

Learning Without Limits: The Power and Practice of Lifelong Learning in Changing World.

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Abstract

In a world where knowledge changes faster than ever before, the idea that education ends when we leave school is no longer true. Lifelong learning—the continuous, voluntary pursuit of knowledge and skills throughout one’s life—has become essential for personal growth, career success, and active citizenship. This chapter explores what lifelong learning really means, why it matters so much in the twenty-first century, and how it is being transformed by new technologies like artificial intelligence. It explains the three forms of learning (formal, non-formal, and informal), examines the major barriers that prevent many people from accessing learning opportunities, and highlights how countries around the world are designing policies to make lifelong learning a reality for everyone. The chapter draws on recent research from UNESCO, the OECD, and academic studies to show that while lifelong learning holds great promise, it currently benefits those who are already well-educated and economically secure far more than those who need it most. The chapter concludes with practical guidance for students on how to cultivate a lifelong learning mindset and take advantage of the many learning opportunities available today. Ultimately, this chapter argues that lifelong learning is not just a policy slogan but a fundamental skill for navigating an unpredictable future and building a more just and inclusive society.

Keywords: Lifelong Learning, Continuous Education, Self-directed Learning, Digital Learning, Personal Development, Skill Development.

1. Introduction

Imagine you are learning to use a Smartphone. You figure out the basics, download a few apps, and feel quite confident. Then, a year later, a new operating system is released, and suddenly everything looks different. The apps have changed, new features have appeared, and you find yourself needing to learn all over again. This small, everyday experience captures something important about the world we live in today: knowledge and skills do not stay the same. They evolve, sometimes very quickly. What we learned five years ago, or even one year ago, may no longer be enough to keep up. This is where the idea of lifelong learning comes in. Lifelong learning is the willingness and practice of continuing to learn beyond formal education, through formal or informal experiences. It is a continuous, gradual, and

deliberate process that takes place throughout a person's entire life, aimed at improving knowledge, skills, and competencies for personal, social, and work-related purposes. In simple terms, lifelong learning means that education does not stop when you receive a diploma or degree. It is a journey that continues for as long as you live.

This chapter will explore the world of lifelong learning. We will begin by understanding what lifelong learning really means and how it is different from traditional education. We will then look at why lifelong learning has become so important in today's world, including how artificial intelligence is changing the way we learn. We will examine the barriers that prevent many people from accessing lifelong learning opportunities and explore how governments and organizations are working to overcome these barriers. Finally, we will discuss practical strategies for becoming a lifelong learner yourself. By the end of this chapter, you will have a clear understanding of why lifelong learning is often called "the survival skill of our age" and how you can make it a part of your own life.ⁱ

2. Understanding Lifelong Learning: What Does It Really Mean?

2.1 Defining Lifelong Learning

The term "lifelong learning" might sound like something complicated, but its basic idea is very simple: learning does not have an expiry date. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which is one of the world's leading organizations on education, defines lifelong learning as learning that begins at birth and continues throughout the entire lifespan. UNESCO has set a global goal to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030.ⁱⁱ This goal, known as Sustainable Development Goal 4, reflects the growing recognition that education is not just for children and young people but is a right that belongs to every person, at every age. It is important to understand that lifelong learning is not simply about piling up more and more courses or collecting certificates like stamps in a passport. As researcher Marjan Laal explains, lifelong learning is a conscious, planned, and structured dynamic that involves reflection, self-assessment, and constant adaptation. It is about developing a mindset that is open to new ideas, curious about the world, and willing to grow. It is about understanding that learning is not something that happens to you but something you actively participate in.

2.2 The Three Forms of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning can take many different shapes. To make sense of this variety, experts usually divide it into three main categories: formal, non-formal, and informal learning.

- Formal learning refers to education that takes place in structured institutions like schools, colleges, and universities. It follows a set curriculum and leads to officially recognized qualifications such as diplomas, degrees, or certificates. Returning to university for a master's degree in your thirties or forties is an example of formal lifelong learning.
- Non-formal learning happens outside the official education system but still follows an organized structure. This includes things like language classes, professional development workshops, and online courses on platforms like Coursera or edX, or training programs offered by employers.

While these may not always lead to a formal degree, they often provide certificates or badges that can be valuable for career advancement.

- Informal learning is the most common and natural form of learning. It happens spontaneously in everyday life without any formal structure. Learning to cook by watching YouTube videos, picking up a new hobby by practicing at home, or figuring out how to use a new app by exploring it yourself are all examples of informal learning. The beauty of informal learning is that it can happen anywhere and at any time, often without us even realizing we are learning.

These three forms of learning are not separate from one another. In fact, they work best when combined. A person might take a formal university course, supplement it with non-formal online tutorials, and engage in informal practice with friends—all as part of a single learning journey.

3. Why Lifelong Learning Matters More Than Ever

3.1 A World in Fast Forward

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has felt like a time machine set to “fast forward.” Pandemics, geopolitical conflicts, aging populations, climate change, and rapid technological advances have reshaped our economies and societies at an extraordinary pace. Andreas Schleicher, the OECD Director for Education and Skills, makes a striking observation: “What used to take a generation to transform now happens in five years.” This acceleration means that the knowledge and skills we acquire in our youth have a shorter and shorter “shelf life.” A skill that was cutting-edge ten years ago may be outdated today. A job that existed for decades may be automated or transformed beyond recognition. In such a world, the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn becomes essential. As Schleicher puts it, “Lifelong learning isn’t a slogan anymore; it’s the survival skill of our age.”

3.2 The Skills Paradox

One of the most puzzling problems facing modern economies is what the OECD calls the “skills paradox.” On one hand, employers around the world report difficulties in finding workers with the right skills for available jobs. On the other hand, many workers find themselves in positions that do not make full use of their existing abilities. This mismatch between the skills people have and the skills that are actually used in the workplace leads to lower productivity, slower innovation, and weaker wage growth. The OECD Skills Outlook 2025, which provides one of the most comprehensive international assessments of adult skills, emphasizes that the challenge is no longer just about producing more skilled individuals. Instead, the focus must shift to creating labor markets and workplaces that make effective use of the skills people already possess. Lifelong learning plays a crucial role in addressing this paradox by helping workers continuously update their skills and by providing pathways for recognizing skills that were acquired outside formal education.

3.3 Adaptability as the Core Skill

If there is one skill that stands out as essential for the twenty-first century, it is adaptability. The OECD Skills Outlook 2025 identifies adaptability as the core skill of our time. In a world where industries rise and fall, where new technologies emerge overnight, and where global events can reshape the job market

in months, the ability to adjust, learn new things, and pivot to new opportunities is more valuable than any single piece of knowledge. This is why lifelong learning is not just about acquiring more knowledge. It is about developing the habits of mind that make continuous learning possible: curiosity, resilience, self-discipline, and the ability to seek out and evaluate new information. These habits, once formed, serve as a foundation for navigating an uncertain future.

4. Technology and Lifelong Learning: The Promise and Challenge of AI

4.1 How AI Is Transforming Learning

In recent years, no development has reshaped the landscape of lifelong learning more dramatically than artificial intelligence. Generative AI tools like ChatGPT have moved from being interesting experiments to becoming part of everyday life. Recent research shows that approximately 10 per cent of adults globally use ChatGPT, and about 49 per cent of these interactions are focused on learning activities, including tutoring, creative development, and skill acquisition. This represents a major shift toward self-directed learning enabled by technology.

The impact of AI on lifelong learning can be seen in three transformative technologies:

- Intelligent virtual assistants now function as always-available tutors, providing immediate access to knowledge and adaptive support across many topics and languages.
- Modern learning management systems use AI to personalize learning pathways, automatically curate content, and provide feedback tailored to each learner's needs.
- AI-generated immersive content allows the creation of lessons, assessments, and even virtual reality simulations from simple text prompts, making high-quality educational experiences more accessible and affordable.

Together, these technologies hold the promise of making learning more personalized, more accessible, and more engaging than ever before. The vision is moving toward “blended, conversational, multimodal learning environments accessible anytime, anywhere.”

4.2 New Demands: AI Literacy and Metacognition

However, the rise of AI also creates new demands on learners. As people increasingly “converse with knowledge” through AI interfaces, there is a greater need for what experts call “AI literacy”—the ability to understand, use, and critically evaluate artificial intelligence tools. Students and workers must learn not just how to use AI but also when to trust it, when to question it, and how to combine AI assistance with their own thinking. Additionally, the role of metacognition—thinking about one's own thinking—becomes more important. When AI can provide instant answers, the skill that distinguishes effective learners is knowing what questions to ask, how to assess the quality of information, and how to apply knowledge to new situations. Educators are shifting from being mere providers of information to becoming coaches and facilitators who guide learners in developing these higher-order skills.

4.3 The Digital Divide: A Persistent Barrier

For all its promise, technology also creates new barriers. The “digital divide”—the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and the skills to use them and those who do not—remains a major obstacle to equitable lifelong learning. Systemic inequality is made worse by the digital divide, which restricts access for the most marginalized populations to digitally mediated learning programs.

Research on learning technologies identifies three major limitations: digital inequality, artificial community, and epistemic exclusion. This means that many technology-based learning solutions have little relevance for people who lack reliable internet access, who do not feel comfortable in online environments, or whose ways of knowing and learning are not reflected in mainstream digital content. As one analysis warns, digital learning increases access while simultaneously amplifying inequality, creating a risk of a “two-speed system” in which some people benefit enormously while others are left further behind.

5. The Inequality Problem: Who Gets to Keep Learning?

5.1 The Cruel Irony of Lifelong Learning

Perhaps the most troubling finding from recent research is what Andreas Schleicher calls a “cruel irony”: the people who most need upskilling and reskilling are the least likely to receive it. Data from the OECD Skills Outlook 2025 shows that more than 60 per cent of adults with a tertiary education participate in non-formal learning. For adults without an upper secondary qualification, participation falls below 20 per cent. This means that lifelong learning, as it currently operates, tends to benefit those who are already well-educated and economically secure, while those in the most vulnerable positions receive the least support. Several factors contribute to this inequality. Adults with lower initial skill levels often face barriers such as time constraints, cost, lack of employer support, and limited recognition of learning from non-traditional pathways. Those in insecure employment or older workers—the very people who face the highest risk of job displacement due to automation and structural change—are significantly less likely to engage in training. Without targeted policy interventions, lifelong learning systems risk widening existing gaps in employability and income rather than closing them.

5.2 The Role of Socioeconomic Background

The circumstances of a person’s birth continue to shape their lifelong learning opportunities. Parental education, gender, immigration background, and even the postal code where someone grows up influence whether they will master the literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills that drive modern economies. Schools can be great equalizers, but they can also amplify existing inequalities. The literacy gap between children with and without tertiary-educated parents often narrows during compulsory schooling, but other divides—such as gender gaps in numeracy and literacy—persist and harden into study choices, career paths, and earnings differences.

These early advantages compound over time. Adults from more advantaged backgrounds go on to earn more credentials and receive more opportunities to reskill throughout their careers. The skills gap is not

merely a matter of individual shortcomings but the cumulative result of unequal access to learning opportunities over an entire lifetime.

5.3 The Commodification of Education

Some scholars argue that the way education is increasingly treated as a commodity—something to be bought and sold in a market—deepens these inequalities. When education is commodified, access becomes stratified based on ability to pay, and intersectional inequalities deepen. The rapid growth of education technology companies during the pandemic accelerated this trend, transforming academic content into marketable products aligned with the logic of privatization and competition. While commodification is sometimes presented as a way to increase accessibility, infrastructural and socioeconomic barriers mean that pre-existing disparities are often made worse.

6. Policy Responses: How Countries Are Making Lifelong Learning a Reality

6.1 UNESCO's Global Vision

UNESCO has been a leading voice in promoting lifelong learning as a fundamental right. The organization's approach emphasizes that lifelong learning should cover all ages, all educational stages, all learning modes (formal, non-formal, and informal), and all learning spaces (schools, communities, workplaces, and digital environments). In 2024 alone, UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning supported 25 countries and 25 cities in developing policies, strategies, and programs to ensure quality learning opportunities for everyone.

UNESCO also promotes the concept of “learning cities”—cities that assume a pivotal role in implementing lifelong learning by mobilizing local resources and partnerships. From disaster preparedness in Thailand to reducing school dropouts in Indonesia, municipal leaders around the world are demonstrating how lifelong learning can be embedded in the fabric of society, driving economic growth and enhancing quality of life for all residents.

6.2 OECD's Evidence-Based Approach

The OECD approaches lifelong learning through the lens of skills development and economic competitiveness. The OECD Skills Outlook 2025 delivers a clear message: building twenty-first-century skills for everyone requires more than incremental reform. The report points to a dual imperative—broadening access to high-quality learning from early childhood through adulthood while ensuring that skills are effectively matched to productive and rewarding jobs. The OECD's Education Policy Outlook 2025 explores how countries can strengthen individuals' agency as lifelong learners, supporting people to take an active role in identifying, acquiring, and applying new knowledge across diverse contexts. The report emphasizes four key life moments when targeted support is especially important: early childhood, early to mid-adolescence, mid-career, and late career.

6.3 Case Studies: Lifelong Learning Entitlements

A landmark UNESCO report published in December 2025 examined how six countries—Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore—have turned the concept of lifelong learning entitlements into reality. These entitlements include vouchers, subsidies, personal learning accounts, and tax credits that tie training rights directly to individuals rather than to specific jobs, making education more transferable, inclusive, and future-oriented. The report found that these six countries have implemented substantial policies and programs designed to support universal or near-universal access to lifelong learning opportunities. Over 3.8 million people have benefited from these lifelong learning entitlements, demonstrating that they can be powerful tools for supporting career transitions, enhancing equity, and responding to changing labor markets.

Based on the case studies, the report offers several recommendations for policymakers: establish clear policy objectives and legal frameworks; simplify administrative procedures; ensure strong quality assurance systems for training providers; provide additional supports like training allowances or paid leave; and create centralized online platforms to manage benefits and provide information about provider quality.

6.4 India's National Education Policy 2020

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a notable example of integrating lifelong learning into a comprehensive education reform. The policy explicitly mentions the necessity of fostering lifelong learning activities at all educational levels and proposes to create an adult education curriculum framework to develop skills and competencies in the adult population.

The NEP 2020 is built on five guiding pillars: Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability, and Accountability. It envisions achieving 100 per cent youth and adult literacy by 2035 and increasing the gross enrolment ratio in higher education to 50 per cent. The policy also introduces multiple entry and exit points in higher education, allowing for greater flexibility and recognizing that learning trajectories are increasingly non-linear, with individuals moving between education, work, and personal development throughout their lives.

India has also launched the New India Literacy Programme (also known as ULLAS—Understanding of Lifelong Learning for All in Society), which targets non-literate adults aged 15 years and above across all states and union territories. This initiative aligns with the NEP 2020's recommendation that the term "Adult Education" should be replaced with "Education for All," reflecting the policy's inclusive vision of lifelong learning.

7. Becoming a Lifelong Learner: Practical Strategies for Students

7.1 Cultivating a Lifelong Learning Mindset

Becoming a lifelong learner does not require expensive courses or fancy technology. It starts with a mindset—an attitude of curiosity, openness, and willingness to grow. Here are some practical strategies that students can use to develop this mindset:

- Stay curious: Ask questions about the world around you. When you encounter something you do not understand, take a moment to look it up or explore it further.
- Read widely: Read books, articles, and news from different fields and perspectives. This broadens your understanding and helps you make connections between different areas of knowledge.
- Embrace challenges: Do not shy away from difficult topics or tasks. The struggle to understand something new is where real learning happens.
- Reflect on your learning: Take time to think about what you have learned and how it connects to what you already know. Reflection helps deepen understanding and solidify new knowledge.
- Set learning goals: Identify skills or topics you want to explore and create a plan for learning about them, even if only in small, regular steps.

7.2 Taking Advantage of Available Resources

Today's learners have access to an unprecedented wealth of learning resources, many of them completely free. Consider exploring:

- Open educational resources: Websites like Khan Academy, MIT OpenCourseWare, and OpenLearn offer high-quality courses and materials at no cost.
- Library resources: Public and university libraries provide access to books, databases, online courses, and often workshops and events.
- Online communities: Platforms like Reddit, Discord, and specialized forums host communities of learners sharing knowledge and supporting one another.
- Workplace opportunities: Many employers offer training programs, tuition reimbursement, or access to learning platforms. Take advantage of these when available.
- Everyday learning: Remember that informal learning counts too. Cooking a new recipe, fixing something around the house, or learning a few words in a new language are all valuable learning experiences.

7.3 Developing Digital and AI Literacy

Given the growing role of technology in learning, developing digital and AI literacy is essential. This means not just knowing how to use digital tools but understanding their limitations and potential risks. UNESCO has launched an open-source course called “Digital Empowerment for Adult Educators in the Age of AI,” covering topics such as essentials of AI for adult education, digital literacy, ethical technology use, and responsible use of emerging technologies. For students, similar principles apply: learn to use AI tools thoughtfully, verify information from multiple sources, and always bring your own critical thinking to bear on what technology produces.

8. Conclusion

Lifelong learning is not a luxury reserved for academics or professionals. It is a fundamental capacity that enables people to adapt, grow, and thrive in a world of constant change. This chapter has explored what lifelong learning means, why it has become so essential, how technology is reshaping it, and what

barriers prevent it from being equally available to all. The evidence is clear: the world is changing faster than ever before, and the skills and knowledge that served us well in the past may not be sufficient for the future. Lifelong learning offers a path forward, but only if we address the deep inequalities that currently determine who gets to learn and who gets left behind. Governments, educational institutions, employers, and individuals all have roles to play in building a truly inclusive lifelong learning ecosystem.

For students reading this chapter, the message is simple: your education does not end when you leave the classroom. The habits of curiosity, self-directed learning, and adaptability you develop now will serve you for a lifetime. In the words of UNESCO's vision, education is not just a stage of life—it is a way of life.ⁱⁱⁱ Embrace it, and you will be prepared not just to survive in a changing world but to thrive in it.

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