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Investigation of Lecturers' Perceptions on Lifelong Learning (A Case of HEIs in Tbilisi)

BY

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Abstract

Lifelong learning is a significant concept to be established in higher education institutions due to the globalized world and its requirements. Even though the concept is not new to the field of education, there are still quandaries confronted in the realization of the notion in educational organizations. In this mixed methodology study, the perceptions of lecturers towards lifelong learning are explored and identified by utilizing a survey with open and closed questions. Lack of consensus on the perception of lifelong learning serves as one of the challenges that prevents the integration of educators and leads institutions to have a lack of urgency. The goal of this research is to present lecturers' perspectives on lifelong learning and to provide an overview of platforms and/or tools they utilize in lifelong learning processes. The results demonstrate that lecturers perceive lifelong learning differently which leads have quandaries in the establishment of the concept in higher education institutions. In this study, the majority of the lecturers in higher education institutions in Tbilisi perceived lifelong learning as continuous education; however, the practices and tools in achieving this mission differed which led to the distinctions in perception and practices. This article will serve as the basis for further research to be carried out on the ways to implement lifelong learning development in educational organizations.

Keywords: *lifelong learning; higher education institutions; lecturers' perceptions*

Introduction

Lifelong learning is not a new concept (Bakken, 2020); however, there are still quandaries confronted in its implementation in higher education institutions. One of the challenges is the lack of consensus on the perception of lifelong learning which prevents organizations from fathoming the mission and the instructions towards the establishment of the concept (Nasser & Karraker, 2018). Since lifelong learning lacks a definition that applies to all contexts, there is a need to understand and discover the perceptions of the concept in particular contexts, countries, and institutions to promote and develop it in educational organizations (Ryan & Ryan, 2012).

Georgia joined the Bologna Process in 2005 (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, n.d.), which led the reforms and challenges to be implemented in education, including higher education institutions. The Bologna Process promotes lifelong learning in its essence, including flexible mobility and exchange

mechanisms (Bennett & Ryley, 2007). The National Qualifications Framework (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2020) entails objectives for promoting formal and non-formal education and informing society of the updates and reforms taken in higher education institutions. The Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (2008) published a report on the development and state of art of adult learning and education for UNESCO. The report included the promotion mechanisms for lifelong learning in higher education institutions where it also presented the challenges confronted in lifelong learning establishment. The quandaries involved the lack of social integration and urgency, which prevented the concept from being popularized in a report published by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE, 2015) in which it is stated that there is a lack of lifelong learning programs and centers in Georgia where there would be a call for educators to integrate and gather to develop the curriculum and programs by sharing experiences.



Considering the need for lifelong learning establishment in higher education institutions, educators need to have a consensus on the lifelong learning conceptualization in order to achieve the goals within an appropriate implication of the concept (Kehm, 2001). Therefore, the current study aims to discover the lecturers' perceptions of lifelong learning in Georgian higher education, and it intends to identify the tools and/or platforms utilized by educators as well as the level of urgency towards the implementation of the concept. The study also aims at contributing the findings to enhance the quality of education.

Defining Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is a broad concept that does not possess a one-size-fits-all definition that applies to all contexts (Sutherland & Crowther, 2006). Lifelong learning is defined distinctly in different contexts. Lifelong learning (LLL) is the awareness of self, one's skills and competencies as well as the thinking habits of an individual which requires a lifelong process of renewing the ideas and understanding of oneself throughout life (ibid). In this way, lifelong learning as a term suggests engaging a person in a persistent development process that encourages not only knowledge and skills improvement but also discoveries of personality and the mind.

In the 1970s, the concept started to be differentiated from lifelong education. Lifelong education requires a formal educational context while lifelong learning is more independent and does not necessarily depend on the educational institutions or buildings (Hammer et al., 2012). At first, lifelong learning was believed to be benefiting the government where the citizens and individuals were expected to develop themselves to learn faster and to adapt to changes in a flexible manner. On the other hand, there was another argument that stated that the term promoted personal improvement and the main aspect was not solely related to economic benefit. Despite the debates on the definition and the intentions of the lifelong learning concept, the term has grown to be understood as learning how to learn and to sustain one's growth throughout life in all aspects (ibid).

Lifelong learning is also viewed as a tool for accomplishing the global demands of the 21st century where it will be integrated into a constant development process to sustain adjustment to the requirements of the globalized world (Tezer & Aynas, 2018). Even though the concept emerged in the 1920s, it became dominant and popular around the 1970s with the emphasis that was brought by UNESCO and OECD (ibid). In this way, the major distinctions between lifelong education and lifelong learning were highlighted and the term has started to gain much attention from the researchers.

Lifelong learning is viewed as a non-formal, informal, formal, and self-directed process where a person is autonomous regarding the choice of context, time, and method depending on his/her own interest (Mocker & Spear, 1982). It is a tool in leads to societal and individual development, diminishing the inequalities in acquiring

education due to the variety of knowledge acquisition sources as well as the platforms (Ates & Alsai, 2012).

Nowadays, the essence of education is altering where it is considered as an economic benefit more than as a social good (Halliday, 2010). Therefore, lifelong learning is considered to be one of the significant tools in benefiting not only oneself but also society at the same time (ibid).

The Importance of Lifelong Learning in Higher Education

Lifelong learning has been an area of research and a notion that started to be prominent around the 1970s. The importance of realizing the concept in higher education institutions, however, is tightly coupled with the emergence of global demands that require individuals to possess a variety of skills rather than sticking to one position throughout life (Bakken, 2020). Considering the 21st century and the necessity to have a diversity of skills, lifelong learning has become a structural and a strategic necessity in higher education institutions to be established and utilized (Ambrosio, Araujo e Sa, & Simoes, 2014).

Even though lifelong learning is a concept that is not new in the field of education, there are still difficulties in establishing it into higher education institutions. There are various reasons such as lack of funds, awareness, and urgency, which prevents the concept from being implemented (Ross, 2007). The role of higher education institutions at this point includes taking the differences, varieties, and preferences of students into consideration so that lifelong learning can be promoted, and learning can be achieved (Cendon, 2018).

Integrating lifelong learning into education policies and objectives in higher education may facilitate the attainment of preparing students to changing society and providing them with the necessary competencies (Güven, 2020). Taking the essence of education into account which also includes the formation of a better society, lifelong learning serves as a tool in accomplishing betterment of the society by raising competent and self-aware individuals. In this way, individuals become flexible in adjusting to new jobs, work, or skills naturally (Güven, 2020).

On the other hand, one of the challenges that prevents lifelong learning from being realized in higher education institutions is due to the vague understanding of the concept (Nasser & Karraker, 2018). Lifelong learning is included in a considerable number of higher education institutions' mission statements; however, the perspectives and conceptualizations of lifelong learning lead organizations to confront a variety of difficulties in the process of promoting the notion. It is viewed as a tool to raise competent individuals, a skill that should be possessed by all individuals, and a motivation that each person needs to own to continue their lifelong learning processes. However, the concept entails all the aspects and requires actions to be taken to realize it in educational organizations (ibid). Thus, when there is a lack of consensus on the

perception of lifelong learning, the establishment and promotion of the notion become arduous.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed methodology that aims to present the perception of university lecturers on lifelong learning and the tools that they use to become lifelong learners. In identifying and discovering the university lecturers' conceptualizations of lifelong learning, this research obtains quantitative and qualitative data through a survey. To maintain objectivity and avoid biases and interference in gathering data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), a positivist approach was selected for the quantitative part of the research. In order to discover the perceptions of university educators towards lifelong learning, constructivist and interpretive approaches were adopted with the aim of rendering qualitative data, which would provide data for ongoing practices and understandings of the concept. Thus, considering the need for blending a variety of methods and approaches to reach the objectives of this study, the mixed methodology was utilized in this research due to the necessity of applying a pragmatist paradigm (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The study uses a survey as a method of mixed methodology which entails five multiple-choice questions, 1 checkbox question, five linear scale, and four open-ended questions that provide qualitative and quantitative due to the distinct types of questions. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms. Snowball and convenience sampling were used in this study due to the pandemic and limited time span. Both samplings allowed the researcher to access more people in the field in a short amount of time and facilitated the prevention of biases. SPSS and Excel were used in the data analysis to better reflect the findings and to provide detailed analysis.

This research aimed to discover three research questions and the survey was designed in accordance with the following questions:

- How do university lecturers perceive lifelong learning?
- To what extent the lecturers are engaging in lifelong learning practices?
- What are the recommendations of university educators about lifelong learning?

Findings and Discussion

There were 15 questions on the survey with 20 participants from two public universities and three private universities in Tbilisi.

The majority of the participants (65%) were female while the minority (35%) were male respondents. This question aimed at discovering if there was a significant difference between the participants in terms of gender. However, there was a minor distinction where thirteen respondents were female while seven participants were male.

Do you take additional courses apart from your job/work requirements?
20 responses

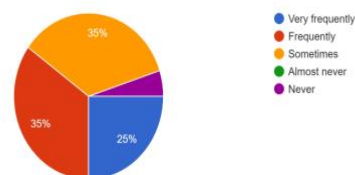


Figure 1. Do you take additional courses apart from your job/work requirements?

Figure 2 presents data for the second question which aims at identifying whether the educators are involved in other courses apart from their work/job requirements. While 25% of the participants stated that they take additional courses *very frequently*, 35% of the participants indicated *frequently* option. The other majority (35%) of the participants indicated that the frequency for their participation in additional courses were *sometimes*. Only one of the participants chose the *never* option, which implies that engaging in other courses apart from work or job was frequent.

How do you study?
20 responses

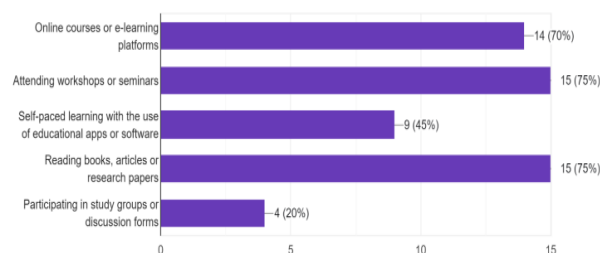


Figure 2. Where do you study?

The third question aimed at identifying the context where the lecturers are involved in learning practices. The majority of the participants (75%) equally selected *attending workshops or seminars* and *reading books, articles, or research papers* options. These responses were specifically offered to see educators' preferences in studies. Online courses or e-learning platforms were widely selected (70%), while the self-paced learning with the use of educational apps or software were selected by 45% of the participants. The least preferred style of the studies was participating in study groups and discussion forms according to the respondents which consisted of 20% among the other responses. Thus, the findings of this question demonstrate that the workshops and reading books and research papers were popular among educators.

Do you attend continuous education courses (language courses, college degree programs, professional certification programs)?
20 responses

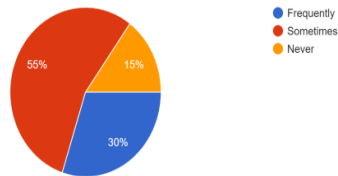


Figure 3. Do you attend continuous education courses (language courses, college degree programs, professional certification programs)?

The question intended to investigate if the respondents were engaging in continuous education courses such as language courses, college degree programs, or any other professional certification programs. While eleven respondents (55%) marked sometimes, six respondents (30%) selected frequently option which indicates that engagement in continuous education was high among the educators who participated in this study. Only three respondents stated that they never attend continuous education courses which contributes to 15% of the participants.

Please choose the platforms you are using for courses/trainings.
20 responses

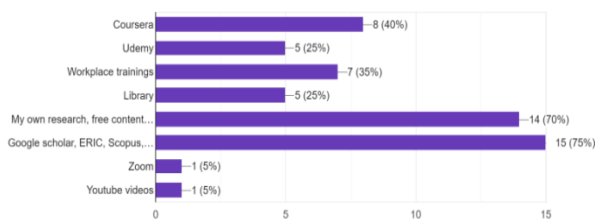


Figure 4. Please choose the platforms you are using for courses/trainings.

The 5th question focused on the platforms that the respondents used for courses or trainings. This question offered checkboxes to allow the participants select their preferences. The major option that was selected referred to Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and others received 75% of selection. My own research, free content on the internet was found to be other main source of preference which gained 70% of the selections. Coursera (40%) and Workplace trainings (35%) were found to be the average in the means of the chosen platforms for trainings and courses. While Udemy and Library were equally taken by the 25% of the participants, the minority equally selected Zoom (5%) and YouTube videos (5%) to engage in studies. Thus, the results of the question demonstrate that research platforms and free content on the internet are leading.



Figure 5. What are the reasons you choose to continue learning and education yourself further?

The 6th question was an open-ended question which intended to explore the reasons why the respondents continued learning and gaining further education. 8 respondents (40%) reflected their reasons as to *stay updated*, thus engaging in constant learning process provided them with the sense of catching up with up-to-date knowledge and events. The requirements of the global world and the need to own a variety of skills were constantly mentioned by the respondents. R4 stated “I want to learn more in order to teach my classes well and improve my skills” while R12 mentioned, “I get a lot of satisfaction and self-confidence”. R17 stated “New information, new experience” which adds a different perspective on the topic. Thus, contemplating the provided answers, it could be observed that most of the educators viewed lifelong learning as a tool for meeting global demands as well as adding on to personal experience and improvement.

Does education help you achieve your goals?
20 responses

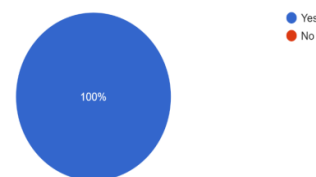


Figure 6. Does education help you achieve your goals?

The 7th question aimed at detecting whether education helped educators to achieve their goals. All the educators (100%) stated that education was helpful in accomplishing their goals which implies that obtaining knowledge is highly valued by the respondents, considering their profession as well.



Figure 7. What is your definition of lifelong learning?

This question was an open-ended question to discover the perceptions of educators towards lifelong learning. It serves as the heart of this study which provides the first-hand data with the

respondents' definitions of lifelong learning. R1 views lifelong learning as *a quest in finding the truth*, while R10 considers the concept to be *a person's conscious decision to invest into continuous, harmonious, and adequate advancement of personal and professional maturity and knowledge*. On the other hand, R4 states "I would call it professional-long; as long as you work, you need to be updated with achievements. It can/should include all formats: formal, informal, " In this regard, R4 provides a response by integrating lifelong learning with lifelong education (which sticks stronger to the formal aspect). The other respondents mention the necessity of lifelong learning which serves as a crucial tool in adjusting to rapid changes in the world where R13 mentions, "*Feeling of being secure in a fast-changing world*". Thus, the concept of lifelong learning is perceived as a significant instrument in meeting the world requirements while the minority of the participants added personal growth and satisfaction along the journey of engaging in the concept.

For the following linear scale questions, SPSS was utilized to calculate the statistical data.

Table 1

		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
N	Valid	20	20	20	20	20
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		4.6000	4.8500	4.8500	4.9000	1.5000
Median		5.0000	5.0000	5.0000	5.0000	1.0000
Mode		5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	1.00
Std. Deviation		.68056	.36635	.36635	.30779	.94591
Skewness		-1.514	-2.123	-2.123	-2.888	2.902
Std. Error of Skewness		.512	.512	.512	.512	.512
Kurtosis		1.170	2.776	2.776	7.037	10.109
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.992	.992	.992	.992	.992

Standard deviation is above 0.5 in all questions, which implies that the level of lecturers' knowledge and perception towards lifelong learning differs and even contradicts each other. Behind, skewness and kurtosis demonstrate that the distinction between opinions and ideas is distinguished dramatically. This also demonstrates that the 5th linear scale question which served as the 'attention check' worked well. The linear scale questions were specifically designed to avoid careless responses and to track if the survey results authentically contribute to the aim of the research. The median and mode were close to mean which implies that there was no dramatic change or difference between the responses. Even though the perceptions differed, considering linear scale questions and lecturers' practices were not significantly distant.

Q1

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Agree	4	20.0	20.0	30.0
	Strongly Agree	14	70.0	70.0	100.0
Total		20	100.0	100.0	

Table 1. Enrolling myself in a variety of courses provides me with a sense of personal attainment and satisfaction.

Figure 9 demonstrates the 1st linear scale question on the survey where the participants were asked to present if they agree or disagree with the given statements. 70% of the participants selected

‘strongly agree’, which implies that the majority of the lecturers were extremely satisfied with taking part in a variety of courses, while only 20% percent stated they ‘agree’ with the statement; and the rest of the participants remained neutral with their satisfaction levels. This question aimed to discover if the lecturers were enthusiastic lifelong learners.

Q2

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
	Strongly Agree	17	85.0	85.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. I enjoy discovering new things, terms, and concepts.

All of the participants indicated that they enjoyed discovering new things, terms, and concepts. While 85% of the participants were choosing *strongly agree*, the other 15% selected the *agree* option. In this regard, it could be observed that half of the educators were enthusiastic about persistent learning.

Q3

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
	Strongly Agree	17	85.0	85.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. I believe that learning should not be limited to formal context.

The 3rd of the linear scale questions intended to identify whether the educators perceived lifelong learning as tightly coupled with the formal educational context. This question was also significant to observe whether the educators could differentiate between the terms ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘lifelong education’. As Figure 11 presents, all of the respondents agreed that learning processes should not be limited to formal context, with the 85% of the respondents selecting *strongly agree* while the others choosing the *agree*. With the data presented here, it could be seen that the lifelong learning concept was fathomed by most of the lectures as an independent process.

Q4

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	2	10.0	10.0	10.0

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
d	Strongly Agree	18	90.0	90.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 4. Education does not only improve an individual but it also develops the society.

Figure 12 identifies whether the respondents consider education and the society to be interrelated. All of the participants view education as a tool in improving not only personal aspects but also societal needs (90% strongly agree while 10% agree). In this way, general perceptions of lecturers in higher education institutions in Tbilisi have a strong association of education with societal changes.

Q5

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	13	65.0	65.0	65.0
	Disagree	6	30.0	30.0	95.0
	Strongly Agree	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
Total		20	100.0	100.0	

Table 4. Graduating from Bachelor’s, Master’s, and PhD is enough and I do not need any additional trainings or learning (e.g., workshops, webinars, seminars, short-term online courses).

Figure 13 provides the data for the final linear scale question which was designed differently to see whether the participants were filling out the form in an auto-selection manner. Unlike other linear scale questions, the statement contradicts the essence of lifelong learning and aims to identify the reliability of the responses. As it could be seen from the data, the majority of the participants disagree with the statement, which implies that formal education context is sufficient to engage in learning processes. Because 95% (65% strongly disagreed and 30% disagreed) of the lecturers disagreed with the statement, the reliability of the other linear scale questions was found to be high due to not having a huge difference from other responses. On the other hand, only one respondent (5%) agreed with the statement which does not affect the reliability of the responses and leads to a major gap

Responses	Frequencies
Yes	19
No	1

Table 5. Is lifelong learning important? Please justify your answer.

Figure 14 presents the frequencies of responses given to ‘is lifelong learning important?’ question. While 95% of the participants

viewed the concept to be vital, there was only one participant who did not consider lifelong learning to be useful. R3 stated, "Very important. When you stop learning, life loses interest". R15 adds, "...it makes your brain more flexible, makes you a better person, can change your life, can make you a better citizen, ..." Thus, it also entails the aim of education institutions in leading to societal changes through personal advancements. Lifelong learning is considered to be playing a critical role, in this regard. The other respondents mentioned the global world demands and constant changes and viewed lifelong learning as a remedy for adaptation and catching track. Thus, the ties between lifelong learning, education, and society seem to be fathomed and contemplated by the participants of this study.

Question 15 asked participants for their recommendations on a voluntary basis. Only 9 respondents responded to the question and 4 participants offered some suggestions. R14 stated, "*I do believe that lifelong learning opportunities need to be provided by the universities and schools for all staff members*", while R6 added, "*Practice what you preach and do a lot of action research which will enable to see the issues from inside*" Thus, the educators mentioned the importance of providing opportunities for staff members as well so that the knowledge does not grow to be obsolete and advancements could be led efficiently.

Taking the findings into consideration, lecturers' perception of lifelong learning was mainly categorized under three main themes. Personal satisfaction, global demands (market needs), and self-development were the themes that were selected by the majority of the participants. On the other hand, continuous education was the major definition of lifelong that was provided by the participants where the contexts and practices differed. While the minority of the participants associated lifelong learning to lifelong education (relying heavily on formal education context), the majority of the participants connected lifelong learning to self-improvement, discovery of the personality, and persistent learning process. Linear scale questions were designed specially in order to eliminate auto-selection procedures which demonstrated that participants were reading the questions/statements meticulously since the kurtosis and skewness were not high, except for the 'attention check question'. In that means, skewness and kurtosis values justified that the participants filled in the survey meticulously. Regarding RQ2 which aimed at finding answers towards the extent to which lecturers were engaging in lifelong learning practices, results implied that free content on the internet, Google Scholar, and Coursera were the major platforms in reaching out to the concept. The third research question intended to discover the recommendations and/or ideas of lecturers regarding the concept. Educators mentioned the need for training and promotion of formal and non-formal education as well as a lack of awareness of the concept. Thus, considering the findings of studies carried out in this field, it could be observed that this research also sheds light on the differences in lifelong learning perception and practices. Contemplating the need for reach a consensus on understanding the concept and collaborating for achieving the mission grow to be of

vital importance as it is also emphasized in studies that were conducted on the field (Nasser & Karraker, 2018).

Some of the educators highlighted the importance of raising awareness of the concept and the significance of its establishment; however, it could not be concluded that the majority of the participants viewed the concept similarly. In this regard, when educators do not conceptualize lifelong learning correspondingly, quandaries and challenges occur to prevent the concept from being practiced in higher education institutions. The mission could be only accomplished when the educators and administration work collaboratively within clear instructions. However, a lack of understanding and distinct perceptions shed light on the difficulties of the realization of the concept. Thus, this research contributes to raising awareness and urgency on lifelong learning perception and establishment in order to enhance the quality of education and to follow the global trends around the world. Effective benchmarking mechanisms and the application of appropriate tools and programs would facilitate the implementation procedures.

Research Ethics

The respondents were informed about the context of the research and the questionnaire emphasized that participation was on voluntary basis where the participants could withdraw at any time. Google Forms was used for the questionnaire and the names and responses were kept confidential.

Research Limitations

This research owns a variety of limitations due to a limited time span. The survey was sent to a larger population; however, there were only 20 respondents due to the busy academic period. In this study, a diversity of higher education institutions was included solely in Tbilisi. This aspect also serves as a limitation to the study which requires further research to be conducted in the field.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the fact that lifelong learning concept existed in the field of education for decades, there are quandaries confronted in its implementation process. Considering the significance of having a consensus on the conceptualization of lifelong learning, this study aimed at discovering the interpretations of university lecturers in a variety of higher education institutions in Tbilisi. The majority of the lecturers connected lifelong learning to continuous education, personal satisfaction, and to a tool in meeting the global demands and adapting to change. While the majority of the lecturers highlighted the importance of the concept, the minority of the educators stated that the concept lacked practicality in life. Even though lifelong learning was perceived mostly as continuous education, the quality of the definitions possesses perceptual differences that shed light on the challenges and quandaries confronted in the establishment process. Thus, contemplating on the issue and discovering a contextual definition of the concept grows to be of vital importance.



Analyzing the results and overview of the situation, there is a considerable number of recommendations to be offered:

- Lifelong learning should not be solely stated on paper and there should be a training on the definition and practices of the concept in higher education institutions;
- Funds and resources should be allocated to realize the concept through specific projects and courses;
- Effective benchmarking mechanisms and promotion of lifelong learning programs appropriate for a particular institution
- There should be a further and wider research conducted on the field in exploring the challenges that prevent the concept from establishment.

As being a dynamic concept, which requires constant development, the implementation of the concept also requires effective benchmarking mechanisms to be established.

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