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ROLE AND PLACE OF LIFE-LONG LEARNING IN THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the analysis of continuing education as a social phenomenon, its nature, basic aspects, and principles, as well as the experience of Kazan Federal University in implementing a life-long learning (LLL) program, its basic stages and achievements. The authors arrive at the conclusion that the LLL program can help to promote social inclusion and personal fulfillment, as well as to increase people's employability and social adaptability. The central point of the program is the idea that people at any age and at any stage of their life should have a chance to take intense training courses in various fields of knowledge. Kazan Federal University offers a multifaceted LLL program that has several levels and profiles. There is the Children's University for children aged 5 to 14 aimed to promote scientific knowledge among children. Senior schoolers choose to enter one of 9 departments of our Minor University, a pre-university training center targeting development of creative activity and cognitive abilities of teenagers. Minor University enrolls about 500 students. Having entered the university, the students have a lot of opportunities to take optional short- and long-term courses in different fields of knowledge. The program includes the University of the Third Age, a unique and exciting phenomenon providing life-enhancing and life-changing opportunities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of continuous education is very relevant in today's conditions when the need for rapid updating of professional knowledge and skills is so high, and the number of active working-age population is steadily declining. But, what are the nature and social essence of continuous education? What are its roles and functions in today's society? How and through what social institutions is it realized? The objective of this work is a theoretical analysis of nature of this phenomenon, its main aspects, and principles, as well as the systematization and generalization of best practices in this field.

The ideas of continuous education are getting more and more popular in our world of new

technologies and globalization. LLL problems are discussed today by many scholars (Asprin & Chapmen, 2001; Burns, 2002; Green, 2002; Colardin & Bjornavold, 2004; Fakhrutdinova & Nurhamitov, 2016; Nordstrom, 2008). Our world is changing so fast that if we do not keep developing constantly, we are sure to be left behind. LLL implies the non-stop building of skills, competences, and knowledge throughout an individual's life increasing his/her competitiveness and life quality.

Moreover, it is well known that LLL keeps one's mind sharp. An active mind is supposed to stimulate physical activity and to keep one's spirits high. Besides, LLL may help people to adapt to the changing world and gives them a feeling of self-fulfillment. It is clear that the process of building "learning society" in Russia should be based on LLL ideas. This paper seeks to describe the LLL system implemented in Kazan Federal University, which is one of the leading educational establishments of Russia.

2. METHOD

Our study uses both theoretical (literature review, complex and comparative analyses, summarizing the advanced experience) and practical (participant observation, interviewing) methods. Thus, we have analyzed and compared theoretical works on the problem (Novenkova & Feifer-Shishkina, 2015; Rozhko & Maklakova, 2014; Mascle, 2007, etc.). Besides, we have investigated and systematized the experience of Kazan Federal University in this field. In addition, we have interviewed 31 students of KFU Minor University (MU) in order to find out the reasons why they join the program. It turned out that 42% of them were planning to enter the university after school and thought that MU is the best way to get prepared both for state exams and for future studies here. 37% of the respondents saw MU as a good chance to advance their knowledge in the sphere of interest, to be guided by highly-qualified university lectures, as well as to have access to the up-to-date university facilities. 17% admitted that they were strongly recommended to participate in the program by their parents, who believe MU to be a useful tool to socialize their introvert children.

Besides, our interviewing of the Third Age (U3A) program participants gave interesting results. They were asked if the program helped them in any way. Everybody was satisfied with the program, but the reasons were different. 53% out of 25 respondents came here to widen their social contacts and they did find new friends at the university. 22% of pensioners were eager to acquire new knowledge and skills, while 20% of them wanted to keep their mental health in order through cognitive activity. The rest 5% admitted that they did not know how to manage their free time.

However, the age of children (5–9 years old) did not allow interviewing them. Instead, we decided to use the method of participant observation. We attended and analyzed lessons from Children's University for two months. Our observation showed that children do not miss classes; they are active and involved in the process at all the stages of the lesson. They are curious and used to asking questions and analyzing information. They are motivated to solve creative problems and work in teams. All this was achieved thanks to the systematic and intensive work of their teachers (university professors and lectures).

3. RESULT

Analysis of psychological and pedagogical literature shows that traditional educational institutions, although they continue to be the main supporting elements of education system, significantly expand their functions and often transmit knowledge through the new organizational forms. Here a special role is to be played by the universities, which mission recently is expanded significantly, turning them into the unique intellectual ecosystem with almost unlimited possibilities for the implementation of life-long learning (LLL) ideas. Nowadays the narrow professional training is unpromising if we take into account the fact of radically changing world when we simply cannot foresee what the professional structure of society will be throughout the life of even one generation.

In this case, as the ideas of continuous education are still insufficiently developed in Russia, it is necessary not only to comprehend the problem theoretically but also to generalize the best practices in this field. In this regard, a serious theoretical and practical interest has the analysis of many years of successful operation of the continuous education system developed in the KFU.

Kazan Federal University is one of the oldest universities in Russia, it celebrates its 215th anniversary in 2019. Today, Kazan Federal University has built a multifaceted LLL system on the basis of a non-linear multidivisional approach, which allows drawing various social groups into the LLL process.

The program starts with the Children's University (CU) meant for girls and boys aged 5 to 14. It was opened in 2011, and today about 2500 children attend its classes. Its main aim is to promote scientific knowledge and to get children interested in science. Children listen to lectures delivered by the university professors, take part in project work under the supervision of lecturers, and work in the university laboratories with the most advanced equipment. The CU program includes not only attending lectures and classes but also visiting museums and exhibitions. The KFE Children's University is a member of the European Association of Children's Universities.

Senior schoolers may choose to enter one of 9 departments of the Minor University (MU), which was established in 1979. It is one of the main areas of activity of the Pre-university Training Center. Its aim is to develop the creative activity and cognitive abilities of teenagers, to help them choose their future profession and get ready for the university entrance exams. Children may take special psychological career-guidance and self-identification tests. Today, Minor University enrolls about 500 students.

Having entered the university, the students have a lot of opportunities not only to master their future profession but also to take optional short- and long-term courses in different fields of knowledge. Thus, the linear structure of the KFU LLL program turns into a branched system. The long-term courses (2–3 years of study) presuppose that learners acquire a new additional profession (psychologist, lawyer, interpreter, etc.). Short-term courses (2–10 months) aim to deepen and advance students' knowledge and skills in a certain sphere. The Department of Additional Education for Students (DAES) established in 1993 includes over 15 centers. DAES is aimed at providing the opportunity for acquiring supplementary knowledge, competences, and skills. The graduates of the Department significantly improve their competitiveness in the labor market.

Both undergraduates and graduates of the university may choose to continue their education taking one of the following retraining courses to acquire an additional qualification: Interpreter in the sphere of professional communication, Practical Psychology, Landscape Design, Physical Training, Sports and Remedial Gymnastics. Besides, the university offers a number of refresher training programs, such as Methods of Teaching Russian as a Second Language, English for Business and Professional Communication, English for Academic Purposes, School of Leadership, Mediation, Extremism and Terrorism Prevention, Effective Negotiations, non-confrontational Communication, Cross-cultural Effective Communication, Family Disputes Regulation.

To crown all this, the program includes the University of the Third Age (U3A) founded in 2007. It is a unique and exciting project. Retired and semi-retired people come together and learn together, not for qualifications but for their own pleasure. They share their skills and life experiences: the learners teach and the teachers learn, and there is no distinction between them.

The slogan of the KFU U3A is “One stays young while he is learning” (Confucius). Learning here not only helps to keep one’s mind sharp but also supports elderly people in overcoming psychological barriers and maintaining healthy social relationships. The LLL program is very popular not only in the University but also in the whole Volga region of Russia.

It would appear, then, that despite the efforts that have been made in a number of countries, targets for increasing the proportion of young people enrolling in degree courses are not being reached. This is particularly the case where the marginalized and less privileged are concerned. While this goes on, the stock of adults who are denied access to HE is growing, and the problem of providing access for adult learners is widening. This stock of adults is likely to contain greater concentrations of young people who have been inequitably treated in the past, and who suffer multiple disadvantages. If we are to understand the degree to which particular regions or countries facilitate adult access to HE, we must first gain an understanding both of the diversity of structural and institutional forms of HE in those regions and of how their regulatory and policy frameworks inform this diversity. The issues to consider are represented in Figure 1:

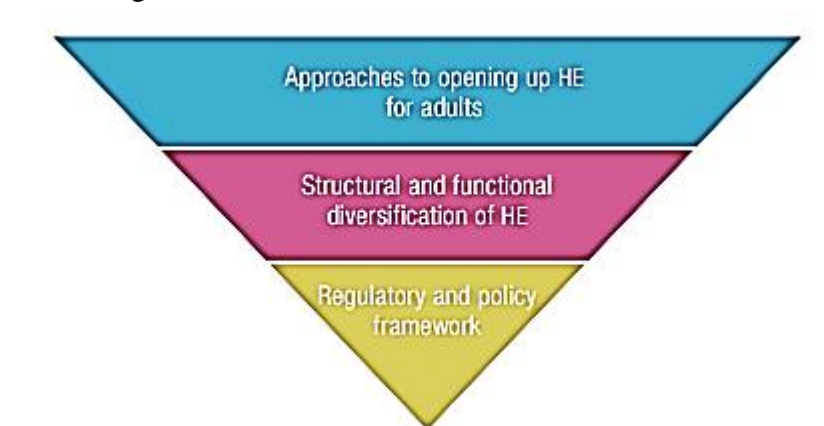


Figure 1: A Heuristic for adult participation in higher education. (Source: Authors)

Describing the situation with regard to adult access to Higher Education in different parts of the world requires taking account of factors such as regulatory and policy diversification, structural and functional diversification of institutions, and the openness of provision. The precise relationships between these factors will vary from country to country. A highly regulated system may or may not

be one that facilitates a diverse set of institutions. In short, whilst diversity in institutional structure may provide a range of opportunities to access HE, it may be that only some of the institutions concerned will provide these opportunities. It could, therefore, be argued that, to a significant degree, the problem of facilitating adult access to HE has been ‘solved’. This, however, is not the end of the story. There certainly are many forms of provision to choose from, and a good deal of knowledge of what works: the main issue that remains is the willingness of the state and institutions to put access into practice. Furthermore, simply gaining access is not enough: once enrolled in HEIs, questions of retention and progression arise. Figure 2, flexibility is therefore not only about access to the system, but also about the delivery of learning thereafter. A comprehensive overview of these issues in the context of the UK was undertaken recently (Houston, McCune and Osborne, 2011).

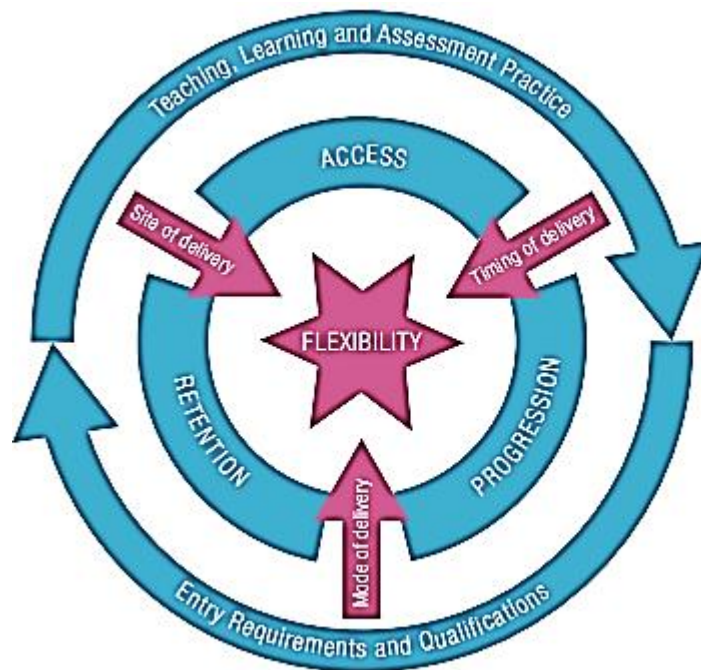


Figure 2: A heuristic element for flexibility. (Source: Authors)

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the literature on the problem shows that the idea of learning through life is not new (Lindeman, 1926; Schwartz, 1974; Duncan, 1984; Knapper & Cropley, 1985; Longworth & Davies, 1996; Nordstorm & Merz, 2006; Mascle, 2007). For instance, we find in (Lindeman, 1926) that education can have no endings, and vocational education should be followed by “adult education”, the purpose of which is to bring meaning into one’s life.

Later, the term “life-long education” was transformed into “life-long learning”, a wider and more accurate term, since it includes both formal and informal forms of learning.

The ideas of LLL change the entire understanding of the modern concept of education. LLL is closely connected with the notion of the learning society since it is expected to maximize the existing educational potential in local communities. In this sense, society can also be seen as educational.

In Russia over the past thirty years, the problem of continuous education has become one of the central pedagogical problems, which is caused by an ever-increasing rate of moral aging of

knowledge and their applications and makes it impossible to limit education to a predetermined age, period or degree.

In analyzing this range of problems, many categories are used. These include "education throughout life" ("life-long education"), "continuing education", "adult education", "recurrent education", and a number of other. The most common term is "continuing education", which, however, is treated differently.

For the purposes of our research, the concept content was simplified. This was done in order to achieve a certain uniqueness and harmony of terminology, to simplify the task of operating categories for the analysis of social phenomena under a study in the framework of this publication. We use this notion in the sense of the most important tool and condition for maintaining the competitiveness of an individual in the labor market, expanding its opportunities in other spheres of life, improving the quality of life, as the most successful form of social adaptation and mobility. Now it is necessary to distinguish its main characteristics.

Firstly, it is a "continuation" of education in time. In the modern context, the educational practices are implemented throughout the person's life, that is, the educational trajectory in its length coincides with the vital life.

Secondly, the essential feature of continuous education is the continuity of human educational activities. This continuity implies the "permeation" of each life moment of the individual with the educational activities, the combination of education with other forms of social activities, in particular, labor, leisure, and other activities. In this regard, the content of the education concept in modern science is somewhat modified and expanded.

Thirdly, the most important feature of continuous education as a system is the continuity of educational practices, easy and smoothed transitions from the lower levels of education to the higher one.

The fourth characteristic of continuous education is related to the personal parameter. The adult is somehow included in the information process through the media, direct communication, etc. But he becomes a subject of educational activities when he realizes the need to replenish knowledge, to introduction to the culture. This awareness is primarily due to his needs.

LLL is supposed to have a number of undoubtful advantages, since it results in the life-enriching because of the self-fulfillment, helps people to establish valuable relationships, and keeps them active participants in society. It opens people's minds and makes it curious, as well as helps them to fully develop their natural abilities. It shows how to adapt to changes and face challenges. LLL brings meaning into life thus making the world a better place.

Nowadays, adult learning is part of a much broader process, as individuals less rely on traditional institutions and can select from a variety of learning centers including distance education and e-education.

5. CONCLUSION

Thus, the conducted analysis shows that there is an urgent need for continuous education, which

we understand as a tool to achieve the correspondence of employees qualification level to the needs of economy and society, as well as the most important means and condition for maintaining the competitiveness of an individual in the labor market.

A life-long learner will keep up with the society by staying aware of changes in such areas as technology, finance, politics, etc. Job promotions will go to the employees who are better trained in their job fields. New specialties open up all the time, and life-long learners remain at the top of their fields so that when opportunities come, they can catch them immediately. Moreover, LLL is constantly enriching life with new chances, ideas, and desires. We are sure that it is the mission of universities to become the center of these processes. Our theoretical and practical research of the KFU's experience in this field shows that its LLL system presents one of the most effective models to be used by other higher education institutions. It is clearly thought out, effectively organized and plays a crucial role in the whole system of education and training in the KFU. At the same time, the system implements the basic functions of life-long learning, such as the continuation of education in time (educational trajectory of a person along its length coincides with the vital one), the continuity of person's educational activity (implying the penetration of educational activities in each moment of the individual's life, the combination of education with other types of social activities), the continuity of educational practices (easy, smoothed transitions from the lower education levels to the higher ones).

6. AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIAL

Data can be made available by contacting the corresponding authors

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