

Maria Bajner

LIFELONG LEARNING REDEFINED: FROM SUSTAINABILITY TO GENERATIONAL LEARNING

ABSTRACT

The following paper is intended to give a brief account of the trends in lifelong learning as they appear in the official documents of UNESCO and the OECD. It identifies the driving forces behind the humanistic and the utilitarian considerations in the opposing approaches of UNESCO and the OECD, while it also addresses the role of political influencers in confusing the issues. The author uses document analysis of studies and findings of international surveys to shed light on the ambivalent stances in educational documents towards the importance of lifelong learning. The author will argue that a shift in rhetoric from lifelong learning to generational learning is needed in order to eliminate 'doublespeak' and meet the needs of today's generations often brought up with utilitarian values and high economic expectations.

Keywords: *equal educational opportunities, paradigm change, competition, quality vs. quantity, sustainability*

PONOVA OPREDELITEV VSEŽIVLJENJSKEGA UČENJA: OD TRAJNOSTI DO GENERACIJSKIH NAČINOV UČENJA – POVZETEK

Članek prinaša povzetek trendov v vseživljenjskem učenju, kot se pojavljajo v uradnih dokumentih organizacij UNESCO in OECD. Nato opredeli gonilne sile humanističnih in utilitarnih dejavnikov v nasprotujočih si pristopih obeh organizacij, hkrati pa se ukvarja tudi z vlogo, ki jo z zapletanjem vprašanj igrajo politični vplivneži. Prek analize dokumentov – študij in ugotovitev mednarodnih anket – avtorica razjasni ambivalentna stališča do pomena vseživljenjskega učenja, kot se kažejo v dokumentih o izobraževanju. Zagovarja tezo, da je treba namesto o vseživljenjskem učenju govoriti o generacijskih načinih učenja, saj lahko tako odpravimo »dvoumni govor« in se odzovemo na potrebe današnjih generacij, ki pogosto odraščajo ob sprejemanju utilitarnih vrednot in visokih ekonomskih pričakovanj.

Ključne besede: *enake izobrazbene priložnosti, sprememba paradigme, tekmovanje, kakovost ali količina, trajnost*

In non-academic circles the meaning of ‘lifelong learning’ is vague and obscure; there is uncertainty about the usage itself: it covers a whole range of educational pathways, from recreation or hobby courses to lifesaver qualifications. It is a constant topic of everyday conversations so that by the time young adults at universities graduate, the jobs they are being trained for now might well disappear, and the curricula and learning materials they are using today might well become useless or obsolete in 5–10 years. Therefore, a rising number of adult learners are searching for new study options, such as different forms of continuous education, from degree courses to professional development training courses online and offline, all of which fulfil the meaning of ‘lifelong learning’.

The aim of the paper – which uses document analysis of studies and findings of international surveys – is to shed light on the ambivalent stances in such documents towards the importance of lifelong learning (LLL) and to call attention to generational learning which seems to be undeservingly absent in political discourse on adult education.

Firstly, the paper will give a brief account of the phases and trends in lifelong learning as they appear in the official documents of UNESCO and the OECD. Secondly, it will identify the driving forces behind the humanistic and the utilitarian considerations from the opposing approaches of UNESCO and the OECD and will highlight the role of the political influencers in confusing the issues. Thirdly, it will try to demonstrate the demand for a new type of learning. Finally, it will argue that a shift in rhetoric from LLL to generational learning is also needed in order to eliminate ‘doublespeak’ and satisfy the needs of today’s generations who have arguably been brought up with a utilitarian view of education and high economic expectations.

THE CONTRADICTIONARY NATURE OF LIFELONG LEARNING: LEARN TO LIVE OR LIVE TO LEARN?

It is much debated whether the concept of LLL used in UNESCO documents represents an overall humanistic ideology, stressing the importance of equal educational opportunities for all as a human right, or expresses a more pragmatic approach to life conformity, and indispensable guidance to the changing economic environment. The differing interpretations of lifelong learning given by UNESCO and the OECD have inspired scholars to explore the contradictory nature of the whole issue of LLL in the light of UNESCO and the OECD reports which seem to reflect conflicting policies, values, and interests (Elfert, 2013; Boshier, 2004; Knoll, 1996; Rubenson, 2009).

The first phase of LLL started in 1945 when the idea emerged from the basic need for access to education for everyone as laid down in the UNESCO Constitution (1945) and in the rejuvenated EFA¹ goals of the 1990s.

1 Education for All (EFA) is a global commitment initiated by UNESCO “to provide quality basic education for all children, youth and adults”. See: UNESCO’s Programme of Education for All (1997), <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001221/122102Eo.pdf>.

Educational projects worded in UNESCO documents all convey the message of the enlightenment tradition in that they are indebted to universal values, emancipation, or individual freedom embedded in a humanist concept with the message that human beings are masters of their own destiny. As stated in one of their latest brochures on education,

UNESCO's Education Sector supports Member States in developing education systems that foster high-quality and inclusive lifelong learning for all, empowering learners to be creative and responsible global citizens while leading the debate to help shape the future international education agenda. (UNESCO, 2017, p. 3)

The OECD's version of LLL is somewhat different from that of UNESCO. LLL according to the OECD is about the acquisition of skills and competencies to meet labour market needs in the broader context of a competitive knowledge society. The OECD represents and documents these apparently pragmatic systems with the objective of promoting policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world. "To participate fully in their society, people need to develop a transferable skillset over a lifetime" (OECD, 2017). This is the objective at the heart of Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by world leaders in New York in September 2015. By advocating "inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all", Goal 4 establishes an ambitious agenda to ensure that every adult has an equal opportunity to a quality education and to contribute to society (ibid., 2017).

DEVELOPMENT OF THEORIES

The whole notion of LLL had its renaissance in 2015 when the old concept of the United Nations was framed into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In other words, providing citizens with up to date education and thus making them more marketable and assisting them in bettering themselves in life is no longer the duty of the state alone; responsibility is shared between the political/economic decision makers and the citizens. While LLL flourished across the developed world during the boom years, it is likely that the years of austerity to follow will see a reduction in all forms of publicly funded education and training. In the context of the EU lifelong learning policy, the Lisbon Strategy Goal (also known as the Lisbon Agenda, devised in 2000) of achieving "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" by 2010 has been only partially achieved and future progress is threatened by a predictable economic crisis.

The third phase is signposted by the boom in technological development around the turn of the century that brought about significant contextual change with regard to LLL. The new concept of LLL has dramatically responded to the challenges of the new labour market from the point of view of global governance, thus labelling a new era of a global economic paradigm, with divergent rights, responsibilities and interests among the stakeholders, especially young adults. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development places education and LLL in a global economic environment, where 'sustainability' is the old

dream in a modern context. Global economy as described in the 2030 Agenda values global citizens with a global mindset, whose role in shaping their own future is more individual than global. Active ageing is strongly articulated in the 2030 Agenda documents, but less attention is paid to the younger generations and their changing learning habits. Since lifelong education has traditionally been discussed in the context of adult education, it is no surprise that the most inspiring literature on the topic of LLL, despite addressing education in its totality, has concentrated mainly on adult education. Adult education literature is aimed at the needs of the future generations with the intention of 'teaching' and moralizing about life, personal responsibility and values, while missing out the young generation who start their intellectual awakening at an early age; this seems to make the whole concept of 'learning throughout life' incomplete.

PROS AND CONS IN FUNDAMENTAL LITERATURE

In order to understand the old/new concept of LLL and trace the hidden meaning behind the rhetoric, it is advisable to look for clues in the 'flagship literature' concerning controversial viewpoints. My concluding views on the anomalies of LLL are highly influenced by three pivotal and inspiring works: Philip H. Coomb's (1968) analysis *The World Educational Crisis; Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*, known as the *Faure Report* (Faure et al., 1972); and *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors et al., 1996), known as the *Delors Report*, all published under the umbrella of UNESCO.

The whole issue of learning can be viewed as the conflicting relationship between the individual and society and how individuals can achieve their goals within given social-economic confines. *The Faure Report* (1972) is groundbreaking in the sense that it endows citizens with the possibility of development. They can go from basic rights to basic responsibilities to taking their future into their own hands. It is a novelty in the sense that it introduces the twenty-first century concept of the 'learning society' which was used in the *Faure Report*, but without making schools responsible. People have to take every opportunity to learn, but they also have to be directed towards this. It is not the school or schooling that is a central actor in this process, but rather the process itself, i.e. the life of the individual who can form their future the whole life long, that would enable the formation of the complete person, "the citizen of the world", and "author of his own fulfilment" (Faure et al., 1972, p. 158). There is a shift in education from the quantitative to the qualitative, from the traditional to the less traditional – as there has been a shift of (state) power from formal, institutional obligation to informal, personal enrichment.

While according to the *Faure Report* there must be a constant need for the individual to learn in order to survive, the *Delors Report* does not exclude schools from this responsibility, saying that "schools should impart both the desire for, and the pleasure in learning, the ability to learn how to learn" (Delors et al., 1996, p. 19). As expressed in the *Faure Report*, people have to take every opportunity to learn but they also have to be directed towards these opportunities. The report emphasises that "although people need to take

every opportunity for learning and self-improvement, they will not be able to make good use of all these potential resources unless they have received a sound basic education” (Faure et al., 1972 p. 19). Education should provide conditions for people to defend themselves against an “alienating”, even “hostile”, system (ibid., p. 95). Both reports challenge the traditional school system: “the old idea that schooling is the only valid education and that the time of learning is limited to traditional school age [...] is fundamentally unjust” (ibid., p. 44). Both call attention to the need to see education in its totality, where the central aim of education is the fulfilment of the individual as a social being, a citizen who is able and willing to think critically and participate actively in society’s affairs.

The line of lifelong education developed by Faure et al. was taken up and modified by Delors et al. (1996) to become “learning throughout life”, which puts the emphasis on the necessity to adapt to learning requirements as a “response to an economic demand” (p. 101). Learning throughout life needs to be guaranteed through a “flexible type of education” that provides for an equality of opportunity for all learners, which is a necessary premise of democracy (ibid.). Delors’ humanistic views stirred up sharp controversies between the supporters of market-driven education and the moralists, the promoters of the “survival of humanity” (ibid., p. 16). The humanistic side collides with the economic side, where competitiveness means the ability to win a market share.

In the foundation reports discussed here, a great deal of attention is paid to the role of new technologies in education and the need for continuous training for job-related purposes. New technology is a prerequisite for individual and/or social development, and both reports express concern that “the world would be dehumanized as a result of technical change” (Faure et al., 1972, p. 94). While the possibilities of these new technologies (of the 1960s and 70s) for the democratisation of knowledge are stressed, the *Faure Report* cautions against their potential to further aggravate social inequalities, as Elfert points out (2015, p. 91). The fourth pillar of the *Delors Report*, “Learning to be”, echoes the dominant theme of the *Faure Report*, highlighting a range of indispensable personal skills which need to be enhanced, e.g. “memory, reasoning power, imagination, physical ability, aesthetic sense, the aptitude to communicate with others” (Delors et al., 1996, p. 21). Almost 40 years later, Andrew Bollington, in an OECD Forum, summarised the challenges the 21st century learners have to face: “Being educated is no longer about how much you know, but about having the skills and motivation for lifelong learning so that you can learn new knowledge whenever you need to” (Bollington, 2015). Both the *Delors* and the *Faure Report* address ‘pupils and students’ who develop their abilities informally and try new methods of alternating study with work. Meanwhile, as Delors et al. (1996) point out, education is a social experience through which children learn about themselves, develop interpersonal skills and acquire basic knowledge and skills (p. 23).

The message that ‘everybody is needed’ is expressed in the *Delors Report*: “None of the talents which are hidden like buried treasure in every person must be left untapped” (ibid., p. 21). If everyone is given an “authentically fair chance” for advanced education, the less favoured and privileged could profit from it and “pass the benefits on to society” (ibid.).

THE QUESTIONS OF DEMAND-SUPPLY: QUANTITY OVER QUALITY?

Long before the *World Declaration for Education for All* was drawn up (UNESCO, 1990), Coombs (1968) pointed out that education can only be viewed in relation to other segments of the economy. He claims that there are different strategies an educational system can use to deal with the demand-supply gap. It can open doors, let in everyone who wishes to enter, allow them to stay for as long as they like, and go as far as they please. He visualises bulging enrolments, crowded classrooms, and probably a sharp decline in quality. This strategy, as stated by Coombs, may satisfy social demand – or at least appear to do so – but at the price of high dropout rates, poor quality, and the waste of public resources. He takes into consideration the critical rates of growth: economic, agricultural, demographic, and educational. If any of these factors become imbalanced, the nation's whole development process will be in trouble: economically, socially, and politically. If the education system turns out graduates faster than the economy can give them jobs, unemployment among the educated will increase. More recent detailed OECD analyses seem to confirm Coomb's concern about the demand-supply theory and were followed by new educational strategies at both national and international levels (OECD, 2007; 2010).

According to the College Board Report (2008), education could be among the next economic sectors “to undergo a massive restructuring” (p. 5) as the banking industry has since seen. Among factors accelerating changes, several issues are named, i.e. the globalisation of commerce and culture, demographic changes in developed countries (which concerns adult education) and accessibility of information and communication technologies (ibid.). Following this line of argument, some questions inevitably come to mind. What is the connection between a higher percentage of college graduates and economic competitiveness? Is quantity given preference over quality? Does this mean that more is better, but that ‘most’ is best? What paths should world leader education innovators, colleges, or administrators take and what tools are they supposed to experiment with?

The topic of education has long been of primary concern for policymakers and seen as a battleground of political rhetoric not free from elements of populist demagoguery. Economic competitiveness and human fulfilment are the most quoted reasons behind the demand for visible changes in both the quality and quantity of education.

In his address to the U.S. Congress in 2009, President Obama noted the connection between education and the chances of becoming a global superpower.²

With all of these steps, I am confident that by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. That's our goal. [...] That's how we'll out-educate other countries. That's how we'll out-compete with other countries tomorrow (The White House, 2011).

2 Obama was giving a speech at Miami Central High School in March 2011.

The message was not left unanswered by the European Commission which came up with the proposal that one of the main targets of “Europe 2020” would be that by 2020, 40% of the EU citizens aged 30–34 would have a college degree in order to contribute to the advancement of the economy. The obvious question, whether having the highest percentage of college graduates has any valid connection to economic competitiveness, remains open.

The ambitious objective is far more complicated than a single correlation of prosperity with the huge percentage of the population possessing degrees. It can be argued that what matters more is what people actually learn and how this capital can be mobilised. In the digital age the highest purpose of higher education in a free society is neither an improved economy nor spiritual fulfilment, but an informed citizenry. In order to give meaning to the political ‘doublespeak’, governments would have to increase revenues and improve the quality of education in an era when they have fewer students, increasing maintenance costs, and decreasing budgets for research and development.

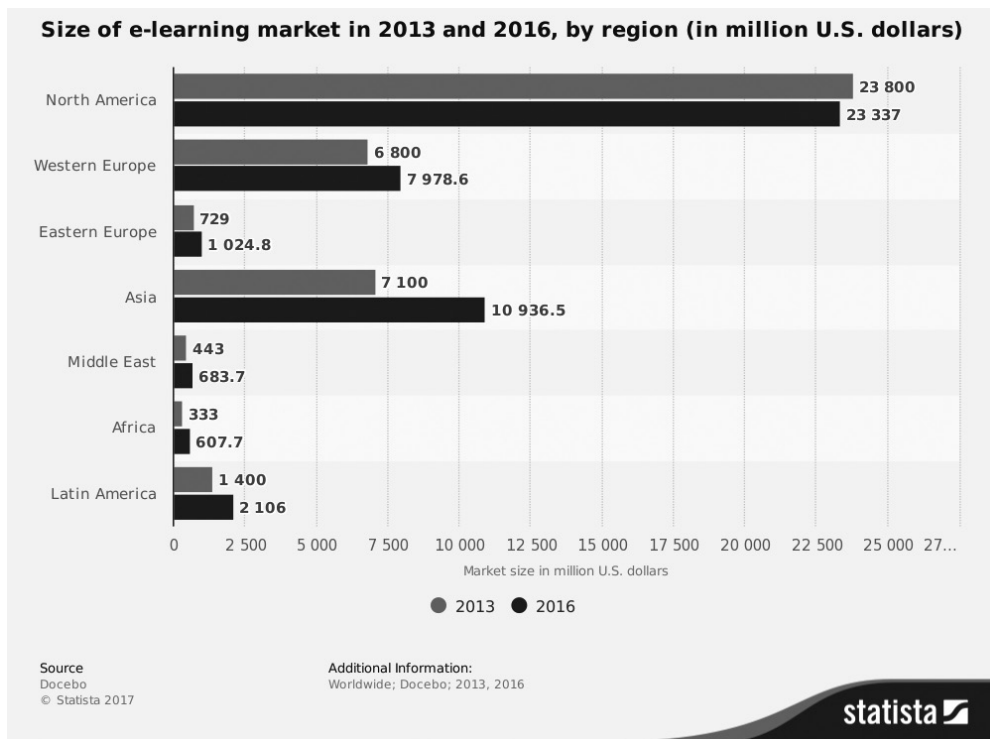
FOR SUSTAINABILITY, PRESS ‘SHIFT’

Academic and non-academic decision makers must look for strategies to lower costs. To recruit more students, it seems to be evident that universities and colleges need to turn to new technologies, e.g. cloud computing, mobile computing, networking devices. As can be seen in Table 1 below, digital education has become global and marketable. With Internet access, learning is ubiquitous and profitable for all stakeholders in the education technology industry. The question is no longer about increasing the number of national or regional degree holders but about raising EdTech investments and the global market share. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) like Coursera, Udacity, or edX advertise their mission to provide open access to those who are disciplined enough to guide themselves, and who already possess the judgement, independence, and discipline to teach themselves. Besides, surveys show that students taking online courses, and taking part in different types of e-learning, especially initial students and adults with little IT experience, need guidance (Sander, 2014). Although they are required to take an active role in their education, it is also assumed that they do not enter tertiary education with definite judgements. Thus, college should be a transformative experience for them.

‘Open access’ to education does not necessarily mean equitable education: ubiquitous digital devices and online networks have radically reduced costs for accessing online and digital learning. As intuitive as the idea sounds, however, free and open technologies do not automatically democratise education. In fact, researchers point out that “free online learning materials disproportionately benefit the affluent and highly educated” (Reich & Ito, 2017, p. 3). According to Reich and Ito, the obvious barriers to democratizing education through technology are related to cost and technology access, but social and cultural barriers vary substantially across different communities and contexts (*ibid.*, pp. 4–15).

In the digital age, education is about receiving, selecting, and using new information with a special emphasis on organisational learning. It is impossible to imagine the information

Table 1: 23 EdTech Industry Statistics and Trends



Source: <https://brandongaille.com/23-edtech-industry-statistics-and-trends/>.

landscape young adults will encounter in another 20 years. What kind of abilities will be needed for the individual to succeed? They are likely to include the ability to recognise, adapt to and utilise information. Information storage will be larger, while information transmission will be faster and less expensive. The role of formal education will be to prepare young adults to understand and navigate this growing array of information, in other words, to teach them how to learn.

‘Sustainability’ in LLL is more than an empty phrase as it stresses the issue of digital technology as a prerequisite for the future of education, and as such, for the future of several generations ahead. Despite the fact that the question of learning through the generations is closely connected with the goal of sustainable development and education, there is little if any concern about the continuity of generational education. Sustainability in this sense comprises all the basic goals our predecessors in different socio-political contexts noted in their reports 70, 50, 30 years ago with a vague anticipation of the ‘digital tsunami’ to come. Over the last fifty years, constant scientific and technological innovation and change has had intense effects on how learning is understood, which was not foreseen by the decision makers at the time of planning the 2030 Agenda (Table 2).

Table 2: GENERATIONAL COHORTS (Strauss-Howe theory)³

2015 At the time of planning the 2030 Agenda	70+ Silent Generation (born before 1945)	60+ Boomers (born between 1945–65)	40+ Generation X (born between 1965–85)	30+ Generation Y (born between 1985–2000)	18+ Generation Z (born after 2000)
Representation (Labour market share)	2%	19%	43%	35%	1%
At the time of the 2030 Agenda	85+	75+	55+	45+	25+

Source: <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/generations-demographic-trends-population-and-workforce>.

19% of the people who were still active in the labour market at the time of shaping the Agenda will become inactive 15 years later and be replaced by a new generation of workers with hardly comparable learning habits. The Boomers and Generation X-ers with a profound interest in economy identify with the learning needs of their own age groups, whereas Generation Y and Z 15 years later may take up wider economic and LLL issues as the Baby Boomers continue to age and leave the policy-making arena.

CONCLUSION

It is commonplace to say that life today is faster and more demanding than it was 50 years ago. We are living in a world of exacerbating conflicts and widening gaps in inequality; we are confronting weighty issues of global warming, migration, and contagious diseases, all of which need to be addressed and reacted upon inter-connectedly. Among factors accelerating changes, several topics have been cited, i.e. the globalisation of commerce and culture, demographic changes in developed countries (all of which concern education), and the accessibility of information and communication technologies. What challenges will educators, students, and prospective employees have to face in order to be competitive in the national and global labour market? It can be concluded from surveys carried out in the past few years that learning with technology itself is not a panacea for all educational problems, which are rooted in social issues, fiscal dilemmas, national priorities and practices.

Generational Learning can express the idea of sustainability when it comes to a global vision of the future of education. Although most studies and reports point out that learning itself is a common value and an asset we can all rely on, there is little emphasis on the joy of sharing the experience, on mixed-age community learning groups, or the satisfaction

³ Neil Howe and William Strauss identified and described a recurring cycle of age cohorts with certain values and called them ‘generations.’ I refer to their classification used in their first book, *Generations* (Howe & Strauss, 1991).

that comes from sharing collective knowledge and cultural heritage. The concept of LLL has changed over the years; the meaning has been transferred from ‘lifelong’ to ‘lifelike’, thus emphasising its ubiquitous nature. There has also been an awakening of the debates over the driving forces behind the discourses as they manifest themselves in different publications issued by supranational organisations such as UNESCO or the OECD. Contemporary discourse is strongly influenced by economic determination, whereas the whole idea of LLL is associated with the enlightenment tradition of justice and equity.

In the contemporary political climate when investment in education technology is seen from the point of view of its global market share, it seems unlikely that UNESCO’s humanistic message will be noticed. But the UNESCO foundation documents, together with the three cornerstone reports, remind us that there are recurring tendencies we can learn from if we turn them to our advantage. If we persist in the utilitarian view of education, and do not practice the humanistic approach or disregard the importance of personal connections, then we lose the chance to connect to the next generation, to the future, without which the meaning of learning is lost. Lifelong.

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