In 1926 the American adult educator Eduard Lindeman wrote that ‘The whole of life is learning therefore education can have no endings. This new venture is called adult education – not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits.’ In a book on the subject of lifelong education, written some three years later and subtitled A Sketch of the Range and Significance of the Adult Education Movement, the author, Basil Yeaxlee, said of adult education that it ‘...is humanist at the core, because it is concerned more with people and with “situations” than with “subjects”. Its purpose is the understanding, enrichment and direction of human living, rather than the achievements of conventional academic standards and distinctions.’

That was a view from 1929, and a British view at that. It is now no longer a separate case of either a concern for people or a pursuit of academic excellence, yet Yeaxlee’s sense of social idealism remains a principal element in many current writings by adult educators and museum educators alike. It also provides a counterbalance to a dominant economic model where equality of opportunity is often related solely to economic growth, yet where a need exists to sustain the social aspect of lifelong learning in areas such as citizenship and global responsibility.
As a global concept, lifelong learning is beginning to become increasingly acknowledged, although there remain some fundamental questions as to what it is, depending to a large extent on country-specific differences and interpretations, breadth, depth, types of provision and solutions to problems. That said, a number of prestigious international organisations, such as the EC, the OECD and UNESCO have all issued major policy statements emphasising the need for a general culture of lifelong learning. The concept is certainly central to emerging debates about the value of and necessity for learning societies equipped to deal successfully with many socio-economic changes being encountered throughout the world.

As to definitions
‘Most experts see lifelong learning as a rallying cry, rather than a specific policy. It has the power to unite various stakeholders around the need for change because it has emerged as a response to today’s challenges. Economic, technical and social shifts demand continuous learning to equip people to deal with uncertainty.’ However, a recent addition to the literature by Smith and Spurling (1999) offers a definition, albeit with the caution that permanent definitions cannot be adopted, as the concept itself is a subject for continuing debate. In brief, lifelong learning is seen as being intended and planned learning, which normally continues throughout life. In addition, four principles operate, these are:

• personal commitment to learning, i.e. the learner takes substantial responsibility for his or her learning
• social commitment to learning, i.e. that learners share their learning experiences and offer encouragement to others
• respect for other people’s learning
• respect for truth, i.e. that the learner is prepared to change an opinion if persuaded by sound evidence and logical argument.

This concept of lifelong learning connects firmly with museums. These have been perceived as being ‘...inherently educative, and the concern of those who would like to advance this purpose has been centred chiefly around making this latent possibility dynamic and effective. Almost all such efforts are aimed at learners of all ages of life.’ Museums thus feature among those institutions recognised for their actual and potential contributions across the life span. However, with notable exceptions, provision for the post-school sector has, over time, been inconsistent at best, as funding priority has until recently almost wholly been allocated to schools.

In broader geographical terms it is impossible to generalise about either lifelong learning or museum policies and practices as they relate to the concept, as there are many variables. In the UK, government intervention has indicated ways in which museums might expand their services. One of these concerns social inclusion. By engaging with groups of variously disadvantaged adults museums are coming to recognise more fully Peter Laslett’s observation that ‘(e)ducation is an interchange between those who know and those who need and wish to know. Because the wish and the need last all life long, the interchange is a lifelong matter, too.’ While Laslett was commenting with regard to older adults his observation...
has wider currency, since those who wish and need to know may also reside within museums as well as in the communities they serve.

But this developing shift of emphasis from elitist tradition to egalitarian change, from the sanctity of the collection to the centrality of the community, surely need not result in an either/or situation – objects or learners – for a museum’s excellence of provision may relate as easily to services for learners as to the excellence of material items. If these changes proceed, policy shifts, such as those dealing with exclusion, must become more widely recognised, understood, debated and given direction, both within and beyond museums. Progress requires change, but a change does not necessarily result in progress; progress requires that discernible and substantial changes are made to existing philosophies, policies and practices. This raises questions: in terms of social exclusion (and given the need for budgetary control), do museums extend access to a broader section of the community, for example, or do they fundamentally reconsider their overall aims and purposes, of which access is but one element?

As lifelong learners themselves, and mindful of their own continuing professional development, museum educators should develop their roles as innovators, assessing and redefining with their communities felt, rather than perceived, needs. Similarly, there is a role to be played as enablers, assisting adult learners to understand and engage with new value systems and ways of learning, while also, themselves, becoming more aware of adult learning styles and procedures. This is particularly relevant given that adults tend to resist learning processes that are at odds with their self-concept as autonomous individuals and that do not correspond with their interests.

One addition to the museologist’s role, and within which a lifelong learning framework is increasingly necessary, is that concerning advice and guidance. If, for example, museums are to become more accessible to non-visitors, they must actively consider their needs and how to engage their interests. One aspect of this extension to their services rests with guidance, and there is substantial evidence to indicate that adult guidance acts as a powerful motivator towards learning. ‘It is through guidance ... that individuals construct themselves and their decisions as lifelong learners ... there is a need for greater diversity in the forms of guidance on offer and the contexts in which they are available.’

Museums might consider offering or contributing impartial advice and guidance as an integral part of their public service. The expanding responsibility of adults as self-directing learners to secure their own learning pathways makes this function ever more necessary. There is a legitimate role here for museums, given their expanding community contributions. In this respect access to impartial information, advice and/or guidance about museum services, resources (human and material), qualification possibilities and routes, and inter-agency links, could benefit the adult learner per se.

Schouten observes that ‘museums have an important role to play in making people aware of questions that are essential for the entire community’. He cites an example of the Casa del Museo in Mexico City: ‘...this little
neighbourhood museum now functions as a general advice bureau ... it has become the local cultural centre, and once that stage is reached any museum is entitled to say that it has fully integrated into its community."

A number of key factors are worthy of consideration by museums in their capacities as lifelong learning centres. Pre-eminent among these lies a need for an acknowledgement of a principal role occupied by adult learners, either as individuals, or collectively in groups. David Anderson’s survey of museums in the UK referred to independent adult learners and communities alike. With regard to the former he notes that these may be ‘...the main source of active public support for many institutions (and that) museums in turn are ideal centres for self-directed learning’. Notions of the need for personal sufficiency through the general effects of rapid change, or assistance towards meeting community goals such as the preservation of cultural identity, are surely within the range of museums on a broader scale than is presently the case.

Another recent survey in the UK has indicated that the most salient theme for encouraging learning is to discover the ‘talents within you’. This, according to the survey, ‘is now far stronger than economic reasons or “fun” as a theme for the marketing of learning’. Those ‘talents’ must be harnessed by museums in order to build upon not only personal interests but also on how people deal with change in their lives and communities. Museums play, and are capable of playing, a multi-faceted role in, for example, assisting communities to deal with inequalities and dislocations, distinctively, if not exclusively, through the use of objects: ‘if a museum is to play a reasonable role in society, people should be able to recognise themselves and their needs in the presentation of a collection’.

In this regard, Kenneth Hudson reminds us that museums’... must never lose sight of the essential truth contained in the apparent paradox that successful popularisation can be achieved only on a basis of sound scholarship.

Thus, museums must preserve their collections: however, they also preserve meanings and, therefore, contribute substantially to recollection and, as one commentator puts it, to ‘...how we define and identify ourselves and our past in the midst of a global and future-obsessed world. Like the churches and the cathedrals of the past, museums are being used to tell us who and what we are.’ In multi-ethnic societies, where both collective and separate histories and traditions obtain, ‘who and what we are’ gains particular significance.

My earlier reference to Yeaxlee’s volume on lifelong education with its stress on people and situations, parallels current discussions concerning museums’ emphasis on ‘community’, and that a change of direction from exclusive concentration on ‘subjects’ or, in museums’ terms, ‘objects’, to learner outcomes in varied settings – home, workplace, community, institution – is both being recognised and, where appropriate, complemented by museum services. Just as technical expertise cannot be exported, only imported, so, too, with adult learning, which can no longer be assumed or imposed.

‘It is clear that museums will need to achieve some degree of counterpoise
between demands emanating from forces geared to change and those relating to stability. The basic shift of emphasis from objects towards people in the mass will...need to be developed... to accommodate community groups, both generally and specifically.”

Museums as learning organisations will need to consider the implications of what this means in a practical sense, such as an obligation to advance their own lifelong learning procedures. This may, in part, be achieved by developing mutuality of interest in learning, and the fostering of skills and knowledge between the museum and its staff, which inevitably implies the personal commitment of senior staff and those, like trustees, who occupy influential positions.

**In summary**
- I have suggested that the concept of lifelong learning is not, in a global sense, easily defined. However, opportunities to debate and learn from colleagues’ policies and practices can, over time, only be beneficial in considering the practical application of the idea in various settings.
- I have argued that the relationship between museums and adult learners is of central importance if museums are to help meet social requirements and aspirations. But mutual awareness, both as a basis for assisting adults to change their perceptions of museums, and vice versa, and for a firm foundation for partnerships of various kinds will become ever more necessary if a lifelong learning culture is to be promoted and sustained.
- I have referred to the complementary provision of services to balance collections. In this sense, the availability of museums’ premises for the exchange and discussion of ideas and information represents an important aspect. Preliminary or continuing links or provision will also need to take place beyond museums’ walls. ‘In a lifelong learning society community-based learning centres would be a common feature of housing estates and residential areas, possibly as part of shopping centres and health centres. They would offer customised arrangements for quiet study as well as facilities for group learning.’

Museums as learning institutions have much to do with preserving the past through their collections and with employing them for both present and future use and inspiration. Their *raison d’etre* thus remains established but also expanded, given the new demands and opportunities placed before them. The museologist George Brown Goode may have expressed an abiding truth in a report concerning museums in the future: ‘no museum can grow and be respected which does not each year give additional proofs of its claims to be considered a centre of learning’.

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