

LIFELONG LEARNING: EVOLUTION AND ADAPTATION TO THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF EUROPEAN SOCIETY

APOSTOLOS KARAOULAS

Laboratory Teaching Staff, University of Ioannina, School of Education Sciences,
Department of Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the significance of lifelong learning as a central component of the modern educational model. It also examines its role as a social tool that enhances social mobility and contributes to the quality of democracy and institutions within the European Union. Through qualitative literature analysis, the study explores the role of lifelong learning in fostering personal development, social inclusion, and professional mobility. Specifically, the research focuses on the necessity of continuous learning and skill renewal, acknowledging the challenges posed by the rapidly evolving labor market and the need to adapt educational policies accordingly.

Lifelong learning acknowledges that education is a continuous and open-ended process that supports individuals in adapting to ongoing social, technological, and economic changes. The constant renewal of knowledge and skills is essential for professional mobility, labor market sustainability, and social integration. It transforms individuals from passive recipients of knowledge into active participants in society while promoting social cohesion and mobility through equitable access to education for all. As modern educational models must integrate new technologies and innovative teaching methods, lifelong learning serves as a strategic approach to strengthening social participation and economic growth.

For its effective implementation, it is necessary to restructure educational institutions, promote collaborations between the public and private sectors, and develop new digital tools that enhance access to learning opportunities. The integration of lifelong learning into social and political strategies is a crucial factor in building resilient societies and enhancing their capacity to respond to future challenges, offering learning opportunities throughout life.

Keywords: Lifelong learning, European education, skill development, modern challenges, educational strategy.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For Europe to remain competitive in the knowledge economy, a lifelong education system is required, one that enables adults to enter and remain in employment. In the democratic societies that make up Europe, it is essential to have educated citizens, as lifelong learning constitutes a fundamental component of a democratic society (Jarvis, 2010). Education and lifelong learning in Europe have evolved as central pillars of European Union policies, reflecting both historical transformations in the labor market and broader socioeconomic changes. From the Industrial Revolution to the modern digital era, the need for continuous skill development has become

critical, as the knowledge and competencies of citizens are regarded as fundamental to economic growth, social cohesion, and innovation.

The formulation of lifelong learning strategies in Europe aims to enhance workers' adaptability, strengthen participation in the knowledge society, and ensure equal access to education. Through initiatives such as the European Qualifications Framework and the Erasmus+ program, the EU seeks to create a dynamic and flexible educational environment that fosters mobility and the continuous upskilling of its citizens. The future of lifelong learning in Europe is closely linked to the advancement of digital education, sustainability, and demographic challenges, making it one of the key mechanisms for societies to adapt to the demands of the 21st century.

2.0 THE DEVELOPMENT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING IN EUROPE

Lifelong learning was institutionalized in Europe for the first time in the 19th century, driven by the needs of the liberal bourgeoisie, both to train the workforce and to exert control over the lower social classes. At the same time, workers also recognized the necessity of vocational training as a means to improve their educational level. Consequently, both social groups within European societies, though for different reasons, converged on the idea of lifelong learning. The workforce began organizing popular schools, informal education structures, and cultural associations (Vergidis, 2005).

The rise of the bourgeoisie and the rapid expansion of industrialization in Europe further contributed to the institutionalization and structuring of lifelong learning. In 1963, the European Economic Community (EEC) Council established ten general guidelines for developing a common, albeit limited, vocational training policy (Pépin, 2006). Starting in 1971, some European Ministers of Education began scheduling regular meetings, and in 1976, the EEC Council approved the creation of an education action program. This program defined six areas of cooperation, including education for migrant workers and their children, collaboration in higher education, foreign language instruction, and the promotion of equal opportunities. However, adult education was omitted, possibly because it was considered a part of vocational training. The decision also established an education committee comprising representatives from the European Commission and member states. Education, however, was not included in the EEC Treaty, making cooperation in this field dependent on the political will of member states (Rasmussen, 2024).

In 1982 and 1983, the Council and the Ministers of Education of the EEC countries approved new decisions in the field of education (Pépin, 2006). Although the EEC Treaty provided a better legal foundation for cooperation in vocational education and training, progress was slow and mainly implemented through soft measures such as reports and decisions. Vocational preparation, guidance, and basic skills began to be recognized as essential policy elements for reducing youth unemployment. The European Social Fund was extensively used to address unemployment, and by 1984, 75% of its funding was allocated to projects aimed at developing skills and employment opportunities for adults (Pépin, 2006).

The Single European Act (SEA, 1986), which came into force in 1987, emphasized the completion of the internal market, including the free movement of workers and professionals.

The legal basis for cooperation in adult vocational training was strengthened, and the European Commission became actively involved in issues such as professional mobility. In 1973, a new entity dedicated to education and training was established, the Directorate-General for Research and Science, whose primary focus was promoting adult vocational training and the development of human resources. However, education and training remained distinct concepts. By 1981, the two concepts began to converge, and by 1989, education and training were formally integrated as a joint area of action within the Directorate-General for Research and Science (Rasmussen, 2024).

By the early 1990s, lifelong learning was no longer seen merely as a useful tool for workforce training but emerged as one of the most crucial mechanisms for enhancing competitiveness and economic growth through specialization and the continuous upgrading of human capital, not only for workers but across all sectors (Vergidis, 2005).

Until the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which officially established the European Union, education and vocational training cooperation had no formal legal basis within the European Community. Collaboration in these areas progressed slowly, primarily as a byproduct of the gradual development of the common market. However, vocational education had already played a significant role. Article 128 of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) explicitly referred to the development of a "common vocational training policy." This acknowledgment translated into a growing emphasis on continuous training for adult workers within the framework of employment policy, ensuring their sustained development and adaptation to the ever-evolving labor market demands (Rasmussen, 2024).

As administrative capacity in educational policy gradually developed within the European Commission, the need for statistical data on education and training also became apparent. Although Eurostat had been publishing education-related data since 1978, it did not establish a dedicated education and culture statistics unit until 2003. As adult education gained increasing attention, more organizations in the field sought engagement and collaboration with the Commission. In response, the Commission adopted an open policy, fostering connections with universities, educators, teachers, and technical education institutions. In 1999, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) was officially founded. Initially, EU member states were hesitant to involve social partners and professional associations in policy discussions related to vocational training. However, after 2000, this process expanded significantly, and collaboration with social partners gained prominence, as the need for more comprehensive and participatory policies became increasingly urgent (Lawn & Grek, 2012).

Ultimately, the establishment of the European Community directed lifelong learning toward continuous vocational training and set guidelines for a unified EU policy on lifelong learning. This policy has since been incorporated into the regulations of European Funds and Programs, shaping the framework for education and training initiatives across the continent.

3.0 THE FACTORS THAT LED EUROPE TO ADOPT LIFELONG LEARNING

The institutionalization of lifelong learning in Europe and, by extension, its influence on global transformation was driven by three main factors: globalization, the rise of the information society, and the rapid expansion of scientific and technological culture.

Globalization has intensified international competition, making it essential for workers to adapt to new technologies and skills. The movement of capital, goods, services, and workers necessitated policies that would facilitate these processes. Additionally, increasing competition in the global labor and knowledge markets has led to a transformation in production structures, a rise in unemployment, and a weakening of labor unions. As a result, economic production resources have been increasingly privatized, and welfare states have been reduced. Lifelong learning has become essential to ensuring that workers can meet the demands of an ever-evolving labor market (Mosley & Friedman, 2006).

At the same time, globalization has shaped a more multicultural society, requiring education systems to recognize and integrate diverse cultural perspectives. The goal is to promote mutual understanding and respect, thereby strengthening social cohesion and fostering peaceful coexistence (Koukounaras-Liagkis & Kolasi, 2020).

A second major factor that necessitated the institutionalization of lifelong learning in Europe is the emergence of the information society. The rapid access to and circulation of information have created a reality in which knowledge quickly becomes obsolete. The information society is defined by the production, distribution, utilization, integration, and management of information, which are now fundamental economic, political, and cultural activities. The rapid advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT) have triggered profound transformations across all sectors of society, reshaping daily life, work structures, and political participation. ICT now serves as the primary medium for knowledge production and dissemination, enabling rapid access to and exchange of information (Kallas, 2006). People participating in this new digital reality are referred to as "digital citizens," equipped with the ability to benefit from digital technologies. Digital citizens are individuals who use technology safely, ethically, and responsibly, protecting their own rights and data as well as those of others in the digital world. Digital participation encompasses critical areas such as online security, digital literacy, ethical behavior, and cyberbullying prevention. In this context, lifelong learning is a necessary condition for individuals to stay updated and competitive in an ever-evolving digital environment (Marinaki, 2015).

The rapid advancement of ICT has made access to information easier and faster. However, it has also heightened the need for continuous education and skill renewal to keep workers informed and professionally competent (Aisopou, 2023). Furthermore, the information society requires individuals to continuously redefine their knowledge and acquire new skills to remain relevant in the labor market. The constant flow of information and the rapid evolution of technologies (e.g. bigdata, internet) require people to be constantly informed and educated. Lifelong learning becomes essential to maintain professional relevance and to cope with new technological challenges (Floridi, 2014).

A third factor that made lifelong learning an immediate necessity in Europe is the rapid development of scientific and technological culture. Advances in science and technology demand the continuous renewal of skills. Lifelong learning fosters the acquisition of digital literacy and other modern competencies essential for success in today's world. The development of digital literacy, in particular, enables workers to acquire the necessary digital skills to fully participate in both society and the labor market (Helsing, 2018).

Scientific progress has led to new technologies and working methods that require continuous training to ensure their effective utilization, reinforcing the need for lifelong learning. The transformation of work and lifestyle patterns makes education and training essential for acquiring the necessary skills. Moreover, scientific progress has reshaped living conditions and influenced cultural development. It serves as a catalyst for intellectual empowerment and cultural advancement, ultimately aiming to enhance scientific understanding, interpret natural and social phenomena, and promote human knowledge and technological innovation. This necessitates continuous research and innovation. As a natural consequence, scientific progress generates an uninterrupted flow of new knowledge, making specialization essential for addressing emerging challenges (Ioannou, 2023).

Additionally, the rapid advancement of science and technology requires individuals to continuously update their knowledge and skills to remain relevant. Scientific progress contributes to economic growth by fostering innovation and the development of new technologies and products. However, it also introduces new challenges, such as excessive specialization, which may narrow the scope of knowledge. Finally, the explosion of scientific and technological culture creates opportunities for the emergence of new professions and the improvement of quality of life through innovation and technological advancements. This makes education and training indispensable for individuals to keep pace with constant change and take full advantage of the opportunities provided by technological progress (European Commission, n.d.).

4.0 GOALS OF THE EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Lifelong learning is a central strategy of the European Union (EU) aimed at promoting education and training at all stages of life. Its primary objective is the development of skills that ensure individuals' ability to adapt to rapidly evolving social and economic environments. The key goals focus on fostering skills that enable citizens to respond to continuous changes in the labor market and contribute to Europe's economic and social prosperity. Additionally, lifelong learning aims to enhance mobility and exchange, encouraging student, teacher, and youth participation in international activities and the exchange of best practices among member states. It also contributes to social inclusion and active citizenship by promoting equality and social cohesion while supporting personal growth and self-actualization, empowering individuals to learn and adapt to new conditions (European Union, 2021).

The achievement of these goals is planned through European programs and initiatives such as Erasmus+ and the "Europe 2020" Strategy. Erasmus+ provides opportunities for education, training, and skills development at both European and international levels, while the Europe 2020 Strategy highlights lifelong learning as a crucial tool for addressing economic and social challenges. A key element of the EU's educational policy is ensuring learning opportunities at all life stages. The EU has set a target to ensure that at least 80% of adults possess basic digital skills by 2030 (Rigou, 2023).

The European educational strategy aims to promote the development of knowledge and skills that contribute to the economic and social well-being of Europe. To this end, it emphasizes the acquisition of competencies essential for the knowledge society, such as digital, linguistic, and social skills. The "European Year of Skills 2023" initiative focused on improving skills to

address labor market shortages and support citizens in obtaining quality employment. Additionally, the strategy encourages investment in education and retraining, aligning skills with labor market needs, and attracting talent from third countries (European Commission, 2023).

For the period 2021-2030, the European Commission has set strategic goals to improve the quality, equity, inclusiveness, and success rates in education and training. This includes ensuring that all individuals acquire the necessary knowledge, competencies, and skills to meet the demands of a rapidly changing society and economy. The promotion of core competencies is a key priority for all European citizens. According to the European Pillar of Social Rights, every individual has the right to inclusive and high-quality education, training, and lifelong learning. This ensures that citizens acquire the skills needed to fully participate in society and adapt to changes in the labor market. Additionally, possessing the right competencies is deemed essential for maintaining living standards and fostering social cohesion, especially in light of future societal and labor market challenges (Council of the European Union, 2021).

A crucial goal of the EU's lifelong learning strategy is the development of key competencies such as literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. Critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork are also considered essential for sustainable career development. These competencies encompass a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for personal fulfillment, employability, social inclusion, and active participation in civic life.

The European Union has identified eight key competencies that all citizens should acquire (Makri, 2024):

- Communication in the mother tongue, and in particular, the ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in oral and written form.
- Communication in foreign languages, so that individuals are able to communicate effectively in an international environment.
- Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering. Basic knowledge in mathematics and science allows individuals to understand and apply scientific principles.
- Digital competence, so that individuals are able to use digital technologies to be able to participate fully in the digital society.
- Learning methodology, which concerns the ability of individuals to learn and adapt to new conditions and knowledge.
- Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, which enable the individual to cooperate with others, understand different cultures and contribute to social cohesion.
- The cultivation of active civic participation skills encourages the individual to actively participate in society and contribute to political life.
- Finally, entrepreneurship, which concerns the individual's ability to develop and implement business ideas (European Union, 2024).

A noteworthy initiative in the EU's lifelong learning strategy is the European Vocational Skills Week, launched in 2016. This annual event aims to promote Vocational Education and Training (VET) and make it a more attractive option by highlighting the quality of skills and

employment opportunities it offers. The initiative includes a range of activities at local, regional, and national levels across Europe to showcase excellence in vocational education.

The main objectives of this initiative are to improve the perception of VET, presenting it as a smart and credible choice for both young people and adults. The campaign's central theme, "VET for All - Skills for Life", underscores the importance of vocational education in equipping individuals with the skills necessary for full participation in society and the labor market.

The European Vocational Skills Week includes press conferences, conferences, workshops and closing celebrations with awards. In addition, over 1,000 activities take place throughout the year across Europe. Stakeholders include learners, parents, companies, social partners, education and training organizations, adult education providers, career counsellors and public services. Vocational Education and Training (VET) offers opportunities for upskilling and reskilling, helping individuals of all ages adapt to labor market changes and new technological advancements.

5.0 CRITICAL REVIEW – CONCLUSIONS

Lifelong learning has emerged as one of the fundamental pillars of modern educational systems, emphasizing the significance of continuous education and training throughout an individual's life. In today's society, where rapid technological and social advancements necessitate constant adaptation and the acquisition of new knowledge, learning is no longer confined to a specific period, as was traditionally the case. Instead, it has transformed into an open-ended and dynamic process, essential for personal development, social inclusion, and professional growth.

Lifelong learning thus serves as a fundamental tool for understanding and managing contemporary challenges faced by both societies and individuals. The recognition that skill development and knowledge renewal are critical for professional mobility, labor market sustainability, and social integration highlights its indispensable role. More specifically, continuous exposure to new learning opportunities enhances individuals' ability to cope with changes, not only in their professional fields but also in their personal lives and social relationships.

However, the concept of lifelong learning extends beyond the mere necessity for ongoing training and skill development. It represents a deeper social and political objective, positioning education as a dynamic process that transforms individuals from passive recipients of knowledge into active participants in society and the economy. Essentially, lifelong learning functions as a social strategy that strengthens social cohesion and supports individual empowerment, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity for continuous learning and self-improvement. When education is accessible to all, regardless of age, gender, or social background, it becomes a tool for social empowerment and upward mobility, enabling individuals to actively and equitably engage in processes of change and innovation.

The lifelong learning model calls for the restructuring of educational institutions and policies. The traditional separation between education and vocational training, as well as the distinction between young and adult learners, must be reconsidered and replaced with a system that

emphasizes continuous learning, regardless of age or circumstances. Modern education must promote creativity, innovation, and critical thinking, integrating targeted tools and methods that respond to the evolving needs of society and the labor market. Furthermore, the utilization of digital learning platforms and online educational communities expands access to education, making learning an ever-evolving and adaptive process.

The new lifelong learning paradigm arises from the dynamic connection between education and social, economic, and technological developments. It acknowledges that modern citizens must manage a broad range of knowledge and skills, which can only be achieved with the support of a flexible and continuously evolving educational infrastructure. Recognizing lifelong learning as a fundamental human right, fostering collaboration between the public and private sectors, and enhancing transnational cooperation in education are crucial prerequisites for ensuring its effectiveness.

Ultimately, lifelong learning emerges as a critical strategy for both individual and societal development, as technological advancements and ongoing socio-economic changes require continuous adaptation. Strengthening learning processes and acknowledging the need for continuous education contribute to creating an educational ecosystem that fosters social participation, economic prosperity, and personal growth. Strategies that incorporate new technologies and flexible learning models will define societies' ability to meet future challenges and ensure a sustainable educational future for all.

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