Transformation of higher education institutions from rhetoric commitment to a place of lifelong learning organizations: a meta synthesis study

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Abstract

Purpose – The current synthesis study was conducted to locate comprehensive perspectives about the transformation of higher education institutions from being the only places where formal education programs are offered into settings where lifelong learning can be integrated. This demands an inquiry through not only instance investigation but also a more comprehensive evidence upsurge which has great importance in obtaining lessons and drawing conclusions from existing facts to show how higher education institutions can be places where lifelong learning is promoted for the good of both individuals and societal advancement.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a meta-synthesis methodology, a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge in the area of higher education institutions’ role in promoting lifelong learning was synthesized.

Findings – The study identified wide-ranging lifelong learning conceptualizations, potential beneficiaries, learning contents and ways of delivery that can be applied in higher education institutions. Furthermore, the practical challenges, partnership and coordination concerns and policy and reform issues towards promoting lifelong learning were addressed.

Originality/value – This meta-synthesis provides crucial evidence for higher education policymakers and practitioners seeking to guide the transformation of their institutions into settings where lifelong learning is integrated with other forms of educational programs, thereby optimizing individual’s professional development and societal progress.

Keywords Higher education, Lifelong learning, Transformation

Paper type Research paper

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Erratum: It has come to the attention of the publisher that the article, Assefa, Y., Gebremeskel, M.M., Moges, B.T. and Tilwani, S.A. (2024), “Transformation of higher education institutions from rhetoric commitment to a place of lifelong learning organizations: a meta synthesis study”, Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-07-2023-0293, was published with an error. This error was introduced in the production process. This has now been corrected in the online version of the paper. The publisher sincerely apologises for this and for any inconvenience caused.
1. Introduction

Lifelong learning is an issue that has been under debate for many years and there is a gap in consensus in the literature about the conceptualization of terms that are related to lifelong learning (Jaldemark et al., 2022; Kim, 2016). This is because the term lifelong learning requires careful description since it is used widely in contemporary educational discourse and has a range of contextual meanings across the globe. The fairly standard concept of lifelong learning has been developed since it was introduced by Faure’s (1972) “Learning to Be” and Delors’s (1996) “Learning: The Treasure Within” reports. These reports played important roles in establishing lifelong learning as a global education paradigm (Kim, 2016) which links the concept of a learning society (Nesbit et al., 2007). Considering this premise, Walters et al. (2014) provided a comprehensive definition that “lifelong learning reflects all contexts in life from a life-wide, life-deep and lifelong perspective, it includes learning behaviors, obtaining knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values and competencies for personal growth, social and economic well-being, democratic citizenship, cultural identity, and employability” (p. 26). In addition, Baker et al. (2023) outline lifelong learning from a domain-agnostic approach, referring to the ongoing, self-directed process of acquiring new information, abilities, and skills throughout a person’s lifetime. Hence, individuals’ capacity and desire for learning aimed at improving their knowledge, competencies, and full-of-life participation in learning activities is regarded as the central conceptualization of the lifelong learning paradigm (Soares and Dias, 2019; Febrinanto et al., 2023).

Specifically, the conversation around lifelong learning is not diluted in Ethiopia, where this meta-synthesis study is concerned. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, [MoE, hereafter], lifelong learning is understood as a comprehensive concept that includes formal, non-formal, and informal learning that extends throughout an individual’s lifespan to achieve the fullest possible development in personal, social, vocational, and professional life (MoE, 2008). At present, the approach of lifelong learning has gained more emphasis through attempts made to connect it as a means of providing people with the required knowledge and skills to succeed in a rapidly changing world (Assefa, 2022; Singh, 2015). To support this process, one of the most important actions that need to be put into action is institutionalizing lifelong learning systems and practices (Jaldemark et al., 2022). In this development process, higher education institutions (hereinafter, HEIs) are crucial actors, as they are a place where various learning platforms including lifelong learning take place (Assefa et al., 2023). Therefore, it is now more vital than ever to emphasize the integration of lifelong learning in the HEIs context (Taşç and Titrek, 2019; *Brooks and Everett, 2008) since the subsequent rise in the work-life is enforcing individuals to engage in lifelong learning to keep their knowledge and skills up to date.

Habitually, HEIs in Ethiopia focus mostly on very formal education which leads to some kind of credentials (Abiy et al., 2014; Walters et al., 2014) which leads to some deficiencies in promoting lifelong learning (MoE, 2018). As far as the researchers’ reading is concerned, studies conducted in Ethiopia so far have figured out the practice of lifelong learning related terms such as adult learning, adult education, and adult literacy operated in different sectors (e.g. Abate, 2022; Assefa et al., 2022; Assefa, 2023; Abate and Adamu, 2021; Seyoum and Basha, 2017; Abiy et al., 2014). Despite these attempts, building knowledge and integrating evidence about the role that Ethiopian HEIs may play in promoting lifelong learning is limited in attracting the attention of policymakers and practitioners. As the same, a previous study led by Abiy et al. (2014) suggested the need for further study to make clear how the Ethiopian lifelong learning system functions across multiple sectors including in the HEIs, and how such initiatives can be set up and carried out. Considering these circumstances, therefore, the current study is located to synthesize comprehensive perspectives given in the body of knowledge. This demands an inquiry through not only instance investigation but also a more comprehensive evidence upsurge through obtaining lessons and drawing conclusions from existing facts to show how the Ethiopian HEIs can be places where lifelong learning is promoted for the good of both individuals’ learners and societal advancement.
To guide the course of generating new understandings in this study accordingly, the following research questions were forwarded. These are:

**RQ1.** What are the common lifelong learning perspectives and themes found in primary studies investigating the interplay between HEIs and lifelong learning?

**RQ2.** How have primary studies characterized the practical challenges that prevent HEIs from becoming places where lifelong learning systems and practices can be integrated into other formal education programs?

**RQ3.** What kinds of partnership and collaboration are mentioned in primary studies in which HEIs can establish to realize lifelong learning in their settings?

**RQ4.** What practices can be drawn from primary studies regarding lifelong learning policy and reform concerns?

In addition to addressing these research questions, the present study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge focused on the evolving rhetorical role of HEIs in lifelong learning into observable practice.

### 2. Synthesis methodology

#### 2.1 Synthesis design

This synthesis study employed a meta-synthesis methodology to integrate the existing body of knowledge available in the literature (Lee, 2018) focusing on the topic of HEIs and their role in promoting lifelong learning. In doing so, a multiple-case study design was employed, given that each selected primary study was considered a separate case. Then, the synthesis is grounded on a conceptual framework drawn from the results observed from primary studies (Card, 2015) and contextualized into the Ethiopian lifelong learning system that can be opted for the HEIs context. Inspired by the protocol suggested by Poul et al. (2021), the current study first assembles the existing primary articles through the identification and acquisition of literature. Then, the arranging of potential primary literature was done through the organization and purification of primary articles. Finally, the quality assessment of the identified primary studies was carried out through evaluation for quality and appropriateness, and reporting with rigor. As seen in Figure 1, a summary of stages from the literature identification to purification is presented using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach. Further methods employed in the synthesis process are illustrated as follows:

#### 2.2 Literature identification and search strategy

An initial review of the literature in electronic databases was conducted to determine the availability of lifelong learning studies based on the HEIs context. Potential database sources such as ScienceDirect, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar were searched to identify exemplary primary studies. Primary studies were then searched for in databases using advanced search terms, using the Boolean operators to combine the search terms. Therefore, the search strategies were formulated as follows: “higher education” OR “higher education institutions” OR “the role of the higher education institution” OR universities OR “public university” AND “lifelong learning” OR “lifelong education” AND “qualitative study” OR “qualitative research”. All of these search terms were used as a significant part of the search strategy.

#### 2.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The current study included potential primary studies if both lifelong learning and HEIs were taken as the main focus of their investigation. Furthermore, to determine the appropriateness and relevance of primary studies to be included as the sample (Card, 2015), the following five inclusion and exclusion criteria were set. These are: (1) The topic or abstract of the primary
study must mention both higher education and lifelong learning. (2) The research method employed in the primary study must be qualitative despite any design. (3) The primary study must be published in peer-reviewed journals. (4) The primary study must be written in either English or Amharic language. (5) The research has to be done since 1972 when the paradigm of lifelong learning became more popular due to Faure’s (1972) “Learning to Be” and the subsequent Delors’s (1996) “Learning within the Treasury” reports. Primary studies were excluded if any of the above five criteria weren’t met.

2.4 Search Results
The search process ended in May 2023. As shown in Figure 1, despite a large number of primary studies in the literature, searches using the developed search strategies yielded approximately 418 potential articles, including duplicate titles. After title-level review and removal of duplicates, 69 articles were filtered for further review in the abstract. By evaluating the abstract, 31 articles were retained for a final suitability check. The remaining articles were omitted at this stage as the abstract contained little information about the role of HEIs in promoting lifelong learning. The final screening in the full-text review confirmed 9 potential primary studies that adequately highlighted the focus of the present study.
2.5 Analysis method
The present study employed a thematic synthesis approach. In doing so, all sample studies were summarized, coded for themes, and analyzed to determine the scope and shared findings (Noah, 2017). Additionally, inspired by the method of analysis used by Lee (2018), each included primary study was read entirely three times. In the first stage, the overall sense of the articles, the most important findings and conclusions, and the significant ideas were noted. During the second round, the occurrence of recurring concepts among the articles was classified which were further separated into themes. In the third round of reading, a summary of key findings was prepared to connect and highlight the emerging patterns of HEIs role-playing to enhance lifelong learning across primary studies.

3. Results
This synthesis study attempted to organize the body of knowledge from previous empirical literature so that academics, institutions, and practitioners can easily comprehend the current trends of lifelong learning taking place in HEIs and draw lessons to optimize practice in Ethiopia. In doing so, the findings obtained from primary studies were organized into themes and presented as follows:

3.1 Common perspectives of lifelong learning observed from previous studies
3.1.1 Major conceptualizations. Most of the primary studies offered a variety of lifelong learning conceptualizations. The study conducted by Abiy et al. (2014) conceived lifelong learning as the promotion of informal and non-formal learning, literacy, and local knowledge. Askling and Foss-Fridlizius (2000) and Brandt (2000) also illustrated that lifelong learning has been linked to the transition from traditional “adult education” through “recurrent education” to “continuing education”, which prepares learners for employment. A more in-depth analysis observed by Soares and Dias (2019) revealed the availability of different understandings of lifelong learning concepts based on study programs offered by HEIs. They referred to the expressions of lifelong learning as: “continuous learning”, preparing learners for continuing their studies to the next level; “autonomous learning”, suggesting learners’ capabilities to be autonomous in learning; and finally, “independent research and updating knowledge”, signifying to develop an independent attempt of updating knowledge. These findings show understanding of lifelong learning differs greatly depending on the setting.

It is now necessary to explain the course of how HEIs can consider the diverse conception of lifelong learning in their purpose. In this regard, primary studies suggested three key ways in which HEIs can do so. One, the findings of *Brooks and Everett (2008), and Walters and Walters (2001) affirm the view of lifelong learning in HEIs could be started by defining the process of learning, in which learners’ experiences of “learning how to learn” can be indorsed rather than making them the receiver of knowledge. Second, some studies mark lifelong learning should be understood in HEIs as an instrument for the construction of learners’ identities. This helps them to develop a positive learner identity that drives them to feel more confident in their ability to learn, and they are more likely to see themselves as lifelong learners (Nesbit et al., 2007; *Brooks and Everett, 2008). Third, some evidence suggests HEIs should be understood as lifelong learning based on the relationship between learning and the wider world. In this circumstance, both the institutions and learners can see lifelong learning as being essential for personal development, career progression, and civic engagement (*Brooks and Everett, 2008; Walters and Walters, 2001; Brandt, 2000). The findings outlined that HEIs have a critical role in conceptualizing lifelong learning in a manner to supports learners in developing the skills and knowledge that enable them to become lifelong learners who are equipped to navigate this ever-changing world. Therefore, a structural shift is
required from the deeply embedded traditional conception of lifelong learning as basic literacy towards a vast expansion of lifelong learning-based educational opportunities. These mean a lot to HEIs to play an important role in redefining lifelong learning as per their institutional mission and purpose to support learners to become more autonomous, confident, and engaged lifelong learners.

3.1.2 Target beneficiaries. Four categories of lifelong learners who can benefit from HEIs were identified across primary studies. These include: partially illiterate, working people/employees, university students and graduates, and university teachers and professionals. The study by Abiy et al. (2014) revealed that illiterate and partially illiterate people can benefit from lifelong learning. These authorities stress the need for HEIs’ disposition to help illiterate people be able to examine traditional norms and be aware of scientific knowledge and practices which in turn may require curiosity for new practices. A similar pattern of results was mentioned by Nesbit et al. (2007), Brandt (2000), and Asling and Foss-Fridlizius (2000) that emphasize working people engaged in any job can follow lifelong learning in flexible programs. This has great importance to those learners who demand greater competence in the world of work. Additionally, it was mentioned in other studies that university students and graduates are more likely to engage in further learning because their experiences of higher education had a positive impact on their attitudes toward lifelong learning (Soares and Dias, 2019; Brooks and Everett, 2008). Furthermore, other studies such as Geleta and Raju (2023), and Walters and Walters (2001) pronounce lifelong learning as the main pathway for instructors and professionals to improve their teaching skills, keep up with the latest research in their field, and advance their careers through engage in variety of professional learning activities, including attending professional discussions and participating in online learning courses.

The availability of such categories of learners implies to HEIs that they have a great role in providing demand-driven and context-based learning. Given the applicability of these findings, this synthesis can derive two important possibilities regarding how HEIs function to serve the diverse learning needs of learners. On the one side, it is critical to identify the premise that lifelong learning increases career prospects—today’s fast-changing labor market, lifelong learning can assist learners in keeping their skills and knowledge up to date. Hence, HEIs must seek to include lifelong learning activities in their formal programs to make learners more competitive. This is because lifelong learning can help them improve career chances, raise earning potential, increase social participation, and fulfill personal goals.

3.1.3 Learning contents and mode of delivery. Findings from the primary study supported that there are differences in learning contents depending on the individuals’ learning needs. For instance, Abiy et al. (2014) noted the need for lifelong learning that incorporates accumulated indigenous knowledge and prior experience so that learners can see the relevance of prior learning opportunities. As well, Geleta and Raju (2023), and Walters and Walters (2001) stressed the importance of incorporating learning activities that promote collaboration, enhance workplace motivation and contribute to the advancement of a profession. Other authors in their study context (e.g. Asling and Foss-Fridlizius, 2000; Brandt, 2000) also identified the focus of lifelong learning on “interdisciplinary education” such as courses in science and technology, humanities, and social sciences in which learners are encouraged to take.

From this standpoint, the delivery of such lifelong learning content can be considered as an issue that needs HEIs’ capability to use several strategies to reach out to learners. In this regard, primary studies mentioned that HEIs can provide lifelong learning for learners in several ways such as computer-mediated communication (Walters and Walters, 2001; Asling and Foss-Fridlizius, 2000), special academic units and departments (Nesbit et al., 2007). Furthermore, Abiy et al. (2014) emphasized the need to increase the potential for the application of ICTs to facilitate lifelong learning at large. Hence, it is possible to understand
that whatever the contents and delivery strategies differed, the main purpose of lifelong learning provision should be enhanced by greater self-directed and resource-based learning which may be supported by flexibility in the curriculum and information technology.

3.2 Practical challenges

Results from primary studies suggest that providing lifelong learning within the broader HEIs system is not an easy task. This synthesis study confirmed the existence of six types of challenges, given that all the barriers are different across studies. The study by Geleta and Raju (2023) identified some (1) personal challenges such as lack of time, lack of funding, and lack of access to professional learning and development opportunities that negatively affect individuals’ professional learning. Also, the study led by Abiy et al. (2014) pointed out HEIs’ restricted program organization across all levels of the formal education programs hampering the integration of non-formal and informal lifelong learning opportunities. In this regard, Nesbit et al. (2007) presented details about the presence of (2) institutional barriers such as bulky enrollment procedures, restrictions on entrance qualifications, insufficient advice, and support systems, inflexible learning schedules, the sluggish acceptance of alternate prior learning evaluation policies, and domination of course content that ignores learners’ previous experiences. Furthermore, Taşç and Titrek (2019) discussed additional sub-themes of barriers affecting lifelong learning activities including (3) Economic challenges: availability of insufficient funding affects individuals who wish to attend various learning courses at the learning center. (4) Academic challenges: in some courses, learners’ expectations and willingness can be at various levels which in turn affects the quality of the learning process. (5) Technical challenges: as a result of their actions, HEIs may encounter difficulties with the lack of staff and equipment required for lifelong learning. (6) Civil society challenges: while HEIs desire to collaborate with NGOs and community-based organizations, there are issues such as discrepancies in mutual agreements and financial issues in the process of learning. According to these findings, while HEIs can have a good impact on encouraging lifelong learning, this effect is not automatic due to the presence of such impediments.

3.3 Partnership and collaboration

Regarding this, several primary studies (Abiy et al., 2014; Nesbit et al., 2007; Walters and Walters, 2001; Brandt, 2000; Asking and Foss-Fridlizius, 2000) emphasized the kinds of partnership and collaboration in which HEIs can establish not only to minimize the barriers that hinder the practice of lifelong learning but also to realize it. The study led by Abiy et al. (2014) recognized that HEIs can collaborate with what they call “supporting units” such as training centers, information communication centers, NGOs, and schools to optimize lifelong learning environments. Also, Brandt (2000) underlined the importance of increasing collaboration between HEIs and private education colleges serving as methodological specialists and associations serving as local instructors for lifelong learning. Moreover, Nesbit et al. (2007) and Asking and Foss-Fridlizius (2000) provide the relevance of HEIs forming and joining national and international partnerships for the exchange of knowledge and experience about lifelong learning provision. As a result, a change towards self-regulated governance frameworks of lifelong learning and the ability to build institutional partnerships can stimulate actors to enhance the provision of lifelong learning.

3.4 Policy and reform issues

Lifelong learning policy and reform concerns have far-reaching consequences. This in turn has significant implications for HEIs in terms of adapting responsive procedures for lifelong
learning implementations which incorporate the changing landscape and the demands of learners. In this context, some primary studies revealed the efforts undertaken to alter lifelong learning policies and procedures, as well as their ramifications for HEIs. A study performed by Abiy et al. (2014) revealed the limitations of lifelong learning policy at the national level of education policy discourse, where the emphasis has been placed on formal education programs rather than incorporating lifelong learning features. They emphasized that the need for conversation around lifelong learning inclusion in the HEIs policy aims to create a literate society.

Another study finding reported by Brandt (2000) illustrates two contradictory facts that the author observed from educational policies for the good of both lifelong learning and HEIs. On the one hand, most HEIs’ policies rhetorically emphasize the necessity of offering lifelong learning opportunities for learners, based on the notion that lifelong learning is necessary for individuals to adapt to changing professional and societal expectations. On the other hand, HEIs focus on offering high-quality education to a small number of students, based on the premise that HEIs are a scarce resource that should be reserved for the most outstanding students. In this regard, the author sees a contradiction between viewpoints which led to a situation where HEIs are unable to meet the demand for lifelong learning courses.

Furthermore, it has been mentioned that there are evolving factors motivating the need for integrating lifelong learning into the HEIs systems and policies (Walters and Walters, 2001; Askling and Foss-Fridlizius, 2000; Brandt, 2000). As to them, the lifelong learning system may be affected by certain social factors such as demographic shifts, economic conditions, labor market conditions, and public attitudes toward lifelong learning. Therefore, HEIs must take these aspects into account to make sure that their policy integrates lifelong learning issues that can be tailored to meet the needs of both individual learners and the wider society.

4. Discussion
Based on the observed findings from primary studies, this part of the present study attempts to discuss how Ethiopian HEIs can be places where lifelong learning is integrated into other forms of educational programs to meet the learning needs of learners and society. Here are the details:

4.1 Developing a comprehensive understanding
The results of this study proved that the conception of lifelong learning practiced in HEIs varies among studies. This could be because as many scholars pointed out, perceptions of what lifelong learning entails differ across the globe (Soares and Dias, 2019; Walters and Watters, 2001). Traditionally, adult and lifelong learning have been somewhat marginalized in universities, relegated to small units or units with no clear strategic role. HEIs don’t wait to clarify lifelong learning definitions as per their purpose. To apply the governing notions of lifelong learning in the Ethiopian HEIs environment, it is necessary to first understand the various lifelong learning approaches taking place at the institutions. These approaches may incorporate formal, non-formal, and informal learning (Walters et al., 2014). Until now, most Ethiopian HEIs have equated formal learning as study programs with structured courses that have credentials. On the other hand, short-term learning activities such as workshops and seminars are examples of non-formal learning. Informal learning can take many forms, including self-directed learning and community-based activities. Therefore, now is the time for HEIs to define lifelong learning and consider how they can integrate each model into their learning systems. In the context of Ethiopian HEIs, there must be a paradigm shift from structured education to comprehensive lifelong learning, where the importance of lifelong learning can be emphasized both rhetorically and practically. HEIs must therefore function as
a learning organization (Walters and Walters, 2001) in which knowledge transfer and learning facilitation can promote personal and professional development. This could be about developing a comprehensive understanding of lifelong learning that helps people learn new things and keep their existing knowledge up to date.

**4.2 Designing learner-oriented programs**

The other issue that this synthesis study brought into concern was to identify the lifelong learning beneficiaries, learning contents, and the kinds of learning delivery that can take place in HEIs. The results yielded four categories of lifelong learners, including those who are illiterate, employed, university students and graduates, and university teachers although there might be more beneficiaries than these. This suggests HEIs have to design learning materials and delivery methods with the participants’ needs in mind. To address this concern, the literature offered three potential approaches that HEIs may employ: First, some authors emphasized the significance of developing pathways for assessing prior learning. As noted by Abiy et al. (2014) and Walters et al. (2014), it is important to note that lifelong learning programs must respond to and incorporate accumulated learning experiences, indigenous knowledge, and informal learning so that learners can see the relevance of learning opportunities. Second, it is critical to develop a culture of lifelong learning within the institutions by inspiring staff to participate in professional learning opportunities (Geleta and Raju, 2023; Walters et al., 2014) and optimizing opportunities for students to participate in non-formal and informal learning (*Brooks and Everett, 2008). Third, HEIs have to offer flexible learning options (Soares and Dias, 2019; Walters et al., 2014; Brandt, 2000), in which various learning choices can be provided to fit learners’ schedules. Overall, incorporating lifelong learning into institutional systems necessitates a commitment to provide a variety of learning opportunities that suit the needs of learners at various phases of their educational journeys.

**4.3 Rethinking partnership and collaboration**

The other emphasis of this synthesis was to look at the partnership established in HEIs for lifelong learning. What most of the primary studies make common is that they stress the importance of developing collaboration with local and global partners to facilitate the provision of lifelong learning. However, they should have provided additional information about how HEIs can establish partnerships with others. Despite deficiency in this regard, the body of grey literature yields kinds of partnership and collaboration in which the HEIs can take action. From the perspectives of Walters et al. (2014), and Walters and Walters (2001), HEIs can establish partnerships with concerned actors at least in three ways: One is, the need for HEIs to make partnerships with business organizations. This gives learners the chance to gain practical experience and pick up new skills to pursue careers in quickly evolving fields. The second is a partnership with government organizations and NGOs. This provides learners with the chance to learn about public policy and to acquire abilities that are needed by government and NGOs. The third is the importance of HEIs partnership with community-based organizations: which can offer students the opportunities to learn about their community and foster a sense of civic engagement. As mentioned, therefore, HEIs can assist individuals to become lifelong learners who are equipped to flourish in an ever-changing environment through developing and strengthening relationships with several organizations.

**4.4 Addressing the challenges**

The current synthesis identified several barriers such as lack of funding and learning opportunities (Geleta and Raju, 2023), the presence of several institutional barriers (Nesbit et al., 2007), economic challenges, academic challenges, technical challenges, and
challenges with civil society (Taşçı and Titrek, 2019). All of these obstacles hurt HEIs’ ability to provide effective lifelong learning. Rather than identifying the factors, proposing ways to address these issues has great importance. In this regard, Walters et al. (2014) proposed the need for developing responsive lifelong learning directives that help to address learning facilities, demand-driven curriculum and training programs, collaboration with actors, funding, and cultural and societal attitudes toward lifelong learning. Furthermore, it has been mentioned that in addressing many of the aforementioned challenges, addressing the question and contextual analysis of what the place of lifelong learning is in the HEIs context (Abiy et al., 2014) may provide clear direction to undergo serious discussions to institutionalize the basic premise of lifelong learning. Hence, policymakers, education providers, and practitioners must work together to make lifelong learning possibilities open, flexible, and integrated. More importantly, scholarly literature (Vieira do Nascimento and Valdés-Cotera, 2018; Walters et al., 2014) emphasized the importance of developing a holistic and overarching policy framework with clear implementation guidelines help to promote lifelong learning for all.

4.5 The need for feasible policy and reforms

When thinking about the lifelong learning policy and related directives for future discussion, answering the questions of how to frame the HEIs policy that supports lifelong learning in terms of reaching common conceptualization, addressing large beneficiaries, required leadership, partnership, and others, can give the accurate pathway. By incorporating these concerns into policies and guidelines, HEIs may develop a framework that facilitates the implementation of lifelong learning initiatives to benefit learners, institutions, and communities at large. To facilitate this process, considering the perspectives forwarded by Askling and Foss-Fridlizius (2000) has vital importance. They stressed the quest for shifts in HEIs “access policy” as signals fundamental system change in education reform, which associates the political rhetoric of “expansion” and that of the HEIs’ obligation for learners to link activities to their social surroundings so that, the number of “knowledge-producing” and “knowledge-consuming” individuals can be increased. This suggests the government has to catalyze the transformation of HEIs by developing a more coherent and comprehensive policy that incorporates lifelong learning claims to ensure that people have the opportunity to learn throughout their lives.

Overall, the results and discussion of this Meta-synthesis study underscore that transforming HEIs from rhetorical commitment to practical actions in promoting lifelong learning is a critical necessity for the 21st century. This shift has the potential to revolutionize the way we learn and work, with profound implications for society, the economy, and national development. Societal implications: transforming HEIs into lifelong learning institutions would benefit society in many ways. For example, it would improve access to education for people of all ages and backgrounds, give people the opportunity to acquire new skills and knowledge throughout their lives, contribute to the development of a more educated and skilled workforce, and promote social mobility. Economic implications: Economic growth and prosperity depend on having both a talented and educated workforce. Transforming HEIs into organizations dedicated to lifelong learning would help ensure that the workforce has the necessary skills and expertise to meet the needs of the 21st-century economy. This would increase productivity, innovation, and economic competitiveness. Overall national development implications: transforming higher education establishments into lifelong learning organizations would benefit the country’s growth in some ways. For instance, it would increase social cohesion by fostering a shared culture of learning, decrease social inequality by giving people from all backgrounds the chance to learn and upskill, improve the economy by boosting productivity and innovation, and improve the nation’s competitiveness abroad by producing a workforce that is better educated and skilled.
5. Conclusion

Based on the present study, it is clear that the transition of HEIs from rhetorical commitment to organizations that promote lifelong learning is a challenging process. However, there is increasing evidence that supports this transition could be feasible and benefit both individuals and society. The study suggests that HEIs policymakers and practitioners can optimize change and support lifelong learning systems through: developing lifelong learning policies aligned with developmental goals, establishing responsive leadership, building a solid partnership and collaboration with concerned stakeholders, developing funding packages for lifelong learning initiatives, creating a more supportive environment for lifelong learning by providing flexible learning opportunities and making lifelong learning resources more accessible, and encouraging leaders and the community to adopt lifelong learning culture and perspectives. Furthermore, the development of legitimate and coherent institutional systems, supported by policies and working strategies, is crucial to promote the implementation of lifelong learning across institutional boundaries rather than just containing the concepts and ideas of lifelong learning. In this regard, higher education policymakers and practitioners can make this change a reality.

References

References marked * are primary studies included in the sample of this study.


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