

## **LIFELONG LEARNING IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES: A CRITICAL REVIEW ON FUTURE POLICY DIRECTIONS**

S. Mubarak,  
School of Computer and Information Science  
University of South Australia

### **INTRODUCTION**

Lifelong learning is a powerful idea. It can support almost any focus on learning, and can therefore be invoked by anyone wishing to position a learning initiative within his or her organisation (Barlow, 2003). The basic concept that learning needs to continue throughout life is hard to deny in today's world, leaving those who, for what ever reason, do not wish to follow through on its implications with only the option of ignoring it. Johnslon and Watson (2004) argue that lifelong learning has been heralded as the survival tool for individuals, the economy and organizations. Professional bodies emphasise on continuing professional development where employees are expected to reflect on their practice to enable them to become 'reflective practitioners' and 'thinking performers'. This paper attempts to draw together relevant findings from a series of studies on lifelong learning evolution and the practice of life long learning within Australian Higher education sector.

### **WHAT IS LIFE LONG LEARNING?**

Life-long learning is a unique learning process occurring within the learners. Both the learner and the teaching settings have to prepare themselves with elaborate arrangements. The learners need to develop a genuine interest to learn through the time and the teaching institutions need to make significant changes in their teaching philosophy for life-long learning to occur. Educational institutions in Australia have been preparing themselves to live up to the expectations. Higher education sector is not an exception to this trend and it can be argued that most of them are under tremendous pressure to incorporate life-long learning within their curriculum and teaching principles.

### **THE ENHANCEMENT OF LIFELONG LEARNING WITHIN UNIVERSITIS**

The universities have responded to the challenges posed by technological revolutions by introducing life-long learning skills within their course curriculum. However, it is a challenging task for the universities to balance between a growing number of students and introducing a new curriculum related to life-long learning. Candy et al. (n.d) have indicated that universities are viewed as repositories of special expertise to meet the learning needs and goals of particular groups, including those already in the work force. This results in university population comprising of young school leavers and mid-career professionals who missed the opportunity to undertake studies when they were younger. Many have extensive life experiences and major family, community and organisational responsibility. This also helps the younger students to get a chance to work with experienced students during their study

time. In addition Universities also fit into the contexts of life-long education where the students get a chance to study further and enrich their personal and professional life.

### **Life long learning versus knowledge based Australian economy**

Knowledge based economy is one of the prominent feature of modern economy. Skills are considered as one of the intangible inputs to the production of goods and services in knowledge based economy indicating the importance of knowledge workers in traditional sectors of production. Watson (2003) stresses that knowledge based economy is the expansion of global markets for goods and services. The intangible inputs includes human resources, R&D technology and intellectual property rights, which are value adding processes. Australia has developed itself as one of the fastest growing knowledge based economies in the world. It is interesting to evaluate the role of lifelong learning in creating Australian work force.

### **Role of Higher Education Institutions in lifelong learning**

Higher education institutions play a major role in identifying and supporting lifelong learning skills of the students. Gallacher and Reeve (2003) write that curriculum designers are now attempting “to introduce notions of reflection on learning, stressing the interaction between practice competence and reflection on practice”, suggesting that the submerging of competences into more general sets of learning outcomes contributes to clearer definitions of standards in higher education. They further argue that this direction as more appropriate for higher education to take than seeking to stay within and protect the traditional discipline boundaries which no longer, neither through substance nor method, provide the only basis for knowledge production. One example for the higher education institutions’ role in lifelong learning is University of South Australia. The University of South Australia (UniSA) has implemented seven graduate qualities, which are embedded in curriculum development, pedagogy and assessment, rather than bolted –on. They are integral to the learning process at UniSA students can track their development of capabilities through an on-line database and present a portfolio demonstrating their attainments to prospective employers. One of the seven graduate qualities is about lifelong learning in pursuit of personal development and excellence in professional practice. A significant aspect of the lifelong learning strategy is that it is a collaborative initiative, bringing together the efforts of three service sections within the Access and learning support portfolio of the University. The library, the Flexible learning centered Information technology services each have responsibility for aspects of institution wide implementation of lifelong learning strategy (George et. al.n.d).

### **Challenges faced by lifelong learning in higher education institutions: Policy directions**

Lifelong learning in higher education institutions has been undergoing revolutionary changes due to the advancement of ICT and increasing pressure on the universities to shift their focus towards distant learning and flexible delivery of teaching. In one way these changes could increase the accessibility of learning to a diverse population groups for which learning was not possible in earlier times. The flexible delivery mode of teaching has opened up wide opportunities for learning to those who are currently in the work force and also for those who cannot afford to travel to the institutions of higher education. By creating opportunities for these people to re-enter or newly enter into the learning process the higher education sector has achieved a milestone in lifelong learning. However, at the same time the higher education institutions have come under intense pressure to expand number of students and cut costs through mass production, which can be achieved only through significant changes made in the

pedagogies. Implications of this new development on philosophy of lifelong learning is a subject currently debated by peak bodies such as CVCP (2000); OECD (2001).

Yet another challenge faced by institutions of higher education is the extent to which their ‘consumers’ have been trained and mentally prepared to take the role of lifelong learner. This responsibility lies with schools and so far little change has been happening in the process of incorporating lifelong learning curriculum within the secondary schools. Without this immediately required changes happening at the school level, tertiary education institutions are currently struggling to cope with the time, money and resources needed to prepare their students to get used to the concept of lifelong learning. Hence the pressure on students entering the tertiary education sector is gradually increasing. The challenges faced by the students does not stop at the level of entering the higher education institution and continues after they finishing their education and well after entering the job market. The profile of lifelong learners mentioned in the earlier part of this essay clearly indicates that lifelong learners need to show enthusiasm and self-motivation to learn throughout their life. Getting these qualities itself can be not expected with all the students. Even if they have these qualities, their employers need to have a forward thinking to allocate funds for their employees and create opportunities to acquire lifelong learning. Without the cooperation of the students and the employers, higher education institutions face the immense challenge of practicing lifelong learning without a context that is conducive to receive students prepared themselves for lifelong learning and employment situations willing to embrace the concept of lifelong learning.

## CONCLUSION

Lifelong learning has been a concept, which has been widely discussed since 1960s, and in recent years there has been a popular following for this ideology at the society level. In this essay the concept of lifelong learning was elaborated and the important role played by institutions of higher education in lifelong learning has been highlighted. The tertiary education sector in Australia has been under constant need to embrace the concept of lifelong learning due to the transformation of Australian economy as knowledge economy. The challenges faced by higher education sector in Australia and elsewhere have been enormous and there is a need for policy changes to create a conducive environment for lifelong learning. Roles played by the schools and employers can be significant and policy changes at these levels can benefit the tertiary education sector in Australia.

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