

# Reshaping Lifelong Learning for All



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Distinguished Colleagues, what a pleasure to be back in Shanghai and I thank the organisers for the invitation. My presentation on 'Reshaping Lifelong Learning for All', has been prepared with my former colleague Dr K Balasubramanian.

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 – which could be the foundation of reshaping lifelong learning for all.

But first the context. The world is reeling under recession, learning to cope with 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. 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.

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, there has been a shift from a humanistic to a human capital development approach to lifelong learning, and this 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.

Is there a third approach? 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.

China seems to recognise this and one manifestation is the newly established National University for the Aged located in the Open University of China. As people live longer, they will need opportunities for skilling and reskilling.

What are some of the models of 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.

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

Shanghai Open University recently opened a Training Institute with close partnerships with industry to address the skills gap and offer just in time learning for livelihoods.

In the informal sector, COL's lifelong learning for farmers 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 all?

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.

Let me suggest three ways forward. First, 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. In the last ten years, the number of MOOCs in China have increased exponentially reaching over 370 million people.

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

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. Shanghai Open University has established a system of credit banks for mutual recognition of outcomes. Governments institutions and QA agencies all have a role in promoting learnability for all.

This means focusing on different attributes--the psychological dimension will involve arousing curiosity and motivating learners. The social aspect will be community based and 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.

With that let me thank you for your kind attention