

Lifelong Learning for Sustainable Development



15 February 2023

Lillehammer Lifelong Learning ICDE Conference
Lillehammer, Norway

Presented by Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Co-written with Dr K Balasubramanian

Distinguished Colleagues. What a pleasure to be back here in this winter wonderland and I thank the organisers for the invitation. My presentation on 'Lifelong Learning for Sustainable Development', prepared with my former colleague Dr K Balasubramanian, will set the scene for our discussion.

I will first highlight some perspectives on lifelong learning, followed by a look at some models for promoting lifelong learning. I will conclude with a new paradigm of learnability for all – which could be the foundation of lifelong learning for sustainable development.

But first, what is it that these two indigenous youth have in common? One is a young Inuit woman and the other a young aborigine boy – both from opposite ends of the world. What they share is thousands of years of traditional knowledge acquired throughout life to deal with extreme cold and extreme heat. Is lifelong learning such a new idea after all?

What happened to the human propensity for learning throughout life? As the context changed in the last few centuries, we moved from learning to education, from practical to theoretical knowledge, from connected to learning disconnected from reality and from oral to documented knowledge.

The context today has changed yet again, when the world is reeling under recession and learning to cope with the phenomenal developments in technology, and the changing nature of jobs. Life expectancy has gone up and those born after 1997 could live to be a hundred. The jobs that exist today were unheard of ten years ago and the jobs of the future will need to be aligned to the green and blue economies.

What then should be our approach to lifelong learning?

UNESCO has played a leading role. The Edgar Faure Report (1972) made the initial formal statement on lifelong education, which highlighted a holistic approach for the complete development of the individual. In the 70's the focus was on 'education' and in the 1996 Delors Report, we can see a transition to 'learning'.

Goal 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. This reflects UNESCO's rights-based approach to learning.

But when we look at the targets for Goal 4, we do not find any relating directly to lifelong learning. There are references to providing technical and vocational skills for livelihoods, literacy and numeracy for adults, knowledge and skills for sustainable development but no specific measures for tracking progress on lifelong learning for all.

At the Transforming Education Summit held last year, the UN Secretary General urged member states to embrace the concept of lifelong learning, provide more flexible pathways, incentives and qualifications that go beyond formal education.

According to the World Bank, lifelong learning must reach large numbers, cater to diverse learning needs, be competency driven and contribute to the knowledge economy. Here we see a reference to competencies and the knowledge economy.

The World Economic Forum, another influential organisation, looks at lifelong learning within the imperative of economic growth and individual careers. Over the years, we have seen a shift from a humanistic to a human capital development approach to lifelong learning, which has become the dominant narrative today. (Maren Elfert, 'LLL in SDG4: what does it mean for UNESCO's rights-based approach to adult learning and education?' *International Review of Education* (2019) 65:537-556) As Aitchison sums up, there are two competing visions of lifelong learning — one visionary and all encompassing, the other driven by utilitarian considerations related to competencies and the world of work.

How do we approach lifelong learning for sustainable development? Nobel laureate Stiglitz considers a society's learning capacities, its knowledge about learning and its knowledge about its own learning capacities, as its most important endowment.

What are some of the ways in which we have approached lifelong learning?

As we know, lifelong learning is a continuum that can take place in formal, nonformal or informal contexts. In the formal sector, the provision of lifelong learning is central to the missions of these open universities in Asia — Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand. Age is no barrier to entry and most students have the flexible opportunity to learn at their own pace place or time. For example, the Open University of Japan caters to the third age with one fourth of its students from this constituency.

Distance education was established to provide lifelong learning and social justice. The Open University of China used distance learning during the pandemic by adopting targeted interventions to support village communities, which improved income and livelihoods for about 50,000 people.

The COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery project skilled and reskilled over 150,000 Commonwealth citizens, many of them first-time online learners during Covid-19. Establishing help-desks to provide learner support resulted in higher completion rates.

The Kenya School for TVET adopted a blended learning approach to provide skills training at scale and lower costs.

TVET institutions are transforming themselves for contributing to lifelong learning for sustainable development. Close partnerships with industry serve to address the skills gap and blended approaches for just in time learning and micro credentials are being adopted.

In the informal sector, COL's lifelong learning for farmers is an example of learning for sustainable development. COL facilitates a process of learning in rural communities, especially for illiterate women, who use their basic phones to learn in their own language.

COL catalyses the linkages among the expert institutions such as agricultural universities and veterinary colleges, banks, the market and the rural communities to empower stakeholders, leading to improved livelihoods.

At present, lifelong learning models largely follow the pedagogic approach where the learner depends on the teacher for what and how to learn. There is little use of andragogy, where the adult learners are more independent, learn when they need to and use their own experiences. But what is learned is still determined by the teacher. The heutagogic approach applies to the independent learner, who determines what and how to learn and the learning is not planned and can take place anywhere. This approach is hardly used at all. How can we integrate all three approaches to promote lifelong learning?

How can we shift the paradigm to ensure lifelong learning for sustainable development?

In India, more engineering graduates are being produced than have the skills to be employable in the changing labour market. Similarly in SSA, only 39% of the employers agree that graduates are willing to learn as per the needs of the employer.

What is missing? Is it the digital divide? Most graduates had access to ICTs —it was the learnability divide that prevented graduates from achieving their full potential. Learnability must be inculcated from the earliest stages and across education, training, and the labour market. Lifelong learning requires that knowledge and skills are acquired continuously. Learnability is the basic premise for lifelong learning.

Learnability is the desire and ability to grow and adapt one's skills knowledge and values on a continuous basis to remain employable productive and sustainable in an ever changing world —it requires learning unlearning and relearning.

What are the ways forward? Can early childhood education improve learnability? Children's ability to learn from experience is highest to age 5. Let me share some examples from the Commonwealth. In Bangladesh, rural children who attended pre primary performed better in speaking writing and math in the early stages as compared to those who did not. In rural Mozambique pre schooling led to better interactions and regulating emotions under stress. In Jamaica early intervention for toddlers increased future earning by 25% bringing them at par with those from wealthier

households. Early childhood education can contribute significantly to learnability and lay the foundations for lifelong learning.

Every \$ invested yields a return of \$ 6-17. Only half of the 3-6 year olds globally have access to preprimary education. In 2012, about 8.8% of the education budget in North America and Western Europe was allocated to preprimary compared to only 0.3% in SSA. Would more investments address the issue of the learnability divide?

The second opportunity would be to build on the momentum for self-directed learning created by the pandemic.

There has been a phenomenal increase in MOOC enrolments, especially for continuous professional development. MOOCs have mostly reached those who already have degrees and completion rates continue to remain low.

How can MOOCs reach the unreached? These gardeners in remote locations have been reached by COL's audio-MOOCs through their basic mobile phones.

Not just in developing countries, workers in the Netherlands spend a large and increasing share of work time in informal learning.

However, to make learning attractive and sustainable, there must be appropriate incentives such as accreditation of prior learning, recognition of qualifications and the ability to move between formal non formal and informal learn. Governments institutions and QA agencies all have a role in promoting learnability for all.

This means focusing on different attributes--the psychological will involve arousing curiosity and motivating learners. The social dimension will be community based and will address issues of social justice. Institutions need to become more flexible in terms of entry and exit, course offering and credentialling. Access to ICT infrastructure and connectivity will enhance the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

In conclusion, lifelong learning cannot be perceived as a mere course or programme. It is a culture that needs to be integrated in every aspect of life. Policies and programmes should focus on building a learning culture by enhancing learnability in the individual, community and society.