

THE IMPORTANCE AND HIDDEN RESOURCES OF LIFELONG LEARNING*

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1. Introduction

Lifelong learning is one of the key words of the 21st century. It seems to be essential not only in the western countries but also in the developing economies.

The rapid development of information and communication technologies is now promoting economic and social transformation, turning the world into an information, knowledge, globalized and lifelong learning society. The integration of education and technology pushes education at all levels and higher education in particular to be open, flexible, inclusive, and lifelong, which has increasingly become a trend of educational reform and innovation in many countries. The open universities, featured by such conceptions, will surely play an essential role in the future education development.

On the one hand, in the ever changing surrounding of the welfare societies, it is important to provide the population the chance to acquire competitive knowledge that can make them suitable for the challenging of the market economy.

On the other, it is also of crucial importance in the developing countries to provide not only general education for the youth but also further tuition for the adults. Thus, lifelong learning is a worldwide need of our age.

It can be found in the core of the aims of different international organizations, for example the World Education Forum that put it directly in the headline among four other targets (These are: equity, inclusion, learning, quality, and lifelong learning.)¹

How did the education develop? What is the exact definition of lifelong learning? Why is it so important? What advantages can be expected in the societies at different economic levels? What is a learning society?

These questions are dealt with in the paper.

* The basic research for that paper was carried out in the framework of the International Visiting Scholar Program by the Shanghai Open University, China.

¹ <https://efareport.wordpress.com/2015/05/18/education-2030-equity-and-quality-with-a-lifelong-learning-perspective/> [06. 10. 2015]

2. What is lifelong learning?

Lifelong learning can be fundamentally defined as learning that is pursued throughout life: learning that is flexible, diverse and available at different times in different places and for different people. Lifelong learning crosses sectors, promoting learning beyond traditional schooling mostly throughout adult life (i.e. post-compulsory education). Delors defined the structure of lifelong learning as follows²:

Learning to know – mastering learning tools rather than acquisition of structured knowledge

Learning to do – equipping people for the types of work needed now and in the future including innovation and adaptation of learning to future work environments

Learning to live together, and with others – peacefully resolving conflict, discovering other people and their cultures, fostering community capability, individual competence and capacity, economic resilience, and social inclusion

Learning to be – education contributing to a person's complete development: mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality

It took a long time while learning and education became a widespread priority.

In the former hundreds of years, knowledge was some sort of privilege of a narrow layer of the society. General working methods in an economy based mostly on agriculture, did not require comprehensive education and further tuition. The ruling class was not interested in the extension of education, consequently, as the owner of the monopoly of the knowledge, they could maintain their power easier for a long time.

After the intellectual movement called Enlightenment and mostly after the Industrial Revolution education was given to the masses. The monopoly of the church in the field of tuition was broken and a new and comprehensive system of public education was established with opening a large number of public schools. The most significant measure of the process was to make the basic education obligatory.

In present days, the more developed societies created a comprehensive system of public education, mostly free of charge.

The process of learning has been an important consideration for early philosophers and educators that continues today. Looking back at the roots of learning and how it occurs, we see the constant effort to make it better.³

The European Union also pays close attention to the topic of lifelong learning. Therefore, a Commission Communication has been issued with the title Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality.⁴

² DELORS, Jacques & UNESCO: *Learning, the treasure within: Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*. UNESCO Publication, Paris, 1996.

³ SCHUNK, Dale H.: *Learning theories: An educational perspective*. Pearson, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2004.

⁴ Brussels, 21. 11. 2001 COM (2001) 678final,

In the paper, a broad definition has been provided: beside its undisputed importance from pre-school education to post retirement period, lifelong learning should encompass the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The consultation also highlighted the objectives of learning, including active citizenship, personal fulfillment and social inclusion, as well as employment-related aspects.

3. The importance of lifelong learning

It is quite undisputed and is rare of its kind that lifelong learning is of utmost importance for the future of the humanity.

An UNESCO report found that education holds the key to achieving most of the sustainable development goals.⁵

In addition, the Commission's Communication has been such an official declaration that highlighted the core issue of the topic.

Overall, consensus can be surmised around the following four broad and mutually supporting objectives. These are:

- personal fulfillment,
- active citizenship,
- social inclusion and
- employability/adaptability.

That lifelong learning promotes this wide range of objectives is reflected in the extended definition below, in the light of which all references to lifelong learning in this document should be understood.⁶

When talking about lifelong learning, the economic motives arise first. From Europe's point of view, it should serve the improving of living standards of the citizens on the one hand and to secure the proper functioning of the Single European Market on the other.

That is, consequently, stressed in the Communication.

In economic terms, the employability and adaptability of the citizens is vital for Europe to maintain its commitment to becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world. Labor shortages and competence gaps risk the limit of the capacity of the European Union for further growth, at any point in the economic cycle. Lifelong learning, therefore, has a key role to play in developing a coordinated strategy for employment and particularly for promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce. This means removing the barriers that prevent

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2001:0678:FIN:EN:PDF>
[06. 10. 2015]

⁵ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002330/233029E.pdf> [06. 10. 2015]

⁶ Brussels, 21. 11. 2001 COM (2001) 678final,
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2001:0678:FIN:EN:PDF>
p. 9 [06. 10. 2015]

people from entering the labor market and limit progression within it. Tackling inequality and social exclusion is part of this.⁷

The Commission, however, emphasizes that not only economic relation is dealt with when coping with the realization of lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning is, however, much more than economics. It also promotes the goals and ambitions of European countries to become more inclusive, tolerant and democratic. Moreover, it promises a Europe in which citizens have the opportunity and ability to realize their ambitions and to participate in building a better society. Indeed, a recent OECD report refers to the growing evidence that learning and investment in human capital is associated not just with increased GDP, but also with greater civic participation, higher reported well-being and lower criminality.⁸

These goals are the elements of the ideal types of a society that is hard to achieve. However, governments are eager to take proper measures, which are promising to regard the structure of the society in the future.

4. Creation of an educated society

The Commission Communication set out the priorities for action of a lifelong learning strategy. Through the realization of that it would be much easier to achieve the desired well-educated society where every member is willing to learn more, and the society is capable to provide the means and methods for the continuous education.

As emphasized in the Communication, in order to achieve a European area of lifelong learning the actions listed below are declared to be essential:

- value learning. This means valuing formal diplomas and certificates, as well as non-formal and informal learning, so that all forms of learning can be recognized. This includes improving the transparency and coherence of the national learning systems, preparing transnational mechanisms for accumulating qualifications for 2003, defining a common system for presenting qualifications (inspired by the European curriculum vitae) by the end of 2002 and creating diplomas and certificates that pertain to European training on a voluntary basis;
- strengthen information, guidance and counseling services at European level. In 2002, the Commission was to launch an Internet portal on learning opportunities at European level and a European guidance forum to promote exchanges of information;

⁷ Brussels, 21. 11. 2001 COM (2001) 678final,
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2001:0678:FIN:EN:PDF>
p. 6 [06. 10. 2015]

⁸ Brussels, 21. 11. 2001 COM (2001) 678final,
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2001:0678:FIN:EN:PDF>
p. 7 [06. 10. 2015]

- invest more time in learning. The Commission is inviting the European Investment Bank to support learning, preferably by creating local training centers, requesting the European investment fund to support risk capital in this area, suggesting that Member States make greater use of the European Social Fund, and committing itself to presenting a survey of tax incentives in the Member States;
- bring learning opportunities closer to learners. This will be possible by developing local knowledge acquisition centers and by encouraging learning on the job;
- provide everybody with basic skills;
- support research into innovative pedagogy for teachers, instructors and mediators, while taking account of the growing role of information and communication technologies.⁹

A further official instrument is a Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 21 November 2008 on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies.¹⁰

This resolution emphasizes the need to strengthen the implementation of an active guidance policy within the framework of national lifelong learning strategies. It sets out four priority areas for lifelong guidance. These areas shall aim to enhance:

- the acquisition of empowering career management skills;
- access to guidance services, in particular for people from disadvantaged groups;
- the quality of guidance services;
- coordination and cooperation among all relevant stakeholders at all possible levels.

It is indisputable that the European Union and its organizations pay closer and closer attention in the topic of lifelong learning. The question, consequently, arises: what advantages actually can be expected from the effectuation of a conscious and learning society.

5. What are the advantages of lifelong learning for different countries?

In general, when economic aspects are kept in mind, countries are divided into two main groups. These are the developed and the developing countries.¹¹

In the developed, industrialized countries, the economic structure is based on the rules of demand and supply, namely the market economy.

⁹ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11054_en.htm [06. 10. 2015]

¹⁰ *Official Journal C*, 319 of [13. 12. 2008]

¹¹ That can be divided further on the basis of income level and GDP. <http://data.worldbank.org/country> [06. 10. 2015]

The fundamental requirement of the market economy is the constant and balanced growth with a special aspect to the sustainable development. These two topics are difficult to harmonize, however, there is a common principle in both of them, the education.

Neither the constant economic growth nor the sustainability can be secured without the persistent education of the society worldwide.

As far as the previous term is concerned, only well-prepared and self-conscious persons can be active and broad-minded members of the society on one hand and useful power on the labor market on the other.

The latter term, sustainability, if it is possible, is of even greater importance because it includes the entire future of the Earth in close connection with the possible future of the humanity.

The realization of both terms, as mentioned above, can only be carried out with the help of lifelong learning, the constant sharing of information to make it possible that people recognize the relevant correlations.

In the developing countries, the points are completely different. While in the modern world people educate themselves to get better job or higher salary, in the poorest countries it goes for the completion of primary education.

The above mentioned UNESCO report emphasizes the urgent necessity that even those most in need can access proper education and set the requirements for that goal.

An equitable and quality lifelong learning approach would require at least:

Firstly, there should be 12 years of publicly funded quality primary and secondary schooling for all.

Secondly, equal opportunities should be secured for all to access education and to learn, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups who are disadvantaged by factors such as gender, poverty, conflict or disaster, geographical location, ethnicity, language, age or disability.

Finally, relevant and effective learning outcomes, including, at a minimum, foundational literacy and numeracy skills that provide the building blocks for further flexible lifelong learning opportunities.¹²

Earlier it was not expected that people educate themselves after leaving school or learn another profession. It was obvious that they could make both ends meet without learning as an adult.

However, the situation has completely changed. It is not because the people changed. It is the world around us that has changed. The economic environment, the technical conditions, the legal matters they all make it necessary for almost everyone to keep his knowledge up-to-date or to learn more.

As it could be seen, it is essential even in developed countries to lay emphasis on the requirements of lifelong learning, just as the European Commission did it in its Communication.

¹² <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002330/233029E.pdf> [06. 10. 2015]

In the developing countries, it seems to be even more important to train and educate the citizens for two reasons. First, it is of crucial importance to make them well prepared for the challenges of the labor market. Second, the government shall provide them the tools that can secure their subsistence.

Countries with lower-middle income¹³ such as Bolivia, Ghana, Zambia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Moldova or Ukraine and with lower income¹⁴ such as Bangladesh, Mali, Togo, People's Republic of Korea or Haiti are affected the most. These countries, however, do not have other chance to enhance their economic situation than to lay more emphasis on education. This is to apply for both the regular teaching and lifelong learning. Children must be involved in the comprehensive system of elementary schools while for adults a wide-range of special education should be offered.

However, for adults it is not easy to get back to school and do the same performance as in their childhood. They have too many things to hinder their efforts. Difficulties make people unwilling and discourage them. The key for that problem can be the distance teaching and the open universities that will be examined in the following section.

The economic strategy for developing or low income countries, whose comparative advantage over the foreseeable future will lie in agricultural commodities, light manufactures and assembly type activities, will need to enhance their access to export markets. This calls for a more active, coordinated and strategic participation in trade negotiations – in the making and the extracting of trade concessions.¹⁵ All these activities, both in the industry or in the trade, require a high level of education that also can be reached in lifelong learning carried out in distance teaching.

6. Learning society and distance teaching

What is learning or knowledge based society? Learning society creates an advantageous environment for adults to be urged being more qualified. Many characteristics of the ordinary school system are appropriate for adults as well. The general goal of the countries of our age is to build a global learning society, thus, it would appear that education for all is a critical starting point. It is important to consider, at all ages, individual differences in perception, different kinds of intelligence and differences in world view. In these differences may lie the strengths that provide the tools that are needed to learn and to develop the abilities, as well as dealing with disabilities. Opportunities to learn in different modalities and understand the own unique characteristics play an important role in successful learning.¹⁶ Students

¹³ <http://data.worldbank.org/income-level/LMC> [06. 12. 2015]

¹⁴ <http://data.worldbank.org/income-level/LIC> [06. 12. 2015]

¹⁵ YUSUF, Shahid: *Globalization and the Challenge for Developing Countries World Bank*. 2001, 10.

<http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/1813-9450-2618> [06. 12. 2015]

¹⁶ DICKINSON, Dee: *Learning Society of the Future: Questions to Consider*. John Hopkins School of Education, 2000.

must also be offered opportunities to understand how to utilize these traits in a variety of contexts including those outside the classroom, in the practice.

In a learning society, most of people take part in the different levels of education, which is advantageous both for the individuals and for the society itself. It is considered normal when younger generations learn or study but there are several countries in the world where it is not the fact. These systems do not belong to welfare states and the lack of the education system has been in close relation to and deep impact on the economic difficulties.

Knowledge-based society has a crucial impact on the economy, mostly on labor market.

The present transition from industrial to knowledge-based societies is characterized by major changes in working conditions and labor-market requirements. This process has resulted in a historically very fast restructuring in the scale of values. For example, the flexibility, non-hierarchical structure and high adaptation capacity are becoming key factors both at individual and organizational level. The traditional educational system is slow to react effectively to these challenges, which may raise walls against further technical developments and decelerate the growth. Three interdependent but parallel processes should be managed successfully in order to enjoy the advantages of the knowledge-based society: Firstly, the renewal of knowledge, secondly, the high-speed changes in labor-market demands and thirdly the changes of applied tools and methods in learning.¹⁷

The existing mismatch between supply and demand in the labor market may lead to a critical situation: a sharp division of the society into two groups by knowledge-based society skills, namely to small number of winners and a large majority of losers. Economically vulnerable countries (like Hungary) should pay close attention to these warnings and, based on their best traditions, they must react to the challenges in time and in a proper way. Otherwise, the favorable foundations created by social, economic and political transformation in the 1990s may not serve the real adjustment to the global trends and the prices of social modernization will become extremely high.¹⁸

One of the methods realizing lifelong learning in a knowledge-based society is distance education. Distance teaching makes it easier for the adults to get involved in the lifelong learning process since it reduces its costs and the time for travelling. The open universities, consequently, provide almost unlimited access to the knowledge for everyone interested and make the lifelong learning available for a

<http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/strategies/topics/Environments%20for%20Learning/learning-society/> [06. 12. 2015]

¹⁷ NYÍRI, Lajos: Knowledge-based society its impact on labor market values. *Society and Economy*, 24 (2002), 212–218.

¹⁸ NYÍRI, Lajos: Knowledge-based society its impact on labor market values. *Society and Economy*, 24 (2002), 212–218.

wide range of those people who otherwise could not have had the chance to widen or sharpen their skills.¹⁹

The network of open universities that offer the key to the precious knowledge of the 21st century is the milestone of what we call learning society.

Open universities are the gates through which one can enter into the world of unlimited educational possibilities. Their advantage is hiding in the easy accessibility, in the lower costs, in the flexibility and in the online teaching methods.

In bigger countries like China or India, where the process of urbanization is still in the primal phase and hundreds of millions live in smaller towns and villages where there are hardly any universities or vocational schools, the role of open universities is of even more substantial.

The Shanghai Open University plays an important role in the area of Shanghai, where more than 30 millions people live, to create the fundamental conditions and possibilities of distance education. Hence, the SOU is providing the reinforcement of qualified workforce in the region, heating up the labor market and, indirectly, stimulating the massive economic growth in China.

It is, therefore, obvious that open universities, distance learning and lifelong learning have a close impact on the economic processes.

7. Closing remarks

There is not anything more important than education. Education means wider possibilities, more working places, balanced economic growth, welfare and happier society. A learning society is consisted of networks of universities both traditional and open ones that offer the chance of studying for everyone without barriers, implied transaction costs and other difficulties.

A well-operating lifelong learning system, however, makes the individual itself interested in participating because it offers them competitiveness, a fresher approach and an unrestricted access to the knowledge.

Catchword for the present situation is education for all. During my visit in Shanghai, China, I had the chance to examine the structure and working methods of one of the biggest open universities, the SOU. It has a key role in providing essential knowledge for those who would like to know more and who have not had the opportunity to study before. Thus, after learning hard and graduating, they have a chance to a get better job, promotion or higher salary.

It is easy to comprehend that lifelong learning has advantageous impact both on the economy and on the society by improving the living standards of the single citizens.

¹⁹ STROHMEIER, R. W.: Die Europäische Union auf dem Weg zur Wissens- und Informationsgesellschaft. In: ROTHE, G.: *Alternanz die EU-Konzeption für die Berufsausbildung*. Universitätsverlag, Karlsruhe, 2004, 179–184.

There could not be better way to conclude this paper than to recall an ancient Chinese proverb. It says: *When planning for a year, plant corn. When planning for a decade, plant trees. When planning for life, train and educate people.*²⁰

²⁰ Guanzi (c. 645BC)