

UNESCO INSTITUTE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: RESEARCH REPORT (2023)

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The UNESCO research report "International Trends of Lifelong Learning in Higher Education" (2023) provides a comprehensive overview of the development of lifelong learning (LLL) in the higher education sector worldwide. It examines how higher education institutions (HEIs) have contributed to lifelong learning and highlights progress in the various areas of implementation. The report is based on the results of an international survey conducted in 2020 among 399 HEIs in 96 countries. The study was led by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in collaboration with the International Association of Universities (IAU) and the Shanghai Open University (SOU). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this report was not presented to the public until 19-21 October 2023 at an international conference in Shanghai.

- The report contains a total of 25 charts on the results, an extensive bibliography (pp. 58-64), an appendix containing the list of countries surveyed, the questionnaire and a glossary (see pp. 65-67).
- The results are categorized into three areas: Policy Environment, Institutional Governance and Implementation, and Widening Access through Diversification.

1. Policy Environment

When it comes to the political environment, the results show that national laws and frameworks reflect political support and drive institutional commitment and resource allocation for LLL. Approximately two-thirds of surveyed HEIs indicate the presence of national legislation on LLL, emphasizing strong commitments to expanding opportunities in higher education.

In the HEIs mission statements, it becomes evident that many HEIs prioritize LLL. At the institutional level, strategies and policies play a pivotal role, with a clear majority of HEIs having LLL strategies, predominantly at the institutional level. Moreover, there is a strong intent among HEIs to translate policies into action.

The correlation between supportive national legislation and institutional strategies underscores the vital role of national policy environments in promoting LLL within HEIs.

2. Institutional Governance and Implementation

Concerning institutional governance and implementation, it is pointed out that institution-wide approaches to implementing LLL require organizational structures sufficient resource allocation and stakeholder management. These practices shape the organization and the delivery of LLL, influencing the learning opportunities available to participants.

The survey results show that establishing a centralized LLL unit can enhance implementation efficiency. Approximately half of HEIs in the survey reported such units, each with varying functions.

In light of the general decline in public funding for higher education, HEIs rely on tuition fees and on-demand services as primary funding sources for LLL. Notably, lifelong learners predominantly depend on personal resources, emphasizing the importance of addressing access issues alongside LLL initiatives.

Quality assurance (QA) in LLL implementation is gaining institutional traction, with roughly half of surveyed institutions having systematic QA procedures. Although not yet on par with QA mechanisms for regular study programs, there is a positive correlation between QA procedures and institutional strategies, underscoring the significance of a supportive policy environment.

3. Widening Access through Diversification

When it comes to expanding access to higher education, flexibility and diversification play a major role. The opening up of universities has led to greater participation of underrepresented groups, such as ethnic minorities, older people, migrants, working people or people with family responsibilities (parenting, caring). The shortage of skilled labor and the pressure to upskill the workforce is another factor that is driving universities to make their approaches more flexible and to open up even more than before to non-traditional learning groups.

According to the study, the most important developments in the area of flexibility and diversification are as follows: The main target groups of LLL provision, namely 75%, are working people who want to continue their education and individuals who work in public or private organizations. The underrepresented groups mentioned above are only addressed by 25% of universities. In contrast, universities claim that they act primarily in a socially responsible manner (almost 75%). This contradiction reflects the basic dilemma of university continuing education: the legal mandate (continuing education for all) conflicts with market pressure. This contradiction is also recognizable in the area of formats: while the universities

offer elaborate formats for full-time students, this format flexibility decreases significantly concerning the group of lifelong learners.

Over 65% of universities state that they offer counselling services for the recognition of prior learning outcomes. Private universities achieve a significantly higher proportion here. Access to universities for non-traditional learners is also not good. The majority of universities still insist on formal access authorizations. The situation is somewhat better for short-term courses. When it comes to the regional engagement of universities, very traditional paths continue to be chosen: Public lectures or workshops, and joint events with other public institutions in the region.

Conclusions

Overall, this study analyses the relationship between universities and their commitment to lifelong learning worldwide. However, it would be premature to speak of an established "culture of university continuing education". In this respect, the study is also intended as a wake-up call to higher education stakeholders around the world to meet the challenges of the 21st century much more vigorously than before through university continuing education.

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