

# Relationship between distance learning and lifelong learning

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## Abstract

The concept of learning throughout one's life has been with us for centuries. Majority of the African governments for instance have embraced this concept and has put policies and practice into action. It is now almost an unwritten rule that continuous acquisition of knowledge and competencies guarantee people integration and responsibility in the society where they belong as well development of a sustainable economy. Therefore, learning must continue throughout the individual's life so as to deal with evolving multiple society challenges and also enjoy longer lives. One of this practice has been adoption of distance learning not as a peripheral form of learning but as an integral form in the mainstream education and as a tool of lifelong learning. Most prominent and great educators have also listed the importance of lifelong learning (LLL) skills. John Dewey (1966) himself stated that 'education is not preparation for life; education is life itself'. This paper seeks to answer the question, at what point does one stop being a learner. Secondly, is there a relationship between LLL and distance learning?

**Key words:** Lifelong Learning, Distance Learning, Reflectivity

## Introduction

*"When planning for a year, plant corn. When planning for a decade, plant trees. When planning for life, train and educate people." Chinese proverb: Guanzi (c. 645BC)*

Globalization and technological development have modified the way of thinking of the populace. It is now almost an unwritten rule that continuous acquisition of knowledge and competencies guarantee people integration and responsibility in the society where they belong as well development of a sustainable economy. Therefore, learning must continue throughout the individual's life so as to deal with evolving multiple society challenges and also enjoy longer lives. Most institutions of higher learning have reacted to the concept of LLL by incorporating distance learning as an acceptable mode of learning that caters for

those who are pressed for time and have work and family responsibilities. The growth in ICT has revolutionized this idea causing the boundaries between face-to-face teaching and distance learning increasingly blurred. By allowing learner to access education anywhere and anytime, distance learning is a powerful tool for supporting lifelong learning.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. By highlighting lifelong learning, SDG 4 brings the role of LLL to the fore of the debate on how to promote and sustain quality education. However, quite a number of people and especially adults lack adequate learning opportunities because in most institutions, learning is equated to formal schooling. That is why a majority of institutions admit students based on their entry qualification with the aim of admitting the more qualified students. This is premised on the fact that since

learning is a cumulative process, a student admitted with higher entry qualification is expected to be well prepared for the course content than one admitted with lower qualification.

However, the outlook of the world as a global village and explosion in knowledge economies have necessitated upgrading of skills among both the working and non-working groups. These groups of people need to be adaptable to emergence of new skills. This therefore calls for availing learning opportunities for every person wherever they are and however old they are. This is what Green (2002) calls a learning society. This is supported by Walters (2010) who asserted that 'our planet will not survive, if it's not a learning planet, and sustainable development will be achieved by learning throughout life'. If lifelong learning has to succeed, then everyone's pattern of thinking about learning must change from individuals, institutions and employers. It should be embedded in all life contexts from the school to the home, workplace and the community.

### Methodology

Desk review of policy documents was undertaken to look into policy and actual practice. Kenya has well documented policy instruments that anchor LLL but in practice, other than individual initiatives very little seems to be done on the subject. Other than official documents, UNESCO documents on lifelong learning were also reviewed with the aim of establishing the desired outcome vis-a-vis the actual practice. Finally, online sources were interrogated to establish what is happening elsewhere with regard to lifelong learning and the relationship that exists between it and distance learning.

### Theoretical basis of Lifelong Learning

Theories of learning in LLL environment focus on the interaction among environmental conditions, individual differences, task demands, educational technology and career opportunities across the lifespan, London (2012). The decision to engage in learning, formal, non-formal or informal often rests with an individual and is determined by a multiplicity of factors. The theory of reflective learning is meant to guide people through the rapid changes, risks and uncertainties of modernity, Aloyfan, (2016). As they examine their experiences and draws lessons from them, men and women are often forced to make choices of lifelong learning to adapt to the changing environment. There is a marriage of sort between distance learning and lifelong learning especially where the choice after reflection involve organized institutionalized lifelong learning. For a busy adult, this is where distance learning in its many variations come in. Edward R., Rason S. and Strain M. (2010) posits that the debate on rapidly changing society has been more on policy change with regard to LLL but less on theories that these policies can be anchored on. In this regard, this paper reflects on policy issues as enablers but the individual player must so self-assessment to really come to a decision on what course of action to take.

### The Concept of Lifelong Learning

The twenty-first century has been called the "Century of Grey Matter", meaning the intellect, which constitutes a new source of wealth for our planet. In his 1996 report to UNESCO, Jacques Delors championed "Learning throughout life" as "the heartbeat of society [...] one of the keys to meeting the challenges of the twenty first century." (Delors, 1996). The European Commission declared 1996 as the Year of Lifelong Learning, and has since then continued to conduct surveys and studies.

In the earlier centuries, every culture in the world has had a way of training and passing knowledge across generations. Islamic religion was among the first cultures to recommend the idea of lifelong education. Islamic scholars exhorted Muslims to educate themselves "from the cradle to the grave," and it called for women and children to educate themselves in order to educate others in turn (Rouse, 2004). In other contexts, this responsibility was left to older generations especially parents. This learning in essence had no end and was from birth into adulthood till death even if one does not attend formal schooling. This understanding of learning suggests a continuous process involving lifelong transformation that 'occurs whenever we are conscious and it needs no objective in itself, although it frequently does have a purpose' (Jarvis, 2009, p. 10).

In the contemporary society, the term "lifelong education" was popularized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other international organizations such as the European Commission and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) following the publication of *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow* in 1972 also known as Faure's report. This report argued that learning should not only be life-long but also life-wide encompassing formal, non-formal and informal learning. The key highlight of this report was acknowledgement that education is a right which should not be limited to age or socio-economic gaps.

Faure's report was followed by Delors' report of 1966, *learning: The Treasure Within*. This report stressed 'the concept of a learning society that offers varied learning opportunities and seamless pathways' to prepare one for challenges of a fast-changing world. This report also introduced the four pillars of education namely: Learning to know; Learning to do; Learning to live together (and with others); and Learning to be. Learning should thus be an integral part of living. Learning activities, whether formal, non-formal or informal should cut across all ages and life-wide contexts of the school, family, workplace or community.

Education has repercussions that are felt in an individual level, community level and in the socio-economic development of a country. One way in which education reaches more people, whether they are at the beginning of their formation or updating their knowledge is through distance learning. Distance learning philosophy recognizes the learner not as a passive participant in knowledge creation but a creator too. This is by building up pedagogic supports and ways of transmitting knowledge which will allow him, more and more each time, to become responsible

and autonomous” (Goulão, 2009, pg. 3) as shown in Figure 1. However, the challenge for higher education institutions is to evolve from a teacher-centered model of education to

an approach that emphasizes learner autonomy without compromising quality.

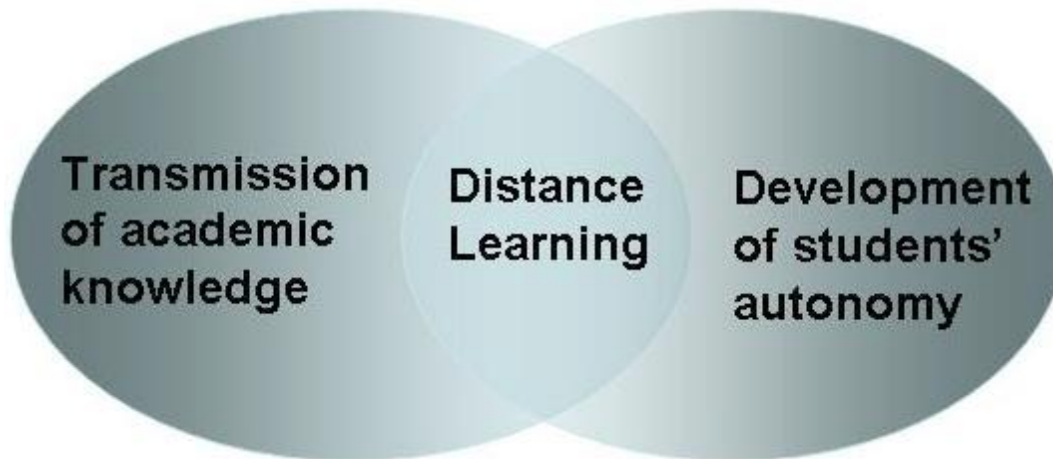


Figure 1: The role of Distance Learning

### Dimensions of Lifelong Learning

As the environment we are operating in continues to change, our adaptive capabilities must also change. That is why learning should start right from birth and continue till death. Learning for life emphasizes continuing learning from childhood to adulthood. At its core, LLL is continuous, open, flexible and diverse and not limited to age or socio-economic status. Therefore, the thought of phases of a worker as: formation – job- retirement is now a misnomer because lifelong learning is all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective” (Commission of the European Communities, 2001, p.11).

There are three main dimensions of holistic lifelong learning: life phases; modality of delivery and learning domains (UNESCO, 2012). Lifelong learning cuts across all life phases from birth to death. Formal schooling is one of the components of LLL. The context in which knowledge and skills are transferred constitutes modalities of delivery. These contexts are either formal, non-formal or informal.

Formal learning is structured and implemented by authorized public and private institutions. This learning follows a formal curriculum that is set and approved. The content, teaching methodology and entry requirements are set as per the level of education. Formal learning mainly leads to formal certification; Formal learning in the LLL context is suitable for people who are either in employment and would like to sharpen their skills in a specific area or are looking for upward mobility at work place. At whatever phase of employment, distance learning would be more appropriate due to its flexible nature. The learner can create suitable time to undertake studies in a relevant area that would lead to certification. To this end, there is a very strong relationship between distance learning and lifelong learning. According to Lesoko (2017), Open Education Resources (OERs) are not only appropriate to LLL but when aligned to

global agenda promotes education needs of adult learners at their convenience. LLL for those that need certification in a formal setting would therefore be made possible through distance learning as they continue discharging their other responsibilities and OERs come in handy to facilitate the needed skills and knowledge.

Non-formal learning complements the formal learning where learning activities are provided in training or workshop courses. It may be short in duration and does not apply a continuous pathway structure. Its certification is not recognized as formal qualification. Mainly, life skills and work skills are acquired in a non-formal learning set up. Many human resource departments have embraced Non-formal learning for training of their employees. In the spirit of lifelong learning, it is recognized that employees are continually working in a versatile environment and therefore need skill upgrade from time to time. In this context lifelong learning can be done for employee development or for functionalism in the organization. Whether done face to face or through distance learning, non-formal learning is appropriate for lifelong learning for active adults in active employment.

Informal learning is self-directed learning that forms part of our daily life. This learning may result from daily life activities related to family, community, work or leisure. It is often referred to as experiential learning. UNESCO recognizes various functions of learning in the twenty-first century. Informal learning can be said to be learning to be as well as learning to become. For lifelong learning, adults directing their own learning experiences in an informal way can be quite enriching. Social networking with like-minded contemporaries would go a long way in enhancing such an experience and as Lesoko (2017) puts it, learning that draws from indigenous African cultural environment are very relevant to adult needs in Africa.

Looking at the three forms of education and their relevance to LLL, it is notable that they all lend themselves to distance learning especially for adults who are past

'normal' school and or college going age. This is because education in many countries in the world and especially Africa tend to be linear. One is expected to progress from one level of education to another age-wise. Normal falls under stereotype and anything beyond therefore becomes lifelong. It is therefore imperative that designers of distance learning programmes keep this in mind so that they incorporate those who ordinarily would not be expected to be in the mainstream education system. This therefore means that one would see a very close link between distance learning and lifelong learning in the context of appropriateness and delivery methodologies.

### Models for Distance and Lifelong Learning

By nature and in practice, LLL is personal initiative. It is a dynamic process that varies depending on motivation and skills. In formal schooling, many governments make it mandatory and therefore a criminal offence to keep a child in the bracket of school – going age at home. Lifelong learning on the other hand is a self-initiative endeavor. Having this in mind, UNESCO identifies six models that can be adopted at policy level as well as individual level. There is no one model that can be said to be the most appropriate because each model presents profound implications for programming. UNESCO, 2005, pg. 4 provides the following models:

- The functionalist model, focusing on “human capital” formation, keeping learners abreast of technical developments, and teaching essential skills for vocation; This model is suitable to either formal or non-formal learning. Can be adopted by institutions or individuals who intend to improve or update their skills. Either way the design should be suitable to the end user keeping in mind the mission or vision of the offering institution.
- The critical literacy model, as promoted by writers such as Paulo Freire, focusing on empowerment and consciousness-raising and the development of a challenging, questioning attitude towards assumptions and concepts that one might previously have taken for granted; this model would be suitable to individuals who have passion for community participation, human rights activists, politicians and political scientists. Learning to be as envisaged by UNESCO calls for a wider range of skills that any individual can possess at once. Lifelong learning, comparative education and exposure would not only develop the individual to participate locally but also in the global arena
- The social justice model, sharing some elements with the critical literacy model and including such areas as gender, human rights, peace studies, neo-colonialism and programs focusing on ethnic minorities and socially marginalized groups; The model gives an array of possibilities for adult

participation especially in the era of gender mainstreaming and an all-inclusive society.

- The reflective learning model, focusing on the development of meta-level skills whereby the individual can critically assess different theories, discourses and knowledge paradigms. This model could be characterized as “learning how to think”; Reflective model would be suitable for lifelong learners who want to move to philosopher’s arena. Meta-thinkers who would put governments as well as institutions to account.
- The compensatory model, in which the educational content is intended to remedy some deficiency in the learners. An example would be remedial writing courses for students who enter higher education with inadequate composition skills; Keeping in mind that life may not give everyone equal chance. Lifelong education providers may adopt compensatory model to give remedial to adults in society who would go a long way in improving themselves as well as participate in the economies of their society
- The humanistic model whose aim is essentially to broaden learners’ horizons and enrich their minds. The world is a global village. Research done by Lesoko (2017) intimates that by 2050 Africans would have their population in the age bracket of 65+ years. This model would enable LLL to think globally even as they act locally.
- While the functionalist model looms increasingly large in today’s world, it is important to be reminded that other models also have an important role to play. As discussed, the model chosen would depend of the goal an individual LLL wants to achieve by participating in a given program.

### Lifelong Learning in Kenya

The concept of LLL in Kenya is not fully conceptualized. However, the government has made great strides in providing access to education for everyone, offering opportunities for adult and continuing education and generally encouraging learning across the ages. Secondly, the government introduced free primary and free day secondary education in 2013. This was followed by an expansion of Technical and Vocational institutions as well investment in Community Learning Resource Centers (CLRCs). These initiatives are aimed at increasing access to education. Finally, there are four fundamental policy documents; Kenya Vision 2030 (2007), Constitution of Kenya (2010), a Policy Framework for Education (2019) and Policy Framework for Nomadic Education in Kenya (2015) that relates to LLL. Of special mention is the Constitution of Kenya (2010) that recognizes education as constitutional and fundamental right for all citizens and Kenya Vision 2030

(2007) which views education as the main driving force that will enable Kenya to become middle income country.

There are other key initiatives that the government as well as the private sector have put in place to promote LLL. These are:

- a) Literacy programs that targets women and disadvantaged population. Safaricom Foundation through her *Elimu* initiative targets children with disabilities and those from Nomadic communities;
- b) Access to Information Communication Technology (ICT) to aid education and competencies in literacy and numeracy;
- c) Post-literacy programs for non-literates;
- d) The introduction of Competency Based Curriculum is meant to offer curriculum that is relevant and adaptable to learners needs;
- e) Creation of multipurpose Community Learning Centers where adults can participate in adult education;
- f) Generation of learning materials in various indigenous languages; and
- g) Development of adult basic education and training curricula.

Despite these initiatives, low funding, poor attitude towards learning /lack of a reading culture among citizens, inappropriate learning environment, inadequate instructional materials and lack of stakeholder coordination has hampered implementation of LLL in Kenya. It is worth noting that at individual levels, Kenyans have embraced LLL and are increasingly registering in institutions that are offering skill enhancement at different levels. These come as either evening programs of institution-based holiday programs. The government initiatives however remain dismal. The challenge with this apparent failure means that lifelong education does not go to those who need it most, the venerable.

All is not lost. At a Pan-African High-Level Conference on Education (PACE, 2018), the Kenyan government together with other participants reiterated their commitment to lifelong education. In support for Sustainable development goal Number Four, Nairobi Declaration and Call for Action on Education committed “to *promote lifelong learning for all at all levels using diverse modes of learning with flexible pathways between formal, non-formal and informal education and training models including strengthened systems of recognition and equivalence to cater for all children, youth and adults in and out of school.*” UNESCO (2018). It is hoped that with this fresh initiative, things will change for the better so that Kenyans can benefit from available resources for LLL.

### **How to build a lifelong mindset/Recommendations**

The following are some of the ways a lifelong mindset can be built.

1. Learning ownership – learners should be encouraged to be responsible for their learning. They should also be encouraged to recognize the rewards of taking such responsibility that includes and not limited to high self-confidence, high self-concept and esteem, pride in achievement, personal fulfillment and even employment especially formal employment;
2. Learn from mistakes – as we learn new skills, mistakes are inevitable. Mistakes should be treated as opportunities to learn and grow and not a way of inhibiting growth;
3. Encourage knowledge sharing – retention of what we learn is maximized when we teach our knowledge to someone else. Therefore, a LLL learner should be encouraged to share knowledge among peers and mentors;
4. Integrate play in learning – learning should be fun and enjoyable and should be seen as process of discovery and personal growth. If play is not integrated, the learners will view it as punishment and will resent it;
5. Goal setting – learning should not be for the sake of learning. Goal setting is one of the LLL skills that strengthens the desire to learn. The goal should be very clear and the learners must be aware of the value of the learning.

### **Conclusion**

There is a strong relationship between distance learning and lifelong learning. To a great extent, most people who are registered in institutions of learning to pursue education do so under distance learning in its many forms of manifestation. For example, e-learning, remote learning, school-based etc. Lifelong learning is best housed in a distance learning environment for the fact that it attracts adults who are busy with other aspects of adult life but who never the less must create time to acquire more knowledge and skills to function. No education in the world can equip an individual with skills and competencies needed for a lifetime. This paper has shown that learning ends when life ends. It cuts across the three main forms of education; formal, non-formal and informal. Lifelong learning, the indispensable key to the twenty-first century, now requires universities to radically review their structures, modes of functioning, and attitudes. Therefore all strategies should be put in place to ensure that there are opportunities created for people to learn throughout their life. To realize this dream, governments should create a reading culture in her citizens and offer support to institutions to offer LLL. This may include appropriate learning environment and instructional materials. In addition, a LLL framework should be developed to enable each person to choose among learning environments. Finally, higher education institutions should integrate distance learning in all the courses. The spread of COVID-19 pandemic interrupted schooling and the learning processes thus forcing many governments around the world to temporarily close all learning institutions. The institutions that have continued with the teaching and

learning process amidst the pandemic are those that have prepared for LLL by institutionalizing distance learning as a mode of learning.

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