

## Book Review

Kenneth Wain (2024). *Lifelong Learning in Malta: Towards the Learning Society*. Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Publication. ISBN: 978-9118-20-302-4.

Kenneth Wain's book publishes a policy plan document drafted in 2003. Wain rejects seeing the Plan as merely a historical curiosity (19). In a powerful endorsement, Carmel Borg notes that: "The belated publication of this policy document by the Faculty of Education, through its MRER [Malta Review of Educational Research] project, serves history as much as it serves the future of Maltese education" (12). The reader receives insights into educational history; yet the book also offers hopeful glimpses into how things could be done otherwise: the paths not taken may serve as vital reminders and even as calls to action.

Wain expresses "disappointment" with the failure to implement the Plans, but also describes himself as an "optimist" (31). I understand and share the sentiment of disappointment that it was not published earlier, when it would have been timelier; it is nonetheless positive that it is finally available for all to read. It should also be said that the Plan captures a moment in time - a time of transition, at the turn of the millennium before Malta's EU accession - and is of undoubted historical interest. Just as the Plan was drawn up having regard for the particularities of the local context (62), the context must also include the time in which it was drafted, and the fact that its intended audience were primarily policy-makers, which may partly account for the tensions described below.

This document can also be situated in relation to Wain's life's work. Wain's previous policy documents pushed for "a democratic and socially just society of active citizens" (30). Wain has been politically as well as academically engaged in the issues he tackles, with the "ability to turn his intellectual position into political act" (Borg, 12). Wain's Preface presents his third book as one "to close [his] unintended trilogy with" (32). Rather than providing

traditional closure however, it is a book that seeks to reopen debates and unresolved questions.

In the Preface/Introduction, Wain identifies some areas that still require attention, e.g.: he recommends a structural “radical overhaul” of education that includes compulsory schooling and pre-school (30) – his approach to a “learning society” is holistic and mobilises all stages of life. Other areas that have shown worryingly persistent patterns can be found in the Plan. For example, Wain delves into socioeconomic circumstances, such as risk of poverty and rental prices (81-82) – issues that remain acute and pressing today (Balzan, 2024); likewise, gendered pay gaps (138; Borg, 2021). Another example is the reading habits of the Maltese, gleaned from a 2000 survey (218) – they are comparable to similar results today (Borg, 2024).

Wain states that he resists the channelling of lifelong learning into policies based exclusively on employability, economic competitiveness, and privatised consumption of commodified knowledge in a “knowledge economy” (17, 25); he instead upholds the “learning society” as participatory and built upon democracy, solidarity, and inclusion (18). Wain laments that the “socio-political agenda” of his plan – “humanistic” and “social democratic” – is not shared by recent EU or Maltese policy, which instead opt for “neo-liberal jargon” (22). He opposes his humanistic vision to the trend of “consider[ing] culture and information as marketable goods, possessions, rather than ways of being and becoming” (43).

Wain recognises that “levels of participation in lifelong learning” are “essentially non-measurable except in very general terms” (29) and claims to resist “fashionable managerialist language” that reduces education to skills acquisition (44). With an eye on social justice, he upholds ethical values as the foundation for skills (29). Yet, Wain notes that lifelong “self-directed learning” (103) means “to regard one’s very life as a learning project” (47), with a focus too on transferable skills and “competences” (76). In an effort to pre-empt the neoliberal co-option of this, he adjusts his proposals towards a shared burden of responsibility (51) – “a partnership between State, employers and workers in the funding of their learning needs” (66). He rightly notes that “given its legislative power and its superior financial resources, the State must be the major partner in setting [the learning society] up and maintaining its infrastructure” (234).

There is sometimes a tension between the critical stance towards neoliberalism taken in the Preface and Introduction, and the implied stance throughout the Plan; rather than consistently critical, it comes across more as an attempt to mitigate the excesses of neoliberal policy. Thus, the Plan “shares the tendency in the [EU] documents to prioritise” the economy, workforce, and employability, even while seeking to counterbalance this by giving attention to “individual self-fulfilment” (64, 77), which Wain aptly asserts as a social aim, rather than a consumer’s private leisure; and prioritising “inclusion and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable” alongside individual responsibility (64). This stance moderates between different views, while standing strong on principles; it sometimes feels like an awkward fit, but he proposes practical ways to make it work.

Some inconsistencies remain. He refers – less critically than the Introduction/Preface would lead one to expect – to the perceived need for an upskilled workforce to be “permanently employable” (230) as “the best guarantee for security” in a world of work where job security is fading (154); and “the changing profile of the student”, as preferring to “choos[e] their own course menus, and [be] treated as independent clients and customers rather than compliant students in the traditional way” (142). Linking the personal to the professional (“The whole packet of basic skills at the vocational level should aim at personal growth and employability”, 189) does not quite escape the neoliberal bind, where the self is put into circulation.

He delivers his strongest critique of, and counterpoint to, neoliberalism and “the market model of the learning society” (201), when he upholds the social/collective dimension, seeing education “as the collective activity/responsibility of a community of learners and teachers” (201). While still giving a place to the learner’s “autonomy” (27), Wain distinguishes his understanding of the “self-directed lifelong learner” from the individualising neoliberal one, insisting on the importance of social learning, which the current policy use of the term neglects (26). Wain declares an indebtedness to Dewey’s view of democracy as a “form of life” and “living together” (28). He thus recognises the nature of education as a public good (e.g. 195, 214). For Wain, political and social participation through active citizenship and community (208) is both an aim of learning, and “in itself, a kind of informal learning” (215). Inclusivity, social justice, and accessibility are central to Wain’s vision. It is clear that Wain cares deeply about the issues and what is at stake; though I

would have liked to see more focus on migrants as a disadvantaged group of learners.

Key terms for Wain are: “lifewide” (across different environments) and “lifelong” (through all stages of life), noting that “lifelong learning” is not synonymous with adult education alone (185). He puts forward an inspiring observation that rebuilds the very bases of a vision of society and learning, by opening up the definitions of ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’: “Every learner in the learning society must be an accomplished teacher too, and must recognise teaching, in whatever circumstance, as a service one gives to others” (232).

Wain’s Plan is, as he notes, “ambitious” (30) – admirably so. However, it would be good to get more insights into the gaps between aspiration and implementation, mentioned in the Introduction. The updating of the Plan for publication seemed to consist mainly in adding a Preface and Introduction – very interesting and incisive additions, certainly – and on the level of style (37). Wain acknowledges frankly that “Some actions are now superseded by events and are therefore dated” (37). The reader is therefore informed as to what to expect. However, I cannot help feeling the book would have benefited from supporting, updating, or reflective commentary accompanying the text, perhaps provided in footnotes, noting key changes and differences across times, though the Preface does some work in this regard. Updates could, for example, make up for the dearth of data about Gozo, lamented by Wain (73). Part 3 of the book is where the bulk is; this section would benefit from statistical updates, and evaluation of implementation. As it stands, it is up to the reader to seek out that knowledge elsewhere and piece together the rest of the picture. I, for one, would be interested in Wain’s assessment of the implementation (or lack thereof); its absence is doubly a pity, because Wain’s judgements are sharply clear-sighted and to-the-point, and he holds those responsible to account. I would be interested to read his views, for example, on recent Active Aging policies. Wain highlights the importance of intergenerational learning (195, 209), which should be given more prominence even today.

The book therefore does not quite take the further step of ‘revisiting’. The issues it raises however deserve regular reappraisal – because of their importance, but also because it would be interesting to trace the report’s influence through subsequent policies and developments; as well as to identify what remains to be done.

If the text were revisited today, no doubt there would be more awareness of the problems arising from precarious labour, rather than seeing it as an “increasing tendency [...] for the younger generations [...] to regard personal and work relationships as temporary and transitional” (40). Given his commitment to critique, and his recognition that “post-industrial society” breeds “uncertainty and risk” among workers “in an aggressive market economy” (40), this is one narrative he could be more critical of. Wain observes that, even at the time, “a significant number of tertiary education graduates have [...] sometimes to wait for years” for a job matching their qualifications (151). This would have benefited from further discussion from today’s perspective, with job insecurity having become sadly normalised (Chesters, 2024), not by the worker’s choice. It would also be interesting to have his views on how precarious working conditions may impact on the provision of training at work.

Wain’s work is, nonetheless, remarkably thorough – covering formal, non-formal, and informal learning through all life stages, and across a variety of locations. Wain does an excellent job of summing up national and EU reports guiding policy recommendations at the time. The Plan engages at the level of administration, while also delving into practical groundwork to be done in implementation. Wain considers the structures that are or should be in place, seeking also to lay a basis for quality assurance in education (228).

Wain delivers helpful recommendations for pedagogical practice, for example: by shaping the classroom environment itself to create conditions for informal learning (56); learning to learn as beginning pre-school and through primary school (90); highlighting the importance of CPD for teachers (116). Wain was an early advocate for e-learning and distance learning (181).

Wain’s contributions to education studies and policy in Malta are impressive and extensive, and this book stands as testament to his continuing investment in the area. His book encourages us – educators, policy-makers, learners all – to embrace learning as a lifelong social experience.

## References

Balzan, J. (2024, June 12). One in five in Malta at poverty risk, NSO survey shows. *Newsbook Malta*.

- Borg, A. (2021). The evolution of women in the Maltese labour market between 1960 and 2020. In M. Debono & G. Baldacchino (Eds.), *Working life and the transformation of Malta 1960-2020* (pp. 49-67). Malta University Press.
- Borg, N. (2024, August 12). Read and weep: over half of Maltese don't read a single book in a year. *Times of Malta*.
- Chesters, J. (2024). Unemployment or precarious employment: Tough choices for young workers in the twenty-first century. In J. Wyn, H. Cahill & H. Cuervo (Eds.), *Handbook of children and youth studies*. Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-8606-4\\_85](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-8606-4_85)

**Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone**

University of Malta

kbone02@um.edu.mt