

## THE CONCEPT OF LIFELONG LEARNING – MANAGERS' EXPECTATIONS AND YOUTH ATTITUDES

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**Purpose:** The purpose of the paper is to identify the attitudes of young people representing the so-called generation Z, towards the concept of lifelong learning in the context of managers' expectations.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The article includes both a literature review and the authors' own primary research. The study applies the results of qualitative (an individual in-depth interview) and quantitative (CAWI) research conducted in 2021 in Wielkopolska [*Greater Poland*].

**Findings:** The research shows that there is a large discrepancy between the managers' expectations and the attitudes of young people towards the necessity to participate in lifelong learning. Managers pay attention to the extreme importance of the necessity to constantly learn new things not only in contemporary, but especially in the future, labor market. At the same time there is a relatively low level of acceptance of this necessity among people representing the generation Z.

**Research limitations/implications:** In the future it is worth repeating the research among the representatives of generation Z living in other provinces and even other countries.

**Social implications:** The article indicates that the development of lifelong learning skills requires, among others, developing a comprehensive education policy and cooperation between the public, private and civic sectors. It is also connected with the necessity to promote this concept in various environments – among different generations of employees, as well as young people soon entering the labor market.

**Originality/value:** The obtained results confirm a large discrepancy between the managers' expectations and the attitudes of young people towards the necessity to participate in lifelong learning. The article provides recommendations for paying attention to the need to teach young people the methods of effective self-learning and promote this concept in various environments.

**Keywords:** lifelong learning, generation Z, quantitative and qualitative research.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Rapid technological development contributes to the increase in the need to learn at every stage of life. The skills and competences possessed and developed at the beginning of the professional career are sufficient for an increasingly shorter time. In order to follow the needs of not only the labor market in general, but also the enterprise in which the worker is employed, it is essential to accept the necessity of lifelong learning. The main goal of this concept is firstly to prepare young people for lifelong learning and also to increase knowledge, competences and skills of the adults. Due to the fact that the concept in its assumptions applies to every stage of life, learning also relates to young children and seniors. It should also be added that this concept adopts a very broad approach based on the use of both formal and informal methods of education. As D. Tran (2021) indicates, “Building a solid foundation with transferable skills learnt across many environments will encourage and perpetuate a cycle of lifelong learning, creating an economy of adaptable workers that can take on current and future roles”. The reasons for the growing interest in this concept also include the demographic processes related to the aging of the society and the necessity to stay longer in the labor market.

The purpose of the considerations in this paper is to identify the perception of the concept of lifelong learning by young people, representing the so-called generation Z (born after 1996) in the context of the expectations of managers representing highly innovative enterprises, belonging to the so-called Industry 4.0.

The study applies the results of research conducted as part of the project “Economics in the face of the New Economy - Regional Excellence Initiative” financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Regional Initiative of Excellence Competition, Contract number: 004/RID/2018/19) and implemented at the Poznań University of Economics and Business in 2019-2022. “New Generation in the New Economy” was the task separated in the project, the aim of which was to develop a methodology for cyclical research conducted on a national scale in the field of economic preparation of the young generation for technological revolutions.

The first part, based on the Scopus database, reviews the current state of knowledge in the area of the concept of lifelong learning and independent acquisition of new knowledge. Then, the methodology of the conducted own research as well as the most important results and conclusions are presented.

## 2. The concept of lifelong learning – literature review

The growing importance of the necessity of lifelong learning has been emphasized by many authors for many years (Hall, Mirvis, 1995; Sambrook, Stewart, 2000). Hall and Mirvis (1995)



These areas were created on the basis of the coexistence of keywords defined by the authors in their papers. On the basis of the similarity measures, using the VOSviewer software, several clusters were created. They visualize the network of coexistence of keywords (the presence of these words was assumed at the minimum level of their frequency – 5). It is worth adding that the size of the circles shows the frequency of occurrence of the keywords, the lines show the links between the words.

When studying the results of the analyzes, six research trends were identified. The first cluster (red colour) is formed of the most, i.e., 14 keywords, focusing mainly on modern methods of education (this is the dominant expression, but it also refers to closely related issues concerning distance learning, e-learning, learning systems, informal learning, university), but also around innovation, sustainable development and knowledge management. It should be noted that the contemporary rapid pace of development of economies, their innovation and sustainable development are also accompanied by a huge increase in the role of modern education methods, especially distance learning, which requires digital competences. At the same time, this necessity to develop competences and skills throughout the whole life prompts people to develop not only by seeking knowledge in formal but also in non-formal systems. In the latter case, e-learning performs a vital role. The learning process should therefore be analyzed not only from the perspective of education in the formal education system, but also taking into account non-formal methods of seeking to reduce the qualification gap - by updating the possessed, and shaping new knowledge and competences (e.g. on-the-job training, mutual knowledge sharing between colleagues, knowledge acquired in the home environment) (Kicherova, Efimova, 2020). It should be noted, as mentioned before, that the aforementioned distance of some workers towards the concept of lifelong learning may also result from the use of distance learning tools in this process. As research shows, for example, Roca et al. (2006) and Sun et al. (2008), fear of the computer, the instructor's attitude to e-learning, flexibility and quality of the e-learning course, as well as its perceived usefulness (including ease), significantly determine the satisfaction of training participants, and thus the attitude towards the future desire to develop knowledge.

The green cluster is made of 12 items, and they mainly concern learning and training, including primarily professional career development and skills of older or adult workers. Researchers dealing with the issues related to learning indicate that people certainly learn most in childhood, and the effectiveness of this process in adulthood depends on successful learning in the very beginning of life (Elman, 1993). Perception of learning by older people as more difficult than for younger ones, however, is partly a result of the stereotypes attributed to seniors (Turek, Perek-Bialas, 2013; Pilarczyk, Stefańska, 2017). Moreover, it is quite common for older people to have much more positive attitudes towards learning than young people. Acquiring new skills, especially digital ones, by the older generation, increases the sense of satisfaction and pride much greater than among young people (Natvig, 2007). Differences in the approach to lifelong learning and development between generations are the subject of many studies (Hall,

Mirvis, 1995; Misra, Gupta, 2021), and their results indicate large discrepancies between generations in the very approach to lifelong learning (Yamashita et al., 2022).

Another cluster, the navy blue one, also includes 12 items. Lifelong learning is clearly predominant among them (this notion occurs nearly 200 times as the key word in all 592 analyzed articles). This cluster mainly comprises general issues related to workplace learning, human resource development, learning organizations, but also internal factors related to self-reflection on lifelong learning. Therefore, the benefits of on-the-job learning and the ways in which the process is organized are emphasized, among others. For example, as the research conducted by Edmondson, Boyer and Artis (2012) shows, people who are able to learn independently, are characterized on the one hand by greater aspirations, creativity, curiosity and satisfaction with life, but on the other hand, as employees, they can anticipate the needs of their organization and with greater success create added value not only for the employer, but also for clients (Cron, Marshall, Singh, Spiro, Sujana, 2005). Motivation to learn, which is a prerequisite for participation in the education process and training is also a major area of consideration (Yamashita et al., 2022). This motivation is significantly related to involvement in acquiring knowledge, especially from informal sources (Gorges et al., 2016).

The fourth, yellow cluster consists of 9 elements mainly related to three crucial issues: management and leadership; soft skills, including critical thinking; and also – students and business education. In the context of lifelong learning leadership is perceived as the key element of progress. Hence, as emphasized by Farr and Brazil (2009), contemporary university curricula (at non-business universities) need to be extended to include the subject of entrepreneurship and professional leadership. Lifelong learning is supported by having and developing soft skills (Gibb, 2014; Santamaría, García-Álvarez, Santos-González, 2022). The analyzed publications primarily emphasize difficulties in assessing these competences. This is because the evaluation of soft skills may be based on various theories, including control theory (Carver, 2018), goal setting theory (Locke, Latham 2006) and attribution theory (Eberly, Holley, Johnson, Mitchell, 2011), the latter being particularly useful. Precise definition of the criteria for assessing these skills (which is more difficult than in the case of hard competences) often contributes to the resistance to developing these competences and depreciating their importance (Gibb, 2014). In addition to lifelong learning, including the development of soft skills, the education system (comprising vocational training for employment), and its adaptation to the development of innovation, methods of learning as well as the use of digital technologies, is crucial for the development of human capital and building an innovative society (Cobo, 2013). It is worth noting that education is such a significant subject that the issues related to this area form a separate cluster (blue), in which 5 items represent the keywords. They mainly concern teaching and higher (especially entrepreneurship) education.

In the last (9-element) purple cluster, keywords are concentrated, similarly to the green cluster, around professional development and human capital. The research shows that "investments in firm-specific human capital have a significant impact on learning and firm

performance", but at the same time the effectiveness of professional development may be adversely affected by the employee's previous experience in other companies in the given industry (Hatch, Dyer, 2004).

### 3. Methodology of own research

Empirical research was based on a sequential, qualitative and quantitative approach. This approach is often used in research on these issues (Misra, Gupta, 2021; Olejnik, Stefańska, 2021). *An individual in-depth interview* was applied in the first stage. The respondents were managers of enterprises representing highly innovative entities, included in the New Economy/Industry 4.0. The reason for choosing this method was the necessity to recruit high-class specialists from a deliberately selected sample of enterprises. It would be difficult to invite respondents to a focused group interview for substantive reasons (data protection of the represented company) and organizational reasons. It should be emphasized that the IDIs are unrepresentative studies, the results of which cannot be generalized – they can be applied to the studied population. They are exploratory studies that allow to generate hypotheses that are then verified in quantitative research. The selection of the sample included, first of all, the selection of innovative companies, start-ups, entities located in technology parks, which was followed by the selection of specific respondents. They had to be people with at least 10 years of work experience, managing employees or recruiting/training new employees, developing requirements for new workers and participating in the recruitment process, but not necessarily HR employees. 8 respondents participated in the study, including 6 men and 2 women; the youngest person was 41 years old and the oldest 51 years old. They represented companies with 2 to 30 years of experience, employing 10 to 600 employees. The research tool was an interview scenario in which several groups of questions were distinguished, including the competences of employees in the economy 4.0 expected by managers. The paper analyzes one of the competences – learning new things.

In the second stage, the methodology of quantitative research was applied. Representatives of generation Z defined their attitudes and behaviors towards learning new things now and in the future. The study consisted of three parts:

- self-assessment concerning the ability to learn new things,
- diagnosing the attitude towards learning new things,
- assessment of the level of acceptance of the necessity to learn new things in future professional work and throughout life, as well as awareness in the sphere of gaps in knowledge and skills; recognizing the situation in which learning new things takes place; the ability to apply new knowledge in life, as well as knowledge about, and evaluation of the ways in which new things are learned.

The study involved 513 students from all types of secondary schools, i.e., high school, vocational school and technical school. Their structure corresponds to the structure of the studied population of students in Wielkopolska [Greater Poland]. Taking into account the age of the students, the surveyed sample comprised 27,8% of respondents under 16, 37,5% aged 17, and 34,7% aged 18 and over. For details on the sampling methodology, see Białowas et al. (2022).

#### 4. Research results

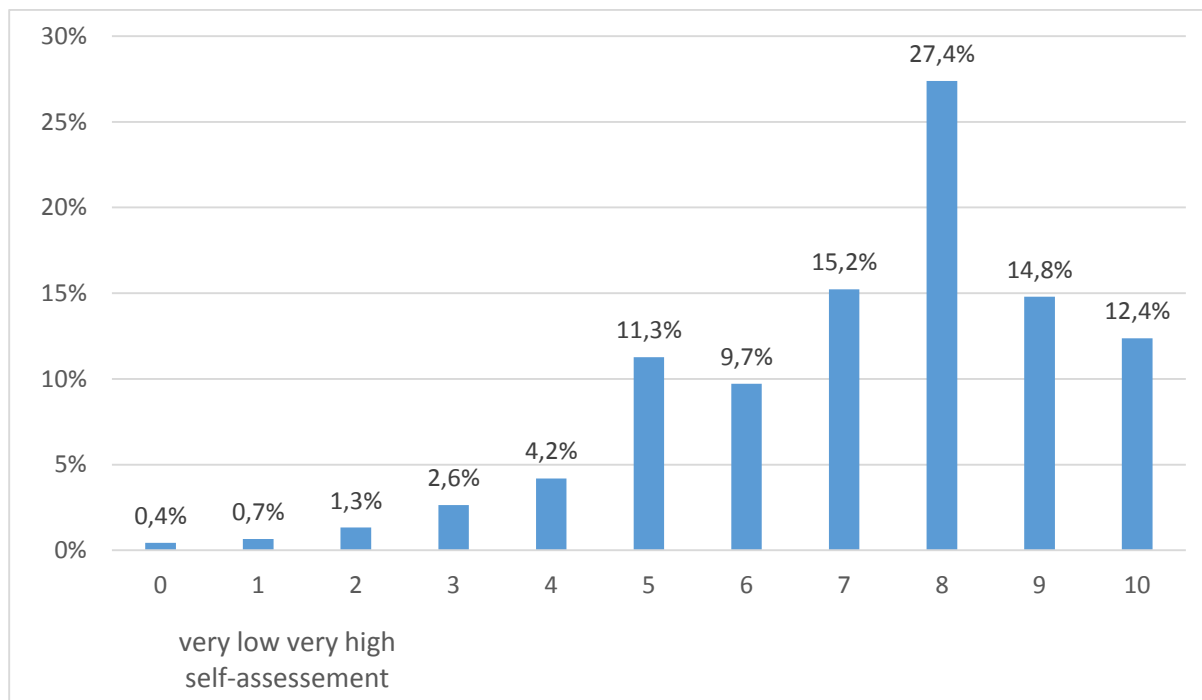
The research of managers shows that the ability to learn new things and the related willingness for continuous development are perceived as one of the most important current and future competences of an employee on the labor market. All managers unanimously highlight that adapting to the development of civilization requires a constant flow of knowledge, continuous observation and analysis of the changes that take place, drawing conclusions, not closing oneself to new experiences, as well as *having an open mind and broad thinking horizons that do not close* (woman 42; interactive agency). In their opinion, the importance of openness to development results, from the fact that *we will lose some skills and abilities and we will still have to learn new ones – it is the engine of development; the change cannot be stopped* (male, 47, production of plexiglass products). Therefore, the *model of an employee who works in one place for 40 years, using the same methods over and over again is definitely being abandoned. It is essential to be ready to change and search for new solutions, to be able to re-qualify quickly, and to smoothly change teams, methods and industries. Flexible and dynamic approach* (41-year-old woman, computer company). Sometimes it is the basic condition for hiring a new employee. As one of the respondents (a man aged 49, owner of an advertising company) noted, he sometimes hires on *No schools, but do you want to learn? basis. Once I started teaching, I provided instructions, and manual. Now this employee is developing computer programs and working on projects of the same value as mine. There was just a wish to learn. But there are also such resistant individuals that even if you hit them with a hammer in the head, they don't know what to do.*

The ideal candidate for a job in Economy 4.0 is therefore a person *who is able to read, study documentation and even scientific publications* (a man aged 46; a company that designs innovative IT systems). Employers unanimously emphasize that future job candidates do not always need to have experience, but they must always be willing to learn – to self-improve. Managers believe that they are able to teach them almost everything they need in a given job, all they need is *open-mindedness and willingness to overcome their barriers related to the fact that sometimes you have to learn something from scratch* (51-year-old man, energy company). At the same time, they also emphasize that in their CVs job applicants often write about *“commonplace competences, including the ability to learn quickly, even though not everyone can do so”* (48-year-old man, production of advertising materials).

In the light of the managers' expectations presented above, it seems reasonable to analyze the competences of people who will soon enter the labor market and start their professional career in Economy 4.0. Taking into account the expectations of managers towards lifelong learning by the employees of Economy 4.0, the competences under study were clarified before starting the quantitative research. It was assumed that it is an attitude towards the ability to learn new things constantly, consistently and persistently, as well as organize the learning process, acquire new knowledge or face new challenges. Taking into account the results of the surveys among managers, the essence of this competence (in relation to people representing the new, future generation on the labor market) was especially related to:

- awareness and openness to what is new,
- speed and willingness to acquire new knowledge,
- open attitude towards gaining new experiences and no concerns related to overcoming obstacles,
- the ability to use feedback in their development,
- the ability to use acquired knowledge in life, at work or school,
- the ability to use the acquired knowledge in life, work, school,
- having your own development plan.

When first analyzing the students' self-assessment in terms of the ability to learn new things, it is worth noting that it is quite high (Figure 2). The distribution of the obtained answers is asymmetric, clearly left-skewed - the average self-assessment is 7.3 points, and the median is 8 at a maximum of 10. It is worth adding that 27% of students chose the highest grades, i.e., 9 or 10.



**Figure 2.** Self-assessment of the level of acceptance of students' necessity to learn new things. Source: own elaboration based on quantitative research.



The results look much worse if we take into account the synthetic index measuring attitudes towards learning new things, knowledge of effective learning methods, the ability to use the acquired knowledge in life and feedback in further development. Of the 100 points possible, on average, young people scored only half. The median had a similar value – 49 points, while the lowest result was 10 points, and the highest 84. It is worth adding that 25% of students did not exceed the level of 43 points, and the best 25% obtained results higher than 56 points. It is worth adding that the attitude to lifelong learning varies between different types of schools. The highest value was recorded for high school students (52), slightly lower results were achieved in technical secondary schools (49), and the lowest in vocational schools (47). Interestingly, slightly higher results were obtained by people studying outside Poznań (52 points) than in the capital of Wielkopolska [Greater Poland] (48 points). Also, the age of students to some extent affects the obtained results - as it grows, the average number of obtained points increased (from 48 among people up to 16 years of age, to 53 points among people aged 18 and more). On the other hand, the analyzed competence is not differentiated by gender.

To illustrate the results better, it is also worth looking at two detailed examples of the studied problems. During the research, the level of noticing the very fact of learning new things and the subsequent use of the acquired knowledge in private life, school or at work was diagnosed, among others. Students notice to a limited extent, that each day may bring an opportunity to learn something new to self-develop and work on themselves. Almost half of the students indicated that in the last month (preceding the day of the study) they had learned rather little, and as many as every third - had learned nothing at all. It should be emphasized that the question stated that "learning a new thing" does not have to mean anything spectacular and it is a subjective concept. At the same time, research shows that only every fifth student noticed that they had recently learned something that even exceeded their expectations. Among people who learned something new, only 16% described (according to the instructions in at least 10 words) this newly acquired knowledge or skill. In addition to acquiring new knowledge, the ability to use it is equally important. Among the students who declared that they had acquired new knowledge, only one in four used it in their lives.

Diagnosing the knowledge of fast learning methods was the second example of a question verifying the competence to learn new things. The research shows that every fourth student does not know any method that would facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge, 59% can indicate 1-2 such methods, while the others know several of them (or 1-2, but the professional ones). At the same time, 46% of students declare that they have their favorite and most effective method of quick learning, the same percentage can also provide arguments for the most effective method in their opinion.

## 5. Conclusions

The discussion on the expectations towards the attributes ending the education of graduates has been conducted for over a dozen years (Harvey, 2000). It should be noted that at the beginning of the 21st century, the disputes emphasized skepticism towards the concept of lifelong learning (Hager, 2004, pp. 22-32). Doubts concerning this approach resulted from the significant role of the type of work in the economy, which did not require, or even discourage, from learning new things.

The concept of lifelong learning has been gaining importance especially in recent years when the pace of technological changes causes the faster outdateding of competences and skills. The results of the conducted research show that managers expect the employee to be able to actively and flexibly adapt to the changes taking place. It is significantly related to the acceptance of the concept of lifelong learning. However, this flexibility does not mean occasional retraining of a given employee, but refers to permanent development, and following the ongoing changes. It ought to be emphasized that not only the forecasts of scientists, but also reports on the competences of the future prepared by many organizations indicate the foremost importance of the need for lifelong learning (World Economic Forum 2020; OECD 2022; Dondi et al., 2021). At the same time, as shown in the research presented in this paper and conducted among the representatives of the generation that will enter the labor market in the coming years, there is a discrepancy between the expectations of managers and the attitudes of young people towards the concept of lifelong learning. While the self-esteem of young people in terms of the ability to learn new things and acquire new knowledge is quite high, their attitudes related to openness to new knowledge and experiences, or the actual skills of acquiring new knowledge, prove to be definitely insufficient.

Therefore, summing up, attention should be paid to the need to teach young people the methods of effective self-learning. For example, the use of “active learning techniques” (Taylor et al., 2011), involving more than traditional methods, may help to arouse curiosity and the willingness to develop further. Practical knowledge of especially fast and efficient self-learning methods is the basis for shaping a positive attitude in young people towards the necessity of lifelong learning. One more very important point should be emphasized – the teaching process must be interesting for young people.

On the other hand, the knowledge of how to learn effectively allows for individual management of the entire process (Boyer et al., 2014). The development of lifelong learning skills requires, among others, developing a comprehensive education policy and cooperation between the public, private and civic sectors. It is also connected with the necessity to promote this concept in various environments, among different generations of employees, as well as the increase of accessibility for all people (Tran, 2021).

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