ARC8 EG2 Inclusive and Flexible Lifelong Learning Pathways

Session 2 | Monday, 11 January 2021

Summary

Presentation of Ms Brikena XHOMAQI, Director, Lifelong Learning Platform

Brikena was asked to focus on the following questions in a 10-minute presentation to provide food for thought for the expert group:

1. What is your take, how inclusive are the national, institutional LLL policies and practices currently, what is the status quo? Do you have any numbers to show?

2. What potential risks do you foresee that could jeopardize greater inclusion in LLL in the next 10 years?

3. What opportunities, leverage points do you see to promote inclusion in LLL the next 10 years?

She started by introducing her organisation, to give a background on its networks and members, as her inputs will reflect the work and diversity of the LLL Platform. The platform founded in 2005 gathers 42 European networks, civil society organizations, that represent different sectors of education from early childhood to adult education.

The main idea was to "Promote a holistic vision to lifelong learning, from cradle to grave, by facilitating European-wide cross-sector cooperation among civil society organisations in the field of education & training and voicing citizens' concerns". Their objective is to build inclusive and democratic education systems; Widening access to quality education for all citizens; Increasing the relevance of education to modern societies.

Brikena shared her take on the status quo of inclusion in LLL, based on the 15 years of experience of the LLL Platform and based on the voice of the different local national regional European stakeholders in their membership.

▪ **There are no "LLL" national or institutional strategies or policies**
There is a lack of lifelong learning national or institutional strategies in Europe, very often OECD or the European Commission is assisting member states to develop such strategies, however, then they call it skills strategy or adult education strategy. For example, Estonia has developed a "lifelong learning strategy for the digital age", which has a very specific focus, instead of a general and cross-cutting approach.

▪ **Lack of lifelong learning approach or common shared understanding: education sectors operate in silos**
There is also a lack of lifelong learning approach or a common shared understanding on lifelong learning among different actors. We see it very often that different sectors of education are working in silos, having their own approach, instead of a holistic one. LLL Platform believes part of the

problem is terminology, there is a misunderstanding of what lifelong learning approach means. Therefore, they are working on a glossary, to assist stakeholder dialogues.

- **Mostly focusing on formal education systems leaving behind non-formal and informal learning**
  It is very often that there are strategies or work done on the issue of lifelong learning, access to it, and inclusion, but it focuses mostly on the formal education system. It does not realise the value and the existence of other forms of education, such as non-formal and informal learning, which are extensively becoming an alternative complementary version of education. LLL Platform has done a position paper on 21st Century Learning Environments (LLL Platform, 2019), where they explain how diverse the learning environments are and how Europe could address this issue.

- **There is lack of flexible pathways for learners to move from one system or level to another**
  In the experience of the LLL Platform, there is generally a lack of flexible pathways for learners. It is very difficult to move from one degree to another, from one level to another, or from one institution to another. Even in European higher education, where most member states are participating in the Bologna Process, which has standardized the qualifications and processes in a certain way.

- **Scattered validation, recognition and accreditation systems / arrangements beyond the higher education provision**
  There is a very scattered or sometimes non-existing validation, recognition and accreditation systems. Agreements beyond the higher education provision are rare, there are no validation, recognition agreements among schools, or our adult education institutions. In many cases we believe this is at the heart of the issue in Brikena's view.

After this overview, Brikena proceeded to share some of the **potential risks and challenges that could jeopardize greater inclusion in LLL in the next 10 years** in her opinion.

- **The commercialisation & austerity measures: lack of public funding and increase of private interest**
  We see less and less public funding and more private interest. The private interest is increasing while the private and the public funding is decreasing in education and training.

- **Digital and green transitions further increasing the pressure on education and training to act fast**
  Digital and green transitions are rather opportunities, but they could be risks as well. These transitions are progressing very fast and put a lot of pressure on education and training systems to act fast. Our fear is that the education and training systems are so bureaucratic and take so much time to change, that they are going to be left behind.

- **The focus on skills vs competencies endangers the very aim of education turning into a commodifiable good**

- **Quantity versus quality of education: inclusion understood as increasing numbers but reducing quality**

Another trend and a big risk that we see is the fact that access to education and inclusion to lifelong learning is currently understood in many member states as to increase quantity versus quality. Two are not tied together. Quantity - to give opportunities to more students and more learners to access learning opportunities - has been increased, while the quality has suffered. We see that for example with the Bologna Process in higher education. There was a massification and democratization of higher education degrees, but the quality decreased.

- **Equality vs equity: we do not all start on an equal footing**
  When we speak of inclusion, we usually understand equality but not equity. Initiatives and actions are usually aiming at promoting equality; however, we should also focus on equity, and address also the different starting points of different individuals. We all start at a different footing and customized support is needed for each individual. The current tendency is rather focusing on equality on opportunities.

Brikena also shared her insights on **potential opportunities or leverage points that could lead to greater inclusion in the next decade.** These were the followings:

- **Lifelong learning entitlements: ILAs extending the public investment to education and training (ILO, UNESCO, OECD, EC)**
  There is a big discussion among international organisations on the individual learning accounts (ILAs), which is basically an individual budget for people to continue learning. This concept is now under investigation, and it would be a good step towards recognizing lifelong learning entitlements and extending the public offer and public investment for education throughout life, rather than just compulsory education.

- **Digital transformation could lead to more access to learning opportunities if it addresses the issue of digital divide**

- **Sustainable development agenda as guiding principles and goals for their role in the society**
  The sustainable development agenda can guide institutions to take up a more significant role in society. They can serve as an additional vision that will help institutions increase inclusion in lifelong learning.

- **Cross-sectoral cooperation among education and training systems: breaking the silos**
  The most important opportunity based on our experience is to increase cross-sectoral cooperation and bring different sectors and forms of education together, including different policy areas too. This can break the silos and therefore we really need to nourish it.

- **Developing more lifelong learning (career) guidance service in the institutions**
  The discussion on lifelong learning and inclusion is also bringing to the table the topic of career guidance services in education institutions. This will become an increasingly important area of development in lifelong learning. It is important to know how to guide people in their personal and professional life.

References:

- Lifelong Learning for Sustainable Societies, LLLP 2020
- 21st Century Learning Environments, LLLP 2019
- Building Synergies between Culture and Education, LLLP 2018
- Reimagining Education in the Digital Era, LLLP 2017
- Integration of Refugees and Migrants through Education, LLLP 2016
- Building the Future of Learning in Europe, LLLP 2015 Manifesto
- For more information: http://lllplatform.eu/resources/policy-statements/

Brikena's presentation was followed by group discussion. Experts provided the following comments on the risks listed by Brikena:

- On "Quantity versus quality of education"
  It is difficult to tell the impact and probability of this risk, because quality is difficult to measure. We see the programs available, and that new lifelong programmes are constantly being developed, and people are upskilling themselves. But it is difficult to decide whether these programmes have a certain quality.

- On "commercialisation & austerity measures"
  The pandemic has caused a lot of disruptions, in terms of jobs, economy, and austerity measures will probably be high on agenda in countries, so the probability and impact of this risk is high.

- On "digital and green transitions that further increase the pressure on lifelong learning"
  It is true that digital and green initiatives are trending in most countries, however, each country has a different pace and different aspiration, and they are designing different policies to achieve their goals, so it is difficult to say how much pressure are they actually putting on LLL.

- On "focus on skills vs competencies turning education into a commodifiable good"
  - Competencies are what people are looking for nowadays. Skills are embedded within the competencies, however, in Europe we speak of skills agenda and don't speak of competencies agendas. Terminology is tricky.
  - Industry always talks about skills, but when you talk to HR people, they always use the term competencies. They are looking for employees with a number of life skills, transversal skills, such as ability for teamwork, emotional intelligence, etc.
  - The main risk here is giving everyone the same thing rather than customizing it to the needs.

- On "Equality vs equity: we do not all start on an equal footing"
  Equality is much more on the agenda than equity. It is much more discussed within the context of disabled groups for example instead of throughout all target groups. There is no high probability of changing this in the next 10 years.

Group members provided the following comments on the opportunities listed by Brikena:

- On "Lifelong learning entitlements: ILAs extending the public investment to education and training"
  - In general, there has been more focus on lifelong learning in recent years in Asia and Europe, however, the pandemic has diminished many opportunities. The focus has obviously turned away from areas such as education. Lifelong learning entitlements are not going to happen in the near future, as the impact of the pandemic is going to last for a couple of year. It is a shame to lose such an opportunity in education such as LLE.

- On "Digital transformation could lead to more access to learning opportunities if it addresses the issue of digital divide"
  - Digitalisation is a double-edged sword, it can lead to more access in lifelong learning, if the issue of digital divide is addressed properly.

- More and more people are going to be engaged digitally at some level, so this opportunity has a very high probability.
- In terms of impact, there are two potential impacts, related to digital literacy. There is a group of people who are digitally literate, and another who are not, therefore get excluded from this opportunity. In both cases, the impact of digital transformation is very high on the group, but in the first case it is going to be positive (those literate), and in the other case negative (those illiterate).
- The pandemic has forced a lot of companies which would not have considered things like working from home or working online normally, to do that, and they have realised that it suits them better.

- On "Sustainable development agenda as guiding principles and goals for their role in the society"
  - The SDG agenda has always been a guideline to many stakeholders including Asian and European international organisations, as a point of alignment. In Asia it has become a strategic goal, and as such a very impactful tool.
  - Maybe some kind of competition will exist in the future for resources, different agendas, but contributing to the achievement of the SDGs will compete for the same resources, such as lifelong learning, green economy, digitalisation, etc.

- On "Cross-sectoral cooperation among education and training systems: breaking the silos"
  - Breaking the silos not just in education but also in training systems is important, working together with private sector and ensuring that demand and supply matches is important.
  - This issue is around the questions what is desirable and what is actually going to happen. Cross-sectoral collaboration It is extremely desirable, at least from a European perspective, but there are many barriers to cross-sectoral collaboration. There is a push to improve it, but the probability is still uncertain.

- On "Developing more lifelong learning (career) guidance service in the institutions"
  - It is important to map out the career options of individuals and provide them possible pathways in a flexible manner. This career path can act in a way as "the light at the end of a tunnel", because sometimes learners can lose sight of their end goals, especially working adults, because they need to deal with so many disruptions in work, etc. So, this opportunity can carry a high impact, but it really depends on the organisations and country involved.
  - This opportunity is similar to the digital divide. It is a double-edged sword. There are different traditions in lifelong learning, in cases it is non-destination focused, and then there are cases where individuals can plot their own trajectory and path in advance. Guidance depends on the system. Sometimes it can be over directive, while other times it allows the learner to reflect on where they want to be and how they want to get there. It is also the case of career trajectories, a person does not necessarily have to follow one single line, can change careers, decide to into more different directions, or may discontinue learning. While it is very important to have guidance, it is an extremely complex area.
  - If something is very high impact, it does not necessarily mean positive impact. Guidance is too directive in a fast-changing world, it can have very negative consequences.

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