

## LIFELONG LEARNING FOR ALL IN ASIAN COMMUNITIES: ICT BASED INITIATIVES

By

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The necessity to adjust to the prerequisites of the knowledge based society and economy brought about the need for lifelong learning for all in Asian communities. The concept of lifelong learning stresses that learning and education are related to life as a whole - not just to work - and that learning throughout life is a continuum that should run from cradle to grave. Providing lifelong learning for all in Asian communities having varied geographical, educational, economical, social and cultural settings seems an unparalleled task. This paper offers possible solution to face the challenge by adopting the approach that ICT is an able mechanism to provide lifelong learning to all in Asian communities. This optimism is based on the argument that exploration and implementation of innovative ways to educate people by using ICT will help them to live productive and creative lives and will also help to uplift educational, economic and developmental standards in Asian communities. Bearing this in mind, an innovative initiative is outlined in this paper to promote lifelong learning in Asian communities. The author discusses in detail about the action plan to implement this initiative and possibilities offered for providing lifelong learning for all to build knowledgeable, productive, competitive and cooperative Asian communities.*

*Keywords: Lifelong Learning, ICT, Asian communities.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The success of any knowledge based society and economy depends on promoting the acquisition of key competencies and broadening opportunities for innovative and more flexible forms of learning for citizens (Misra, 2011). Hosseini (2006, p.79) supports this claim, "Economic growth is increasingly driven by knowledge, and no country can remain competitive without applying knowledge. The knowledge economy provides efficient ways to produce goods and services and deliver them more effectively, and at lower costs, to a greater number of people." In this context, the main requirement to help Asian communities to emerge as a technology driven knowledge based societies and economies is to provide continuous opportunities for training of workers to meet labor market demands of the knowledge economy. EIM Business and Policy Research and SEOR Report (2005) suggest, "It is generally accepted that in the future workers will need to be trained more frequently than today. Technological change and increased competition in a global economy induce job contents to change more

rapidly and job security to diminish." Therefore, it is essential for learners to learn new skills on regular basis and continue to develop their knowledge and attitudes over their lifetimes.

Talking about the importance of skills, a Report from ILO (2004, p.1) indicates, "Skills have become increasingly important in determining an individual's ability to secure a job, retain employment and move flexibly in the labour market. Although vocational skills remain important, another category has become crucial for the individual's employability. This category has been variously labeled under key and core skills, key competencies, generic skills, etc. These skills differ both in number and type according to the socio-economic context and time reference. However, there is consensus over the requirement of higher and non vocational skills that enable the individual to perform at work and in society." Asian countries are required to promote these skills on continuing basis among their citizens for benefit of their economies and societies. Otherwise, they face the danger to be marginalized in this globalize world, as observed by World Bank Report (2003,

p.xvii), "Developing countries and countries with transition economies risk being further marginalized in a competitive global knowledge economy because their education and training systems are not equipping learners with the skills they need."

Talking about the role of education in knowledge societies and knowledge economies, an article of infoDev (2010, p.09) argues, "The current emphasis on creating "knowledge-based" societies has made "learning" throughout life more important, which in turn requires an education system to have greater flexibility to enable learners to enter and leave the system at different points in time." Unfortunately, majority of Asian countries are unable to offer this type of education to their citizens, as pointed out by the World Bank Report (2003, p. xix), "In the transition economies of Europe and Central Asia, the quality of education is inadequate and the education system is too rigid. Rote learning, exam-driven schooling, and the soaring cost of private education have long been policy concerns in some Asian countries." These observations reveal that Asian countries must come up with new learning models to offer lifelong learning to their citizens, as pointed out by Hosseini (2006, p.79), "The major challenge of learning and training in the 21st century for developing countries consists of insufficient capability to provide necessary education while also not being market oriented or not based on the needs of the market."

Besides, Asian communities are also required to overcome other developmental challenges to make their societies 'knowledge societies' and 'knowledge economies'. Some of these major challenges are: Ten countries in East Asia and the Pacific and four in South Asia have least developed country status, with high levels of poverty and dependence on external assistance. The region also has the largest concentration in the world of people in extreme poverty, and the majority of the world's two billion people who live on US\$2 or less daily. Access to high-quality literacy and adult learning – especially for women – is a major challenge in the region, attesting to the lack of integrated policies, innovative strategies and adequate financial allocations. In some countries, less than one per cent of the education budget is allocated to adult learning and education,

including literacy programmes. Migration and the displacement of populations, language diversity and structural shifts in the economy from farming to industry and services, as well as rapidly-changing labour markets, add to urgent social and individual needs for learning and upgrading occupational skills. These challenges are aggravated by high population growth, large numbers of non-enrolled children and early primary school-leavers (Confinte VI Preparatory Conference, 2009).

## **Lifelong Learning: Key to meet Developmental Challenges**

Lifelong learning (LLL) seems an appropriate approach to help Asian communities to fulfill most of the above mentioned developmental challenges. Compared with traditional forms of learning, lifelong learning is different because it claims to be universal, i.e. covering all citizens across lifecycles and across individuals. The ultimate goal (although nowhere achieved so far) is to give each individual the motivation, the financial means and the physical access to learning at any time in his or her life, so that he or she can develop skills, upgrade or learn new skills for work or for his/her own satisfaction and personal development (ILO, 2004, pp.3-4). Talking about the significance of lifelong learning, Hager (2004, p.31) observes, "Changing social and contextual circumstances may be creating conditions in which the concept of lifelong learning is potentially a fruitful one." Similarly, World Bank Report (2003, p. xvii) advocates, "Lifelong learning is crucial to preparing workers to compete in the global economy. But it is important for other reasons as well. By improving people's ability to function as members of their communities, education and training increase social cohesion, reduce crime, and improve income distribution."

Lifelong learning, according to Royce (1999, p. 149), "Aims to give students the skills to go on learning throughout life and also positive attitudes towards learning which accept and even welcome change and new learning." While, Schuller and Watson (2009, p.2) suggests, "Lifelong learning includes people of all ages learning in a variety of contexts – in educational institutions, at work, at home and through leisure activities. It focuses mainly on adults returning to

organized learning rather than on the initial period of education or on incidental learning." Lifelong learning ensures that the individual's skills and competencies are maintained and improved as work, technology and skill requirements change, ensures the personal and career development of workers; results in increases in aggregate productivity and income; and improves social equity (ILO, 2000, Para V). Keese (2007, p. 81) confirms the utility of lifelong learning in context of Asian communities, "A range of evidence points to clear economic benefits from lifelong learning both for individuals and for society as a whole."

The economic rationale for lifelong learning comes from two principal sources. First, with the increasing importance of knowledge-based economy the threshold of skills demanded by the employers is being constantly raised. There is a relative decline in demand for low-level skills. Second, as firms respond to a more volatile market and shorter product cycles, career jobs are fewer and individuals experience more frequent changes in jobs over the working life. The shelf life of skills is shorter. There is a need for continuous renewal and updating of skills, which is essential for structural adjustment, productivity growth, innovation, and effective reallocation of human resources (infoDev, 2010, p.4). All these observations clearly establish that a number of important socioeconomic forces are pushing for offering lifelong learning to all in Asian communities. In reality, a number of issues need to be discussed first before chalking out strategies to promote lifelong learning among Asian communities.

### **Promoting Lifelong Learning in Asian Communities: Key Issues**

The first key issue for promoting lifelong learning for all in Asian communities is suitability of academic institutions to offer new forms of skills and competencies. The reason is that traditional learning model differs from lifelong learning methods in important ways. Abeles (2001) is of the view that with the idea of lifelong learning becoming critical, the very institutions that originally created academic communities, extending back into the home and forward into life beyond the campus, are not only ill designed to support these efforts, but also are burdened with the overhead of having

monetized the services that were naturally included in the more traditional community. The second key issue is to motivate and convince the older members of society to continue learning and embrace technologies, as suggested by Agee (2005, pp.249-250), "To be merely current with today's technology one must learn effectively and take a broader view of life and relationships than was possible in the past." To make this happen at ground level is a big task in Asian communities, as the older members of society often seem reluctant to go for new learning after retirement.

The third key issue is to convince academic institutions and enterprises to come out of the isolation and work on collaborative basis to provide lifelong to all. According to Ojala (1994, p.14), "There is a need to join forces among universities, other educational providers, and industries, to develop long-term strategies for competence development and to provide employees with lifelong learning which supports their current and future work." The fourth key issue is to come up with clear cut framework and strategies to provide need based lifelong learning opportunities related to life as a whole - not just to work. Because lifelong learning includes many kinds of learning it is important for an individual that these pieces of learning can be combined to raise competence level. For this purpose, there is a need for clear-cut frameworks and goals. Beside these key issues, there are many other barriers that need to be overcome for successful provision of lifelong learning for all.

In relation to generating further demand for LLL, individuals face a number of important barriers which prevent their further participation in learning and development. The main barriers are costs of training, both in terms of financial resources and opportunity costs; individuals apprehensions about the benefits of LLL; lack of motivation and low aspirations among low-skilled people to even consider LLL as appropriate to their lives; lack of time to participate in training; and unwillingness of some employers to support learning activities amongst their employees; and the reluctance of governments and public authorities to support LLL (Pavlovaite, Harrison and Dearling, 2008). These barriers were identified in European context, but remain

equally visible and present in Asian societies. This discussion also establishes that providing lifelong learning to all in Asian communities having varied geographical, educational, economical, social and cultural settings seems an unparalleled task. To fulfill this task, Asian countries need a new and viable approach.

## **ICT: Key to promote Lifelong Learning in Asian Communities**

Information Communication Technologies (ICT) seems a suitable approach to promote lifelong learning in Asian communities, as suggested by Moore and Tait (2002, p.40), "When conventional systems and approaches cannot meet the needs, it is necessary to look for new strategies." The reason behind this optimism is that ICT is changing the access to knowledge, the process of learning, and the delivery of education and training all over the world including Asian communities. ICT can be of great use in helping to achieve the goals of lifelong learning. ICT can reduce digital divide between rural and urban areas and engender community development and empowerment. ICT tools are very powerful and can go a long way in addressing certain issues like adult illiteracy, education for school dropouts and women empowerment (infoDev, 2010, p.17). ICT can open up the potential for most Asian countries to boost education by overcoming the problem of access to lifelong learning and training faced by remote communities, people with various disadvantages and those who, for various reasons, cannot participate in conventional learning and training.

Talking about her experiences to use ICT for lifelong learning, Jakkamal (2009) explains,

*"I watch television to learn something about agriculture and goat rearing. Whenever I come across any experts, I discuss with them about the various aspects of agriculture and animal husbandry. I use my mobile phones mostly for talking to experts, SHG members and listening to the audio messages. This type of lifelong learning has helped me to improve my goat rearing abilities particularly in buying good breed, better feed and health management etc."*

These experiences and arguments convince us to accept that ICT is an able mechanism to provide lifelong learning

to all in Asian communities. This acceptance further motivates us to explore and implement innovative ways to use ICT to educate people; help them to live productive and creative lives; uplift their educational, economic and developmental standards; and to provide lifelong learning to remote, rural and marginalized communities in Asia.

## **Proposed Initiative: E-Lifelong Learning Centers**

In Asian societies, people are often willing to learn and relearn, but the problem is that they are not sure whom to contact and where to go for learning. The other problem is that majority of Asian population lives in rural areas and they can not afford to travel faraway for the sake of learning and training. They need training in close vicinity of their workplace. The cost of training is another big issue. People need training but do not have enough financial support to make it happen. These realities compel us to look for innovative ways to provide lifelong learning for all in Asian societies. We need measures that can help individuals to get lifelong learning and provide them access to various sources of education and training at one place. The lifelong learning needs of Asian communities can be met effectively and efficiently by establishing 'E-Lifelong Learning Centres' in different places. The purpose, mechanism and proposed services by these 'E-Lifelong Learning Centres' are discussed below.

### **Purpose**

The main purpose of Establishing 'E -Lifelong Learning Centers' in different regions will be:

- To offer lifelong learning to all those willing to learn at any stage of life.
- To help individuals to learn as per their convenience and ease by using ICT.
- To train and re-train workers for changing occupations and job demands.
- To offer Lifelong learning at the doorstep of learners.
- To counsel and motivate people to learn for betterment of society.
- To support people to become active members of knowledge economy.

## **Mechanism**

These centers will be a joint venture between respective governments and communities. The mechanism and modus operandi of proposed 'E-Lifelong Learning Centers' will be as follows:

- These centers will be community driven initiatives by the people, for the people, of the people. The grant for establishment of these centers will be provided by respective governments on cost sharing basis. The governments will provide grant for buildings and equipments and community will take care of maintenance and running costs. The government and donor agencies will be required to provide subsidy to support the educational services of these centers.
- The centers will be equipped with sufficient number of different ICT technologies namely computers with High speed internet connections, telephones, Radio, and Television. The centers will also be required to have the teleconferencing facilities for learners. The centres will be required to invest wisely for procuring the technologies. The centers can ask other institutions/people to donate ICT tools (old but in good working conditions) for these centers. The reason that people/institutions have a tendency to procure new ICT tools at regular intervals and dump the still workable but old ICT tools. This initiative will save lot of money for these centers.
- These centers will be established in the existing buildings of the educational institutions/ enterprises. The institutions/ enterprises will be required to allot any surplus rooms to run the centers; otherwise the required rooms will be built. On working days, these centers will offer their services in the evening and during Sundays and other holidays the centers will remain open throughout the day. This provision will help in two ways, first there will be no need to pay additional maintenance expenses on building part and in other side this provision will help the working people to come and learn after their working hours.
- The centers will be required to employ at least two personnel, one who will look after the overall activities of center and one ICT specialist. Instead of appointing

these personnel on salary basis, institutions can look for volunteers specially the retired people to give their services to run these centers. Besides, the centers can also invite different personnel from industry and other organizations to offer their services to run the centers.

- Every center will be required to advertise about their activities and services and invite people to come to centre for lifelong learning. The centres will use different means (person to person publicity, ICT based advertising) to aware masses about their purpose and activities. The centers can also take the services of employers, non governmental organizations, employee unions, etc. to make workers aware and counsel them to join these centers for individual and societal benefits.
- All the willing learners of the community will be registered as the members of the center. The registered learners will be issued a member card to utilize the services of the centers. The registered members will get a detailed plan about the services, available training facilities and schedule of training programmes. The centers will charge a nominal fee from learners and the amount of fee will be based on the nature and duration of the training programmes.

## **Services**

The proposed 'E-Lifelong Learning Centers' will be helpful to fulfill a number of lifelong learning needs of learners in Asian communities. These centers will offer following major services to the learners:

- These centers will offer need based and market oriented courses and training programmes mainly for those who are already in employment or left their jobs. The centers will assess the learning needs of registered learners and counsel them about present job trends and skills. On the basis of these assessments, the centers will arrange different lifelong learning and training programmes for the benefit of learners. The centers will take help of different ICT tools to inform and guide the learners about training programmes. As follow-up of these training programmes, the learners will be surveyed and get required support through e-mode.

- The proposed centers will also offer need based e-adult education programmes in regional languages. The learners will be asked to enroll for these programmes and will be provided study material and other relevant information along with necessary guidance to pursue these programmes. The centers will mainly use ICT for documentation, dissemination and distribution of relevant information to the adult learners. The centers will regularly invite education specialist and learners will be given an opportunity to present their problems /query before these experts by using ICT. The centers will also have the provision to refer the learners to other experts for any further advice. In other side, these centers will also promote different lifelong learning and training programmes run by other organizations.
- These centers will work as a learning sharing platform and will provide an opportunity for learners to share their occupational experiences, knowledge and tricks of trade among other learners by using different ICT. Any registered learner of the center will get the contacts of other registered learners to share their experiences and concerns. This peer learning opportunity will help them to learn together on continuing basis. The centers will also develop lifelong learning social sites and invite the learners to get in touch with other lifelong learners and remain connected through this site.
- The other important task of these centers will be to organize virtual occupational training programmes/workshops for learners. This provision will specially help those who would like to update their knowledge and skills without going to distant places or paying a hefty fee. The centers will arrange these programmes via two modes-online and offline. Those who have ICT tools will attend training in online mode and those learners who have no access to ICT tools will be required to come to the center to attend the training.
- These centers will provide the list and contact of those voluntary, governmental and non-governmental organizations offering lifelong learning programmes. The learners will be asked to contact these organizations for

conducting desired learning programmes in their respective communities. Besides, the centers will also advise and counsel different institutions and organizations to offer different lifelong learning programmes for learners. The centers will also use ICT to promote a lifelong learning culture in society and this in turn will help learners to come forward and join the lifelong learning programmes on regular basis.

- These centers will further act as a data bank of lifelong learners. The details, problems and concerns of learners will be put up in the e-repository of these centers. This data bank will help the respective governments to assess the needs of lifelong learners to plan different lifelong programmes in future. In other side, on the basis of available data and existing trends, these centers will request different agencies to design and run need based and area specific lifelong learning and training programmes.

#### **Implication of proposed Initiative: Key Benefits**

The Asian communities are witnessing different socio-economic changes. Responsiveness to these changes is a challenge for individuals, as observed by Leader (2003, p. 367), "As the pace of socio-economic change and technological innovation gathers speed, individuals will need to update their skills to keep abreast of global challenges." To keep pace with the rapidly changing employment patterns and different working environments, the individuals are required to be a lifelong learner. The individuals are expected to learn and relearn on regular basis to improve the quality of their life and that of society. To make this happen, Asian societies are required to offer easily affordable and convenient lifelong learning opportunities for individuals to learn on regular basis as per their need, choices and convenience. The proposed 'E-Lifelong Learning Center' is one such initiative. This initiative intends to ensure that 'lifelong learning for all' should not remain an elusive goal in Asian countries. It is expected that establishment of these Centers will help Asian communities to propagate and disseminate lifelong learning in many ways.

Banking on the trend that ICTs are being integrated into everyday lives of people in the Asia Pacific region (Richards

and Nair, 2007), proposed initiative is based on use of ICT for offering lifelong learning opportunities to different sections of society. The proposed E-lifelong learning centers aim to bring lifelong opportunities to the doorstep of those who can not participate in conventional learning and training due to various reasons like living in remote places, not having any formal schooling, not having enough financial support, etc. These centres will offer an alternative learning path for individuals by helping them to learn new subjects and skills in addition to formal schooling. We can hope that proposed centers will provide opportunities for individuals to learn throughout their lifespan and help them to function as productive members of their communities. The prime beneficiary of this initiative will be workers, who can prepare them to compete in the global economy by regularly learning new knowledge and skills through these centers.

### Conclusion

This is a well recognized fact that 'lifelong learning for all' is instrumental to build equitable and sustainable societies in Asia. Kagia (2003, p. xiv) observes, "Lifelong learning is education for the knowledge economy. Within this lifelong learning framework, formal education structures-primary, secondary, higher, vocational, and so on-are less important than learning and meeting learners' needs. It is essential to integrate learning programs better and to align different elements of the system. Learners should be able to enter and leave the system at different points. The learning system needs to include a multitude of players, such as learners, families, employers, providers, and the state. Governance in the lifelong learning framework therefore involves more than just ministries of education and labor." This observation is a testimony that we need community supported initiative to promote lifelong learning in Asian countries. We can hope that establishment of 'E-Lifelong Learning Centers' will be an able mechanism for providing lifelong learning for all to build knowledgeable, productive, competitive and cooperative Asian communities.

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