



Lifelong Learning Policies and Provisions for Senior Citizens in India: An Overview

Ruchi Mittal^{1*} and Pradeep Kumar Misra¹

¹Department of Education, CCS University, Meerut-250004, India.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author RM managed the literature and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author PKM reviewed the draft and given it a final shape. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The population of senior citizens is on the rise in India. Keeping senior citizens engaged and active throughout their lives is a challenge that can be met by offering need-based lifelong learning opportunities to them. Senior citizens, in addition to their will and efforts, need support from the government and community to engage in lifelong learning in a productive and meaningful manner. Therefore, the right kind of policies and opportunities can help senior citizens practice lifelong learning and have maximum benefit. This paper analyses significant policies and provisions related to senior citizens' lifelong learning since India's independence in 1947. Based on this analysis, the paper suggests potential measures to realize the vision of 'Lifelong Learning for All Senior Citizens' in India.

Keywords: Lifelong learning; senior citizens; policies; provisions; India.

1. BACKGROUND

The elderly in India have always been treated with great respect and occupied a prominent

family position. But the increasing population of elders in Indian demography has become a potential issue for policymakers. According to a 2016 report by the Ministry for Statistics and

*Corresponding author: Email: ruchivasu@yahoo.com;

Program Implementation, there are nearly 104 million senior citizens (aged 60 years or above) in India (53 million females, 51 million males) [1]. A report by the United Nations Population Fund and Help Age India suggests that the number of senior citizens in India is expected to grow to 173 million by 2026 [2]. This aging population presents two different challenges before policymakers (i) helping such a significant proportion of society to sustain their quality of life for a long time, and (ii) finding ways to use the productivity and experiences of this population.

Aging is a natural, ongoing, universal, irreversible, and heterogeneous phenomenon that has been a cause of concern since early times [3]. Not only biologically but aging also affects other aspects of life, such as affective, social, personal, cultural, and economic conditions [4]. Many terms and circumlocution for old people are used worldwide. These terms include the *seniors* or *senior citizens* in America, *old-age pensioners* in Britain, and *older adults* or *elders* in other countries. The United Nations has agreed that 65+ years may be denoted as old age [5]. At the same time, the WHO recognized that old age had been defined not by years but by new roles, loss of previous roles, or inability to make an active contribution to society. Hence, it can be said that the definition of old age continues to change. But policymakers in India tried to come up with a definition of *senior citizens*.

According to the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 in India, senior citizen means any person who attained the age of 60 years or above. In legislation, this term applies to the age at which pensions, social security, or medical benefits for the elderly become available [6]. From a societal perspective, senior citizens are those who became free from their responsibilities up to some extent and are not engaged in any obligatory work. Senior citizens are generally perceived as persons contributing less and needing investment, but this is a wrong perception. Senior citizens' life and work experiences and human values may significantly nurture a society with more tolerance, patience, and perseverance. Keeping senior citizens engaged and active throughout their lives is a challenge that can be met by offering need-based lifelong learning opportunities to them.

2. LIFELONG LEARNING: A VIABLE APPROACH TO KEEP INDIVIDUALS ACTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE

The concept of lifelong learning stresses that learning and education are related to life as a whole, not just to work, and learning throughout life is a continuum that should run from the cradle to the grave. Jarvis [7] and Özcan [8] defined lifelong learning as a complement of theoretical and individual learning. According to a similar definition, lifelong learning was defined as all activities that include formal, prevalent, and informal learning that continue from birth to death, and has a comprehensive and visionary structure. Lifelong learning is crucial for individuals of all ages and holds an array of benefits for them and society, as stated by Candy and Crebert [9].

Lifelong learning is characterized by its unstructured nature, and is based on the philosophy that education should be openly and easily accessible to all at any time of life; it establishes that self-improvement and enrichment are goals that are equally as important as the need to update professional and vocational skill (p.7).

Dinevski and Dinevski [10] described lifelong learning as an approach that provides equal opportunities to individuals by removing restrictions related to location, time, age, and socioeconomic status. For example, learning had been found as an essential inhibitor of cognitive decline among older adults [11]. Ozdamli and Ozdal [12] stated that every individual needs lifelong learning to fulfill their occupational and individual needs. They also indicated that changing world conditions and developing technology makes lifelong learning essential for all individuals. Global research reveals that lifelong learning, which is an ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional reasons, helps individuals by:

- Retaining knowledge, skills, and interests in their lives [13].
- Engaging them with the right labor market skills and increasing their chances of generation of new employment opportunities.
- Increasing their quality of life.
- Improving physical and mental health [14].

- Increasing their health knowledge and changes in health-related behaviors such as reduced smoking and increased exercise [15].
- Acquiring newer skills and qualifications and bringing more employment opportunities and higher average wages [16].
- Increasing their social connections and creating social networks for them outside of their workplace [17].

These benefits, from lifelong learning, can be much more significant for senior citizens. Continuing lifelong learning, whether situational, formal, informal, or non-formal, can keep them motivated and engaged to make amends in life. This learning, which can be availed anywhere in any form, offers them many opportunities and benefits. Neurological research showed that intellectual power, which assists in maintaining the mental function, can be boosted by learning in later life. The study further claimed that learning also helped reverse memory decline [18,19]. Therefore, it can be argued that lifelong learning can support senior citizens in terms of social inclusion, active citizenship, personal development, self-sustainability, competitiveness, and employability.

3. LIFELONG LEARNING FOR SENIOR CITIZENS: POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

According to Erikson [20], senior citizens live in a state of ego integrity versus despair. Those senior citizens who have ego integrity look back with satisfaction and better accept life and death. In comparison, those in despair, have feelings of anger, bitterness, depression, inadequacy, failure, and fear of death. In such a condition, a viable tool is required for senior citizens to balance their life adequately. Lifelong learning can be one such tool, as observed by WHO [21].

“Continuous engagement in lifelong learning is one such solution for senior citizens to maintain a higher quality of life, however education and learning are assumed to be important factors in facilitating participation and allowing older adults to enjoy a positive quality of life as they grow older” (p.16).

It is often assumed that lifelong learning helps senior citizens to seek a better perspective of their life's meaning and direction. Highlighting the benefits offered by lifelong opportunities to

senior citizens, a document from the United Nations [22] suggests.

“The potential of older persons is a powerful basis for future development. This enables society to rely increasingly on the skills, experience and wisdom of older persons, not only to take the lead in their own betterment but also to participate actively in that society as a whole” (p. 3).

Senior citizens often have restricted constructive abilities and are more receptive to disease, syndromes, injuries, and sickness than younger adults. Lifelong learning is helpful for them to overcome these and many other challenges, such as:

- Providing continuous stimuli to give purpose to them and increasing their quality of life.
- Keeping them busy during all of the free time they inherit.
- Shaping their perceptions towards life and giving positivity for later life.
- Improving their cognitive performance [23] and reducing risk for dementia [24].
- Making them socially active and helping them adopt new technologies.
- Enhancing their self-reliance, self-sufficiency, coping strategies, and social relationships [25].
- Helping them to accept more responsibility for their life and increasing their independence.
- Helping them to make the right choices, taking rational decisions, and having better planning.
- Helping them to be less demanding for family and community due to active, healthy, and well-informed life.
- Making them a vital contributor to community well-being through their accumulated life experience, expertise, and voluntary activities [26,27].
- Improving their well-being and mental health [28,15].

Considering such multifarious benefits it is obvious to expect that senior citizens must embrace lifelong learning enthusiastically and effectively. But it is not so easy in practice. The reason is that almost every single capacity of human-beings starts declining after 60 or 65 years. This decline in mental and physical capabilities lowers senior citizens quality of life and reduces their functional independence and

learning ability, as noted by Knox [29], "Age trends in learning ability are associated with such factors as physical condition, social class, and personality" (p. 422).

Knox [29] observed that senior citizens have cognitive limitations with growing age. He also noted that some factors seem to contribute to the deterioration of problem-solving performance in old age, which includes a decline in short-term memory capacity; increased difficulty in organizing complex tasks; greater interference from previous learning; more difficulty in disregarding irrelevant aspects; and reduced ability to discriminate between different stimuli. This is a well-known fact that senior citizens are, generally, an under-represented group in the learning sector and face many challenges while participating in lifelong learning programs and activities. Some of the widely reported challenges include:

- Acceptance to prevalent perceptions that older people cannot learn or they have no need to learn.
- Lack of confidence, interest, and motivation to learn.
- Avoidance to new commitments after a lifetime of work.
- Fear of experimentation and failure.
- Language problems in learning new courses or activities.
- Financial constraints in joining new courses.
- Lack of time to attend learning programs due to family engagements and responsibilities.
- Physical ailments like lack of hearing and vision, fatigue, impaired memory
- The unfriendly physical and social environment of educational institutions
- Lack of flexibility in terms of educational provisions, curriculum, and delivery of courses.
- Inadequate information and guidance about lifelong learning opportunities.

The majority of senior citizens go through phases of boredom, loneliness, and helplessness. And these phases also affect their chances to pursue lifelong learning. Besides, tendencies like not intermingling with others, particularly youths, and homesickness also play a negative role. Patience and curiosity are necessary for any learning, and senior citizens often lack on both these counts. Lack of motivation and confidence, and unwillingness to change also block their roads to new learning opportunities. Senior citizens have

also been seen feeling reluctant and fearful to use technologies, a gateway, to practice lifelong learning these days.

Social conditions and lifestyle factors are significant for practicing any learning, and this is equally applicable for senior citizens. Generally, it is assumed that a healthy lifestyle, high social position, regular contacts with other people, and participation in social and cultural activities are crucial factors for a prosperous old age. Adding to this, an active lifestyle in old age prevents loss of functions [30,31]. In short, learning at old age is a question of social, cultural, and pedagogical conditions more and less of biological aging. Thus we can realize that practicing lifelong learning is not an easy task for senior citizens. Besides their will and efforts, they also need support at policy levels to overcome various challenges and fulfilling their lifelong learning needs. The right kind of policies and opportunities can help senior citizens practice lifelong learning and take maximum benefit from it. Let's see what are the major policies and provisions for the lifelong learning of senior citizens in India.

4. LIFELONG LEARNING FOR SENIOR CITIZENS IN INDIA: POLICIES AND PROVISIONS

From the beginning of Indian civilization, the ultimate goals of education were self-realization and self-liberation. Ancient Indian texts (like *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and *Puranas*) gave prominence to self-directed and self-generated learning for the self-growth and self-enrichment of every individual till the end of their life. The concept of lifelong learning may be called a modified version of past generations' self-directed learning. In independent India, the first formal recognition of lifelong learning came in 1966 when the Indian Education Commission (1964-66), also known as Kothari Commission, observed that education does not end with schooling but is a lifelong process. Commission's report advocated that the adult needs an understanding of the rapidly changing world and society's growing complexities for his enrichment, professional advancement, and effective participation in social and political life [32].

After India's independence in 1947, several initiatives and programs have been visualized by different agencies to promote lifelong learning among senior citizens. All these efforts are built upon the premises of Article 41 of Directive

Principles of State Policy in India. According to this Article, "the State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and public assistance in case of old age" [33]. At present, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment coordinates different programs to be undertaken by other ministries to support senior citizens in India. A summarized account of significant initiatives, schemes, and policies focusing on lifelong learning of senior citizens is as follows.

4.1 The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act [34]

This Act is credited with defining senior citizens in India. According to the Act, a "senior citizen" means any person being a citizen of India, who has attained the age of sixty years or above and "welfare" means provision for food, health care, recreation centers, and other amenities necessary for senior citizens.

4.2 National Policy on Older Persons (NPOP)

The NPOP, announced by the Government of India, has identified several areas of intervention like financial security, healthcare, nutrition, shelter, education, welfare, and protection of life and property for the well-being of older persons. This policy emphasized to create awareness regarding elderly persons to help them to lead productive and independent lives [35].

4.3 National Council for Older Persons (NCOP)

This council has been constituted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to operationalize the National Policy on Older Persons. Council has suggested several steps to make old age productive and engaging. Council also highlighted that undertaking any work or activity is in the best interest of older persons.

4.4 National Policy for Senior Citizens (NPSC)

This policy, formulated in 2011, mainly focused on supporting and assisting organizations that provide counseling, career guidance, and training services for the productive aging of senior citizens. This policy aimed to create avenues for continuity in employment and post-retirement

opportunities for individuals. The policy also advocated for the creation of a directorate of employment to enable seniors to find re-employment.

4.5 National Council for Senior Citizens (NCSC)

This council, reconstituted and renamed in 2012, mandated to advise Central and State Governments on the entire gamut of issues related to the welfare of senior citizens and enhancement of their quality of life, with particular reference to policies, programs, and legislative measures and promotion of physical and financial security, health and independent and productive living [36].

4.6 Integrated Programme for Older Persons (IPOP)

IPOP had been revised in 2015 to implement the NPSC and bring about a qualitative improvement in the lives of older people. The programs admissible for assistance under IPOP are running multi-service centers for older persons. These centers aim to provide day-care, educational and entertainment opportunities, healthcare awareness generation programs for older persons, and caregivers. These centers mainly work for self-care, preventive health care, disease management, preparation for healthy and productive aging, and intergenerational bonding [37].

4.7 The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment

The Ministry has 72 recreation centers for senior citizens and old age homes and publishes magazines for the elderly. The website of the Ministry portrays the annual plan of action for carrying out various senior citizen programs. These include senior citizens' education programs, senior citizens' welfare programs, programs regarding retirement benefits, etc.

4.8 National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

Regarding lifelong learning, NEP 2020 envisions that "Literacy and basic education open up whole new worlds of personal, civic, economic, and lifelong-learning opportunities for individuals that enable them to progress personally and professionally" (p.61) [38]. The policy proposes

to start the innovative Centre for adult education and suggests that the State/UT government must take initiatives to facilitate and encourage community involvement and smooth and beneficial technology integration. The policy also emphasizes developing an outstanding adult education curriculum framework in which emphasis will be on adults' thought process. Regarding such a curriculum, the policy states.

The curriculum framework for adult education will include at least five types of programs, each with clearly defined outcomes: (a) foundational literacy and numeracy; (b) critical life skills (including financial literacy, digital literacy, commercial skills, health care and awareness, child care and education, and family welfare); (c) vocational skills development (with a view towards obtaining local employment); (d) basic education (including preparatory, middle, and secondary stage equivalency); and (e) continuing education (including engaging holistic adult education courses in arts, sciences, technology, culture, sports, and recreation, as well as other topics of interest or use to local learners, such as more advanced material on critical life skills p.61 [38].

The policy also advocates for ensuring the suitable infrastructure for all interested adults for accessing adult education and lifelong learning through Adult Education Centres (AECs) to facilitate and encourage community involvement and the smooth and beneficial integration of technology in their lives.

In addition to government schemes, many NGOs and voluntary organizations are also offering their services to meet the lifelong learning needs of senior citizens. Organizations like Help Age, Sathi Re, Harmony for Silver Foundation, Tata foundation, Centre for lifelong learning are making sincere efforts in promoting lifelong learning among senior citizens. Interestingly, senior citizens have also started forming self-help groups to practice lifelong learning. For example, U3A, a group of like-minded people (50 plus years) who have retired or about to retire from professional careers and have fulfilled commitments towards their families, share time to enrich their knowledge, acquire new skills, and use their experiences to create a new vibrant community. Besides, different educational institutions and online learning portals like SWAYAM also offer some lifelong learning courses for senior citizens.

5. REALIZING THE VISION OF 'LIFE-LONG LEARNING FOR ALL SENIOR CITIZENS': POTENTIAL MEASURES

The approach of lifelong learning emphasizes that learning occurs during the whole course of a person's life. Therefore all senior citizens must be given specific opportunities to learn new things. They also need to be equipped and motivated to undertake further learning according to their interests and capabilities. But the analysis of lifelong learning policies and provisions for senior citizens in India reveals that much needs to be done on both these fronts. The most problematic aspect that emerged from the analysis is that words like 'Welfare' and 'Well-being' of senior citizens are not well defined in policy documents. The policymakers must realize and ensure that senior citizens are entitled to have sufficient opportunities to utilize their experiences and knowledge for the betterment of self and society. Senior citizens must be given an important place in different educational schemes, and special attention should be given to meet their lifelong learning needs. The policymakers must consider the following measures to realize the vision of 'Lifelong Learning for All Senior Citizens' in India:

- Starting senior citizens' education centers in each district.
- Marketing and publicity of lifelong learning programs among senior citizens.
- Promoting educational exchanges among senior citizens from different parts of the country.
- Starting need-based and demand-driven lifelong learning courses for senior citizens in the formal and non-formal education sector.
- Having provisions for inclusion of senior citizens in the formal education system and regular classrooms.
- Employing flexible modes such as e-learning, blended learning, collaborative learning for the learning of senior citizens.
- Designing specific training programs for senior citizens to make them engaged, productive, and financially independent.
- Introducing special courses based on art, history, music, languages, and computers for senior citizens
- Including discussion-based activities, special events, and trips to different places an integral part of the courses for senior citizens.

- Introducing specific training programs for trainers and teachers interested to teach senior citizens.
- Considering that the "cradle-to-grave" vision of lifelong learning is more extensive than the concepts of adult education or recurrent education, for better policy formulation.

6. CONCLUSION

Lifelong learning has a significant impact on the quality of life of the aging population [39]. It has been noted that the process of education of senior citizens needs specific attention due to their psychophysical and environmental challenges. The psychophysical challenges include longer response time to stimuli, limited attention, deterioration of memory functions and formal and logical thinking, difficulties with abstraction and generalization, reduced vision, and hearing efficiency, While environmental challenges may be a stereotypical perception of the elderly as incapable and not interested in acquiring new messages and skills, or their discrimination on grounds of age [40]. It means well-designed policies and provisions are vital to promoting productive aging among senior citizens. Therefore, policymakers are supposed to provide varied opportunities for senior citizens to meet and exchange their experiences, develop positive attitudes towards aging, engage in practical activities, and participate in scientific and cultural events. This vision and subsequent actions will ensure that, along with every youth, every senior citizen will also be able to give their best, for a productive, prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable Indian society.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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