



8th ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARC8)

Outlook 2030: Inclusive and Diverse Higher Education in Asia and Europe

ARC8 Expert Group on Inclusive and Flexible Lifelong Learning Pathways

Session 3 | February 2021

Memo

Dr Borhene CHAKROUN, Director, Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems, Education Sector, UNESCO

Dr Chakroun was asked to make a 10-minute presentation on the following questions, to serve as an input to the expert group discussion:

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?

Dr Chakroun began by explaining that the focus of the discussion was on the challenges faced in inclusive and flexible lifelong learning pathways. Dr Chakroun explained that, while national, regional, and international actors were doing a lot to advance developments in the lifelong learning landscape, stakeholders should not take the progress made thus far for granted. Thus, Dr Chakroun focused on three major **challenges**:

- **Revolutionize the Perspective of Lifelong Learning**

Currently, the understanding of lifelong learning is limited, the main tendency is to think about lifelong learning as adult learning. However, all the research, studies, and analysis conducted established that lifelong learning starts from early learning, and includes adult learning, and continued learning.

According to Dr Chakroun, some Asia countries, specifically Japan, Korea, Singapore and Brunei, offer plenty of good practices and lessons learned. These countries focus not only on the skills needed in the workforce, but also on adult learning and on lifelong learning programs, even for senior persons. These countries “focused on life and not just work.”

The international discourse on comprehensive lifelong learning has not been adopted. However, to a certain extent, adult learning has been adopted. This showed that there is a narrow understanding of Lifelong Learning, which is often conflated with Adult Learning, and this has implications.

This narrow perspective on the right to education is the dominant discourse, and it does not include Lifelong Learning as a right. Thus, in practice, the right to education is limited to schooling, to accessing school, and nothing more.

“We need to revolutionize the perspective on the right to education, to bring into perspective the right to lifelong learning.”

- **Lifelong Learning as an International Normative Instrument**

Internationally, the normative instruments such as conventions and recommendations have a very narrow perspective with regard to the right to Lifelong Learning. Subscribing to this narrow perspective applies at times to UNESCO and member states.

According to Dr Chakroun, the challenge is to take the agenda toward the Sustainable Development Goal, to include lifelong learning opportunities for all in international normative instruments.

- **Lifelong Learning as a Cross-sectorial and Multi-stakeholder Challenge**

Dr Chakroun established that lifelong learning is a cross-sectorial and multi-stakeholder challenge. In many countries, facilitating cross-sectorial and multi-stakeholder collaboration remained to be a difficult challenge. Often times, the challenges came about due to the situation wherein schooling and formal education were in the portfolio of the Ministry of Education, while adult learning was under the Ministry of Social Affairs, and service training was in the portfolio of the Ministry of Labor, for example.

Dr Chakroun referred to examples of how countries addressed this concern. First, the case of Brunei Darussalam. The Brunei Government established a national center for lifelong learning (L3C). Because of such a center, different stakeholders could be brought to the same table, and thus created an institutional home for multi-sectorial and cross-sectorial dialogue and collaboration.

A different approach, but one in the same direction, was an initiative in France. According to Dr Chakroun, because multi-stakeholder governance, social partnerships and dialogue required coordination to navigate the different legal structures encountered in cross-sectorial initiatives. France created a national council for Lifelong Learning led by the Prime Minister. Because of the high-level leadership and coordination, challenges faced in cross-sectorial initiatives were possible to overcome.

Dr Chakroun proceeded to discuss his thoughts on **opportunities**:

To begin, he expressed that “opportunities for lifelong learning does not mean leveraging opportunity.” Instead of approaching opportunities from the standpoint of leveraging these opportunities, Dr Chakroun approached opportunities in relation to **agency** of individuals and their motivation for engaging in lifelong learning.

- **Learning Opportunities Close and Narrow by the Age of Seven**

Based on studies by OECD and UNESCO, **by the age of seven, the learning opportunities of many young people begin to narrow**. This may be due to the individuals socio-economic background, their responsibilities to their family, and possibly, the impact of an individuals’ early learning experience. On one hand, there are experiences that open new opportunities for more and better experience, on the other hand, there are experiences that narrow the opportunities of an individual and close possible experiences in the future. Thus, Dr Chakroun expressed that it should not be assumed that people are on an equal playing field. Not everyone has equal access to the same opportunities, more so as time goes by.

- **Opportunity, Agency, and the Vygotsky perspective**

According to Dr Chakroun, in light of varying backgrounds of individuals' and narrowing opportunities in life beginning at the age of seven, **agency is very important**. What must be discussed is how to develop an individual's *agency* and their motivation for lifelong learning. *Agency* must be given plenty of thought when Lifelong Learning is discussed.

Dr Chakroun introduced the Zone of Proximal Development, a **Vygotsky perspective** explaining the Cognitive Development Theory¹. According to Vygotsky, **cognitive abilities are socially guided and constructed**. Culture serves as a mediator for the formation and development of specific abilities, such as learning, memory, attention, and problem solving. Hence the need for interventions by coaches, tutors, adult guidance, or experience in collaboration with more capable peers.

- **UNESCO, Rethinking Education**

According to Dr Chakroun, UNESCO is rethinking the right to education. Lifelong Learning should not be seen as part of education, as a component of education. Rather, education should be part of Lifelong Learning, education is the component of Lifelong Learning.

- **COVID-19 Comes Into Play**

- It is a crisis, but it is also an opportunity. According to Dr Chakroun, the pandemic highlighted learning in different settings, the importance of recognizing learning in different settings, equity, and inclusion.
- Half of the learners globally do not have access to internet.
- **Home learning, distance learning, and online learning are not the panacea.**

Summary of Dr Chakroun Conclusion:

Developing from the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education², and developing beyond it, the UNESCO team is reframing the right to education toward lifelong learning rights.

Considering that the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education does not admit any reservation, it has been [ratified by 106 States](#) since its establishment in 1960. The ratification of the convention of all states has a long way to go, but it too has gone a long way since 1960. To close, Dr Chakroun emphasized two specific points:

- First, UNESCO needs to think about the time frame and identify what can be achieved, and what should be achieved, in the short term and in the long term.

¹ ZPD is defined by Vygotsky (1978) as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”.

Cognitive Development Theory argues that cognitive abilities are socially guided and constructed, through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”. As such, culture serves as a mediator for the formation and development of specific abilities, such as learning, memory, attention, and problem solving.

² The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education occupies the foremost place among UNESCO standard-setting instruments in the field of education. It is the first international instrument which covers the right to education extensively and has a binding force in international law.

- Second, in terms of analysis, research, advocacy and policy actions, the team in UNESCO has focused on rethinking education and has remained dedicated to the long path towards revolutionizing the perspective on education and Lifelong Learning.

Following the presentation of Dr Chakroun, experts weighed in with their **comments and question:**

Professor Séamus O'TUAMA, Chair, ASEM Education and Research Hub on Lifelong Learning (ASEM LLL Hub); Director of ACE (Adult Continuing Education) University College Cork, Ireland

- Based on Dr Chakroun's presentation, Séamus **identified autonomy of the learner as an important and critical aspect of all approaches to Lifelong Learning**. Séamus mentioned the ILO concept paper on Lifelong Learning published in 2019³, which discussed in detail the critical importance of autonomy for the learner and agency for the learner.
- Séamus' gave particular notice to the dilemma on the conflation of adult learning and lifelong learning, as presented by Dr Chakroun. Séamus confirmed that there are times that the two are conflated. As somebody who has worked and continues to work in adult education and lifelong learning in the general sense, Séamus expressed the appreciation for, and importance of both.
 - With regard to adult education, Séamus emphasized that, based on research, **adult education had significant impact on individuals lives, across generations, the children of participants, siblings, so on and so forth.**[^]
 - With regard to Lifelong Learning, Séamus built on the point of Dr Chakroun with regard to learning opportunities at an early age and the narrowing of learning opportunities beginning at the age of seven. Séamus emphasized that **Lifelong Learning is a basic human right, and that everybody has the right to participate in lifelong learning journey.**
- Finally, still in relation to the dilemma, Séamus raised the point that it should not be assumed that people can be lost at any point in a lifelong learning journey. Regardless if the individual is 80 years old or 8 years old, an individual should have the right to participate in the lifelong learning journey since it is a basic human right.
- Lastly, Séamus shed light on the misconception of lifelong learning as a component of education. When in truth, education is "just one very small but important component of lifelong learning."

Dr Chakroun's response, in summary:

There are aspects to lifelong learning that were not mentioned, such as artificial intelligence, and the economic and sustainability pathways. Lifelong Learning sits in a broader sustainability dimension. With this, it is probable for new issues to arise.

Ms Brikena XHOMAQI, Director, Lifelong Learning Platform; Co-chair of the European Economic and Social Committee Liaison Group of Civil Society

- Brikena agreed, there is an issue with the understanding of lifelong learning. She argued that this needed to be understood with a broader definition. Brikena shared the current

³ The International Labor Organization published in 2019 the Concept paper entitled "[Lifelong Learning: Concepts, Issues and Actions](#)"

initiative of her team in developing a **glossary that will include a list of all the terminologies surrounding Lifelong Learning**. This initiative would clarify to the stakeholders and policy makers the meaning of the terms, and in which contexts these terms developed and are used in.

- According to Brikena, supporting the right to education also means supporting the right to lifelong learning. The right to **lifelong learning is very important because it translates to supporting individuals, and public investments in education beyond the formal education and compulsory education**.
- However, Brikena explained that there is an **ongoing debate in Europe with regard to public investment in education and lifelong learning**. The argument is that if lifelong learning is a basic human right, public investment in education should go beyond compulsory education and include lifelong learning. However, many think that, after a certain age, it is upon to the individual to pay for their continuous learning.

Thus, by bringing agency and autonomy into this discussion, it may be possible for these concepts to be misinterpreted to the detriment of revolutionizing the perspective on lifelong learning. Thus, these two concepts may not necessarily have the right impact.

- Brikena raised that, within the context of the pandemic, there has been significant investment in lifelong learning, and there is more pressure on lifelong learning now. However, despite investments focused on reskilling and upskilling, most investments have been on adult education.
- To conclude, Brikena posed the question: Considering the acknowledgement of the long path ahead, what can be done to accelerate the process?

Dr Chakroun's response, in summary:

- Rights-bearer and Duty-bearer
 - According to Dr Chakroun, when discussing lifelong learning rights, challenges arise within the legal dimension. Since the discussion revolves around lifelong learning rights, it is important to include in the discussion the **rights-bearer** and the **duty-bearer**. The right-bearer are the citizens, and the duty bearer is the state. With this in mind, Dr Chakroun clarified that the **provision of education is the responsibility of the state**. However, the discussion on who is responsible for the provision of lifelong learning is not as straightforward.
 - Dr Chakroun explained that lifelong learning is more complex. At times, the right depends on the career path, and **lifelong learning opportunities could potentially be the responsibility of the company, as part of the labor law of the country**.
 - **Some states have taken a powerful responsibility**. Based on the recent publication with ILO, Dr Chakroun shared that in Singapore for example, individuals were provided a learning account. Learning accounts were not only for members of the workforce, and it remains accessible after retirement from the workforce.

In France, for example, individuals had access to learning accounts if they were part of the workforce. But, once retired, they would lose access to their learning account.

In Australia, every individual had access to learning accounts. These learning accounts catered to 'low skilled and low qualified persons.'

Thus, Dr Chakroun agreed with **Brikena's comment that there are** diverse cultures and varying understanding of terms. Dr Chakroun explained that there is diversity too regarding the understanding expectations of duty-bearers and rights-bearers in different contexts.

- Further developing on the understanding of diverse rights-bearers and duty-bearers, Dr Chakroun shared research recently conducted by UNICEF. **There are 70 countries which tax the payroll of their staff in different ways and modalities for training funds.** The training funds essentially supports continuing learning opportunities, in service-training, and supports learning and the choice of the individual.

Hence the challenge presented by Dr Chakroun, how to combine the interest of companies and the interest of the individuals?

- **Additional Challenges and Opportunities**
Dr Chakroun chose to push the discussion further by introducing additional dimensions of concern to the discussion. First, the technology dimension, hand-in-hand with both challenges and opportunities. To begin with, **opportunities:**
 - As for opportunities, the role of **artificial intelligence and technology development can support the choices of individuals and the learning opportunities in their daily lives.**
 - Artificial intelligence will offer learning opportunities and learning pathways that can be connected with employment and learning opportunities.
 - **Discussion on open access to knowledge** from an international and multilateral perspective, distinguished from the narrow geographical or country perspective.

As for the **challenges:**

The challenge in facing ethics and artificial intelligence.

- The perspectives of inclusion, equity, and gender are needed. There may be biases in policies if left unchecked. UNESCO has a recent study published on the artificial intelligence and developing a gender perspective was mentioned.
- Dr Chakroun reminded the group that there are limitations to technology development despite it evolving very fast.

Dr Melinda dela Pena BANDALARIA, Chancellor and Professor, University of the Philippines Open University; Chair, Asian MOOCs Steering Committee

Melinda agreed on a number of points.

- First, with what Dr Chakroun had mentioned in his presentation, expanding the definition of the right to education. Consequently, the **focus of investment is often limited to adult education only, this should be broadened.**
- Second, Melinda also commented on the observation that **education is often compartmentalized**, such is the case in the Philippines. One ministry focuses on the basic education, another ministry focuses on higher education, another ministry focuses on adult education, and research institutes prioritize open source and distance learning.
- Third, **lifelong learning is a critical domain for a sustainable education.** Lifelong learning should be anchored in the Sustainable Development Goal 4. The dimension of sustainability is important.
 - For example, the experience during the pandemic. Universities closed and stopped operations because their system was not sustainable. Universities and education programs were not agile and flexible and were unable to provide lifelong learning opportunities.

- Fourth, Dr Chakroun mentioned open science. Melinda wanted to **expand the discussion to cover open education practices such as open educational resources, massive open online courses, open data, open journal, open books, and all options that can expand the opportunities for lifelong learning**, including opportunities for the formal system of schooling and informal schooling, in line with the dimension of sustainability.
- Fourth, **lifelong learning initiatives and technology can very much enable institutions**. The two will contribute to lifelong learning opportunities for many types of learners, and not just those who pursue skills advancement. However, technology is an enabling mechanism which needs extra work for national policies to support lifelong learning and make sure that inclusion and access will be provided to as many as students as possible.

Dr Sheikh Lukman S A HAMID, Deputy Director (Academic) Lifelong Learning Centre (L3C), Brunei Darussalam

Sheikh shared their definition of lifelong learning as “any activity undertaken throughout life which aims at providing knowledge, skills, and competencies coming from a personal, civic, social, and employment perspective.”

- The Lifelong Learning Centre (L3C): National Policy and Lifelong Learning Strategy
L3C is government driven but collaborates well with the private sector and with other government ministries. A testament to the efficacy of the national policy and lifelong learning strategy. There has been plenty of traction in the first seven months since its establishment. The L3C also works on:

- Guidance and Counseling

The Lifelong Learning Centre (L3C) also works on **developing guidance and counseling**, as this was identified to be important to the people. A key component in this initiative was research on job trends, opportunities, and course information.

- Recognition of Prior Learning

The Lifelong Learning Centre (L3C) is developing policy **for recognition of prior learning**. Going beyond current technical and vocational institutions the L3C is looking at national level policy.

Prior learning is based on criteria, references, and assessment of skills and knowledge. Upon assessment a certificate is awarded by L3C which is considered by Sheikh as a game changer for everyone.

- Employment Landscape and Skills in Demand

According to Sheikh, the **employment landscape has changed**. Skills and work are based on trends of the nature of changing jobs, more frequently due to technological advancements and as a result of necessity. **Employability is less focused on credential attainment and more focused on the demonstration of skills and hard skills**.

Due to the pandemic people have lost jobs and the economy has been greatly affected. Thus, the greater need for individuals to quickly adapt. There is a **need to upskill in relation to soft skills, cognitive and non-cognitive skills, literacy and numeracy, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence**.

Finally, Sheikh concluded by stating that there was still a need to raise awareness on lifelong learning and recognition of prior learning with the general public in Brunei.

Dr Alexandra IOANNIDOU, Secretary and Board Member, European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA); Internationalisation Unit – Executive Department, DIE – Leibniz Centre for Lifelong Learning, Germany

Alexandra inquired whether Dr Chakroun considered lifelong learning a public good, something that is beneficial to all, and a collective endeavor of diverse social institutions and actors. Thus the question posed: Is lifelong learning as a public good attractive?

Dr Chakroun’s response, in summary:

First, reflecting on the thought of **common goods and global problems**, this was an avenue that had to be explored. Colleagues of Dr Chakroun in the team have worked on an international education commission, looking at the future of education. Dr Chakroun explained that there was a tendency to look at lifelong learning as an individual endeavor, but in reality, it has to be seen also as collective endeavor.

“Learning is not an individual endeavor.”

Dr Chakroun explained that collective engagement can be a rich experience, such as the case exemplified by the L3C in Brunei. Dr Chakroun proceeded to introduce the evidence-based approach as critical dimension to help answer questions. Evidence-based data has benefits. For example, those who benefit most from adult learning are the ones that are best educated. Thus the question posed by Dr Chakroun was whether or not new instruments used offer opportunities to the most marginalized and the hardest to reach?

To conclude, Dr Chakroun stated that there is plenty of data internationally, within countries, on lifelong learning. More information from countries will contribute to an evidence-based approach to lifelong learning.

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