperative. Fairness and prosperity must proceed hand-in-hand. No person, community or region can be left behind. As the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) sets out in its long-term strategic vision for Student Equity 2030 titled *The Best Chance for All* (Zacharias & Brett, 2019, p. 6)

> *Australia's future depends on all of its people, whoever and wherever they are, being enabled to successfully engage in beneficial lifelong learning.*

Consensus for transformational change, with learner equity at the centre

Significant change is required. And the consensus of multiple recent national examinations, when an attempt is made to stitch them all together, is that nothing less that transformational, rather than incremental, change will suffice. For example, an expansive and inclusive agenda has been canvassed in recent reviews: of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (Noonan et al., 2019); of VET (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019); of Senior Secondary Pathways (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020); and for a Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine, 2019)). Industry reports such as those from the Australian Industry Group (2019) and the Business Council of Australia (2017) have called for bold re-visioning. Think tank contributions abound, such as those from: the McKell Institute (Biddle & Cavanough, 2019); the Mitchell Institute (Dawkins, Hurley & Noonan, 2019); the Monash Commission (2018); and the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education (Locke & French, 2019). More recently still, we have seen jointly conceived visions, shared across select tertiary education and employer bodies (for example, Australian Industry Group et al., 2020).

In 2021, much in these discussions is not new, though the urgency for integrated and coordinated action has escalated. Certainly, the centrality of equity and equality to educational opportunity as the *bedrock* of socially cohesive, inclusive and flourishing societies has been long encapsulated as a *global common good* (United Nations, 2020, p. 3). What is new, or at least freshly presented, are three matters. First, as the necessity for lifelong learning is understood and accepted, the language of rights has emerged, with lifelong learning being elevated to a *fundamental human right* (United Nations, 2020, p. 3), if not also worthy of safeguarding as a *statutory right* (Independent Commission on the College of the Future, 2020, p. 14). Secondly, as is so often the case in disrupted times, the burden of the pandemic (on top of Industry 4.0) has not fallen equally. Educational inequality has been exacerbated by COVID-19 and the consequent loss of learning due to online delivery in schooling for example (Lamb et al., 2020), and especially for disadvantaged students, will not be easily mitigated (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). Long-standing educational inequities and system vulnerabilities have been accentuated, chief amongst them the compounding impact on participation and attainment of digital poverty, financial precarity and fragile mental wellbeing. There is now a new COVID generation of learners and workers experiencing extreme and exacerbated disadvantage.

The third matter, the specific focus of this Special Issue, is that the pandemic has accelerated a shift in focus and rhetoric, from macro-qualifications (workforce entry-level degrees and certificates) to shorter form credentials, to aid the up- and/or re-skilling of displaced workers for their return to

employment. In response to COVID-19, there has been a dazzling array of free and low cost short courses offered by VET/FE and HE providers, frequently with government support. Also on offer is a range of other opportunities, in what Oliver (2020, p. 6) describes as a *learning for earning* marketplace that takes *industry-integrated education to a new level*. Pointing specifically to Coursera's Professional Certificates and Google's Career Certificates, Oliver (2020, p. 6) cautions that *Traditional providers should take note, particularly if they plan to compete through microcredentials*.

At their best, shorter, stackable (micro)credentials should allow for flexibility and learning pathways for those who do not necessarily want or need an expensive and [inflexible] formal qualification. In that spirit, in September 2020, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson committed to creating a 'Lifetime Skills Guarantee' to provide flexible loan funding for four years of post-18 education, permitting learners to *break up their study into segments, transfer credits between colleges and university, and enable more part-time study… rather than having to study in one three or four year block* (United Kingdom Government, 2020, n.p.). If implemented effectively and efficiently, this is good news for our UK brethren, particularly if flexible entry and credentialed exit points are enabled for stackable qualifications that are recognised and portable across providers. In Australia however, absent an integrated ecosystemic approach, caution should be exercised to assure meaningful outcomes for already disadvantaged learners who might otherwise be encouraged to forego trusted macro-credentials in favour of the untested promise of stackable micro-learning. As UNESCO has identified, the risk is that *the stacking to form a macro-credential will not be conceptually sound and… will not be recognizable by employers. Hence stacking… may not always lead to coherent qualifications* (Chakroun & Keevy, 2018, p. 37). Identifying another ecosystemic issue, Moodie and Wheelahan (2020, p. 12) also observe that *Micro credentials are the most recent attempt to improve the match between education and work by changing education, while leaving work [again] unchanged*.

The collective will for a connected lifelong learning ecosystem

It seems almost impossible to overstate the urgency for collective endeavour to pursue the topics canvassed in this Special Issue. All education sectors – K-12, VET/FE, HE and connected tertiary, both public and private – must come together with government, business, industry, professions, communities, workers and learners, to ensure that lifelong learning is actuated as a universal entitlement and is supported by portability of learning across multi-directional pathways over the lifespan.

But there are many challenges to delivering on such a complex change agenda in a post-pandemic world. Our education sectors from high chair to higher education and beyond are siloed and disconnected. Post-secondary pathways are opaque – *linear and hierarchical* (Noonan et al., 2019, p. 8) – stymied by unbalanced funding arrangements, inadequate financial support for students, and the absence in Australia of strong intergovernmental cooperation between the Commonwealth, States and Territories for funding and policy coherence. To take the Australian example again, participation in VET has fallen dramatically in tandem with its reducing funding. This has fueled a decline in tertiary participation overall that the Mitchell Institute says is expected to continue well into the 2020s (Dawkins, Hurley & Noonan, 2019).

Real flexibility for learners is nascent at best. There is little support to enable, let alone inform, choice as to the how, when, where and what of foundational learning and iterative skills' acquisition, nor are there processes to facilitate easy credit transfer and recognition of prior learning and experience. Critical, oft-cited contingencies remain in the unimplemented basket. These include: policy and pragmatic infrastructure to facilitate learner agency (for example, by way of universal access to quality careers advising and *labour market literacy* (Oliver, 2020, p. 3)); languishing AQF reform; and the delivery of a 'Lifelong Learning Account' (for example, as per the American Workforce Policy Advisory Board, 2019). We continue to struggle with widening participation and attainment goals for many underserved cohorts; most particularly in the Australian context, for First Nations and regional and remote learners (Zacharias & Brett, 2019). And connecting tertiary education to the workplace as a

conjoint enterprise remains elusive and aspirational, though occasional bright spots appear (for example, Australian Industry Group et al., 2020). The solutions to many of these challenges are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, further exhorting ecosystemic responses. For example: the life-wide aggregation of all learning by agentic learners in a Lifelong Learning Account enables every citizen to *track, credit and verify learning,… to learn, train and re-skill as their needs and circumstances change* (Monash Commission, 2017, p. 16), *incentivis[ing] lifelong curation* of learning gain (Oliver, 2020, p. 12).

It cannot be beyond national wit and thought leadership to tackle this social and economic crisis. A number of jurisdictions are already quite advanced. For example, the Scottish government has commissioned the Scottish Funding Council to review that nation's colleges and universities for coherence and sustainability. A Phase 1 Report has been delivered, identifying ten key themes for a more *integrated, connected tertiary education and skills eco-system for learners and employers*; one where students and equalities are positioned *at the heart of everything we do* and where long-term relationships between educational institutions and employers and industry are nurtured (Scottish Funding Council, 2020, p. 5). This is hard and long-term strategising to build patient capital for real national transformation; the activating of rare collective will to progress thought and action beyond political short-termism and sectoral self-interest. If we are really dreaming large, we could do worse than look to the recent work of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) (2020). The UIL's framing of a 'culture of lifelong learning' positions learning as occurring *anytime* (from birth to death) and *anywhere* (sites or types), being undertaken by *anyone* (all peoples) about *anything*. Lifelong learning, enacted through deep cultural and societal transformation, is powerfully positioned as central to many critical policy goals. The UIL speaks of: societies that understand themselves as *learning societies* (2019, p. 8); people who identify as *learners throughout their lives* (2019, p. 8); schools and tertiary institutions transformed into *lifelong learning institutions* (2019, p. 9) available to all community members; and the *lifelong learning culture [being] rooted in the labour market, which means reengineering and revitalizing workplace learning* (2019, p. 39).

We can do this. These are global imperatives and much of the big thinking is quite advanced. As I have sought to illustrate with some Australian context as the provocation, there are existing precedents for ecosystemic visioning and actioning that reimagine joined-up, age-agnostic, responsive education and training. But we must act collectively to co-design *and implement* long-term solutions and eschew the easy temptation to perpetuate existing siloed efforts. To do otherwise will not deliver 'The Best Chance for All', nor will it realise individualised success via supported learning journeys, regardless of background or circumstances. Specifically, it will not deliver for future work and learning in a disrupted world.

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