WCES 2012

Lifelong learning challenges and opportunities for traditional universities

Constanța Aurelia CHIȚIBA

PhD Professor, Christian University „Dimitrie Cantemir”, International Business and Economics Faculty, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

The development of the informational society and the widespread diffusion of information technology give rise to new opportunities for learning and they challenge established views and practices regarding how teaching and learning should be organized and carried out. At the same time, globalization and the emergence of new players in the world economy have intensified competition, many countries turning production towards high value-added and knowledge-intensive products and services which request high-level skills labor force. Lifelong learning concept offers the prospect of a radical new approach especially for the higher educational process focused on the opening up traditional universities for those who want to learn lifelong. In the same time, educational institutions, universities most of all, are facing a number of challenges: globalization, aging society; growing competition between higher educational institutions both national and international, and rapid technological development. To answer successfully to all these challenges, in the opinion of most of the specialists, traditional universities must transform themselves by adopting a lifelong learning system. This system will transform how universities currently teach. To achieve this transformation, universities will have to introduce strategies and policies which implement flexible academic frameworks, innovative pedagogical approaches, new forms of assessments and institutional collaboration.

© 2012 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Keywords: globalization, traditional education institutions, human capital, lifelong learning, pillars of education, drivers and barriers, academic preferences;

• General Approach

Today’s depressed economic environment and challenged workforce have dramatically increased the needs and demands of learners to retool their capabilities, acquire new competences and align knowledge to the emerging new economy to avoid being laid off. At the same time, leaders within traditional education institutions, colleges and universities, are aggressively seeking new sources of revenues to counteract current budgeting shortfalls. Globalization and the emergence of new players in the world economy have intensified competition. As technological innovation continues apace, many countries are turning production towards high value-added, knowledge-intensive products and services. There are winners and losers as growth and innovation continue to cluster around those which have invested in human capital development and go away from those that do not.

Globalization and the emergence of new players in the world economy have intensified competition. As technological innovation continues apace, many countries are turning production towards high value-added, knowledge-intensive products and services. There are winners and losers as growth and innovation continue to cluster around those which have invested in human capital development and go away from those that do not.

It is generally accepted that growth is driven by tertiary education. Universities and other higher education institutions are fundamental to human capital development and innovation and can do much to help labor force to become more innovative and globally competitive. However to do this they need to change, and in some cases change dramatically. Universities and other higher educational institutions need to come out of their ivory towers (Conner, 2009).

They need to become more active in order to play a meaningful role in the local and global setting. They must do more than simply provide education and research, they need to provide opportunities for lifelong learning and contribute to the development of knowledge-intensive jobs which enable graduates to find local employment and attract talent not only from the region but also elsewhere. The capacity to compete in the global knowledge economy...
depends on how well countries and regions can meet the demand for high-level skills. Human capital development, that is to say education at all levels, the re-skilling and up-skilling of the population, is a major factor in this process.

Lifelong learning has to be relevant in this context. Higher education focused on educating the young in traditional classical curricula is not satisfactory in the new global context. It is necessary to expand the scope of traditional higher education and the range of learners who are served, to open educational opportunities to people who want to continue to learn.

• The Concept of Lifelong Learning

The early 21st century began the age of education globalization with local education institutions continuing their expansion efforts both within and outside the national area, in an attempt to meet growing market demand. The breakdown of geographic boundaries has facilitated both local and global competition. To face this competition many universities and vocational schools moved aggressively into the adult learning market. Today is even easier to serve adult learners utilizing new technologies and the introduction of the Internet, online, blended and e-learning. Continuing education and distance learning organizations lead the way by adopting technologies and flexible operations to support the varied needs of adult learners including lifelong learning.

Lifelong Learning means the continuous development and improvement of the knowledge and skills needed for employment and personal fulfillment through formal and informal learning opportunities. Learning is therefore part of life which takes place at all times and in all places. It shares mixed connotations with other educational concepts, like adult education, training, continuing education, permanent education and other terms that relate to learning beyond the formal educational system. Lifelong learning is the lifelong, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons. It not only enhances social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development, but also competitiveness and employability (Watson, 2003).

Lifelong Learning may also be defined as learning that is pursued throughout life. This process is based on four pillars of education for the future:

• **Learning to know**: mastering learning tools rather than acquisition of structured knowledge.
• **Learning to do**: equipping people for the types of work needed now and in the future including innovation and adaptation of learning to future work environments.
• **Learning to live together, and with others**: peaceably resolving conflict, discovering other people and their cultures, fostering community capability, individual competence and capacity, economic resilience, and social inclusion.
• **Learning to be**: education contributing to a person’s complete development: mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality.

Lifelong learning can and instills creativity, initiative and responsiveness in people thereby enabling them to show adaptability in post-industrial society through enhancing skills to: manage uncertainty; communicate across and within cultures, sub-cultures, families and communities; negotiate conflicts. The emphasis is on learning to learn and the ability to keep learning for a lifetime.

Most major universities accepted the new educational challenges and were expanding their traditional, degree-credit offerings with a variety of adult, continuing and executive education experiences, some for credit and some non-credit. New education programs were offered through a combination of organizational mechanisms: extension divisions, adult and continuing education units, schools of professional study, executive education programs and distance learning units. The diversity of these programs and their unique operations propagated completely new organizations within the traditional universities. New processes for education delivery and learner support mechanisms advanced to meet the dynamic needs of the adult learner marketplace. Those institutions with historical developments and expansions in adult learning, continuing education and executive education have recognized an innate ability to meet the diverse needs of today’s economically challenged learner. In a single word, traditional response to all these global educational problems was lifelong learning.

The concept of lifelong learning spans a wide range of education and training issues and speaks to many different audiences. In the actual global economic and educational environment, main challenges for lifelong learning process are:

• Inducement of informal learning opportunities.
• Stimulation of self-motivated learning.
• Acceptance of self-funded learning.
• Stimulation of universal participation to the learning process.
Lifelong learning offers a systemic view of learning, since it examines the demand for, and the supply of, learning opportunities, as part of a connected system covering the whole lifecycle and comprising all forms of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Also, it emphasizes the centrality of the learner and the need for initiatives that cater for the diversity of learner needs. This represents a shift of attention from the supply of learning to the demand side. Lifelong learning is focused on the motivation to learn, and draws attention to self-paced and self directed learning and it stresses the multiple objectives of education policy, which include economic, social or cultural outcomes; personal development, and citizenship. The lifelong learning process also recognizes that, for the individual, the priorities among these objectives can change over the lifecycle; and that each objective has to be taken into consideration in policy development (Smith & Ferrier, 2002).

In the specialist opinion, the main lifelong learning characteristics are (Isâîlâ, 2011): educators are guides to sources of knowledge; educators serve as facilitators for the student's acquisition of knowledge; people learn by doing, or action learning; people learn in groups and from each other; assessment is used to guide learning strategies and to identify pathways for future learning; educators develop individualized learning plans; educators are lifelong learners. Initial training and ongoing professional development are linked; people have access to learning opportunities over a lifetime; learning is put into practice; learners reflect upon learning and analyze their personal development.

There are ten main benefits offered by lifelong learning, such as (Nordstrom, 2008):
- Helps fully develop natural abilities.
- Opens the mind.
- Creates a curious, hungry mind.
- Increases our wisdom.
- Makes the world a better place.
- Helps people to adapt to change.
- Helps people find meaning in our lives.
- Keeps us involved as active contributors to society.
- Helps us make new friends and establish valuable relationships.
- Leads to an enriching life of self-fulfillment.

• Lifelong Learning Concept and Process in European Union

European Union is considering that the scale of current economic and social change, the rapid transition to a knowledge-based society and demographic pressures resulting from an ageing population in Europe are all challenges which demand a new approach to education and training, within the framework of lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning is thus defined as "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal civic social and/or employment-related perspective" (European Society of Association Education, 2010). The European Union Lifelong Learning initiative hopes to empower citizens to move freely between learning settings, jobs, regions and countries in pursuit of learning. Hence, lifelong learning focuses on learning from pre-school education until after retirement and covers all forms of education. This initiative enables people at all stages of their lives to take part in stimulating learning experiences, as well as helping to develop the education and training sector across Europe.

The European training and education systems are subject to changes to come. They begin to adapt to new co-ordinates of the modern world.

Long life learning is not only one aspect of learning and training anymore, but it becomes day by day the leading principle of an active participation of the citizen in the society throughout the lifetime.

Lifelong learning is not only one aspect of education and training; it becomes ever more a fundamental principle of individual's lifelong active participation to social life. Adult professional training is to be found in every curricula targeted at re-activating national economy, and it aims at transforming the actual system of professional training institutions, completing it with necessary components that forecast and achieve professional re-orientation and training in advance labor force for activities that use new technologies and request creativity, innovation and high professionalism.

All European citizens, irrespective of their origin must be granted equal opportunities of adapting to the demands of the socio-economic changes, and also of an active participation to creating the Europe of the future by facilitating their access to all types of education during their whole life.
The Lifelong Learning Program for European Union is stipulated in Article 15, paragraph 5 of the Decision No. 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006. The Lifelong Learning Program acts as a catalyst for structural change through support to policy development, cooperation and mobility in European Union. It improves policy-making by providing quality tools, analysis and research as well as for exchanging information on best practices.

Erasmus, the higher education part of Lifelong Learning Program, paved the way for the Bologna process, for the convergence of higher education study cycles and for the development of a system for the recognition of studies done abroad based on learning outcomes. Leonardo da Vinci, the vocational education and training part, supports the implementation of the Copenhagen process, developing the quality and relevance of vocational education and training, increasing the transparency of qualifications and promoting the mobility of learners and professionals. Lifelong Learning Program also stimulated understanding of the European construction and the education of young professionals in European Union matters under Jean Monnet.

At the European Union level, 80 % of the Lifelong Learning Program is delivered through a network of 40 National Agencies which together manage around EUR 900 million per year, while the remaining part of larger-scale cooperation projects and networks is managed by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency.

The progress quantitative targets expected to be achieved through Lifelong Learning Program by 2013 are: some 3 150 000 pupils per year involved in Comenius education activities; over 3 million students to be participating in the Erasmus mobility program; least 90 000 placements in enterprises by Leonardo da Vinci program and at least 7 000 per year individuals are to be involved in adult education mobility by Grundtvig program (Athu & Bentoiu, 2011).

The interim evaluation confirmed that the Lifelong Learning Program successfully reached staff and learners in formal education and training and met most of their needs with regard to the quality of learning, the acquisition, recognition and validation of skills and competences, personal development, language learning and social skills.

Also, the Lifelong Learning Program contributed to opening up and modernizing education institutions through the introduction of new teaching methods, exchange of good practices, the review and internationalization of curricula as well as improvements in institutional management and governance. The majority of schools participating in Comenius improved their working environment and introduced new teaching and learning methods inspired by partners from abroad (Isăilă, 2011). They became more open to international collaboration and enhanced their image and status locally, which attracted parents and retained motivated teachers. Leonardo da Vinci contributed to the adaptation of vocational program to labor market (Musetescu, 2011) needs and to improving European Union transparency regarding curricula, qualifications and occupational standards. By participating – often for the first time – in European cooperation through Grundtvig, organizations involved in adult education developed improved teaching methods, more effective strategies for outreach to socially marginalized learners, new ways of validating skills and competences, and improved provision of courses for the training of adult education staff. The participation in Erasmus improved student services and fostered new learning and teaching methods and professionalization of management procedures.

The Lifelong Learning Program is considered by the external evaluation as relevant and instrumental to reaching the key education and training objectives agreed at European Union level and thereby contributing to attaining the overarching strategic objectives of the European Union. It is also important for the lives of the individual citizens involved, user friendly, highly popular and addresses the needs of its various target communities. The control framework is working effectively.

Considering the need of the Romanian society to adapt to the European Union educational and professional training systems, as well as the need of an European dimension in education, it was founded, in 2001, the Romanian Society for Lifelong Learning, provides and implements informal education and training, by means of traditional, online courses etc, to all those wanting to benefit of lifelong learning opportunities.

• Conclusions

In conclusion, it is to be appreciating that lifelong learning's core values of learning, exploring, and serving, coupled with benefits for the mind; body and spirit make it an incredibly powerful tool for personal transformation and enhancement.

But, there are drivers and barriers which increase or decrease motivation to engage in lifelong learning process, and provides some insights into the challenges of embedding lifelong learning in higher education. The most important key drivers underlying the adoption of lifelong learning are the need to up skill the population to meet the challenge of the information and knowledge society and the need for accessible and flexible access to education. As
concerning the significant barriers to implement the lifelong learning strategies at higher educational level it may be noticed: academic staff non-acceptance and non-engagement in this process and lack of funds.

The successful implementation of lifelong learning strategies at higher educational institutions level requires not only adoption by enthusiastic innovators but also institutional structures in order to support the sustainability and mainstreaming of lifelong learning initiatives.

References


