
MANAGING LIFELONG LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Nwachukwu, Ruth Michael.* Ojugh, Womemi

Department of Educational Management Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt,
Rivers State, Nigeria.

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***Corresponding Author: Nwachukwu, Ruth Michael**

Department of Educational Management Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a position on the management of lifelong learning and skills development within the Nigerian education system as a strategic pathway for building a productive, innovative, and globally competitive workforce. It argues that effective management of lifelong learning initiatives in schools is critical for fostering critical thinking, creativity, digital literacy, problem-solving abilities, and entrepreneurial competencies among learners. It further contends that educational stakeholders have significant roles to play in creating learning environments that encourage continuous knowledge acquisition and skills enhancement beyond formal schooling. The paper highlights challenges such as inadequate funding, weak technological infrastructure, limited teacher capacity, policy inconsistencies, and poor access to quality learning resources, which hinder the realization of lifelong learning objectives in Nigeria. It advocates for curriculum reforms, investment in educational technology, continuous professional development for teachers, strengthened school-community partnerships, and supportive policy frameworks to enhance the management of lifelong learning and skills development programmes. The paper concludes that the sustainability of Nigeria's human capital development agenda depends largely on the ability of educational institutions to cultivate a culture of continuous learning and skills acquisition that prepares learners for lifelong personal, professional and societal contributions.

KEYWORDS: Lifelong Learning, Skills Development, Human Capital Development, Nigerian Education System.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of education is crucial for maintaining and enhancing a nation's wealth. Scholars widely agree that education is the most powerful tool for a country's overall growth (Abolade et al., 2019). In the 21st century, the knowledge economy has reshaped education, work, and human development. Fast technological progress and shifting labor market needs have made lifelong learning essential rather than optional. Accordingly, lifelong learning has become a key element of educational progress and human capital development. It involves the ongoing gain of knowledge, skills, values, and competencies in formal, non-formal, and informal settings (UNESCO, 2025). This approach acknowledges that learning goes beyond formal education and continues throughout life to help individuals adjust to social, economic, and technological changes. Combined with human capital growth, it supports the development of both societies and individuals. Increasingly, lifelong learning is seen as a way to boost employability, social inclusion, personal growth, and workforce flexibility in fast-evolving knowledge economies (Roche, 2017).

There are also demands for devising strategies and formulating policies for the development of pedagogical processes, as well as crafting individualized pathways for the professional development of learners, and those capable of making independent decisions and engaging in evaluative control of processes. Thus, there exists a pressing need to cultivate new skills and competencies, rectify outdated concepts, and integrate these innovations into the practices of the new educational system (Bayarystanova et al., 2014). Human capital development involves the process of enhancing the knowledge, skills, competencies and productive capacities of individuals to improve their contributions to economic growth and national development. The quality of a nation's human capital largely determines its productivity and socioeconomic progress. According to the World Bank (2025), education and skills development constitute the foundation for employment, productivity, poverty reduction and sustainable economic growth. Education equips individuals with the competencies required to function effectively in society and participate meaningfully in the labour market.

There can be no productive human capital without a functional education, hence Van Den-Berg (2021) opined that countries that are at the forefront of technological advancement equally have the most educated population. This assumption is probably borne out of the view that the purpose of quality education is to create critical thinking that brings about the development of new technologies and new methods of production in line with the demand of the new dispensation. Educated people possessed more skills and can perform their jobs

effectively. They are also better suited to more complex jobs, which are often associated with high rates of pay and greater economic benefits.

The relationship between lifelong learning and human capital development is particularly significant in contemporary societies where knowledge and skills quickly become obsolete. Individuals are increasingly required to update their competencies through continuous learning, reskilling and upskilling to remain productive and relevant. UNESCO emphasizes that lifelong learning has become indispensable for addressing emerging global challenges and preparing citizens to function effectively in rapidly changing environments. Educational systems across the world are being restructured to promote continuous learning opportunities that support personal growth. In Nigeria, the education system occupies a strategic position in the development of human capital. Education constitutes a vital element of human capital development by furnishing individuals with the knowledge, skills and ethical values indispensable for fostering personal growth and societal progress (Takdir et al., 2020). It empowers individuals with the essential expertise and knowledge to navigate an ever-changing labour market, thereby enhancing their productivity and innovative capacities. Moreover, education catalyses entrepreneurial initiatives and technological progress, thereby propelling innovation and enhancing economic competitiveness.

Schools, colleges, and universities serve as institutions for knowledge transmission, skills acquisition, innovation and character formation. However, the Nigerian education system continues to face challenges such as inadequate funding, limited access to digital technologies, skills mismatches, graduate unemployment, poor infrastructure and insufficient opportunities for continuous professional development (Birrabil & Ogeh, 2020). These challenges have raised concerns about the capacity of the education system to produce graduates with the competencies required for effective participation in the modern economy. As the demand for digital, entrepreneurial and problem-solving skills continues to increase, educational institutions must move beyond traditional approaches to teaching and learning and embrace lifelong learning as an organizing principle for educational development.

Managing lifelong learning within the Nigerian education system therefore requires deliberate policies. Educational managers must create learning environments that encourage continuous knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability and skills development among learners and educators alike. Such efforts are essential for building a workforce capable of responding to emerging national and global challenges. The World Bank maintains that education systems should not only prepare learners for current

employment opportunities, but also equip them with the capacity to adapt to future economic and technological transformations through continuous learning and skills development.

Conceptual Clarification

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is a process of developing knowledge, skills and interests that provides opportunities for teaching and learning. It is not restricted or constrained to specific time, periods, years, certain organizations or institutions. The concept of lifelong learning most often refers to learning or education across an individual's lifespan. Lifelong learning has been a central part of not just educational but also in social and economic discourse for some decades, mainly tied, within adult education, to improving an individual's employability in light of the changing requirements of working life. Since, it is a natural tendency to improve personal capacities, it becomes a continuous process in which individuals retain and develop their life-based conduct, knowledge, and skills. The main aim of lifelong learning is to reinforce and improve the quality of an individual's life or to develop their personal potential to the utmost level (McGarrah, 2015). In the educational sector, or in whatever situation, lifelong learning has served as a supportive process. This is because it stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire the knowledge, values, skills, and understanding they require throughout their lifetimes. In other words, the characteristic or desire for lifelong learning is based on the fact that it incorporates permanent, compassionate, stimulating attributes that amalgamates knowledge, values, and skills that span throughout a lifetime.

Learning flows from a variety of activities in respect of observing how other people functions through discussion, looking up information, trying something for oneself and learning from trial and error, and reflecting on all the previous activities (Salim et al., 2018). On this note, the mental activities reflect on four components: social interaction, processing verbal and other symbolic information, direct experience, and reflection. These have remained the categories in which lifelong learning skills are acquired. Thus, it reinforces corporate confidence, creativity, and inclusiveness in all functional activities. As a matter of fact, it is asserted that lifelong learning entails a broad range of skills and professional attributes that reflect creativity, divergent and critical thinking, as well as teamwork, especially in heterogeneous groups. This circumstance generates work autonomy that develops cognitive and interpersonal skills among individuals' social and civic competences. Also, lifelong learning skills specifically require commitment and passion for knowledge. Thus, having access to a relevant knowledge-base is fundamental for sustaining permanent skills and

confidence. When competency in a domain increases, the learner begins to develop his or her own domain-related goals, chooses and employs more adequate strategies and shows an increasing ability to operate independently (Svetlana, 2016).

Learning is often regarded as a process that necessitates ongoing involvement and growth throughout an individual's entire life. It is crucial for individual development and adjustment to the constantly evolving world and enables individuals to gain new skills, knowledge, and perspectives that can enrich their lives in diverse ways. Today, lifelong learning is increasingly recognized as essential for personal and professional success in a rapidly changing global economy. Lifelong learning was categorised by Nwiyi and Ukulor (2018) as covering formal, non-formal, and informal learning activities that occur throughout a person's lifetime. Examples of formal learning include attending university courses, obtaining certifications, or completing vocational training programmes. On the other hand, non-formal learning may involve workshops, seminars, or online courses, while informal learning can occur through daily experiences, interactions with others, and self-directed exploration. However, this paper focused on the importance of formal and non-formal learning in the Nigerian education system.

Human Capital Development

The concept of human capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, abilities, health status and competencies possessed by individuals, which enable them to contribute productively to society. Human capital development, therefore, refers to the deliberate process of improving these attributes through education, training, experience and other forms of capacity-building. It involves increasing the stock of skilled and knowledgeable individuals capable of supporting economic growth and sustainable development. Human capital represents the most valuable resource in the production process because, unlike physical resources, human beings possess the ability to learn, innovate, adapt and create solutions to emerging challenges. Investment in human capital development has long been recognized as a critical driver of educational advancement, economic transformation, and social progress. Ebisine (2015) opined that sustainable national development cannot be achieved without substantial investment in the education and development of people. Beyond its economic benefits, human capital development enhances individuals' understanding of themselves and their environment, improves quality of life, and generates broad social benefits for society (Febriyanti & Ihsani, 2019). It also promotes innovation, increases workforce productivity, and enhances organizational competitiveness. Consequently, organizations that invest in the

continuous development of their employees often experience higher levels of commitment, job satisfaction, and productivity.

The multidimensional nature of human capital has made it difficult to define comprehensively. Nevertheless, scholars generally agree that it comprises the knowledge, competencies, experiences, talents and creative abilities that individuals possess and apply to achieve organizational and societal goals. Amaechi (2024) described human capital as the collective intelligence, skills, expertise, and innovative capacities of individuals within an organization. These attributes enable organizations to adapt to change, generate new ideas, and sustain long-term growth. Human capital therefore represents the capacities acquired by individuals and groups that enable them to perform assigned responsibilities effectively and contribute to the achievement of predetermined objectives.

The growing recognition of the importance of human capital emerged from the realization that physical capital alone is insufficient for sustainable development. While infrastructure, equipment and technology are important resources, their effectiveness depends largely on the quality of the human resources available to utilize them. Many economists have argued that human capital is the most significant determinant of national development because it drives the accumulation and productive use of other forms of capital. Without skilled and knowledgeable individuals, investments in physical infrastructure and technology cannot yield optimal results. According to the OECD (2021), human capital development is a continuous process involving the acquisition and application of knowledge, skills, competencies and experiences for the creation of economic and social value. This process is essential for promoting sustainable national development and enhancing global competitiveness. Bayarystanova et al. (2014) viewed human capital development as the systematic enhancement of individuals' capabilities to enable them to perform effectively in modern economies. As labour markets become increasingly dynamic and technology-driven, the need for continuous learning and skills development has become more important than ever.

The significance of human capital development is further underscored by the World Bank, which identifies human capital as the largest contributor to economic growth among the major forms of capital. Human beings serve as the active agents who generate knowledge, mobilize resources, build institutions, and drive national development. Supporting this view, Bartolucci et al. (2023) argued that the true wealth of nations lies not in their physical resources but in the quality of their human resources. It is people who create, manage and utilize all other resources for productive purposes. Thus, the pursuit of sustainable

educational and economic development requires deliberate investment in lifelong learning and human capital development.

Human capital is the state of knowledge, skills, habits, social, and personality attributes including creativity, embodied in the ability to perform labour activity to produce goods and services that have economic value. Edison (2018) maintained that the theory of human capital is closely related to the study of human resources management and business administration. The original idea of human capital can be traced to Adam Smith (1776) in his book, titled "Wealth of Nations" written in the 18th century. Smith believed that, human capital is accumulated specific to the nature of the task or skills required for the task and the human capital accumulated for the task are valuable to many firms requiring the transferable skills, which is applied to job - assignment, wage dynamics, promotion dynamics incase firms. Thus, according to the above definitions, human capital is concerned with the stock of knowledge, skill, competitiveness and attributes embedded in an individual that facilitates the creation of personal, social, educational and economic wellbeing (wealth) of nations.

Becker in Edison (2018) observed that, human capital is similar to physical means of production. Backer further states that, one can invest in human capital through education, training, and medical treatment of which the output mainly depends partly on the rate of turn over or return to human capital investment. Thus, human capital is a means of production, of which additional investment yields additional output, hence, it is substituted not transferable as other factors of production like land, labour, or fixed capital. Therefore, education and training are investments that are intimately related, and are added to the productive level of any economy. Education is an important aspect of workforce and treated as renewable part of the productive force in a nation. Operationally, human capital refers to the stock of skills, knowledge, right values and attitudes which form an important component of the productive forces of an economy for developmental purposes, be it economic, political, or socio-cultural aspects of the people's life and development.

The Nigerian Education System

The Nigerian education system refers to the organized structure, policies, institutions, programmes and processes established by the government and other stakeholders to provide education and facilitate learning at all levels in Nigeria. It encompasses formal, non-formal and informal educational activities designed to develop the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and competencies required for individual and national development. The Nigerian education system is guided by the National Policy on Education and is structured to provide

opportunities for lifelong learning, human capital development, citizenship education, and socioeconomic advancement. It comprises various levels of education, including:

1. Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE)
2. Basic Education
3. Secondary Education (six years)
4. Tertiary Education
 - Universities
 - Polytechnics
 - Monotechnics
 - Colleges of Education
5. Adult and Non-Formal Education
6. Vocational and Technical Education
7. Special Education

According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014), the Nigerian education system is designed to serve as an instrument for national development by promoting the acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary for effective participation in society and the economy.

Managing Lifelong Learning as a Catalyst for Sustainable Human Capital Development in the Nigerian Education System

Managing lifelong learning for sustainable human capital development in the Nigerian education system entails the deliberate planning, coordination, implementation and evaluation of educational policies and programmes that promote continuous learning and skills acquisition throughout an individual's life. The concept is rooted in the recognition that learning does not end with formal schooling but continues across different stages of life in response to changing social, economic and technological demands. Lifelong learning has become increasingly important in contemporary societies because knowledge and skills rapidly become obsolete, requiring individuals to continuously update their competencies to remain productive and relevant (OECD, 2021). Within the Nigerian education system, effective management of lifelong learning involves creating opportunities for everyone to engage in continuous education and skills enhancement initiatives. Such efforts are essential for developing human capital, which Becker in Billet (2018) described as the stock of

knowledge, skills, competencies and abilities that individuals acquire through education and training and subsequently utilize to enhance productivity and socioeconomic development.

The Nigerian education system occupies a central position in human capital formation because it serves as the primary mechanism through which citizens acquire the knowledge and competencies required for national development. However, the rapid transformation of labour markets, technological innovations and globalization have exposed the limitations of traditional educational approaches that emphasize certification rather than continuous learning and practical skills acquisition. Educational managers are increasingly expected to adopt policies and practices that support lifelong learning as a means of equipping learners with transferable skills such as critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, communication, collaboration, and digital competence. According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014), education is an instrument for national development and should facilitate the acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competencies necessary for individual and societal advancement. This objective can only be achieved when educational institutions embrace lifelong learning principles that encourage continuous knowledge renewal and skills development.

Sustainable human capital development requires educational systems to move beyond the provision of basic literacy and academic qualifications toward fostering a culture of continuous learning. Schultz in Billet (2018) argued that investments in education and training enhance the productive capacities of individuals and generate significant returns for society. This perspective underscores the importance of managing lifelong learning opportunities within schools, tertiary institutions, and adult education programmes. In Nigeria, such management involves curriculum innovation, integration of information and communication technology, continuous professional development for teachers, strengthening vocational and technical education, and establishing partnerships between educational institutions and industry. These measures help ensure that learners acquire relevant competencies that align with labour market demands and national development priorities. Furthermore, lifelong learning contributes to employability, entrepreneurship, social inclusion and active citizenship, all of which are critical components of sustainable human capital development (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022).

Challenges of Managing Lifelong Learning for Sustainable Human Capital Development in the Nigerian Education System

i. Inadequate Funding of Education

One of the major challenges confronting lifelong learning in Nigeria is inadequate funding of the education sector. Insufficient financial resources limit the provision of learning facilities, instructional materials, technological infrastructure and capacity-building programmes necessary for continuous learning. Poor funding also affects the implementation of adult education, vocational training and professional development programmes that are essential for human capital development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

ii. Weak Educational Infrastructure

Many educational institutions in Nigeria operate with inadequate classrooms, laboratories, workshops, libraries and information technology facilities. The absence of modern learning infrastructure hinders the effective delivery of lifelong learning programmes and limits opportunities for skills acquisition and continuous professional development.

iii. Digital Divide and Limited Access to Technology

The increasing reliance on technology for learning has exposed disparities in access to digital resources. Many schools, especially those in rural areas, lack internet connectivity, computers and other digital learning tools. This digital divide restricts learners' access to online education, digital literacy programmes, and lifelong learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2023).

iv. Inadequate Teacher Capacity Development

Teachers play a central role in promoting lifelong learning. However, many educators have limited access to continuous professional development programmes that would enable them to update their pedagogical, technological and professional skills. This challenge affects the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of lifelong learning initiatives.

v. Curriculum-Industry Mismatch

A significant challenge in the Nigerian education system is the disconnect between educational curricula and labour market demands. Many graduates possess theoretical knowledge but lack practical and employability skills required by employers. This mismatch contributes to unemployment and undermines sustainable human capital development (World Bank, 2024).

vi. Policy Inconsistency and Poor Implementation

Although Nigeria has several policies that support education and skills development, implementation remains weak. Frequent policy changes, inadequate monitoring, and poor

coordination among stakeholders often hinder the achievement of lifelong learning objectives.

vii. High Rate of Poverty

Poverty limits access to educational opportunities and lifelong learning programmes. Many individuals are unable to pursue further education because of financial constraints. This situation reduces opportunities for continuous skills acquisition and human capital enhancement.

CONCLUSION

Managing lifelong learning is fundamental to sustainable human capital development in the Nigerian education system. In an era characterized by rapid technological advancement, globalization, and changing workforce demands, continuous learning and skills development have become indispensable for individual and national progress. Although challenges such as inadequate funding, among others, continue to impede the realization of lifelong learning objectives, strategic educational management and stakeholder commitment can address these constraints. Therefore, educational institutions, policymakers and other stakeholders must prioritize lifelong learning initiatives to develop a skilled, adaptable, and innovative workforce capable of driving sustainable socioeconomic development in Nigeria.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Increase government funding for education and lifelong learning programmes.
2. Improve educational infrastructure, including classrooms, libraries, laboratories and workshops.
3. Expand access to digital technologies and internet facilities in schools and learning centres.
4. Strengthen continuous professional development programmes for teachers and educational administrators.
5. Regularly review curricula to align educational content with labour market and industry needs.
6. Ensure consistent implementation and monitoring of educational policies related to lifelong learning.

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