

# PERCEPTION OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

*The paper is an empirical study based on questionnaires of 450 postgraduates' students, and 30 teachers enrolled in different courses in Tirana University. It aimed to identify the problems and to find out some solutions to the problem focused on the wide availability of information and communication, which makes learning take place wherever and whenever it suits the student. The study highlights the way how education can be organized to ensure quality and lifelong learning. The study, based on the analysis of questionnaires, pointed out that it is considered as not efficient if lifelong learning is focused only on short-term requirements. The teacher educators had quite a number of concepts on lifelong learning, and their perceptions were concentrated on: 1) developing a range of skills; 2) being able to identify problems; 3) ways of tackling, finding and using information effectively; 4) understanding and extending ways of learning to gain and apply new knowledge.*

*The paper is divided into two parts. Part one outlines the key issues related to the importance of lifelong education and part two analyzes lifelong learning approaches, conclusions and recommendations.*

**Key words:** *creativity, innovation, knowledge, lifelong learning, perception.*

## Introduction

During the last 20 years of Albanian democracy constant scientific and technological innovation and change have had a profound effect on learning needs and styles which asks from the society to have creative individuals who value knowledge and learning. Taking into consideration that the globalised society like that of today asks for qualified citizens in different areas of life the demand for quality based higher education has been on a constant rise. The implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)<sup>1</sup>, which began in 1999, demanded from all Albanian higher education institutions not only to introduce credits in all subjects but also to develop a system of education which will comply with the new

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<sup>1</sup> The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a student-centered system based on the student workload required to achieve the objectives of a program. ECTS was introduced in 1989, within the framework of Erasmus, now part of the Socrates program. ECTS is the only credit system which has been successfully tested and used across Europe.

circumstances that Albania is undergoing. During 2003 – 2005 several acts and orders were amended by the Parliament and the Ministry of Education and Science in order to implement the Bologna Declaration<sup>2</sup>, including the study cycles, academic standards, teaching load, financial autonomy, and university admissions procedures.

The knowledge and skills gained through study at the universities will continue to be essential as graduates begin their professional life, but will not be sufficient enough throughout all their professional life. The study considers as very important if the focus is moved away from what the teachers are doing at universities towards what is going on for providing the learner with life long learning skills. The idea of learning is much wider than that of education for 100% of the participants in the survey. They highlighted that it reflects a major shift of attention towards skills and competences. All the teacher educators pointed out that after teacher students' graduate they will need to continue to develop career-long learning and professional knowledge for their students. The way how we teach determines the kind of society we build told 100% of the teachers. ("Teachers open the door. You enter by yourself" Chinese Proverb). They are pretty conscious that they prepare students for a future which is largely unknown. All the perceptions of teacher educators and student teachers go in line with the idea how a 'knowledge society' needs 'knowledge works' and citizens of the world' (Drucker, 1993). The authors suggest that different and differentiated personal development would contribute to better understanding and improved implementation of educational policies in lifelong learning and should focus on long-term requirements.

#### *Problem of Research*

The study is based on a concept which asks for a great concern and change in the education system, business, professional bodies and government due to the demands of development and the employers voicing and their concerns and deficiencies they perceive in the skills and competences of their employees. The study treats three education key features in lifelong education as: (1) lifelong learning seen as building upon and affecting the educational system of higher education; (2) lifelong learning, which goes beyond the formal educational providers involved in any kind of learning activity; (3) lifelong learning as a shift from personal growth to human resource development.

The article deals with the perceptions of lifelong learning of the teacher educators and student teachers followed by a brief description of emerging trends to broaden and enhance teaching that promotes lifelong learning. The study treats several basic elements in teaching and education where the dissemination of the concept has been developed further due to the development of the communications' revolution and the mobility of the people. The study explores not only the views of teacher educators and student teachers in a Master Program of Tirana University about lifelong learning but also explores in the use of methods for developing it further.

#### *Research Focus*

The study is focused on the concept that preparing students to be lifelong learners is a duty because it offers opportunities to update people's knowledge of activities which they had either previously laid aside or always wanted to try but was unable. The study was based on three analytic issues (EU orientation) about: (1) perception of life learning; (2) teaching that promotes lifelong learning; and (3) lifelong learning as a personal growth. It is focused as well on the views of lifelong learning education for: (1) employability; (2) globalization; (3) rapid development of technology; (4) EU integration; (5) national economic growth.

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<sup>2</sup> Albania signed Bologna Declaration during 1993.

*General Background of Research*

As lifelong learning was crystallized as a concept in the 1970s, by three international bodies; Council of Europe, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) developed further during the first years of the new millennium. It drew most attention and had the broadest influence, considering education as a transformative and emancipator force, not only in schools, but in society at large in Albania. Adaptability to such circumstances and readiness to learn the work which related to knowledge and skills has become important instrument of the education policy during these last years. For all the teachers and students learning is no longer considered as a place and time to acquire knowledge but a place, and time to apply the acquired knowledge; the majority of them consider learning as something that takes place on basis comprising the daily activities with others and with the world. The research pointed out that technology and social change have direct impact on the work, the workplace and the living conditions, which can be improved only through a lifelong learning process. For the majority of the Albanian teachers and students lifelong learning is considered as the development of individuals through a continuously learning process which empowers them to acquire the knowledge, values, skills, and ready to apply them with confidence, creativity and optimism in all roles, circumstances, and conditions. "Perhaps the most valuable result of all education is the ability to make yourself do the thing you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not; it is the first lesson that ought to be learned; and however early a man's training begins, it is probably the last lesson that he learns thoroughly" Thomas H. Huxley<sup>3</sup>.

The study examines the trends of lifelong learning education as a reflection on experience and as an instrument to make life vivid, strong, and creative, which can realize continuous progress in a developing society. "I have argued that life, for most people, is a process of discovery – of who we are, what we can do, and ultimately, why we exist and what we believe. It is a circular process, because when we discover what we are capable of and work out why we exist, it changes the way we see ourselves, which can send us off in new directions, discovering new capabilities and new reasons for our existence. This spiraling journey is the true meaning of lifelong learning, and it remains, for those who pursue it, an endlessly fascinating experience, one which enriches not only the individual but all those around. Those who have tired of the journey have tired of life. They come across as dull and boring, and can soon infect their friends and colleagues with their apathy" (Charles Handy 1997).

*Sample of Research*

The sample consisted of 450 students of Master Program on Teacher Education offered by University of Tirana and 30 teachers who teach in this program. All students and teachers were invited to participate in the survey. From 450 students, responded 450, and from 45 teachers responded 30 to the questionnaires of the survey.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Henry Huxley, born on May 4, 1825, was an English biologist, known as "Darwin's Bulldog" for his advocacy of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

**Table 1. Gender of students' sample.**

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	375	83.4
Male	75	16.6
Total	450	100.0

**Table 2. Age range of students' sample.**

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage
22-25	70	15.6
26-31	315	70
32+	65	14.4
Total	450	100

1. 83.4 % of sample comprised by female as the teacher education programs are attended in majority by female.

2. Majority of students belonged to age 26-31 years. They decided to attend the master program to improve their career and find a better job in the market.

**Table 3. Teachers' sample.**

Age range	Frequency	Percentage	Prof	Assoc. Prof	Dr	MA	Total
35-45	12	40.0	4	4	16	6	30
46-56	18	60.0					

### *Instruments and Procedures*

A questionnaire was completed by both teacher educators and teacher students on questions related to perception of lifelong learning, tips thought useful for fostering lifelong learning in students, and factors to develop further and educate students as lifelong learners. 450 master student teachers completed a questionnaire, which included two sections: a section with biographical information; and a section with questions on lifelong learning understanding, namely perception of lifelong, teaching that promotes lifelong learning, education and lifelong personal growth and development. The questionnaires were formulated based on the National Strategy of Ministry of Education of 2009.

30 teachers completed a questionnaire composed of three sections: first section asked biographical information, second section asked questions on lifelong learning conception, and the third one asked questions on relationship between teaching, and lifelong learning.

It was invested a lot of time into preparation, particularly through conversation and in building a relationship with the participant. 42 students and 12 teachers were interviewed in the form of conversational interview in order to remain as open and adaptable as possible to the interviewee's priorities. The aim of the interviews was to collect more detailed information on open ended questions included in the questionnaire about their perceptions on lifelong learning.

The teachers and students' responses given in the questionnaire were measured on the interval scale during March 2010. The analysis of the data started with the content analyses which were carefully observed to present perceptions on lifelong learning and the tendency of the future. It focused on the student teachers' concerns for teaching lifelong learning interests and the needs of the market. Following all ethical principles, information was provided on the nature and purpose of the interviews. The data was treated with the confidentiality and their anonymity was assured.

In answer to the open ended questions student teachers suggested that lifelong learning can be enhanced and fostered depending on: (1) the subject matter and the instructor; (2) course format and structure; and (3) grades associated with the skills.

They told that questioning, lesson management, assignment, can either enhance or hold back lifelong learning. If they are graded highly for a precise recall of the subject content they will match their learning style to that way of teaching, if they are graded highly for being able to apply their learning strategies to new learning situations and for being creative, a must for lifelong learners, they will try to develop this skill. Although they are postgraduate students, they condition their learning and performance depending on the teacher's teaching and their understanding. In the case of teacher education courses, the lessons must be a practice of what teachers teach and intend to teach in line with the society's needs and future development.

The interviewees (90 % of teacher educators and 74% of teacher students) displayed very positive attitudes towards the inclusion of lifelong learning concept into the curricula of higher education as an instrument which will prepare them not only to be part of EU but also would help them to live and work in a globalized society. They also highlighted that having a good command of English language and sound knowledge on IT technology will create them possibilities to adopt them quickly to new circumstances. The interviews were conducted during the study under the promise of confidentiality. Most respondents spent most of the interview time discussing their own experiences rather than promoting or opposing proposed reforms.

## **Results of Research**

After the analysis of the answers provided by the participants in this study we came to the conclusion that lifelong learning includes several basic elements: (1) a belief in the idea of lifetime human potential; (2) efforts to achieve the skills, knowledge, and attitude necessary for a successful life; (3) recognition that learning takes place in many manners and places, including formal educational institutions and non-formal experiences such as employment, military service, civic participation, informal self-initiated activity and mobility; and (4) the need to provide integrated systems adapted to individual differences that encourage and help individuals to achieve mastery and self-orientation. The society should make these systems available to learners with flexibility and diversity.

**Table 4. Perception of lifelong learning (student teachers & teacher educators).**

Perceptions on Lifelong Learning	Student Teachers				Total		Teacher Educators				Total	
	Yes		No		N	%	Yes		No		N	%
	N	%	N	%			N	%	N	%		
Education for employability	351	78	99	22	450	100	27	90	3	10	30	100
Globalization	333	74	117	26	450	100	27	90	3	10	30	100
EU integration	297	66	153	34	450	100	27	90	3	10	30	100
National economic growth	270	60	180	40	450	100	26	86	4	14	30	100
Rapid development	297	66	153	34	450	100	28	93	2	7	30	100
Lifelong learning as very important	324	72	126	28	450	100	27	90	3	10	30	100
Lifelong learning to be developed further	324	72	126	28	450	100	27	90	3	10	30	100
Lifelong learning differs to gender, type of job, experience	261	58	189	42	450	100	24	80	6	20	30	100
Lifelong learning as capability & performance	405	90	45	10	450	100	28	93.3	2	6.7	30	100
Lifelong learning from culture to culture	387	86	63	14	450	100	27	90	3	10	30	100

To conceptualize lifelong learning and articulate policies to realize the “lifelong learning for all” it is a great challenge for the whole system of education, policy-makers, universities, and educators. As Smethurst remarks: What does not come out of the statistics is that, in order to succeed in life, in the world, in history, you need not just academic skill but personality, independence of mind, and autonomy of spirit (1995).

## Discussion

The study participants concerns offer insights into the nature of lifelong learning, which are important not only for understanding student teachers` perceptions of teaching lifelong learning skills but also about knowledge and interpretation of which goes in line with the lifelong education to meet society`s` needs in the context of this rapid change and the global market. The way how both groups perceive learning brings us to the conclusion that the tendency is rising in favor of lifelong education.

### *1. Perception of Lifelong Learning of Both Groups*

Lifelong learning is considered by the majority of both groups as “all learning activity” undertaken during the life, aiming to improve knowledge, skills and competences, which will

be able to identify problems, ways to solve them, and use information in an effective way. "Can we teach and promote ways that develop students' commitment to lifelong learning?" 97% of teachers reported that curricula and educational practices have a great influence to the development of a lifelong learning orientation. The reform of curricular components and educational practices serve as an element which should increase our motivation to use them more. All the teachers told that commitment to lifelong learning does develop gradually and not necessarily visibly.

Lifelong learning - along with ideas such as "the learning society" - has become popular in a number of universities. But what do people mean by it? Is the idea of lifelong learning helpful? Both groups consider lifelong learning as a very decisive factor for their future; students (72%), teachers (90.0%). Results indicated that 90.0% of teacher believed lifelong learning could be developed, whereas, 72% of the student teachers shared the same opinion.

Students in 58% and teachers in 80.0% did not agree that men and women are lifelong learners in the same way. They list as the main factors of the differences: gender status, type of job, and life experience.

The notion of special places for learning is deeply rooted in nearly all cultures, and the creation of the formal school is the first of Ashby's four educational "revolutions" that transformed our ability to learn and produce great advances in civilization (Knapper, Carnegie Foundation, 1972). This brings us to the critical question: what kind of culture might promote lifelong learning? The Fryer Committee suggested that the following might be seen as the general hallmark of a learning culture: "Above all, a vision of a learning culture will envisage learning as a normal, accessible, productive and enjoyable (if demanding) feature of everyday life for all people, throughout their lives. Yet human beings learn throughout their lives and in almost all situations - at home, in their leisure activities and at work. We start learning even before birth, and we continue until senility (Fryer 1998). Both groups in majority, students (86.0%) and teachers (90.0%) stated that lifelong learning differs from culture to culture.

Based on the figures of the study on perception of the lifelong learning aspects, student teachers ranked as the most representative aspects of lifelong learning: Education for employability (78.0%), globalization (74.0%), and rapid development of technology (66.0%), EU integration (66.0%), and national economic growth (60.0%).

While, teachers identified as the five first aspects of the following: rapid development of technology (93.3%), Education for employability (90.0%), globalization (90.0%), EU integration (90.0%), and national economic growth (86.6%). Student teachers perceived lifelong learning more than product, whereas teachers perceived it as a process. Both groups identified as the main element of lifelong education for employability and ranked at the end for national economic growth. The teachers and the students rank differently the aspects of lifelong learning priorities due to their experiences and their educational formation.

## *II. Teaching that Promotes Lifelong Learning*

Can we teach in ways that develop students' commitment to ongoing, lifelong learning? Yes, said all 30 teachers who highlighted that curricular designs and educational practices have direct impact in the development of a lifelong learning orientation. It entails that: to ensure meaningful learning, it is essential to place both pedagogy and technology in teaching process told all teachers. 100% of teacher educators and teacher students state that they need to develop IT skills. They told that on-line education should be a part of continuous education. The study found that teaching practices that encourage students to reflect-active learning techniques, opportunities for perspective taking, and the chance to positively interact with diverse peers may develop the students' commitment to lifelong learning.

Both teachers and students' concepts to lifelong learning go in line with the research of

Brian Tracy<sup>4</sup> and The Economist Journal (October 9, 1999) “Various research, evaluation methods and indicators based on the global vision, are presented for measuring and improving learning performance. It requires a shift in our thinking about the fundamental organizational unit of education, from the school, an institution where learning is organized, defined and contained, to the learner, an intelligent agent with the potential to learn from any and all of the encounters with the world around”.

The idea of lifelong learning has become part of our national strategy discussion, particularly as global competition and economic restructuring toward EU Integration and knowledge-based industry (Annual Statistical Report of Education 2009 of MASH<sup>5</sup>).

### *III. Education and Lifelong Personal Growth and Development*

The concept of education as a “public good” and the responsibility we all share for the mutual benefit of all members of society is considered as fundamental to the need for “lifelong learning for all” told 94% of teachers. The increasing of skills and competences can continue throughout life, as a vital part of individual’s growth and development as citizens in a participative democracy, as well as being productive factors in economical progress.

Individual and the society wellbeing is protected and promoted by making these activities, and the resources to support them, available to the widest range of communities. Is education a public or a private good? All groups in majority, students (76.0%) and teachers (90.0%) stated that education is both. There is some education that is a public good in that its benefits increase widely, to society at large as well as to the individual. People can have their view of the world and capacity for rational choice continually transformed by the educational experiences and achievements offered by lifelong learning. It provides people with one of the principal means of personal empowerment, emancipated understanding and informed choice in exercising the duties and responsibilities of a citizen in a participative or representative democracy. Nowadays this notion has been taken seriously even by different groups, managers of education who have articulated, drafted programs of education and strategies of lifelong learning. In the traditional institutions and non-profit organizations (NGOs, national and international) in Albania, there is a trend for offering opportunities for lifelong learning by the creation and expansion of a range of community initiatives by providing trainings for different categories of people. The central elements in what the teachers have described as the nature of lifelong learning is for:

1. Economic progress and development (90% of both teachers and students);
2. Personal development and fulfillment (60% of students and 84% of teachers);
3. Social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity are fundamental to building a more democratic policy and set of social institutions (50 % of students and 67% of teachers).

Both groups highlighted that these principles and ideals of social inclusiveness ask for a) equity; b) an economy which is strong, and competitive; c) and a range of provision of activities on which people choose. To realize these elements, concepts and goals of education and training, and a major re-orientation of its direction towards the concept and value of the idea of “the learning society” is required.

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Tracy. He is now the Chairman of Brian Tracy International, a human resource company, with affiliates throughout the United States and thirty-one other countries.

<sup>5</sup> MASH (Ministry of Education and Science of Albania)

## Conclusion

The notion of learning society needs some theoretical and analytical potential which requires realization of a considerable work. There is a need for greater clarity in defining the meaning of the learning society, and for establishing criteria for interpretation. Learning continually throughout life is vital if we are to make informed choices about our lives and the societies in which we live. The strength of the idea of a learning society is a concept that needs to link learning process with the idea of a future society. It is necessary to link the theory of relationship between education and economic life and to draw upon understandings of human beings as active, and cooperative in the learning society. The different and differentiated personal development would contribute to better understanding and improved implementation of lifelong learning policies. Formal education needs to become more meaningful and relevant in its on-line application.

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