

Achieving Lifelong Learning for All: What are the possibilities?



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Distinguished Colleagues.

Thank you for the invitation to the Global Education Policy conference. My topic today is ‘Achieving Lifelong Learning for all: What are the possibilities?’ and I have prepared this presentation with my colleagues Alexis Carr and Sanjaya Mishra.

But first a word about the Commonwealth of Learning, or COL. COL is an intergovernmental organisation that works in 54 countries that span all regions of the globe.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to education and training.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

This aligns us closely with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 which aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

In this presentation, I will first focus briefly on what we understand by lifelong learning. This will be followed by examples of how three Commonwealth countries are implementing lifelong learning. Technology has a major role in promoting lifelong learning for all, and I will highlight this with some examples from COL’s work. In conclusion, I will look at the way forward as we try to achieve lifelong learning for all by 2030.

First, what do we mean by lifelong learning? As we know, COVID-19 has disrupted education across the world. But on the other hand, there has been a huge rise in self-directed learning during the pandemic, as can be seen from the phenomenal increases in MOOC enrolments. How can we build on these foundations to promote lifelong learning for all?

What do we mean by lifelong learning? The term may have emerged in the 1960’s but the concept goes back to ancient times. 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 1970’s the focus was on ‘education,’ and in the 1996 Delors Report, we can see a transition to ‘learning’.

Formal education only accounts for a small fraction of the time we spend in learning. In 16 waking hours during grades 1 to 12, we spend 18.5 % time in formal learning environments—and this keeps decreasing as we transition to undergraduate and graduate study. The rest of our waking lives are spent in informal learning environments. How can formal education and voluntary learning be integrated?

As we know, lifelong learning is a continuum from cradle to grave. It can take place in formal, non-formal or informal contexts. The motivation could be employment-related or personal, social or cultural reasons.

With six years into the SDG 4, what are countries doing to accelerate progress towards achieving lifelong learning for all? Let us take the cases of three countries in the Commonwealth—Australia, Singapore and South Africa.

Australia promotes lifelong learning to skill and reskill citizens for a dynamic economy. Adult Learning Australia is the key organisation promoting lifelong and lifewide learning. It addresses issues related to: literacy, non-formal learning, indigenous education, young people, ageing population, and rural Australia. Australia has always believed in the power of open and distance learning from the early days when home schooling was common. There is no comprehensive national policy on lifelong learning which would serve to coordinate the formal, non-formal and informal sectors.

However, Australia has an overarching national Qualifications Framework that includes Recognition of Prior Learning, so that credit can be given for non-formal and informal learning. The AQF has served as a model for the development of qualifications frameworks internationally.

Singapore aims to build a competitive economy by investing in Singaporeans to develop their fullest potential through continuous skilling and reskilling. The government provides the funds for several programmes that support career guidance, job searches, and placements. However, despite these incentives, some employers have been slow to embrace the opportunities offered.

The Singaporean government has invested significant resources in lifelong learning. All Singaporeans aged 25 and above receive an opening credit of S\$500 to encourage them “to take ownership of their skills development and lifelong learning”. In addition, a mid-career enhancement subsidy covers up to 90% of course fees for those over the age of 40, so that older members of the workforce can become lifelong learners.

South Africa has a visionary national policy and strategy on lifelong learning which aims to redress post-apartheid social inequities. To enhance recognition of learning and learner mobility, the South African National Qualifications Framework encompasses learning through all stages of life, from early childhood to adult education and higher education. There are strong linkages between skills training and the labour market, and the government has launched a national career advice portal called Khetha.

South Africa believes in open and distance learning as a viable strategy for achieving lifelong learning. As far back as 1995, the African National Congress stated that ‘to meet the challenge of lifelong learning successfully, we need to recognise the delivery of education and training within an open learning framework.’

As we have seen, these countries have adopted various strategies: Qualifications Frameworks, distance learning, financial incentives. Lifelong learning is understood differently in different contexts. In spite of the attempts to broaden the frame of reference, we still find the focus on the formal education sector. Governments are playing an active role, but there is need for better coordination between different ministries and stakeholders.

Let us now turn to the role of technology in implementing lifelong learning. What does the COL experience show?

In India, women entrepreneurs at the bottom of the economic pyramid established a farm producers company with COL support. These illiterate women learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones. In the past two years, over 140,000 women in 11 countries have been lifted out of poverty and every dollar invested has resulted in assets worth 16 dollars.

These opportunities for learning have resulted in empowerment. Mary Arogya is a school dropout and grandmother who knew nothing about computers. As part of COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers project, she is now working as a content and web manager for a farmers' organisation, has uploaded hundreds of resources on YouTube, Facebook and trained over a thousand other farmers.

MOOCs continue to provide opportunities for lifelong learning. COL has tailored blended MOOCs to suit the needs of developing countries, and these gardeners in remote locations have been reached by an audio- MOOC through their basic mobile phones.

The COL experience shows that ICTs by itself will not help us achieve lifelong learning but must be placed in an appropriate social, political and economic context. The bottom billion can be reached by providing simple technology solutions such as basic mobile phone interface, social media integration and open content designed for delivery in low bandwidth situations. Technology solutions designed for the last person in the queue have the potential to benefit even privileged constituencies.

In conclusion, what next? As we have seen, we will have to go beyond the 'business as usual approach' and shift the current paradigms if no one is to be left behind.

First, there is a need to shift the emphasis from formal education alone to a blend of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The teacher-led sequential learning in formal education needs to be supplemented with unstructured learner-led approaches to support the learning needs of individuals at different stages of their lives. Open and distance learning can be a very powerful means of not just expanding access to formal education but also supporting non-formal and informal learning—as you have seen from the COL experience.

The operationalisation of lifelong learning involves moving beyond pedagogy to the integration of three approaches: pedagogy, andragogy and heutagogy. In pedagogy, the learner depends on the teacher for what and how to learn. Under andragogy, 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. Blaschke's pyramid reflects the lifelong learning process. 'Engagement' indicates participation while 'cultivation' refers to autonomous and self-directed learning. 'Realisation' occurs when the learner is mature and autonomous—and can transform circumstances rather than simply be transformed by them.

Can heutagogy be integrated into formal learning programmes? According to Blaschke (2012:63) educators in the nursing, engineering and education professions have found heutagogy to be a credible response to the critical issues that the learners are faced with.... The University of Western Sydney has implemented the heutagogical approach in its teacher education programme which has resulted in improved teacher outcomes and more capable teachers (Blaschke, 2012). Canning and Callan (2010) have found that the heutagogical approach in three higher education institutions in the UK have led to reflective learning.

Second, formal learning relies on codified knowledge which constitutes 20% of what we know. Informal learning is based on tacit knowledge which is informal, personal, intuitive or acquired through our experience. Think of the large reserves of indigenous knowledge, language and cultures that are not yet part of global knowledge flows.

‘The centrality of tacit knowledge to the production and reproduction of society has typically been unrecognized’ and is one of the hidden dimensions of lifelong learning. Livingston’s study based on New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) in Canada showed that more than 70% of the workers identified informal and tacit learning as the most important source of job knowledge. There is evidence to show that informal and tacit learning is the main source of knowledge generation among farmers in many Commonwealth countries.

The present approaches have focused more on acquiring skills and competencies for livelihoods, helping adapt to the changing circumstances with the main emphasis still being on formal learning. The third shift would be to move beyond acquiring skills and competencies to transformative learning. This would mean not just adapting to changing circumstances but acquiring the ability to change circumstances.

According to Mezirow, transformative learning enables us to make our own interpretations rather than act on the beliefs, judgements and feelings of others. We need to make our own interpretations—transformative learning develops autonomous thinkers.

The SDGs aim to transform the world for the people, planet, prosperity and peace. If such goals are to be achieved lifelong learning should be perceived beyond acquiring skills and competencies and focus on empowerment. Such an approach will also lead to environmental conservation and peace.

Let me leave you with the image of this learner who completed her secondary school with distinction at the age of 94. She is the highly motivated Kathyayani, who has not only transformed herself but is also inspiring and motivating others around her to become lifelong learners. Can we set up systems and processes that help support lifelong learners like her?