

Original Article

ENHANCING ACCESS TO QUALITY LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL IN NIGERI

Chinwe Uzoma Ugwu

Department of Adult and
Continuing Education,
Michael Okpara University of
Agriculture,
Umudike, Abia State.

Email: uzomaugwu1@gmail.com

Phone: 07033850793

Abstract

This paper explores the critical need for enhancing access to quality lifelong learning opportunities in Nigeria, addressing the multifaceted challenges that hinder participation in educational programmes. The paper identifies key barriers, including inadequate infrastructure, social and cultural stigmas surrounding adult education, and economic constraints that limit access for many individuals. It proposes a comprehensive strategy focused on investing in educational infrastructure, developing digital learning platforms, and fostering community engagement to raise awareness about the importance of lifelong learning. Additionally, the paper emphasizes the need for public-private partnerships and incentives for adult learners to create a more inclusive educational environment. By implementing these strategies, stakeholders can facilitate greater access to lifelong learning, empowering individuals and ultimately contributing to national development and social cohesion in Nigeria.

Keywords: Enhancing, Access, Quality and Lifelong Learning

Introduction

Lifelong learning is increasingly recognized as a critical component of personal and societal development, particularly in a rapidly changing global landscape. It encompasses all learning activities undertaken throughout an individual's life, aimed at improving knowledge, skills, and competencies. In Nigeria, where educational disparities and socioeconomic challenges persist, enhancing access to quality lifelong learning opportunities is essential for fostering inclusive growth, reducing poverty, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Despite the

recognition of its importance, access to quality lifelong learning in Nigeria remains limited due to various barriers, including economic constraints, infrastructural deficiencies, and social-cultural factors. For instance, many educational institutions struggle with inadequate resources, which affects the quality of educational programmes offered (Ogunsakin, 2024). Moreover, the growing population and increasing demand for education further complicate the situation, making it imperative for educational policies to adapt and evolve to meet these challenges (Ogunbodede & Achugbue, 2023).

In light of these challenges, there is a pressing need for comprehensive strategies that promote access to quality lifelong learning opportunities for all

Nigerians. This includes the development of favorable policies, investment in educational infrastructure, and community engagement initiatives that raise awareness about the benefits of lifelong learning. By addressing these areas, Nigeria can harness the potential of lifelong learning to empower its citizens, stimulate economic development, enhance social cohesion and improve the quality of education. Quality education, one of the 17 different development goals, emphasizes an egalitarian, inclusive, quality and lifelong education content. Achieving the goals set in the scope of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is of great importance in terms of achieving sustainable development goal 4. Lifelong learning is rooted in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages, in all life-wide contexts and through a variety of modalities that, together, meet a range of learning needs and demands; this is the holistic understanding of Lifelong Learning (Ferguson and Roofe, 2020).

Lifelong learning refers to the continuous, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional development. It encompasses all forms of learning that occur throughout an individual's life, including formal education, non-formal and informal learning experiences. The concept emphasizes the importance of adapting to the constantly evolving knowledge and skills required in a rapidly changing world, enabling individuals to remain relevant in their careers and contribute effectively to society.

There are five essential elements to the UNESCO definition of Lifelong Learning;

All age groups. Lifelong learning, in other words, is a process that starts at birth and extends across the whole lifespan. It provides people of all ages and origins with learning opportunities and activities, responding to their specific needs in different life and professional stages.

All levels of education. Lifelong learning is about linking all levels and types of education, building

adaptable pathways between them. This includes early childhood care and education (ECCE), primary and secondary school education, higher education, adult and non-formal education, as well as technical and vocational education and training (TVET).

All learning modalities. Lifelong learning recognizes all modalities of learning: formal (institutionalized, leading to recognised qualifications), non-formal (institutionalized, alternative or complementary to formal education, usually not leading to recognized qualifications) and informal (not institutionalized, on a self-directed, family-directed, community or socially directed basis).

All learning spheres and spaces. Schools are just one part of a wide learning universe, a space which also includes families, communities, workplaces, libraries, museums and other online and distance learning platforms. Promoting lifelong learning means effectively to build bridges between the formal education sector the diverse non-formal and informal learning environments in order to create new opportunities for very diverse learning needs.

A variety of purposes. Lifelong learning is both people-centered and human rights based. Providing equitable and inclusive lifelong learning opportunities means responding to the needs of very different learners, irrespective of age; sex; ethnicity; and national, economic or social origins, while including persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples and every community living in vulnerable situations.

Importance of Lifelong Learning in National Development

Lifelong learning plays a crucial role in national development by fostering human capital development, enhancing economic productivity, and promoting social inclusion. As economies become more knowledge-driven, the ability of individuals to continuously acquire new skills and knowledge is essential for maintaining competitiveness and adaptability in the workforce. This is particularly

important in Nigeria, where a rapidly changing job market necessitates a skilled and adaptable workforce (Ogunbodede & Achugbue, 2023). Furthermore, lifelong learning contributes to social cohesion by providing opportunities for marginalized groups to gain access to education and improve their quality of life. It empowers individuals to make informed decisions, participate actively in civic life, and contribute to sustainable development. By fostering a culture of lifelong learning, Nigeria can address issues of inequality and ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to thrive in a dynamic and interconnected world (Gardner & Howard, 2024)..

Current State of Lifelong Learning Opportunities in Nigeria

The current state of lifelong learning opportunities in Nigeria reflects a complex landscape marked by both progress and significant challenges. While there have been various initiatives aimed at promoting lifelong learning, access to quality educational resources remains inconsistent across different regions of the country. Many Nigerians, particularly those in rural areas, still face barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, limited access to technology, and insufficient funding for educational programs (Ogunsakin, 2024). In urban centers, there has been a gradual increase in the availability of adult education programmes and vocational training initiatives aimed at addressing the skills gap in the workforce. However, these programs often suffer from lack of standardization and quality assurance, leading to varying outcomes in terms of skill acquisition and employability (Ogunbodede & Achugbue, 2023). Additionally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in access to lifelong learning, as many educational institutions struggled to transition to online learning modalities, leaving behind marginalized populations without adequate support (Chauke, 2024).

Furthermore, there is a growing recognition of the need to integrate technology into lifelong learning strategies, particularly through digital platforms that

can provide flexible and accessible learning opportunities. However, challenges such as the digital divide and limited internet connectivity continue to hinder widespread adoption and participation in online learning initiatives (Moch, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from government, educational institutions, and various stakeholders to create a more inclusive and equitable lifelong learning environment.

Key Principles of Lifelong Learning

1. **Continuous Learning:** Lifelong learning emphasizes the importance of ongoing education throughout an individual's life. This principle promotes the idea that learning is not confined to formal education but is a continuous journey that can occur in various settings and formats (Moch, 2024).
2. **Self-Directed Learning:** Individuals are encouraged to take initiative in their learning processes, setting personal goals and seeking out resources and opportunities that align with their interests and needs. This fosters autonomy and empowers learners to take control of their educational paths (Garrison, 2023).
3. **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Lifelong learning recognizes the necessity for learners to be flexible in their approaches to education. This includes adapting to new technologies, methodologies, and changing circumstances in both personal and professional environments (Molnár et al. Molnár, Jenei, Moreno, Lakshmi, Malatyinszki, 2024).
4. **Inclusivity:** Lifelong learning initiatives are designed to be accessible to all individuals, regardless of their background, age, or educational level. This principle ensures that everyone has the opportunity to engage in educational activities that enhance their skills and knowledge (Ogunbodede & Achugbue, 2023).
5. **Relevance to Life and Work:** Learning experiences should be directly applicable to the real world, equipping individuals with the skills

and knowledge necessary to navigate personal and professional challenges effectively.

Role of Lifelong Learning in Personal and Professional Development

Lifelong learning plays a critical role in personal development by fostering a growth mindset and enhancing self-awareness. Individuals who engage in lifelong learning are more likely to develop critical thinking skills, creativity, and emotional intelligence, which are essential for personal fulfillment and effective interpersonal relationships (Gardner & Howard, 2024).

In terms of professional development, lifelong learning is vital for maintaining competitiveness in the labor market. As industries evolve and new technologies emerge, continuous education helps individuals acquire new skills and knowledge that are relevant to their careers. This adaptability not only enhances employability but also supports career advancement and job satisfaction (Molnár *et al.* 2024). Moreover, organizations benefit from fostering a culture of lifelong learning, as it leads to a more skilled workforce, increased innovation, and improved organizational performance. By investing in the continuous development of their employees, organizations can respond more effectively to market demands and changes, ensuring sustainable growth (Whelan, 2024).

National and Global Context of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning has gained prominence both nationally and globally as a response to the changing demands of the workforce and the need for sustainable development. In Nigeria, the government recognizes the importance of lifelong learning in addressing educational disparities and enhancing workforce skills. The National Policy on Education emphasizes the need for continuous education and training to equip individuals with the necessary skills for personal and national development (Ogunbodede & Achugbue, 2023). Globally, lifelong learning is increasingly viewed as essential for fostering innovation, adaptability, and resilience in societies

facing rapid technological advancements and economic changes. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been a strong advocate for lifelong learning, promoting frameworks that encourage member states to integrate lifelong learning into their educational policies and practices.

Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals 4

Lifelong learning is fundamentally aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." This goal emphasizes the importance of accessible education at all levels, from early childhood to adult learning, and aims to eliminate barriers that prevent individuals from engaging in lifelong education (UN, 2015). The integration of lifelong learning into national educational frameworks is crucial for achieving this goal, as it supports individuals in acquiring the skills needed for sustainable livelihoods and active participation in society. Quality education is fundamental to sustainable development. It is one of the most powerful tools by which people can lift themselves out of poverty and fully participate in their communities.

The Capacity to learn is a gift; the ability to learn is a skill; the willingness to learn is a choice as stated by Brain Herbert. Lifelong learning is based on four pillars that helps the learner gain a foothold and then foundation in the learning. These pillars help the learner get set for life and bring in marvelous ways to reach successful outcomes. The four pillars of Lifelong Learning are:

- **Learning to Know:** Developing the learner's curiosity and eagerness to learn, having critical and inquisitive thinking.
- **Learning to do:** Putting knowledge into practice, learning through real experience, learning by doing.

- **Learning to live together:** Developing social skills, a good sense for giving and receiving feedback and teamwork skills.
- **Learning to be: Self-knowledge.** Knowing what the learner's interests are, the strengths and weaknesses, the purpose and the kind of knowledge the learner should seek. According to UNESCO's Learning: The Treasure within (1996), education throughout life is based on these four pillars.

Lifelong Learning Initiatives in Other Countries

Several countries have implemented robust lifelong learning initiatives that serve as models for best practices. For instance, Finland is renowned for its comprehensive lifelong learning system that integrates formal, non-formal, and informal learning opportunities. The Finnish education system emphasizes self-directed learning and provides various pathways for adult education, enabling citizens to continuously update their skills and knowledge.

Similarly, Germany's dual education system combines classroom instruction with hands-on training in various industries, promoting lifelong learning through apprenticeship programs that facilitate skill development for both young people and adults. This approach has resulted in a highly skilled workforce and low unemployment rates.

Challenges to Accessing Quality Lifelong Learning in Nigeria

Accessing quality lifelong learning in Nigeria is hindered by several significant and economic challenges. These include infrastructural limitations, social and cultural factors constraints.

1. **Infrastructure Limitations:** One of the most pressing challenges is inadequate educational infrastructure. Many learning institutions lack the necessary facilities, such as libraries, laboratories, and technology resources, which are essential for effective lifelong learning. This deficiency is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where access to educational resources is severely limited

(Oyekunle, Gbenga-Julius, & Dare., 2024). Furthermore, the digital divide exacerbates these challenges, as many learners do not have access to the internet or modern technologies that facilitate online learning and skill development (Onayinka, Ugwu, Onyekwere, & Opele, 2024).

2. **Social and Cultural Factors:** Social and cultural factors significantly influence participation in lifelong learning. In many communities, there is a prevailing belief that formal education is primarily for the youth, leading to stigmatization of adult learners. Additionally, cultural norms may prioritize traditional roles over education, especially for women, which limits their opportunities for engagement in lifelong learning initiatives (Ogunbodede & Achugbue, 2023). Moreover, societal attitudes towards education can discourage individuals from pursuing further education or training, particularly in areas where educational attainment is undervalued.
3. **Economic Constraints:** Economic barriers also pose a significant challenge to lifelong learning. Many individuals cannot afford the cost of further education or skills training, especially in a context where poverty rates are high. The lack of funding for adult education programs and vocational training initiatives further limits opportunities for individuals seeking to enhance their skills and knowledge (Oyinlola, 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach involving government policy reforms, community engagement, and investment in educational infrastructure to create an inclusive environment conducive to lifelong learning.

Strategies for Enhancing Access to Lifelong Learning

1. Investment in Infrastructure:

- To improve access to lifelong learning, substantial investment in educational infrastructure is essential. This includes upgrading existing facilities, building new learning centers, and equipping them with modern technologies such as computers and internet

access. Governments and private sector partners can collaborate to fund these initiatives, ensuring that both urban and rural areas benefit from enhanced educational resources (Oyekunle *et al.*, 2024).

2. Digital Learning Platforms:

- Developing and promoting digital learning platforms can significantly enhance access to lifelong learning. These platforms can provide online courses, resources, and support for learners of all ages, making education more flexible and accessible. Special attention should be given to ensuring that these platforms are user-friendly and available in local languages to cater to diverse populations (Onayinka *et al.*, 2024).

3. Community Engagement and Awareness:

- Engaging communities through awareness campaigns is vital to promote the value of lifelong learning. These campaigns can focus on changing perceptions about adult education, highlighting success stories, and demonstrating the benefits of continuous learning. Collaborating with local leaders, organizations, and educational institutions can create a supportive environment that encourages participation in lifelong learning initiatives (Ogunbodede & Achugbue, 2023).

4. Partnerships with Local Organizations:

- Forming partnerships with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, and businesses can enhance the reach and effectiveness of lifelong learning programs. These partnerships can facilitate resource sharing, provide funding for community-based educational initiatives, and create tailored programs that address specific local needs (Moch, 2024).

5. Incentives for Adult Learners:

- Providing incentives for adult learners, such as scholarships, stipends, or tax breaks, can encourage participation in lifelong learning programs. These incentives can help alleviate the economic burdens associated with pursuing further education and make lifelong learning a more attractive option for individuals (Chauke, 2024).

A comprehensive strategy that includes investment in infrastructure, the development of digital platforms, community engagement, partnerships, and incentives is essential for enhancing access to lifelong learning in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Lifelong learning is crucial for personal development, economic growth, and social cohesion in Nigeria. However, significant challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, social and cultural barriers, and economic constraints hinder access to quality lifelong learning opportunities. By implementing targeted strategies that focus on investment in infrastructure, digital learning platforms, community engagement, and support for adult learners, stakeholders can create an inclusive and effective lifelong learning environment.

Summary of Key Points

1. Challenges: Access to lifelong learning in Nigeria is limited by infrastructure deficits, social and cultural stigmas against adult education, and economic barriers that prevent individuals from pursuing further education.

2. Strategies for Enhancement:

- Investment in educational infrastructure and technology.
- Development of digital learning platforms to broaden access.
- Community engagement initiatives to raise awareness and change perceptions.
- Partnerships with local organizations to tailor educational programs.
- Incentives for adult learners to encourage participation.

Suggestions

To effectively address the challenges of lifelong learning in Nigeria, stakeholders—including government agencies, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders—must collaborate and take proactive steps:

1. Government: Increase funding for educational infrastructure and create policies that prioritize lifelong learning initiatives.
2. Educational Institutions: Develop flexible and inclusive programs catering to the diverse needs of adult learners and promote digital literacy.
3. Community Organizations: Engage in awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of lifelong learning and provide support networks for adult learners.
4. Private Sector: Invest in educational programs and partnerships that facilitate skill development and workforce readiness.
5. Individuals: Embrace a mindset of continuous learning and seek out opportunities for personal and professional development.

By uniting efforts across these sectors, Nigeria can foster a robust culture of lifelong learning that empowers individuals and contributes to national development.

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