

## **Some Critical Reflections on Lifelong Learning Policy in Turkey**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the Lifelong Learning Strategy document which was on the agenda during the European Union harmonization process of Turkey. The public policies in the document, regarding non-formal and adult education, will be analyzed. Lifelong Learning strategy became a current issue in the last stage of neoliberal transformation of education and occurs within the context of neoliberal transformation which began many years ago in the educational field. At the same time, Lifelong Learning also contains some dimensions which strengthen liberalization and commercialization in formal education. Neoliberal transformation of education has been expressed through “structured adjustment program,” directives of the World Bank imposed over thirty years and through the European Union’s “harmonization” process enforced steadily within the past 10 years. During this process, although transformation of formal education was given priority and the adult education field kept its character with the globalization discourse, terms such as “learning society” and “knowledge society” were imposed, while commodification in adult and non-formal education fields was not a large factor. Thus market driven vocational training discourses were not regulated properly through non formal education. The strategy document actually was formulated to reorganize this field. This article analyzes the effects of neoliberal globalization over adult education in Turkey, including reflections on the interconnection of this document with general European Lifelong Learning policies.*

**Key Words:** *Lifelong Learning, adult education, non-formal education, globalization, neoliberalism*

## **Context- Neoliberal Globalization and Lifelong Learning**

The “Lifelong Learning” (LL) notion, which is at the center of global educational policies today, originally appeared in education at the beginning of the last century, with a liberal, humanistic emphasis regarding non-vocational forms. It was conceptualized as education and learning which were not limited by age, time, space and access, and is a limitless learning process which develops humans in all aspects. These first thoughts of liberal educators such as Yeaxle, Lindeman and Dewey have continuously been reinterpreted and have evolved, guiding educational and training policies over time (Ayhan, 1995; Belenger, 1994; Boshier, 1998; Field, 2001; Sayilan, 2001). LL has been used as an umbrella term since 1960’s regarding educational and training policies. Although it contained some philosophically ambiguous content during this period, it generally conformed to liberal humanism, and it has been connected to an approach which tries to compensate for educational inequalities. In the scope of welfare state lifelong education and national developmentalism after the World War II, LL was adopted as a perspective to prepare and present “access opportunities” regarding education and training for everyone. In the climate of organized modernity<sup>i</sup> which attributes support to public education and gives a crucial role to the state regarding training of the citizens, it is an optimistic approach which pursues equal opportunities in education; it broadens the function and scope of adult learning.

The Lifelong Learning term appeared with a new formulation after “education” was replaced in policy language by “learning,” since the 1990s and the earlier wave of neoliberal globalization. Lifelong Learning, in conformity with the spirit of the neoliberal period, shed much of its humanist origins it had previously expressed and became totally economy driven, and gained a momentum determining formal, non-formal and adult education systems. On the other hand it has become a sign indicator of a paradigmatic shift in the educational field associated with obscure meanings involved in the transition from education to learning. Today, Lifelong Learning is introduced along with a range of slogans, such as the “knowledge economy” and “learning society” which are interrelated globally and which strengthen each other, and also

operate in the spirit of “advertising” and “branding” which is characteristic of the market ethic.

In the background of this conceptual change exists a human capital development approach of developed capitalist countries (such as the EU and the OECD) steering the neoliberal globalization processes with global actors such as World Bank (WB). The prominence of human capital approaches dissolved the historical social gains of adult education and the non-formal education field on global scale and instead, vocational training became primary. Adult education, shaped by the matrix of state, civil society and market in developed capitalist countries, suggests “reproduction of the system itself and also solutions for life-world” (Welton, 1997: 27). Around the world, a significant leverage of modernization politics, mass literacy campaigns, agricultural extension and community development, had become effective tools for civic education. With the dominance of the human capital approach, assuming adult education as a productivity tool for economic activities became widespread. The structural drive of capitalism aimed to transform human capacity to human capital, and found a way to realize itself in the neoliberal period. Vocational training always had especially strong bonds with the market and employment and has been adapted to the needs of flexible production, thus becoming a legitimizer of flexible labour.

Today Lifelong Learning, with a new meaning within the human capital approach, increasingly works as a strategy that organizes and adjusts global educational systems. LL has broken away from broader humanitarian and social implications, and has focused only on regulation of employment. Thus, while the aim of maximizing marketing capacity and skills is placed at the heart of individual learning and market characteristics, the ethic of competition, quality and productivity are placed at the centre of human development. A perspective where each individual is motivated to maximize his/her individual learning for the sake of his/her own interests replaces social priorities and social needs. The reductionist human capital driven, Lifelong Learning strategies is directed by the World Bank in developing countries and by OECD in developed capitalist countries; this fact has significant implications for

individuals, communities and countries. When “individual development” has been characterized as a way to quickly create more effective qualification of individuals within the scope of productivity strategies (Koorsgaard, 1997), those who remained outside these processes were completely excluded. Thus it is not striking that one of main topics of the Lifelong Learning strategy is the problem of exclusion/inclusion. The futures of the countries became more dependent upon the skills and capacity of populations that can compete in global labor markets. Education and training today serve as a threshold for entrance into global markets which demand adults who continue Lifelong Learning processes. At the same time, educational and training standards that LL strategies forced, pave the way for the mobilization of the brain drain (qualified labor force which global markets need) from less developed regions to the developed ones. As such, countries today are forced to form Lifelong Learning systems that focus on continuous training in order to survive in international competition.

Today countries have to do this under less advantageous conditions than the previous period (see Steward, 1995; Nuscheler, 2002). While on the one hand they have to deal with the problems in school systems produced as result of deterioration of public education, increasing inequality and exclusion in education. On the other hand, they have to compete by educating the qualified labor force on a global scale. Indeed, Lifelong Learning politics is realized under the dynamics of “uneven and combined development” of capitalism. Developing countries which faced unequal development became more unequal in the processes which individualized learning and dissolved public education. Therefore current policies which are subsumed under Lifelong Learning and which lead to neoliberal restructuring, have caused a curious interpretation of Lifelong Learning in the world. While in developing countries “the right to Lifelong Learning and education” that focuses on basic learning needs and the right to education are emphasized (Torres, 2002; UNESCO, 2010). It is not a coincidence for developed capitalist countries (OECD and EU) to formulate Lifelong Learning strategy as part of the “knowledge economy” since this formulation strengthens them in global competition, or at least in the rhetorical completion for positive attention from the world’s bankers.

Today Lifelong Learning strategy for the EU has aimed to produce a highly qualified labor force in global competition. Some partly ambiguous definitions mentioned in various EU papers during 1990's (such as White Paper Education and Training: Towards Learning Society, European Commission, 1995) were made explicit and clarified with the Lisbon 2000 goals and the Lifelong Learning Memorandum (European Commission 2001). On the one hand, it was aimed at increasing economic, social and political integration under the concept of the knowledge economy (Smith, 2002; Borg and Mayo; 2005). Also, the aim was, according to the Lisbon Summit goals of re-making Europe, "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (Green, 2005). In realizing the knowledge economy, a strategic role was given to educational and training policies. Determined as a specific model of the knowledge economy and the knowledge society, Lifelong Learning has played a regulatory role for organizing common educational and training basis of the EU.

The EU also needs a Lifelong Learning strategy for adapting the given labor forces to the qualifications and skills required by flexible production around its territory. Thus it is aimed to connect and interconnect all over the continent. Also, it aims to form the substructure of developing common certification standards through formal, all non-formal and informal learning webs, which will provide continuous skilling and re-skilling that the market and economy demands. Under EU conditions where there is no problem of access to basic and advanced education; where varied and widespread learning opportunities with new technologies are on the agenda; and where informal learning is part of formal learning it seems that LL strategy is in accordance with EU position in global competition and objective interests. The European Commission (EC) under these conditions determines steering principles of member country policies for creating a European educational domain. The EU uses criteria and indicators for monitoring the performance of member countries. Various structures, mechanisms and processes are predicted for the "Europeanization" of education (Hake, 2005; Knoll, 2004). Each member country realizes these targets according to its

national educational systems and needs. Therefore, the arrangement and organization of education and training under Lifelong Learning system differs in relation to countries that have different and varying social, cultural and political traditions. Today European LLL regions contain many different models (Green, 2000; 2005; Riddell, et al, 2012). Among all differences it seems that the basic feature of EU LL models work to emphasize the strategic role of governments which realize the policies based on motivating individuals to learn and to be extrinsically rewarded (through tax discounts or learning permission) instead of treating education as a public responsibility and a social right. At this point in spite of all the advantages that the information technologies provide, we may claim that the individualization of learning, regarding who will learn what and where, determined by markets, will give rise to the situation where the social class system determines the structure. A Europe designed as a Lifelong Learning space determines the way for neoliberal transformation of educational systems in countries such as Turkey, which is a paradigmatic example.

The mystified claim that information technologies changed the nature of education within the scope of globalization in adult education and non-formal education encourages the transition from “education” to “learning.” The dissolution of public adult education is thus accelerated. In spite of democratic implications, it is difficult to understand electronic learning and distance education, apart from material/objective conditions of access to these opportunities. Therefore, it is evident that the emphasis on the significance of information technologies accelerates the transition from social responsibility in education, to mere individual preferences and responsibilities. Hence today after the collapse of the public sector, globally, social targets and programs of adult education are left to civil and voluntary movements and vocational training, while qualification is connected to international standards and market demands. In the globalization period, while adult education is globalized, it is also commercialized. This transformation is shaped both by the human capital approach and Lifelong Learning policies. While human capital was connected openly with employment policies of market and profit drives, Lifelong Learning originally realized its aim through the emphasis on the eagerness of individual to learn.

## **Lifelong Learning Policy in Turkey**

Although the engagement of Turkey into Lifelong Learning concepts is a new development (2009), a lifelong education perspective has an older history. The notion of Lifelong education which vaguely entered into educational discourse during 1970s and which was used as an integrating tool for formal, non-formal and informal education during the 1980s, has been introduced into the vocational training context, which is employment driven with human capital approach in 2000s (Duman, 2005). Transition to Lifelong Learning from Lifelong Education was actually carried to the agenda during the EU harmonization process and played a direct and crucial role in reshaping the non-formal and the adult education field. Thus, the adult education field has also been adapted rapidly to neoliberal transformation which had continued for a long time in the school system.

Today the LL Strategy Documents (MoNE, 2009) and Action Plan (MoNE, 2014-2018) which regulate restructuring of non-formal and adult education on the LL basis are formulated generally in line with Lisbon goals. The department of non-formal education under the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) is restructured as Lifelong Learning during the same period. The national public education system in Turkey consists of two parts as formal and non-formal. Today there are five big public education institutions which provide education and training under Lifelong Learning on a national scale. These institutions educate nearly three million adults annually and preserve their public features only in appearance, not in reality.<sup>ii</sup> Opening and organizing courses, determining curriculum, monitoring and evaluating courses is conducted by the Ministry, centrally. Besides, there are a smaller number of public and private institutions, municipalities and NGO's which provide LL opportunities (Yıldız, 2012). The Lifelong Learning Strategy Document is generated for the restructuring of both public and private adult education and the non-formal education field.

The foundation for the Strategy Document is mainstream globalization discourse and the key concept here is "change." The document highlights how learning the "Developments regarding information and

communication technologies which change living, learning and working styles,” and by how learning should continue for life (MoNE, 2009: 3). Additionally, lifelong learning discourse is strengthened by using the proverb of learning from the “cradle to the grave,” which is part of our traditional and authentic learning culture.<sup>iii</sup>

The target of the Strategy Document, in line with Lisbon goals and European LL space contains perspectives formulated as “forming a Lifelong Learning system meeting the needs and expectations of Turkish society and making this system work and sustain” (MoNE, 2009: 3). Sixteen priorities regarding the realization of the target are related to creating mechanisms (restructuring, arrangement, organization and monitoring) in order to preserve the system and make it function. The connection between employment and education is emphasized as the foundation of the strategy document. This can be detected clearly in the references of the projects excluded in coordination with the EU. It is noticed that the focus of creating a Lifelong Learning system is forming a formal, non-formal and adult education structure, in which the relation with employment lies at the center.

Some democratic and political concepts of European LLL space such as creating democratic public life and active citizenship were generally ignored except in some trivial references. This fact is not surprising at all because EU negotiations which started in 2005 are continued by neo-liberal and neo-Islamic AKP (Justice and Development Party) governments which has been in power for the last 12 years. These negotiations, which aim to restructure all fields comprehensively, are carried on very slowly, while those regarding education and culture proceed relatively faster. The reason for this is AKP’s enthusiastic support regarding the EU’s liberalizing approach to education. It is proceeded considerably toward transforming public and “statist” formal and non-formal education systems into market oriented models with the help of successive neoliberal “reforms” (Sayılan, 2009; Sayılan and Türkmen, 2013; İnal, 2012; Yücesan-Özdemir and Özdemir, 2012). On the other hand, under AKP rule, which has become steadily authoritarian, it seems impossible to realize some European targets which broaden political democracy, such as active citizenship. Thus, it is

noted that the existing LL perspective and discourse of Turkey is more reductionist than the EU perspective and discourse, and through LL it is aimed at establishing market-driven vocational education and training systems formally and non-formally. Hence some steps to strengthen the employment-education connection are taken rapidly. Many multipartite projects, which are conducted under the name of “modernization of vocational education and training,” are incorporated under LL concepts, a professional competence council and system is structured, and a group of social partners coming from business circles, are created. A secondary stage of formal education for meeting flexible labor force demand of markets was adapted to the process in 2012 (Sayılan and Türkmen, 2013; Bulut, 2012). Privatization has accelerated in vocational and technical secondary level education. The LL 2014 action plan is formulated actually in order to adapt non-formal and adult education field to this process (MoNE, 2014).

There is no doubt that the connection between education and employment, which this reductive and instrumental LL strategy prescribes, is directly relevant to the objective interests of the capitalist class. But there is a significant problem regarding the reality of Turkish capitalism; chronic unemployment, huge increase in jobless graduates, an economy which does not create employment, and austerity policies which are always on the agenda. Additionally, problems created by the dissolution of public education increase educational inequalities, decrease the quality of education, schools and courses left to their fate and illiterate or the poorly educated large masses continue to grow. In this situation, can the real aim of prioritizing vocational education and training be directed to a broadening educational market? Today everyone in Turkey knows that the competence to be employed, in other words, to have knowledge, skill and capacity, are infrequently the main requirements for getting the job. To get the job one has to find a hole in the cliental network. Thus participating in LLL systems which aim to build a competitive knowledge economy for EU, still partly—even if capitalism in crisis increases jobless graduates, they can have some objective basis. But here in Turkey people basically need qualified education, knowledge and skills to increase basic life competence, meaningful social and political literacy toward a capacity for understanding the

change occurring around them continuously. As a result, the LLL strategy introduced new actors to the extended certificate and diploma market by focusing on vocational education and training.

The Strategy Document mentions the aim of the “information society” as a part of LL discourse but without any real seriousness. Neither political actors and university, nor research institutions, believe that this target will be realized. It is used only rhetorically. The budget allocated to scientific research, R&D activities and substructure in Turkey is a symbolic amount (the share in 2013 central administrative budget expenditure is 1.28%).<sup>iv</sup> Also, there is a kind of Islamic siege that does not support scientific thought and research. Thus under the present conditions that aim to raise highly qualified people for a “Lisbon” based knowledge economy seems to be an unrealistic dream.

That aforementioned documents follow the European LL approach which was based on the concept of the inquiring and curious individual. There is no corresponding concept in Turkey because where the budget is continuously tightened to a point that makes it impossible to maintain state educational and cultural policies.<sup>v</sup> No investments are made to increase and diversify learning spaces or opportunities. On the other hand, under these conditions, existing cultural and art institutions press activities and media work under censorship and political pressure. There is neither a condition in which individual learning is encouraged nor the opportunities for it. Besides, increasing social partners out of capital and business circles in the scope of LL are not very eager to support independent learners; they see this as a cost and do their best to hinder the education of their student workers. Within this entire picture the individual development target is connected to vocational skills. In a system where self-realization is evaluated along with productivity and participation criteria, in a situation where social and cultural alternatives decrease drastically, participation in religious and vocational courses is encouraged. Thus, not only are LL culture targets unreal, but also, there is an ideological assault that threatens individualization, freedoms, civil rights, freedom of choice, secular life forms, democratic public life and gender equality. Therefore “learning festival” campaigns for spreading

LL culture cannot become anything else but a part of public relation activities of the government.<sup>vi</sup>

In individual-driven LL strategy and action plans, educational inequalities are mentioned superficially under the “disadvantageous groups” definition, which includes women, elderly people, the disabled, seasonal agricultural workers, chronically unemployed and convicts. It is unclear which tools and supports will be provided for the educational opportunities of these groups. Besides, no regulatory principle is proposed to this end. These documents do not mention any notion of social justice and equality in education and also appear blind to general social issues. The only alternative actualized and extended, in practice, is family trainings which are subsumed under non-formal education. This program designed for reproduction of conservative-religious family patterns and life styles is used to consolidate the project of the transformation of society by the Islamic conservative government.

Documents directing Lifelong Learning policy in Turkey are formulated exactly in accordance with the hegemonic neoliberal trends of the period. Some principles of the Turkish educational system, such as equality to access, educational right, equal opportunity, scientific education, coeducation and universal education can facilitate adaptation to the EU educational field, but all these principles also suffer erosion from liberalization and Islamization of education as well. The most striking problem in this entire picture is that the government lost its sense of reality as a result of looking at the Turkish reality through globalization and the EU lens. Although Turkey as a candidate country locates itself in the periphery of the EU politically, economic, social and cultural indicators denote that it must be classified among developing countries, the “south countries.”<sup>vii</sup> Not accepting this fact leads to an inability to find realist solutions to the problems Turkey is facing. Lisbon goals are meaningful within the European reality. Therefore, for Turkey, where literacy rates, rates of participation in education at all levels, life expectancy and national income per capital are low (MoNE, 2014), in order to be on course with the EU, it is required to have very strong justice and equality policies in education, as well as cultural and social policies to this end. Of course, the EU does not demand these policies.

However various alternatives exist in the EU region (Green, 2000; 2005; Riddel, et al, 2012). Thus to transform a central statist and public system, by liberalizing it in conformity with market demands, is in no sense realistic. Turkey probably might have generated an alternative critical course emphasizing “right to Lifelong Learning,” but neoliberal and Islamic ideology has preempted this already.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that the educational field has been placed completely into the social class system under the neoliberal and Islamic siege during the last ten years. Within this system, where only the relatively rich can have access to qualified education, non-formal and adult education fields have been restructured in order to reproduce the system itself. It has been not only the demand of the market, but was also made functional for the Islamization of life-styles, social and cultural life. It is obvious that educational inequalities will sharpen more as a result of privatization and marketization trends in vocational training, public adult education and non-formal education, which are aimed at the general laborer as well as poor and disadvantaged groups. With the LLL Strategy Document and Action Plan, the importance of non-formal and adult education with provisions for equal opportunity have dramatically decreased, along with the complementary, and persistent shortages of formal education.

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<sup>i</sup> See Wagner, P. (1994). *A sociology of modernity*. Routledge, London & New York.

<sup>ii</sup> Public lifelong learning institutions and the number of them are as follows: 1) Popular Education Centre (978), 2) Vocational Education Centre (332), 3) Further Practical Art Institute (15), 4) Tourism Education Centre (10), 5) Open Schools (primary and secondary level). 65.1% of nonformal courses opened in 2013 was organized by the Ministry and relevant institutions/organizations, 21.9% by municipalities, 7.3% by NGOs, and 5.6% by the private sector. TÜİK/ Turkish Statistical Institute, Research on Non Formal Education Courses. See <http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=16123> (14 October 2014)

<sup>iii</sup> “learn from cradle to grave” is a Turkish proverb. At the same time in the final report of The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (Confinteá VI, 2009), Lifelong learning “from cradle to grave” is a philosophy, a conceptual framework and an organising principle of all forms of education, based on inclusive, emancipatory, humanistic and democratic values; it is all-encompassing and integral to the vision of a knowledge-based society. (See UNESCO, CONFINTEA VI Final Report. Belem-Brazil 2010).

<sup>iv</sup> See Turkish Statistical Institute/TÜİK

<http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=16199> (TÜİK News, 18.6.2014)

<sup>v</sup> The budget of education and culture have decreased permanently. While the share of the general budget of education in 2013 is 3.24 per cent, it is 45 per thousand for

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the Ministry of Culture. See Grand National Assembly of Turkey: 2013 Budget  
<http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/butce/2013/belgeler.htm>

<sup>vi</sup> Ministry of National Education, Lifelong Learning Directorate General is organizing a campaign “to create a culture of lifelong learning” festivities. See  
<http://hbogm.meb.gov.tr/>

<sup>vii</sup> Average years of schooling is 7.6 years, above 15 years old illiterate (4.9%), there are 3 million 784 667 thousand people literate but no school completed and also the rate of participation in lifelong learning 3.2% (MoNE, 2014). Also the percentage of internet usage 53.4 %. According to the Information Technology Usage Survey on Households, the proportion of households with internet access throughout Turkey in April 2014 is 60.2%. (TSI -Turkish Statistical Institute- Bulletin August 22, 2014).

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