Chapter 48
Lifelong Learning in Europe:
The Erasmus Program

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning has become an indispensable concept in our lives in the 21st century with the advent of technologies and the development of knowledge-based economies and societies. This concept has given a variety of names, such as lifelong education, recurrent education, and adult education. With the establishment of the European Union (EU), economic and civic issues have become more important in terms of social integration and economic competitiveness in Europe in 1980s. As a solution to these challenges, several lifelong learning programs were launched by the EU, including Erasmus, Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, and Grundtvig. Since the Erasmus program covers university students in terms of a formal schooling period and staff in the higher education setting and people employed by private businesses, it seems a hybrid and prominent solution for lifelong learning in Europe. Therefore, after some information about lifelong learning and adult education are provided, how the Erasmus program works is explained, and some statistics are given to emphasize its importance for Europe.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of information and communication technologies and the impact of globalization, the world must accept the reality of knowledge-based economies and societies. In order to sustain their competitiveness, nations are looking toward the improvement of their human capacity by adopting strategies that enable people in all periods of their lives to develop new knowledge, skills, and competencies. "Lifelong learning" has appeared as a common solution for building the knowledge and skills needed for new or furthered employment and personal accomplishment throughout one's life.

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning has been further defined as the individual's "lifelong, voluntary, and self-motivated" acquisition of knowledge and skills during his or her lifetime (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 31). This acquisition can happen through formal, informal, and non-formal learning.

Formal learning classically takes place in an educational or training institution and is provided in a structured manner, leading to recognized certifications or diplomas. Formal learning has been widely accepted as the primary shaper of people's education and training, as well as playing a major role in defining for society what "learning" officially is (European Commission, 2000).

On the other hand, informal learning occurs in everyday life. It is not intentional learning; individuals may not perceive the informal knowledge and skills that they have acquired. Moreover, it is not necessarily structured, so it generally does not require specific outputs of time or support for the learner. Informal learning does not usually result in recognized certifications or diplomas.

The third type of lifelong learning is non-formal learning, which occurs in a planned way within organizations; however, it is not formally recognized with certifications or diplomas. In general, the types of non-formal learning include, but are not limited to, professional seminars, workshops, preparation courses, short courses, and fitness programs. Individuals that have a passion for learning and are active in improving their knowledge and skills are well suited for non-formal learning (SEEQUEL, 2004).

The concept of lifelong learning covers all human life from cradle to grave, starting from a child's first years in the home and continuing through preschooling, schooling, training, and adult education. There is ongoing debate about "learning" versus "education"; however, the use of the term "learning" has become more popular than "education" for adults who are personally active in their own learning processes. Since adults are more self-motivated and self-directed, it is important to examine the concepts of adult education and andragogy, which are main components of lifelong learning.

Adult Education

Adult education can be defined as "systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training" (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 31). Although the higher education literature in North America distinguishes between traditionally aged students who are non-adults, under age 25 and adult students or non-traditionally aged students who are 25 years old or older (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992), this chapter defines that adult education covers all ages who are out of formal schooling, university education, and initial vocational training, which is also in line with the common understanding in the European context. When adult education is under discussion, Malcolm Knowles certainly needs to be mentioned. He is a leading scholar of adult education and an advocate of the term "andragogy," which can be described as a scholarly approach to the ways in which adults learn. Knowles explained his first encounter with andragogy as follows:

…in 1967 I had an experience that made it all come together. A Yugoslavian adult educator, Dusan Savicevic, participated in a summer session I was conducting at Boston University. At the end of it he came up to me with his eyes sparkling and said, 'Malcolm, you are preaching and practicing andragogy.' I replied, 'Whatagogy?' because I had never heard the term before. He explained that the term had been coined by a teacher in a German grammar school, Alexander Kapp, in 1833 … The term lay fallow until it was once more introduced by a German social scientist, Eugen Rosenstock, in 1921, but it did not receive general recognition. Then in 1957 a German teacher, Franz Poggeler, published a book, Introduction

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