Transforming higher education institutions into lifelong learning institutions

Lifelong learning has become the overarching concept and vision for education, as reflected in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), one of which, SDG 4, explicitly petitions countries to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UNESCO, 2016). Lifelong learning (LLL) is rooted in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages, in all life-wide contexts and through a variety of modalities that, together, meet a range of learning needs and demands.

In the face of the challenges of the twenty-first century, including technological advancements, climate change, demographic shifts, globalization and the transforming world of work, higher education institutions (HEIs) must be willing to expand their LLL opportunities to reach a greater range of individuals and respond better to societal needs.

Given their unique capacity to develop learners' skills and foster knowledge and innovations, as well as their potential to mobilize educational resources and provide learning opportunities (Osborne, Rimmer and Houston, 2015; Orazbayeva, 2017; Šmídová et al., 2017), HEIs – including universities, colleges, polytechnics and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions – have the potential to expand access to and participation in learning and transform into 'lifelong learning institutions'.

This potential is far from being realized however, partly due to a lack of awareness within HEIs about the role LLL plays in equipping learners with the knowledge and skills they need to better address current and future challenges.

The majority of HEIs continue to promote academic excellence in teaching and research, remaining in the so-called 'ivory tower', with less attention to the real-world challenges that LLL addresses (Brennan and Magnes, 2019). For those HEIs that do recognize and offer LLL opportunities, often there is no unified nor standardized approach across institutions. This leads to a diversity of LLL curricula that obscures its true potential (De Viron and Davies, 2015). LLL is offered via a wide range of learning modalities by a multitude of formal and non-formal education institutions, leaving the specific role of HEIs in promoting LLL unclear (Milic, 2013; Ratana-Ubol and Richards, 2016; Johannesen, Øyan and Magnus, 2018).

The third mission: Higher education institutions as social actors

Once accessible to a privileged few, higher education is now an egalitarian opportunity. HEIs have broadened their reach by diversifying curricula and becoming more learner centred (Allais et al., 2020). As a result, the global gross enrolment ratio in higher education has risen from 19 per cent in 2000 to 38 per cent in 2018 (UIS, 2020).

This illustrates the main trend in the higher education sector: expansion, which is often described as 'massification' (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2019). This massification has been generally confined to traditional students; that is, post-secondary students under 25 years old in full-time study and without major additional work or family responsibilities (Marginson, 2016).

One consequence of HEIs serving a larger share of the population is their increased competitiveness and exposure to market dynamics. Moreover, as new university models emerge – including mass online tertiary education – the differentiation of higher education, wherein what is being learned is of varying quality and status, has also increased. Hence, while higher education has become more widely accessible, major inequalities persist, including by gender, age, socio-economic background and ethnicity.

On a more positive note, HEIs have also become more active societal stakeholders. Universities' traditional mandate has been defined in terms of teaching and research. In recent decades however, higher education institutions have begun to embrace their so-called 'third mission', which involves an active role in local development.

The contribution of HEIs to the economic, social and cultural aspects of the community in which they are based is becoming just as important as their traditional role of teaching and research (Fongwa, Marais and Atkinson, 2014). The emergence of LLL as a key concept in education policy has pushed HEIs' third mission further up the agendas of policy-makers, who view higher education as an opportunity to widen access to learning further and promote the concept of LLL as a core principle of sustainable development.

Strategic approaches for higher education institutions to promote lifelong learning

There are multiple strategic approaches that higher education institutions can adopt to contribute to LLL. First and foremost, they can broaden the scope of their target population and offer learning content to a wider demographic. By providing skills training

and expanding the knowledge base to more people, HEIs can better respond to social and economic challenges and support sustainable practices. HEIs can also promote LLL in other ways, for example through the public dissemination of scientific knowledge, local partnerships and outreach activities.

Nevertheless, in order for HEIs to transform into LLL institutions, they must undergo a fundamental shift, from soliciting the participation of young students coming from secondary schools to welcoming a diversity of learners who are (re)entering higher education at different ages and stages of their personal and professional lives (Slowey and Schuetze, 2012; Cendon, 2018). HEIs are now expected to be more responsive to the realities of working adult learners, helping them to not only acquire skills and knowledge but also to become active participants in society and ultimately improve their quality of life. Offering more flexible provision is key to accommodating non-traditional students' diverse backgrounds, professional and personal commitments, and individual learning styles and life experiences. This requires more versatile pathways into and trajectories within higher education, promoted by tools and mechanisms.

On top of taking action across their campuses, HEIs are increasingly reaching out to the community and addressing broader societal needs. The so-called 'engaged university' plays a role in local development by providing LLL and other services that actively help to shape or transform the social, cultural and economic circumstances of local communities and respond to the learning needs of local citizens in particular disadvantaged groups. This is based on a mutually beneficial and equal relationship in which HEIs learn from the knowledge systems and practices of communities and vice versa. One example of this is the emergence of 'learning cities', in which HEIs play a strategic role in promoting holistic learning at the local level. Another is intergenerational learning and engagement with older adults.

Key concepts related to widening access

Flexible learning pathways (FLPs):
FLPs provide entry and re-entry points to learning for all ages and educational levels, bridge formal and non-formal learning structures, and promote the recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal education (UNESCO, 2016, p. 33).

Recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA):
Recognition, validation and accreditation of all forms of learning outcomes is a practice that acknowledges and values the full range of competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that individuals have obtained.

- Recognition is a process of granting official status to learning outcomes and/or competences, which can lead to the acknowledgement of their value in society;
- Validation is confirmation by an officially approved body that learning outcomes or competences acquired by an individual have been assessed against reference points or standards through pre-defined assessment methodologies;
- Accreditation is a process by which an officially approved body awards qualifications (certificates, diplomas or titles), grants equivalences, credit units or exemptions, or issues documents such as portfolios of competences after having assessed learning outcomes and/or competences. In some cases, the term 'accreditation' applies to the evaluation of the quality of an institution or a programme as a whole (UIL, 2012).

Policy recommendations: How to make the transformation happen

Transforming HEIs into LLL institutions has implications for all aspects of institutional implementation, including national policies, institutional commitments in the form of strategies and mission statements, and funding and organizational structures. It also calls for updated curricula and pedagogies, flexible learning pathways and community engagement. Ultimately, embedding LLL in higher education and vice versa is about fostering a culture whereby LLL is not only viewed as adult learning or continuing education but encompasses all education and prioritizes all types of learners.

The following three statements and related policy recommendations lay out the steps needed to transform HEIs into LLL institutions.

Enabling policy environments form the basis for lifelong learning in higher education.

1. **National governments should create comprehensive national policies and frameworks to establish LLL as a core mission of HEIs, show political will and support the institutionalization of LLL.**
   These actions will encourage individual HEIs to develop strategies based on their specific profiles and in line with national regulations. Through their impact on institutionalization, funding and quality assurance, properly formulated national policies have a reinforcing effect in support of LLL.

2. HEIs should develop institution-wide approaches to LLL that adhere to all three missions of higher education: teaching, research and wider societal engagement.
Strategies must therefore be overarching enough to encompass this diversity but still define sound principles to rationalize LLL throughout the institution. Striking the right balance between flexibility and rules-based professionalization of LLL in HEIs requires engaging all stakeholders and reflecting the interests of professors, learners, academic leadership and the staff responsible for implementing programmes.

Institutional structures and mechanisms support the establishment of lifelong learning in higher education institutions.

3. Dedicated LLL units that take the operational lead of LLL implementation can be a useful structure for coherent LLL institutionalization.
LLL units allow for institution-wide implementation as opposed to decentralized models and are thus able to establish a shared understanding, engage different stakeholders and develop specific expertise.

4. Funding schemes for higher education, both institutional and for learners, should extend to LLL opportunities.
Redesigning funding to reflect the growing importance of more flexible forms of LLL provision, including non-accredited courses and short-term courses characteristic of LLL, can structure and professionalize LLL in higher education. Public or institutional financial support for learners, such as means-tested grants, should be extended to non-traditional learners.

5. Quality assurance procedures that regularly monitor and evaluate LLL opportunities in HEIs should be implemented.
Since funding is often tied to measurable outputs, a mechanism to define and monitor these outputs, including for non-formal LLL, is essential to ensure recognition and effectiveness. Well-established quality assurance procedures contribute to the professionalization of LLL, thus representing a tool to promote the expansion of academic and financial resources for LLL in HEIs.

Widening access and increasing participation in LLL opens HEIs to society.

6. To make educational opportunities and content relevant for non-traditional students in higher education, HEIs should diversify curricula and decolonize knowledge.
This requires a global perspective of epistemologies and opening up knowledge systems to include knowledges from Indigenous peoples, minorities and cultures from the Global South. HEIs should follow a concept of open science that is relevant to the societies they serve and creates spaces for underserved communities and knowledge systems.

7. Learning formats must address diverse learning needs and include degree- and non-degree granting formats as well as different delivery modalities.
Enabling a variety of learning experiences encourages learners, especially disadvantaged learners, to engage in higher education but also to consider further education, employment and certification. Offering both comprehensive study programmes and short-term courses in different areas beyond the traditional study fields is necessary to strike an appropriate balance. Different modalities, including the possibility to switch between full- and part-time study and to take breaks when needed, enable participation in HEIs while recognizing family and work responsibilities.

8. Flexible learning pathways (FLPs), including the recognition, validation, and accreditation of prior learning (RVA), should be introduced and expanded across HEIs.
FLPs allow learners to enter and re-enter higher education at various points of their lives and promote individualized and learner-centred education. RVA can include alternative forms of accreditation, such as certificates and badges, industry certification by employers and micro-credentials. Moreover, flexibility should be enhanced through various arrangements that guide learners on FLPs.

9. **The potential of technology-enhanced learning should be further developed in an inclusive way.**

Online teaching and learning – recently accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as sophisticated methodologies, such as learning driven by mobile technology, social media and artificial intelligence, provide enhanced opportunities for adaptive and self-led learning. The democratizing influence of technology that is, the increasing possibility to learn anywhere at any time gives students greater autonomy for their own learning, allowing them to decide what, when and with whom they learn. This should come with support mechanisms both for learners and educators, however, as they adapt to changing pedagogical methods.

10. **HEIs should expand their engagement with local communities through localized approaches to benefit wider society and fulfil their 'third mission' through LLL.**

HEIs can assume different roles for community engagement, including as stakeholders, strategic partners and advocates, service providers of teaching and learning, and as instrumental stakeholders in city development. Collaborative partnerships, wherein HEIs and communities work towards a common goal, turn communities into partners involved in knowledge production. It is also instrumental for ensuring the participation of non-traditional learners and particularly disadvantaged groups in societies, including migrants and refugees, older adults and people with disabilities.

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