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# Emerging systems of recurrent education

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## Functions of recurrent education

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Two decades ago, around the time when recurrent education was first proposed as a planning strategy for the implementation of lifelong education, concern with the systematic provision of post-initial education and training to workers on the labour market was marginal compared with the widespread interest in the expansion of upper-secondary schooling for youth and higher education for mainly young adults. The development of recurrent education during the early 1970s was influenced by serious doubts regarding the capacity of formal education to achieve many of the goals sought by policy makers, which related to equality, efficiency and cost effectiveness. The concept was given meaning in response not only to substantive criticisms levelled against the relevance of schooling but also as a result of a diminishing confidence on the part of decision-makers in the validity of manpower and social-demand models in education

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and in the usefulness of educational planning generally (Carton, 1984).

The then Minister of Education in Sweden, Olof Palme, launched the idea of recurrent education at an OECD meeting of Ministers of Education held at Versailles in May 1969. Palme envisaged recurrent education in his keynote address as a strategy that, potentially at least, could promote participatory democracy, provide equality of opportunity, guarantee individual freedom of choice and, also, could serve as an additional instrument in an economic policy aimed at achieving full employment without inflation. Concern with the concept of recurrent education in Sweden at that time can be explained in several ways. Important was the desire on the part of the Social-Democrat Government to establish a comprehensive strategy or philosophy of educational change by means of which already established policies as well as programmes envisaged in the planned 'rolling reform', which was aimed at modifying and extending educational provision at the successive levels of the system, could be brought into a new and functional relationship with economic, social and labour market policies.

Even though equality of opportunity was used as an important argument by the Swedish Education Commission of 1968 to promote recurrent education, the concept was also interpreted as a means for solving acute problems of development encountered in the rapidly increasing public demand for upper-secondary schooling and, particularly, the continuing demand for

the democratization of traditional higher education. Educational planners sought to satisfy this demand not only by means of opening up the doors of the university to different categories of adult learners but also by creating realistic opportunities for occasional returns to education later in life. However, at least at the practical level, recurrent education was principally conceived as a policy aimed at diverting young adults from going straight from upper-secondary schooling to university (Murray, 1988). The implication was that organized education should be made available throughout the life-time of the individual in a systematic way and in alternation with other activities such as work, leisure and also retirement (Bengtsson, 1974; Kallen, 1979).

It follows from the above that recurrent education was defined functionalistically, that is, in relation to the perceived need of solving specific problems obstructing progress in rapidly developing economies. Important among these were problems associated with rising expectations, increasing popular demand for education and the concomitant threat of an enormous growth of higher-education enrolment. Others related to the question of educational relevance, both to the needs of societies and labour markets generally and to the individual. A shortage of certain categories of skilled workers was anticipated, while there would be an oversupply of young people whose schooling was expected to be deficient in vocational training. Additional arguments in support of implementing recurrent education related to problems arising in the wake of introducing new technology in the workplace and those resulting from strong rigidities and inertia in the social and institutional 'fabric' of education systems (Coombes, 1968; OECD, 1971). Moreover, recurrent education was proposed as a means for implementing a more flexible system of education, aimed at improving equality of educational opportunities while matching diversified individual demand for education with the diversified needs of changing labour markets.

However, by emphasizing the postponement of a component of formal education until some time later in life, recurrent education was seen as

a means of checking the 'pressure of numbers' on higher education, of guiding more students into mainly vocational study programmes and, above all, of supplying the labour market with the skilled manpower required for sustaining economic growth. It follows that recurrent education provided welcome arguments for emphasizing the liaison among education and working life. By strengthening the correspondence among education and work, recurrent education was aimed at facilitating the structural adjustment of labour markets and education systems by managing imbalances among supply and demand, and trade-offs among equality and efficiency.

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### Recurrent and lifelong education

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Pragmatic differences notwithstanding, the central meaning of the original idea of recurrent education was rather similar to the notion of lifelong education advanced by UNESCO, *inter alia*, in a report entitled *Learning to Be* (Faure et al., 1972). Whereas lifelong education was understood to refer to a set of financial, organizational, administrative, didactic and legal procedures for the fostering of systematic learning across the life span (Dave, 1976), recurrent education was more limited in scope and more utilitarian. The latter not only emphasized the interdependence of educational, public and economic policies (Bengtsson, 1985), but also implied instances of interruption in the lifelong process of education, as would occur if educational experiences were spaced cyclically and in alternation with other activities, such as productive work and leisure.

Thus, whereas the concept of lifelong education had advantages with regard to its holistic and humanistic appeal (Schwartz and de Blignières, 1978; Rivera, 1983), recurrent education seemed to offer more scope for actual implementation. It must be emphasized that recurrent education was from the outset regarded as a planning strategy for the introduction of lifelong education (OECD, 1973). Thus, the early proponents of recurrent education did not advance the concept as being

distinct from or opposed to lifelong education. There was a difference in focus however, in that the former was interpreted as being concerned mainly with post-initial education, whereas lifelong education was considered to comprise both basic, higher and adult education. However, as the use of a distinction involving the exclusion or inclusion of formal youth education proved to be impractical, differences in the vocational and skill orientation of the two approaches were targetted as the main classification principle instead (Ryba and Holmes, 1973). Accordingly, differences of a pragmatic nature emerge in comparing the implications of the two frameworks for educational policy.

Models of lifelong education have tended to emphasize the extension of educational provision into adult life as a basic human right, whereas models of recurrent education have paid more attention to the degree of correspondence among the goals and functions of education and work (Carnoy and Levin, 1985). Despite claims to the contrary, recurrent education is essentially based on the view that educational opportunities should be spread out over people's life careers alternating principally with work, and as an alternative to the lengthening of the period of formal education early in life. In contrast, models of lifelong education neither imply delaying or shortening some component of initial education nor make the alternation principle central to the definition.

A further distinction can be made in that recurrent education, though it also implied a break with the 'quasi-monopoly' of education exercised by the school (Ryba and Holmes, 1973), did not to a similar extent originate in the radical, widespread criticisms of the school as a social institution, as was the case with the development of lifelong education which, at least in part, was influenced by the de-schooling movement (Illich, 1970; Goodman, 1971). Recurrent education was criticized not only for its alleged neglect of a perspective on individual development, but also because it was interpreted as a strategy for steering gradual, organizational change in education without questioning the basic functions of schooling in society.

It was felt by some authors that recurrent education would provide legitimacy for conventional practices of education, thus endorsing the critical role of early formal education in the perpetuation of social inequality. This aspect is brought clearly into the open in several different paragraphs of the seminal report concerning recurrent education published by the Centre of Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) at the OECD in the early 1970s (OECD, 1973, pp. 5-6). For example:

Yet, however strong the case for recurrent education may be, it would be naive to seek or expect a major reversal of educational policy. Education is too sensitive and complex a system to respond to surgery. Recurrent education is to be looked upon as a framework for a major but gradual reorientation of policy towards new objectives, rather than as an immediate, radical change.

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### Policy dimensions of recurrent education

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Several features of recurrent-education policy can be distinguished. The following would seem crucial (Kallen, 1973; OECD, 1975; Schuller and Bengtsson, 1977; Tuijnman, 1989a):

- Promoting complementarity between learning taking place in schools and learning occurring in other life situations.
- Reviewing the structure and curriculum of compulsory schooling.
- Co-ordinating educational policy with public policy generally and with labour market policy in particular.
- Introducing compensatory education at the primary, secondary and upper-secondary-school level.
- Increasing participation in higher education by 'opening up' adults' opportunities for learning in traditional university institutions.
- Extending the provision of planned adult education to wider audiences.
- Acknowledging the value of credits gained through non-traditional educational routes.

Abolishing 'terminal stages' in the system of formal education, so that all tracks will lead into other programmes.

Alternating education and work at the level of upper-secondary school as well as university and the workplace.

Recurrent education was advocated at a time when much of the optimism about the possibility of 'front-loaded' formal education achieving a fair and equitable society had begun to erode. In several OECD member states, emphasis had gradually shifted to organized adult education and learning beyond the traditional period of schooling. This new orientation implied that organized procedures for the facilitation of learning in adult life needed to be established. However, whereas several countries belonging to the OECD group had expressed an interest in recurrent education in the 1970s, few of them had ventured to any significant extent into the policy domains that were implicated (Blaug, 1985). How can this be explained?

One explanation must be that most educational policies with a bearing on recurrent education were stated in vague terms that were probably understood by planners and reformers but not always by those involved in the day-to-day running of the education system. The gap between stated adherence and the lack of policy action can also be explained in other ways (Levin and Schütze, 1983; Tuijnman, 1989a). The following reasons are often mentioned in the literature of the field:

The inadequacy of conventional mechanisms for the financing of adult education in general and student aid in particular.

The scepticism of some political parties towards further rises in public expenditure on education.

High unemployment rates among young adults. Limited access opportunities to programmes of study offered in universities and other institutions of tertiary education.

Insufficient legislation, particularly with regard to the rules regulating the right to educational leave and income maintenance during a period of study.

Structural obstacles to policy co-ordination arising

from diversification and diffusion of responsibility in the post-compulsory sector of education.

Hence, it would seem that the alleged failure to implement recurrent education policy in the 1970s was caused, at least to a significant extent, by a situation in which major prerequisites for a thorough change in education were not met. As a result of the generally slow pace with which changes were carried through, the practical usefulness of recurrent education was called into doubt. It should be noted, however, that people working with questions concerning the implementation of recurrent education during the 1970s had acknowledged that pervading reforms in education could not be implemented overnight. In an OECD (1973) publication, a distinction was made among short-term priorities for the general development of education systems and long-term policy for the implementation of recurrent education. Thus, it was acknowledged that the development of a system of education organized with a cyclic strategy would be a slow, time consuming process, not least because it involved thorough changes in basic, upper-secondary and higher education as well as the setting up of opportunities for learning in adult life.

Yet, despite the obvious gap between rhetoric and actual implementation, policies with a strong accent on recurrent education have gradually been implemented in many industrialized societies during the 1970s and 1980s – notably in Nordic and developed socialist countries. Today, interest among educational planners and administrative decision-makers in the strategy of recurrent education for improving the relevance and efficiency of providing education is once again increasing. Most governments in Asia and Europe have by now issued fairly similar statements committing the country to policy changes involving the extension of systematic educational opportunities into adult life, as in a system of recurrent education. Even though explicit adherence to recurrent education as presenting the rationale principally guiding the process of educational change is usually lacking from these statements of policy intent, the strategy of devel-

opment associated with recurrent education is undoubtedly exerting a significant impact on the goals and organization of education in many developed societies.

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### Policy dilemmas of recurrent education

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It is clear from what has been said earlier that recurrent education was proposed not only as a means of improving the vocational relevance of education but also as a plan of action for counteracting inequality in educational opportunity. It is illustrative in this regard to remind the reader of the warning issued at an early stage by Kallen (1973), that it would be preferable to accommodate initially poorly educated adults in the traditional educational institutions right from the outset of the reform process because a parallel, second-route and second-class system of non-traditional continuing education would otherwise develop in isolation from the formal system of education. In retrospect, it can be concluded that this is exactly what has happened in a number of European countries. The emergence of dual systems of recurrent education presents a dilemma, not least because a situation is created in which the further education of adults is likely to be given relatively low priority by governments compared with the improvement of formal education generally.

Research studies conducted in Sweden and other countries have documented the basic finding that the level of formal education initially received is among the principal factors influencing the decision of people to return to school or to take part in educational programmes organized in connection with the operations of the workplace (Felmlee, 1988; Wojciechowska, 1989; Tuijnman, 1989a). As a result, there is a danger that policy involving recurrent education will contribute to reinforcing rather than diminishing disparities in participation and educational attainment among different social groups. It can be argued that it would be unrealistic to expect

that post-initial education can help make different generations and various social groups within these generations more equal, as such voluntary participation is influenced by vastly unequal home backgrounds, unequal cognitive resources and unequal schooling. The initially poorly educated and those coming from relatively disadvantaged homes should therefore be given priority in the implementation of a recurrent education strategy for developing human resources.

Another dilemma associated with recurrent education derives from its emphasis on the vocational orientation of education programmes. As there is a tendency for such programmes to be directly skill- and employment-oriented, it is important that the system of formal education provides programmes that are general in character. It would seem imperative particularly with respect to upper-secondary education that the curriculum must remain broad in coverage, even though vocationally relevant education could be gradually introduced – possibly by means of alternating classroom-based instruction with education organized at the level of the workplace. Furthermore, as training programmes organized by companies and public-sector employers tend to be excessively narrow and limited both in time, purpose and content, it would seem desirable to strengthen the humanistic tradition of public adult education in a system of recurrent education.

Recurrent education is based on the idea that earlier experiences of learning must be considered to influence the quality of later experiences. Hence, if higher levels of early formal education are associated not only with the probability of subsequent participation in programmes of recurrent education but also with the quality of additional educational experiences, then those who have postponed a part of their formal education until a later stage in their lives and, particularly, those who do not return to school or university after a long delay, run a greater risk of becoming disadvantaged in the long run compared with the people who received a good formal education early in life.

If a policy of providing programmes of post-

initial education and training to workers contributes, potentially at least, to increasing instead of decreasing the gap in educational attainment among different social groups and generations, then a system organized around a cyclic strategy may serve to augment social inequality also in other areas of public policy. This is so because many variables are known from previous research to correlate significantly with educational attainment. A related issue of some concern is that variables measuring the extent, frequency and quality of participation in programmes of post-initial education and training, including adult education, have been shown also to vary significantly with indicators of the life-career outcomes of individual men and women, such as occupational status and earned income (Felmlee, 1988; Tuijnman, 1989a). Hence, even though those recruited to educational programmes later in life may gain access to jobs with higher levels of skill and prestige compared with those who are not reached by the system, the conclusion that the provision of adult education will have a net positive effect on occupational mobility *per se* is premature, because access to such educational programmes depends, at least in part, on previous educational and occupational attainments.

Arguments of the kind presented above have served to weaken initial optimism regarding the possibility that a policy based on recurrent education would help in improving the equity of using and developing human competences and in influencing the equity of distributing resources among the different groups in society. Because educational attainment generally plays an important role in the differentiation process whereby people are allocated to distinct social and economic positions, it is imperative that an equal education of high quality and broad coverage is provided to all children early in life. It follows from the above that the implementation of alternating education at the post-initial level necessitates the setting up of procedures for providing compensatory education to children 'at risk' in the formal school.

To sum up, the following additional dilemmas are associated with the strategy of recurrent

education: (a) contradictions between the private and social returns to education; (b) ambiguity about the sharing of the costs of recurrent education; (c) uncertainty about the benefits of recurrent education generally; (d) doubts as to the role of the state in the development of mixed public and private training markets; and (e) questions regarding the influence of worker collectives on decisions involving training policy taken at the company level.

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### Progress towards recurrent education

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Rather than seriously contemplating recurrent education as a means of avoiding diffusion of responsibility for the provision of opportunities for adult learning, most governments seem to have opted for a less radical approach, such as that implied by encouraging the extension of conventional programmes of adult education to a wider clientèle. Hence, for ideological as well as practical reasons, the postponement aspect of recurrent education has gradually lost some of its policy relevance. This development was reinforced by falling school level enrolments as the result of a declining birth-rate, controversy over the skill implications of introducing new technology, renewed emphasis on human capital as a crucial factor in the production of goods and services and, in some countries, a modest transition rate to higher education among young students. Instead of delaying a component of formal education until a mature age, the importance of a broad and general schooling in providing a basis for recurrent learning is currently emphasized. While the postponement aspect of recurrent education policy was regarded by some as superfluous to the needs of society and the individual (Blaug and Mace, 1977), the usefulness of the alternation principle itself was not called into question to a similar extent.

In studies prepared for the OECD, Schütze and Istance (1987), Charmes and Salome (1987) and Tuijnman (1989b) mention several different

areas in which progress towards the establishment of education systems organized with a cyclic strategy is currently taking place. For example, a general increase in individual demand for education in adult life can be observed. Institutions of formal higher and adult education have responded in innovative ways to this increased demand. Upper-secondary education has been expanded and is now reaching nearly all members of an age cohort in many developed countries. Admission requirements for higher education have been modified in some countries. This has helped in increasing enrolments in tertiary education to the extent that, in countries such as the United States and Japan, 40 to 50 per cent of an age cohort now receive some form of tertiary education. Moreover, continuing education and on-the-job training have become a reality for most categories of workers employed in different internal labour markets. There are countries, notably in Scandinavia, where work experience is seen as an instrumental qualification in its own right (Marklund, 1988). The provision of programmes of general adult education has been increased in scope, intake capacity and quality. Furthermore, the availability of educational facilities has been improved and localized. Brief modular educational programmes have been developed in nearly all OECD member countries in response to the needs of part-time adult learners. There has also been a tremendous advance in recruitment to programmes of distance and correspondence education in different countries. Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom provide excellent examples of achievement in this regard.

While the implementation of the original idea of recurrent education may be considered to have failed in certain countries with respect to specific policies, such as the postponement of a certain part of formal education until some time later in an individual's life career, the thrust of the strategy of recurrent education, namely, the development of organized procedures for the facilitation of systematic learning in adult life, has had an enormous impact on the provision of education in most OECD member states. Even

though reality may appear bleak compared with the grand visions of recurrent education presented in the original plans, statistics collected in industrialized societies in recent years generally bear witness to an increasing willingness on the part of industrial companies and public-sector authorities to assume financial responsibility for providing further education and training at the workplace level (OECD, 1989). As a result, in many developed countries, large numbers of people are now being exposed to systematic learning experiences in the years following their exit from the 'front-end' education system, which provides initial education and training.

It must be concluded that progress in the development of mass education systems organized around a cyclic strategy has been made since the idea of recurrent education was first introduced in Sweden in the late 1960s. The process whereby traditional systems of 'front-end' education are transformed into systems of recurrent education is well underway in different parts of the world. This signifies that recurrent education is gaining policy relevance in reforming and planning education for the future. That institutions of adult education have become part and parcel of the formal system of education is characteristic of this development. The effort to connect programmes of adult education with those of institutions providing formal education to youth is increasingly becoming a global issue, featuring on the agenda of all who share in the responsibility of planning for the future of education. It would seem useful to conclude this article by quoting a passage written by one of the architects of the original concept of recurrent education (Kallen, 1973, p. 63):

Recurrent education will become history or even be soon forgotten as just one more utopian idea if it is not accepted by what is sometimes called the 'educational establishment' as the long-term planning strategy for its own future instead of a somewhat eccentric proposition which will be allowed to develop as a complement to the present educational endeavour or as a means of providing a poor second chance to those who did not make it in school or university. ■

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