

Students' perceptions and opinions for the concept of lifelong learning

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ABSTRACT

The present article explores students' perceptions and opinions about the concept of lifelong learning. The survey involved 102 students from 17 out of the 24 Departments of the University of Patras (Greece) for the academic year 2014-2015. Additionally, at this article a comparative presentation of the findings with a similar research carried out in the academic year 2004-2005 at the same university, is presented. The results showed that students were placed positively for lifelong learning which they associated with professional development and education. The comparative analysis between these two research projects, did not reveal significant differences, but in general it seems that the students have gradually develop a more conscious understanding of what is and what can offer lifelong learning and education.

KEYWORDS

Lifelong learning, perceptions, students

RÉSUMÉ

L'article présent examen les opinions et les idées des étudiants sur le sujet de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. Poursuivant cette enquête, menée pendant l'année universitaire 2014-15, on a étudié 102 étudiants qui étaient inscrits en 17 différentes Départements du total des 21 qui forment l'Université de Patras (Grèce). En plus, dans cet article, on fait une présentation comparative qui correspond à une enquête pareille, réalisée pendant l'année 2004-5, dans le même Université. Les conclusions ont démontré que les étudiants étaient positifs à l'éducation permanente, laquelle ils considèrent conjointe à leur développement professionnel. Cette analyse comparative entre les deux enquêtes n'a pas montré des différences significatives, pourtant de point de vue d'un cadre général, on distingue que pendant ces années les étudiants ont formé une attitude plus consciente en ce qui concerne l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie.

MOTS-CLÉS

Apprentissage tout au long de la vie, perceptions, étudiants

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning seems to gather the interest of national and international organizations, being a key element in educational policies of almost all developed countries. It is expected that students of higher education institutions should have shaped opinions and perceptions for this widely used term as it is connected with their current and future educational and employment situation. In this article two similar studies are presented, both of them implemented at the University of Patras, in the western region of Greece, with a time span of more than ten years (Stathopoulou & Karalis, 2007), having as main goal to investigate the opinions and perceptions of students for the term *lifelong learning*.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

The first widely known reference to the term is located in the seminal work of B. Yaxlee *Lifelong Education* (1929), though the term here is used to underline the right of citizens to participate in further and continuing education, that is to say, it is used more as a synonym to the term *adult education*. The idea that lifelong education or lifelong learning could refer to a more holistic approach to education it was described in the UNESCO Report for the future of education in 1972, mostly known as Faure Report by the name of Edgar Faure who acted as president of a Committee of international experts. In that Report (Faure, 1972), the term is approached mainly as a principle for the reorganization of the educational system and it is connected to the holistic development of human beings in terms of fulfilling all their goals, both in personal and economic terms (development of personality, knowledge and skills for labour market).

The years to come, following the dominance of neoliberal policies, lifelong learning becomes the vehicle for the gradual withdrawal of the State as the main provider of education and the expansion of privatization policies. The term *lifelong education* is replaced with the term *lifelong learning*, in order to transfer the content of educational policies from the State provision to the commitment of the individual to be responsible for the adaptation of his/her skills to the labour market demands (Jarvis, 2007). It is therefore common for the citizens to confuse the content of the term connecting it with the labour market needs or conceptualizing it unilaterally with adult education (Himmelstrup, 1981). Thus, educational institutions not addressed to adults (for example primary education) are not considered as a part of lifelong learning, while in scientific discourse lifelong learning forms a continuum incorporating all educational and learning activities throughout life. Moreover, the expansion of new technologies has in certain cases an impact to the opinions and perceptions of citizens, as lifelong learning is identified with e-learning systems (Karalis & Koutsonikos, 2003; Vorvilas, Karalis, & Ravanis; 2011). On the other hand, some contemporary approaches of adult education, for example, the transformative learning theory (Mezirow & ass., 2000; Karalis, 2010) or the development of critical thinking skills (Raikou & Karalis, 2011; Liodaki & Karalis, 2013) are increasingly widespread in higher education institutions.

METHODOLOGY

Context of the study

The study was conducted during the academic year 2014-2015. The participants were 102 students from 17 out of 21 departments of University of Patras, namely: Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Geology, Biology, Material Science, Architecture, Mechanical

Engineering and Aeronautics, Electrical and Computer Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Computer Engineering and Informatics, Civil Engineering, Business Administration, Medicine, Pharmacy, Philosophy and Theatre Studies.

In the present research, students from both pedagogical departments of the University, (Department of Primary Education and Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education) were excluded due to the fact that they had been taught courses for lifelong learning and education and therefore their views and perceptions could be affected.

Furthermore, in this article we present a comparison between the findings of this study and the findings of a similar one, based on the same research tool, that was conducted during the academic year 2004-2005 (Stathopoulou & Karalis, 2007).

Data Collection

For the data collection, a questionnaire was used as the research tool. This questionnaire included thirteen closed ended questions, two of them being dichotomous and the rest gave the respondents more than two choices. Also the research tool included an open-ended question concerning the opinions of students about the concept of lifelong learning.

RESULTS

Below are presented the research findings per question and the comparative presentation between this study and the similar one conducted in 2004-2005. In the first question students were asked to be placed on how they consider *lifelong learning* both as a concept and as a process.

TABLE 1

Attitudes towards lifelong learning

	2015 (%)	2005 (%)
Strongly positive	55.8	41.4
Positive	34.5	39.3
Neither positive, nor negative	8.8	9.3
Negative	0.9	6.7
Strongly negative	0	3.3
Total	100.0	100.0

The 90.1% of students in this study and the 80.6% in the 2005 study appears to be “very-positive / positive” to the term of lifelong learning both as a concept and as a process. In the 2015 study, the rate of students who were positioned “negatively/very negatively” to the concept of lifelong learning was decreased. Such a differentiation may be due to the wider dissemination of the term in Greek society the last ten years.

Tables 2 and 3 present the opinions of students for lifelong learning as analysed by the open-ended question. As it seems from the 2015 data, the highest percentage of students perceive the concept of lifelong learning as a continuum of education and also as an acquisition of experiences in contrast to the 2005 study, where students tried to give statements approximate with the definitions of the term. According to Stathopoulou and Karalis (2007) correlating the students’ opinions with their attitudes towards lifelong learning, and in particular the negative ones, we can conclude that students linked lifelong learning exclusively to professional development.

TABLE 2*Perceptions for lifelong learning (Research 2015)*

Perceptions	(%)
Continuous Education/Learning	36.4
Acquisition of new knowledge/experiences	15.6
Personal development	13.9
Broadening cognitive horizons	10.7
Way of life	7.8
Professional development and improvement	6.8
I don't know	8.8
Total	100.0

TABLE 3*Perceptions for lifelong learning (Research 2005)*

Perceptions	%
Variations of the term definition	41.1
Personal development and improvement	34.2
Acquisition of knowledge after the completion of formal education	10.4
Identification with the workplace	10.4
Obligation related to integration in the labour market	3.9
Total	100.0

Concerning the fields¹ related to lifelong learning the “personal development and improvement” seems to be the field that is more related to lifelong learning in both studies gathering the highest rates, 91.1% and 72.6% respectively.

TABLE 4*Fields covered by the term lifelong learning*

Fields	2015 (%)	2005 (%)
Personal development and improvement	91.1	72.6
Finding a job	35.2	38.0
Acquisition of more certifications	33.3	25.3
Participation of citizens	29.4	-
I don't know	-	4.6
Professional development	-	56.6

The 35.2% and 38.0% of students in both studies linked the concept of lifelong learning with the labour market (finding a job) and the 33.0% and 25.0% accordingly linked it to qualifications (acquisition of more certificates). The above findings show that students have acquired a broader context of entering the labour market, mainly oriented to the acquisition of credentials. Acquisition of more certificates can mean that they want to be able to deal with new knowledge, competences and skills in their profession while entering the labour market.

¹ In the 2005 study, there was the field of “professional development” as a separate category, while in 2015 study the field of “participation of citizens” was added.

Noteworthy is that in the 2005 study, the professional development concentrates the second largest proportion (56.6%). According to Stathopoulou and Karalis (2007), the percentage of men who chose the category of professional development stood at 64.0%, while the proportion of women who have chosen this category at 49.3%. Especially in Greece the concept of lifelong learning has been associated mainly with continuing vocational training (Karalis, 2010). The programs provided for the training of employees are more than those of general adult education in contrast to other European countries.

As far as concern the educational organizations and activities that are included within the context of lifelong learning and lifelong education, the highest rate of students in both studies (82.3% -2015 and 86.0% - 2005) claimed that *lifelong learning* includes non-formal education activities such as training programs. The 73.5% and 62.0% support that includes activities which take place within the university and in postgraduate studies (68.6% and 72.6%). However, lower rates, as shown in Table 5, gathered educational organizations such as preschool and primary school. The only differentiation between the rates of both studies lies in the activities included in the secondary education. Specifically, in the 2015 study, 56.8% of students claimed that secondary education belongs to lifelong learning educational activities, while in the research 2005 this percentage was 30.6%.

TABLE 5*Educational organizations and activities of lifelong learning*

Educational organizations and activities	2015 (%)	2005 (%)
Training Programs	82.3%	86.0%
Preschool education	38.2%	39.3%
Primary education	47.0%	41.3%
Secondary education	56.8%	30.6%
University	73.5%	62.0%
Postgraduate studies	68.6%	72.6%
I don't know	6.8%	-

Most of the students in both studies claimed that after obtaining the bachelor degree, they intend to continue attending a post-graduate program. However, there is a considerable variation in the rate selection. In the 2015 study the percentage was 65.6% while in the 2005 study the percentage was 30.0% (less than half). Moreover, the job search (21.5%) gathered the second highest percentage in 2015 study, while in 2005 study “job search” and “postgraduate studies” compile both 30.0%. Concerning the participation in training activities there are no significant differences. Furthermore, (24.7%) of students in the 2004-2005 study seems not to have decided yet while the corresponding percentage in present research was 14.7%.

TABLE 6*Orientations after completion of bachelor studies*

	2015 (%)	2005 (%)
Postgraduates studies	65.6%	30.0%
Job opportunities	21.5%	30.0%
I have not yet decided	14.7%	24.7%
Further training	12.7%	11.3%
Other	-	4.0%

As we can notice from Table 6 the students in 2015 study are more aware of their orientation after completing their studies, giving clear rates to the "job search" and "post-graduate studies" in contrast to the 2005 study.

The majority of students in both studies (75.5% and 66.0%) stated that they have the intention to participate in continuing professional education and training every year while the 17.7% and 26.0% every five years. The 4.9% and 5.3% claimed that they will not participate in any kind of training after completing their basic education while only 1.9% and 2.7% claimed that they have the intention to participate in continuing professional education every ten years.

TABLE 7

Frequency of participation in further training

Frequency	2015 (%)	2005 (%)
Never	4.9%	5.3%
Every year	75.5%	66.0%
Every five years	17.7%	26.0%
Every ten years	1.9%	2.7%
Total	100.0	100.0

At the 2005 study, the Departments that gathered higher percentages of negative perceptions for lifelong learning gathered also higher rates in the category "never" in contrast to Departments such as: Civil Engineering (90.0%), Engineering / Computer and IT (90.0%), Electrical and Computer Engineering (78.6%), and Philology (83.3%), where the highest rates presented in the category "each year".

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we explored the perceptions and opinions of students of the University of Patras towards lifelong learning. As derived from the results, the majority of students have positive attitudes towards lifelong learning and education.

According these students, lifelong learning and education is more linked to personal development and improvement which, however, is directly related to professional development. The continuing education is considered as a tool to ensure continuing development both in professional and social life. In 2005 study, students seems to relate the concept of lifelong learning mainly with professional development, while in 2015 study students have a more holistic approach. Professional development such as finding a better job, get a promotion or even maintain the existing one can lead to personal improvement by giving the opportunity to individual to ameliorate his quality of living standards. Thus, the participation in lifelong learning activities helps individuals to be active citizens developing their critical thinking.

Additionally, in 2005 study the 30.0% of the students claimed that they aim to find a job and also attend a post-graduate course, while in the 2015 study the percentage for postgraduate studies was 65.6% and the choice "find a job" gathered only 21.5%. Maybe, the above finding can be associated with the ongoing worldwide developments and the need for continuous acquisition of new competences and skills that will enable individuals to respond to an increasingly competitive labour market. Also, in 2015 study, the 56.8% of students claimed that the activities undertaken within the framework of secondary education (middle school and high school) are related to lifelong learning in contrast to the 2005 findings where

the percentage was 30.6%. We observe that students perceive lifelong learning as a more holistic context, as a process that lasts during the life span.

The comparative analysis of the two studies showed that there are no major differences, except those stated above. In both studies we observe a positive attitude of students towards lifelong learning, which is mainly connected to personal growth and amelioration. Therefore, during the period between the two studies, students seem to have a more conscious view of what lifelong learning means and what can offer to individual and society. Thus, their views and perceptions are closer to current scientific conceptual approaches.

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