

# A STAKEHOLDER APPROACH TO LIFELONG LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

Lifelong Learning (LLL) has been high on the policy agenda for several decades, but the actual implementation has been lagging. Various publications point at the advantages of a LLL ecosystem. This article highlights one core aspect of the LLL ecosystem – the actors. It aims to shed light on the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in LLL and their role in the ecosystem. The paper starts with a description of the historical developments regarding the objectives of LLL and the learning activities involved in LLL. Subsequently, it discusses the shift in the main actors involved in LLL and their role therein. The paper discusses developments in Europe in general and in the Netherlands in particular, based on an analysis of relevant literature and documents. The article concludes with some final remarks and recommendations for higher education institutes.

## INTRODUCTION

Significant societal transformations and developments such as digitalisation, technological progress, and climate change have a major impact on the way we live and work. The world around us is constantly changing. In this rapidly changing society, continuous learning and development is vital to ensure that people are able to participate in both work and societal interactions (World Economic Forum, 2016). This continuous learning and development is called Lifelong Learning (LLL). Lifelong Learning can be defined as “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective” (Commission of the European Communities, 2001; p.9). While LLL relates to the individual and the activities undertaken by the individual to develop personally and professionally, it does not mean that LLL is solely the responsibility of the individual. Facilitation and support by employers, educational, and government institutions is essential (ILO, 2019).

The strengthening of LLL has been on the strategic agenda of policy makers for many decades. It was receiving attention even in the 1960s it, with a particular emphasis at that time on the need to emancipate certain groups in society and offer them possibilities for personal development. Currently, it is the economic value, that is, being and remaining employable, that prevails (e.g., Bengtsson, 2019; Biesta, 2006). Despite the long tradition, successful implementation is lagging; international research points at the slow implementation process and the lack of support from various stakeholders (Bengtsson, 2013; ILO, 2019). Part of the problem with LLL is the responsibility and involvement of the multiplicity of stakeholders, each with their own target group, means, needs and interests.

In 2019, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) urged the need to move towards a LLL ecosystem in which LLL is a shared responsibility based on the active involvement and support of government, workers, employers and educational institutions. The International Labour Organisation did not clarify what an ecosystem entails and how it contributes to the effective implementation of LLL. However, the literature on economic ecosystems (e.g., business, knowledge and/or innovation ecosystems) offers guidance. In this field an ecosystem is described as a group of interconnected organisations aimed at realising as a collective added value for end users (by developing and producing new products or services, and/or in developing new knowledge) (Autio & Thomas, 2014; Jacobides, Cennamo and Gawer, 2018). According to Fuller and colleagues (2019), an ecosystem flourishes in unpredictable and dynamic environments. In stable environments, traditional organisations and linear chain cooperation can be adequate. In a dynamic and volatile environment, a loosely organised and dynamic network of participants with semi-permanent collaborative relationships, such as in an ecosystem, facilitates agility and quick responses to environmental dynamics (Fuller et al., 2019). Distinctive aspects of an ecosystem are: (1) the relationship and interaction between the ecosystem (the set of organisations) and its wider context; (2) the actors in the ecosystem and their place in the ecosystem (centre vs. periphery) and (3) the relationships and interactions between these actors. Openness of the system, heterogeneity of actors, the interdependence between these actors and agency are important characteristics of an ecosystem.

Previous research on LLL mainly focused on LLL policies on a European and national level, and on policy changes regarding LLL. This article highlights one core-aspect of the LLL ecosystem as it focuses on the actors in the LLL ecosystem. It aims to shed light on the stakeholders involved in LLL and their role in the ecosystem. The paper discusses developments in Europe in general and in the Netherlands specifically, based on an analysis of relevant literature and documents. We start by describing the historical developments regarding the objectives of LLL and its learning activities. Accordingly, we discuss the shift in actors involved in LLL and their roles. The article concludes with some recommendations for higher education institutes.

## THE OBJECTIVES OF AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN LLL

### The value of LLL: a shift from learning to be to learning to earn

Because of the dynamics both outside and inside the ecosystem, it is important to pay constant attention to the shared ambitions or objectives of the actors involved. The upper rows of Table 1 show the shift in objectives and focus in LLL over the years.

	≤ 1960/1970	1990/2000	Since 2020
<b>Aim</b>	Personal development, emancipation and inclusion.	Employability and productivity	Agility
<b>Main focus</b>	Education	Learning	Development
<b>Learning activities</b>	Initial and post-initial (formal) education	Formal and informal learning activities	All formal and informal learning activities and career guidance and counselling
<b>Actors in the lead</b>	Education institutions and Individuals	Employers and Individuals	Individuals, Employers, and Education institutions

Table 1: The shift in focus, aim, activities and actors in LLL

Lifelong learning was set on the European and national policy agendas around the 1950s/1960s. It was primarily seen as an emancipation tool to reduce inequalities based on the educational background of certain groups in society (e.g., older generations, women, immigrants) and to improve quality of life (Volles, 2016; Bengtsson, 2013). In the late 1960s, the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme introduced the concept of LLL across the lifespan, arguing for 'learning to be', aimed at 'fulfilment of man and mankind as a whole'. Everyone had the right to a good education and opportunities for self-fulfilment, even in later stages of life.

In the 1970s, this humanistic view of LLL began to integrate with a more human capital perspective as learning and training for work gradually became a more prominent objective of LLL. In the 1990s, European governments noted that skills and knowledge were rapidly becoming obsolete, and companies stressed the need of up-to-date skills and knowledge for employees to stay ahead of the competition (Bengtsson, 2013). The call for continuous development in order to stay productive and employable became stronger (ILO, 2019). This emphasised the shift from a humanistic to an economic approach (i.e., an emphasis on work and importance for economy) and to a neoliberal approach to LLL (i.e., an emphasis on responsibility of the individual in developing qualifications for future employability) (Volles, 2016; Biesta, 2006). This trend was galvanised in the 2000s by the Lisbon Strategy, whose ambition was to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world (Jarvis, 2007). Education and training, including of the workforce, were seen as essential tools to making that happen (Volles, 2016; Biesta, 2006; Bengtsson, 2013).

In the late 2010s, there was a growing voice and influence from the world of business. Employers started pointing at a skills gap and urged educational institutions to offer more educational programmes that are relevant for business and to make education more flexible to facilitate continuous development from cradle to grave (Volles, 2016; ILO, 2019). More recently, the Covid-19 crisis and its impact on the labour market showed the importance of agility as an objective of LLL: a person needs to have the skills and knowledge to be employable in current and future jobs, and the willingness and potential to easily switch sectors and occupations. The aforementioned skills gap is now being replaced by an agility gap, as citizens face struggles to respond quickly and proactively to labour market developments. This agility gap places demands on employees to be constantly working on their development.

In summary, LLL can serve three purposes: (1) emancipation and social inclusion; (2) personal development and self-actualisation; (3) economic employability and productivity (Biesta, 2006). According to Biesta (2006), the objectives shifted from 'learning to be' to 'learning for earning,' and the economic dimension is given more priority than development as a person and emancipation.

### **Learning activities: a shift from a narrow to a broad perspective**

Related to these shifts in the objectives of LLL, publications also point at a shift in the nature of learning activities (Biesta, 2006; ILO, 2019). In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, LLL was built on the provision of (post-) initial education by public educational institutions (controlled by the government) for all citizens. It gradually shifted to training, courses and more non-formal learning activities for workers in the 2000s, and currently, LLL includes a total package of development opportunities that an individual can make use of: formal, informal, and non-formal learning activities and career advice and guidance for both working and non-working target groups (Tuschling and Engemann, 2006; Field, 2000). Moreover, the Netherlands, boosted by the activities of the Dutch Social and Economic Counsel, are promoting a broad variety of measures and actions in governmental policy documents. These include activities focussing on the transition from school to work, the promotion of a

learning culture in companies, or learning activities that increase the sustainable employment of those within vulnerable sectors of the labour market.

## **ACTORS INVOLVED IN LLL**

As mentioned above, the heterogeneity of actors is an important characteristic of an ecosystem. Suppliers, producers, end users and funders are all part of an ecosystem network (Moore, 2006). Each actor has its specific and unique role and actors need each other to achieve their mutual aim (Fuller et al., 2019; Moore, 2006). Moreover, according to the ecosystem literature, all actors in the ecosystem have agency and a high degree of autonomy, including end-users (Fuller et al., 2019). Nonetheless, some actors may be more at the centre of the ecosystem and others at the periphery, and therefore have more or less power (Koenig, 2012). In this section, we will describe the main stakeholders in LLL, the shift in their role in LLL (also see Table 1), and the multiplicity of organisations who represent these stakeholders in the national and regional LLL ecosystem.

### **From governmental to individual responsibility**

Research on collaboration in LLL in the south of the Netherlands shows four main actors in LLL: governmental organisations (including intermediaries), education institutions, employers and workers (Thunnissen, 2021). In recent years, there has been a shift in who is most responsible for LLL. In the early years of LLL, the government, together with public educational institutions, were in the lead, in particular in the development and facilitation of appropriate initial and post-initial education for a specific group of adults (those who had no previous education). In 2000, Field stated that the direct influence of the government on LLL had decreased. Following a time of low involvement, however, governmental organizations once again moved from the periphery to the core of the Dutch LLL ecosystem. Currently, the central government has taken on the role of policy maker, promotor, and funder of LLL. In 2018, the Dutch government asked the Social Economic Counsel to assume a boosting role in LLL (SER, 2020a), and in 2022, the government granted a nearly 400-million-euro fund to a partnership of secondary vocational institutes, universities of applied science and regular universities to jointly boost LLL on behalf of public education (LLL Catalyst, 2021). As we will later demonstrate, particularly at the local level, governmental organizations play a prominent role in LLL.

With an emphasis on productivity and employability, the role of the employer has increased enormously, with employees being LLL's most important target group. Currently, many Dutch organisations acknowledge the importance of LLL and offer both training and development opportunities to their employees or allocate a budget for this purpose (SER, 2019; SER, 2020b). Therefore, the employer holds a multifaceted role as producer, funder and/or end user of LLL activities within the LLL ecosystem. Compared to other countries, the Netherlands scores high on participation in formal activities aimed at LLL (SCP, 2019). However, when it comes to informal learning, the Netherlands belongs to the middle ground within the EU (SCP, 2019). Several reports mention that the lack of a learning culture within companies is one of the bigger bottlenecks in LLL in the Netherlands (e.g., SER, 2020a).

The important role of education as a 'producer' of learning activities is beyond dispute. In the 1960s/1970s, public education institutions played a significant role in the LLL ecosystem. Yet, with the increasing responsibility of the employer in LLL and the broadening of LLL activities, private educational institutions and training agencies have also found their place. In 2000, Field (2000) argued that most LLL activities took place in the private domain (in organisations and by private providers), and this is still the case. Private institutes are far more agile and able to adapt to the user's needs, and this increased their share on the

'education market' significantly at the expense of public education institutions. Furthermore, the role of public sector institutes has been highly criticised in the past. Various sources mention that the education system itself is one of the key problems regarding LLL. Important points of critique include the mismatch between the educational programmes and the needs of employers in the labour market, and the institutes' inflexibility and inability to address the changing needs of employers and workers (Bengtsson, 2013; Biesta, 2006; Rijksoverheid, 2020; Volles, 2016).

On the individual level, we see a shift from certain disadvantaged groups based on their education to all those involved in the labour market, both unemployed and employed. The financing and actual learning and development of LLL are increasingly becoming the responsibility of the workers themselves, in coordination with their employer (Field, 2000). In terms of the business ecosystem, the individual is both the end user of LLL activities and the funder. Biesta (2006) and others (e.g., Tuschling and Engemann, 2006; Field, 2000; Jarvis, 2007) point to the increasing individualisation in the approach to LLL on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a shift from the right to follow education to the individual's duty to ensure his/her continuous development and employability. According to Tuschling and Engemann (2006), the core responsibility of the contemporary lifelong learner is to maintain the ability to learn and unlearn according to the circumstances, but research shows that Dutch employees do not feel a sense of urgency to develop themselves. Most workers believe that they are sufficiently equipped to perform their job now and in the near future, and that they need no additional training (SCP, 2019).

### **A shift from national to regional stakeholders**

International publications discussing policy development at the European level show that up until the 2000s, LLL was primarily an issue debated at the European rather than at the national level (Volles, 2016; Bengtsson, 2013). In the years following, LLL gained more traction at the national level. Goldtseyn (2012) concludes that in the Netherlands, despite important policy recommendations having been addressed in certain projects, none of these efforts were reflected in an increase in training participation by adults. In 2013, Bengtsson recommended linking LLL to economic, social, and cultural developments at the local level in cities and regions, since it would be easier to take steps on a local level than at the national level. In addition to the national LLL policies and activities implemented by the Ministries of Economic Affairs, Social Affairs and Education and national action plans from the Social Economic Counsel, the Dutch Social Economic Counsel is also firmly committed to stimulating LLL in regions and sectors (SER, 2020a), and to have employees, employers, local authorities and education working together in a regional ecosystem to implement LLL. In the regional ecosystem, local Dutch governmental organisations – originally mainly involved in facilitating participation and training and development of the unemployed – play a dominant role in facilitating LLL among the unemployed as well as the employed labour force, as captured, for example, in regional human capital agendas (Thunnissen, 2021). Other core stakeholders in LLL – education, employers and employees represented by trade unions and professional associations - are often more at the periphery of the regional LLL ecosystem and have (and/or take) less administrative and actual authority and agency.

### **The multiplicity of actors**

Finally, the four main stakeholders in LLL - government, education, employers and workers (including jobseekers) – are, in practice, represented by a wide range of organisations on a national, regional and sectoral level (see Table 2 for a further elaboration). As a result, the number of stakeholders involved in LLL policy-making, funding, implementation and participation in the Netherlands is huge, and includes thousands of citizens and employers or companies, social partners, industry associations and R&D funds, various local authorities, various ministries and public advisory bodies, as well as many public and private providers of

learning and development activities (Field, 2000; Bengtsson, 2013; Gielen, Moerman and Bobeldijk, 2017). The multiplicity of actors at multiple levels creates multiple connecting ecosystems. This complexity hinders employers and individuals – both end users - from gaining an overview of who provides what kind of support and has a role to play (Thunnissen, Rosendaal and Koop-Spoor, 2021).

<p><b>Individuals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workers: employed, unemployed, self-employed</li> <li>• Work council</li> <li>• Trade unions, professional associations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Employers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HR-department, career centre, corporate academy, management</li> <li>• Employers' organisations, both sector-specific and nationwide</li> <li>• Sectoral funds for L&amp;D of employees</li> </ul>
<p><b>Government</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional mobility teams</li> <li>• Municipalities, employee insurance agents</li> <li>• Employer service point</li> <li>• Service centre on education and work</li> <li>• Regional investment companies</li> <li>• Ministries (of Education; Social Affairs and work; Finance)</li> <li>• Tax authorities</li> <li>• Social and economic council</li> </ul>	<p><b>Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public funded (vocational) education institutions (secondary and higher education)</li> <li>• Private funded education institutions</li> <li>• Training and consultancy agencies</li> <li>• Career counselors</li> <li>• Online learning platforms</li> <li>• 'Boundary crossing' organisations, bridging employers and education</li> </ul>

*Table 2: Representatives of core stakeholders in LLL*

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION

This paper aimed to shed light on the stakeholders involved in LLL in the Netherlands and their role in the ecosystem. Government, education institutions, employers and workers (including jobseekers) were identified as the four main actors. We also concluded that in the regional LLL-ecosystem, governmental organisations are in the lead and, despite their crucial role as producers and end-users, education institutions, employers and workers are more at the periphery of the regional LLL ecosystem and have less agency. A second important finding is that these four main stakeholders are, in practice, represented by a wide range of organisations on a national, regional and sectoral level. This may be limiting for workers and employers, but also for educational institutions as the producers in the LLL ecosystem. The lack of transparency regarding the actors, both of competitors and of potential cooperation partners and participants, can delay the development of an adequate LLL strategy and LLL portfolio.

We see education institutions as crucial stakeholders in LLL, worthy of a position in the core of the LLL ecosystem. For this to come to fruition, it is important to know what is going on in the local labour market and which regional actors – the organisations but also the specific staff members – are involved, as well as their needs and ambitions. A stakeholder analysis might be a useful technique to identify the local actors, and we recommend looking beyond the competitors as well to identify user groups, funders, policy advising and policy making organizations in order to get a complete picture of the relevant network. Please be aware that the shifting dynamics of LLL imply that organisations and persons will both join and leave the ecosystems. As such, it is important that the analysis be evaluated frequently. Also, of

relevance is having an awareness of if and where these stakeholders meet, and to be one of the stakeholders present at these meetings and commissions. It is also essential that you define the role you want to play in the regional LLL ecosystem, based on your strengths and strategy as an educational institute. Finally, realising your LLL ambitions is not a single-person-job. It is a long-term process ultimately realised by a multidisciplinary team that includes colleagues with different contacts in the region to help achieve organisational and the ecosystems' ambitions.

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