

# THE ROLE OF MODERN UNIVERSITIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF LIFELONG LEARNING: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND THE UKRAINIAN CONTEXT

## РОЛЬ СУЧАСНИХ УНІВЕРСИТЕТІВ У РОЗВИТКУ КОНЦЕПЦІЇ НАВЧАННЯ ПРОТЯГОМ УСЬОГО ЖИТТЯ: ТЕОРЕТИЧНІ ПІДСТАВИ Й УКРАЇНСЬКИЙ КОНТЕКСТ

*In the context of rapid technological progress and globalization, the concept of continuous learning or lifelong learning is of particular importance, since it becomes obvious that a one-time education, typical of the traditional educational system, is not able to meet the growing needs of the individual, the labor market and society as a whole. In this regard, higher education institutions face a new strategic task – to provide conditions for continuous personal and professional development of citizens throughout their lives, which requires a fundamental rethinking of the role of universities and the transformation of their educational practices and models. The authors consider the theoretical foundations of this approach, namely: M. Knowles's andragogy, D. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, D. Levinson's concept of personality development stages, as well as K. Dweck's theory of "flexible consciousness". The authors substantiate the importance of andragogy as a theoretical direction that allows universities to take into account the characteristics and needs of adult learners, to create educational programs focused on practical orientation, independence and internal motivation of adult students.*

*The authors examine the first steps in implementing the lifelong learning concept in Ukrainian universities, which were significantly accelerated by the pandemic, war, and digitalization of higher education in Ukraine. The authors emphasize the need for universities to create adaptive educational ecosystems that will integrate formal, non-formal, and informal forms of learning and allow citizens to freely form individual educational trajectories.*

*The article is a comprehensive study of the lifelong learning concept, examining its theoretical foundations, practical challenges, and implementation prospects. The findings can form the basis for developing effective educational strategies that will contribute to the sustainable development of society, the formation of a culture of lifelong learning, and the competitiveness of Ukraine at the international level.*

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**Key words:** *lifelong learning, continuous learning, andragogy, distance learning, adaptive learning, educational trajectories, professional retraining, educational policy.*

*В умовах нестримного технологічного прогресу та глобалізації концепція безперервного навчання, або lifelong learning, набуває особливого значення, оскільки стає очевидним, що одноразове здобуття освіти, характерне для традиційної освітньої системи, не здатне задовольнити все більші потреби особистості, ринку праці й суспільства загалом. У зв'язку з цим перед вищими навчальними закладами постає нове стратегічне завдання – забезпечити умови безперервного особистісного та професійного розвитку громадян протягом усього життя, що потребує фундаментального переосмислення ролі університетів і трансформації їхніх освітніх практик і моделей. Автори розглядають теоретичні підстави цього підходу, а саме: андрагогіку М. Ноулза, теорію трансформативного навчання Д. Мезірова, концепцію стадій розвитку особистості Д. Левінсона, а також теорію «гнучкої свідомості» К. Дюека. Крім того, обґрунтовують важливість андрагогіки як теоретичного спрямування, що дає змогу університетам урахувати особливості й запити дорослих учнів, створювати освітні програми, орієнтовані на практичну спрямованість, самостійність і внутрішню мотивацію дорослих студентів.*

*Автори досліджують перші кроки впровадження концепції lifelong learning в українських ВНЗ, які були значно прискорені пандемією, війною та цифровізацією вищої освіти в Україні. Наголошують на необхідності створення університетами адаптивних освітніх екосистем, які інтегруватимуть формальні, неформальні й інформальні форми навчання, дадуть громадянам змогу вільно формувати індивідуальні освітні траєкторії.*

*Стаття є комплексним дослідженням концепції навчання протягом життя, містить розгляд її теоретичних основ, практичних викликів і перспектив впровадження. Отримані висновки можуть стати основою для розроблення ефективних освітніх стратегій, які сприятимуть сталому розвитку суспільства, формуванню культури постійного навчання й конкурентоспроможності України на міжнародному рівні.*

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**Ключові слова:** *lifelong learning, безперервне навчання, андрагогіка, дистанційне навчання, адаптивне навчання, освітні траєкторії, професійна перепідготовка, освітня політика.*

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The modern world places new, increasingly complex and diverse demands on people. Globalization, technological innovations, changes in the labor market and demographic shifts require

constant updating of knowledge and competencies. The concept of lifelong learning is becoming a prerequisite for a successful professional and personal life. Skills that were in demand 10 years ago may be

outdated tomorrow. In this context, a person's ability to learn continuously becomes the most important competence, ensuring their competitiveness and professional sustainability.

According to a study **by the World Economies Forum (WEF)**, more than **40 % of workers worldwide** will need to retrain within the next 5 years due to automation and digitalization<sup>1</sup>. Many professions are disappearing or changing dramatically. For example, traditional accounting tasks are increasingly being automated, and data processing, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence specialists are becoming increasingly in demand. In medicine, technological advances allow doctors to use artificial intelligence for diagnostics, and biotechnology is creating new treatment methods. This requires professionals to update their knowledge constantly. If 20 years ago, many students joked that they would have to retrain immediately after receiving their diploma, today the need for continuous learning has turned the joke into a truism.

**The UN** predicts that by 2050 the proportion of people over 60 in the world's population will almost double<sup>2</sup>. This means that the concept of "one education for life" is becoming obsolete. People will work longer and change careers several times, which will require intellectual flexibility and willpower to learn and retrain.

Nevertheless, the problem is not limited to changes in the labor market. Modern society faces large-scale challenges – from climate crises to ethical issues related to technological development. In order to make informed decisions, citizens must constantly update their knowledge and critically evaluate information. In the context of information overload, the pressure of manipulative technologies and the spread of fake news, the ability to learn and think critically is becoming an important tool for personal development and the sustainability of the social order.

However, the question remains open: **who and how should organize this process?** If in the traditional educational system, learning is associated with a certain age stage, and then in the conditions of lifelong learning it should become continuous and accessible to people of different ages and professions. Here, universities can and, in our opinion, should play a key role, adapting their structures, programs and teaching methods to the new reality. In this article, we examine the transformation of higher education as a response to new societal demands, highlighting key strategies that allow universities to remain relevant in a rapidly changing educational space.

**Theoretical framework.** The *lifelong learning* concept based on several key theoretical approaches formed by the works of famous educators and representatives of other scientific fields. One of them is **andragogy**. The German educator Alexander Kapp first introduced the term "andragogy" in

1833 to describe the specifics of adult education. However, this concept received wide recognition and development thanks to the works of the American educator Malcolm Knowles in the 1970s. Knowles highlighted the features of adult learning, including their desire for independence, practical focus and rich life experience that influences the learning process. He emphasized that adult learners are motivated by internal factors and strive for the direct application of the knowledge they have acquired [3].

Modern universities are increasingly seen not only as places for basic education, but also as centers of lifelong learning, capable of supporting the professional and personal development of individuals throughout their lives. As we have already indicated, this is due to the rapid development of technology and the economy, which requires constant updating of knowledge, while demographic changes lead to an increase in the number of mature students who need new competencies. In order to fulfill the function of lifelong learning effectively, universities must rethink their educational mission, using key theoretical approaches developed in the field of andragogy, transformative learning theory, the concept of flexible consciousness, and research on the stages of personality development. Andragogy focuses on the specific features of adult learning: in addition to a generally more attentive and skeptical attitude to the material, students expect practical orientation of programs oriented towards their experience, independence, and current career goals. This means that universities need to implement more flexible educational formats (modular courses, micro-degrees and distance learning systems), that allow learners to combine work, family and study. At the same time, transformative learning theory emphasizes that critical reflection on experience plays a key role in the learning process, especially among adults. This requires universities to create learning environments that encourage analysis, reflection and reconsideration of established views, which is especially relevant in the context of an ever-changing labor market and societal challenges.

American psychologist Daniel Levinson developed the **stage-crisis theory of personality development**, based on extensive research into the biographies of men and women between the ages of 35 and 45. He identified a sequence of "seasons" of life, each characterized by specific tasks and crises. Levinson believed that adults continue to develop and change throughout their lives, passing through stages such as early adulthood (17–45 years), middle adulthood (40–65 years), and late adulthood (60 years and beyond). These stages emphasize the need for continuous education to adapt to new life challenges and roles [5].

Jack Mezirow, an American professor, proposed the theory of transformative learning, which focuses on how adults change their preconceived notions and beliefs through critical reflection on experiences. According to Mezirow, transformative learning occurs

<sup>1</sup> The Future of Jobs Report. World Economic Forum. URL: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020/>

<sup>2</sup> URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2023/06/1442007>

when an individual is confronted with a “disorienting dilemma” that causes a reconsideration of previous assumptions and leads to a more open and inclusive worldview. This theory emphasizes the importance of critical thinking and reflection in the adult learning process [6].

Transformative learning theory explains how adult learners can not only acquire new knowledge, but also change their worldviews, critically rethink their experiences, and adapt to new conditions. In today's rapidly changing world, critical thinking skills and the ability to analyze and reconsider one's beliefs are becoming no less important than professional competencies. It is emphasized that adult learning should go beyond traditional information acquisition and include elements of deep analysis and self-development. Universities can use transformative learning principles to create programs aimed at developing critical understanding of information, especially in a digital society where the spread of fake news and manipulative narratives requires a conscious approach to data processing. For example, programs focused on change management, adaptation to new technologies, or leadership can include modules that help learners analyze their own stereotypes, master new perspectives, and form a more inclusive worldview. In addition, transformative learning theory can be useful for training professionals who need to regularly update their knowledge and adapt to new realities. In such fields as medicine, education, business management, and public administration, professionals are constantly faced with the need to re-evaluate their approaches and decisions. Universities using transformative learning principles can implement active learning methods, including case studies, role-playing games, and simulations of real situations that stimulate students to reflect and become aware of their cognitive barriers. Finally, this approach focuses on dialogic learning – in university programs, this can be implemented through group projects, debates, mentoring programs, and interdisciplinary studies, which is especially valuable in a global society that requires intercultural competence and the ability to take into account a variety of points of view. Thus, the integration of transformative learning principles into the educational strategies of universities allows not only to increase the effectiveness of adult learning, but also to prepare people for active participation in a rapidly changing world, developing their resistance to change, readiness to adapt and the ability to rethink their professional and personal trajectory productively.

The next concept we will look at was developed by Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck, who coined the term “growth mindset”, which describes the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort and learning. People with this mindset perceive challenges as opportunities for growth, which motivates them to continually learn and improve throughout their lives. This concept is related directly to lifelong learning, as it emphasizes the importance of a growth and adaptive mindset [1].

The concept of flexible consciousness demonstrates that learning ability is not a fixed characteristic, but a skill that can be developed. This means that universities should create a culture of lifelong learning, encouraging students and graduates to strive for continuous growth and adaptation. This is not only about introducing retraining and advanced training programs, but also about changing the educational paradigm itself – from receiving a one-time education to creating open educational ecosystems that support lifelong learning. Finally, research on the stages of personality development shows that a person's learning needs change with age, which requires an individualized approach to learners of different ages and professional experiences. In this context, universities should offer adaptive programs that meet the needs of both young students and professionals in the mid- and late stages of their careers.

Psychologist Clare Graves proposed the theory of emergent cyclical levels of existence, according to which human nature evolves through a sequence of value systems in response to changing living conditions. Each level represents a specific system of values and worldviews, and the transition between levels requires adaptation and learning. This theory emphasizes that personality development continues throughout life, which is consistent with the concept of lifelong learning [2].

These theoretical approaches substantiate the need and importance of lifelong learning, taking into account the characteristics of adult learning, stages of personal development and the focus on continuous development. All of them, in one way or another, demonstrate to us that modern universities must increasingly move away from the traditional model of education, limited by strict periods, and move towards the concept of lifelong education. To do this, they need to develop digital platforms, partnership programs with industry, flexible educational trajectories and research projects aimed at analyzing and predicting future competencies. Relying on modern theoretical concepts, universities can not only maintain their significance in a changing world, but also become key institutions for the development of society, helping people adapt to new challenges and reveal their potential throughout their lives. At the same time, it is obvious that there is no universal and simple algorithm for the transition of universities to the concept of lifelong education. It is quite possible that there is even no complex algorithm, since the global nature of society's need to develop lifelong learning does not eliminate local conditions and cultural characteristics that differentiate the prospects and trajectories of specific universities in implementing the outlined task.

**Ukrainian context.** The implementation of the lifelong learning concept in Ukrainian universities is a key factor in ensuring the country's competitiveness in the global economy and improving the quality of life of citizens. Ukrainian higher education institutions can improve their work in this direction within the framework of several strategic approaches.



Firstly, universities are already actively developing programs of **continuous education and retraining of specialists**. Many universities today have centers for advanced training. For example, the National Technical University "Dnipro Polytechnic" is implementing such initiatives, offering interdisciplinary institutes of continuous education<sup>3</sup>. Kharkiv National University offers a number of programs within the framework of the activities of the Center for Postgraduate Education and Distance Learning<sup>4</sup>.

Secondly, due to the war and the pandemic, there is an active **integration of distance and online learning formats**, which has become an integral part of the modern educational environment. These crises have accelerated the transformation of the higher education system in Ukraine, forcing universities to introduce digital tools and rethink traditional approaches to learning. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has become a catalyst for a massive transition to distance learning. This period has demonstrated the importance of online courses, video lectures, interactive platforms and digital educational resources. Among the key solutions implemented in Ukraine, one can highlight the use of the National Online Platform EdEra, the cooperation of universities with Coursera and Udemy, as well as the active use of learning management systems such as Moodle and Google Classroom. However, if in the early years the digitalization of education was forced, today it has become a strategically important area of development and has become the basis for the formation and maintenance of the concept of continuous education, as it has created opportunities for working people.

Military aggression has created even greater challenges for the educational system. The destruction of university infrastructure, forced migration of students and teachers, as well as safety during training – all this required universities not only to continue distance learning, but also to improve it qualitatively. Many Ukrainian universities have completely switched to online learning while maintaining interactive elements and scientific activities. At the same time, modern online formats go beyond simply translating lectures into video recordings. Today, universities are developing adaptive digital educational environments that use artificial intelligence, interactive simulations, virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR).

Another important trend has been the development of a **hybrid-learning format** that combines face-to-face classes with distance learning technologies. This is especially relevant for students who were forced to leave Ukraine but continue their studies at Ukrainian universities. Distance learning is no longer perceived as a temporary measure – it has become a full-fledged element of the educational process, which requires further development, modernization and institutional consolidation. In the future, universities will have to improve online tools, implement personalized educational trajectories, develop digital competencies

of teachers and students, and integrate Ukrainian digital platforms with international educational ecosystems.

The modern education system in Ukraine is rapidly adapting to new realities, making the *lifelong learning concept* an integral part of the educational process. Universities are developing retraining programs, digitalizing education, introducing hybrid formats, and strengthening ties with the labor market. The war and the pandemic have become powerful catalysts for these changes, accelerating the transition to online learning and adaptive educational environments. Ukraine is moving towards creating a sustainable *lifelong learning system* that will ensure its competitiveness at the global level. However, for the full implementation of lifelong learning, Ukraine needs a further institutional support, improvement of the legislative framework, and incentives for citizens to develop continuously. In addition, along the described path, Ukrainian universities will inevitably face serious substantive difficulties. It can already be argued that the rapid development of distance education, as well as its digitalization, entails an increase in the bureaucratization of the learning process and the leveling of its communicative component. The negative consequences of the forced nature of these transformations significantly increase the degradation processes provoked earlier by the active marketization of higher education in Ukraine. We are talking about the hypertrophy of formal success as a criterion for the quality of education, the dominance of prestige and comfort in the list of factors for choosing a specialty by applicants, the development of ideological servility of university management and the erosion of substantive richness under the pressure of commercialization and superficial practicality. Distance education coupled with digitalization adds to the listed problems de-individualization, depersonalization of teaching activities, a sharp decrease in the substantive motivation of all participants in the educational process, the growth of technocracy in the management practices of the university administration. Inattention to these problems, apologetic optimism regarding the formal-quantitative approach to the development of *lifelong learning* can lead to the meaninglessness of the very idea of these transformations.

**Conclusions.** An analysis of the Ukrainian context of the implementation of the lifelong learning concept within the framework of key theoretical approaches allows us to assert that Ukrainian universities are faced with the need for a profound transformation of the educational paradigm. Today, it is important for universities not only to provide adult students with the opportunity to gain knowledge, but also to provide conditions for the development of critical thinking, self-analysis, adaptability and the ability to constantly update competencies. The most important task of Ukrainian higher education institutions is to move from the traditional model of "education is a profession for life" to a model of supporting a person's personal and professional growth at all stages of his or her life.

<sup>3</sup> URL: <https://mibo.nmu.org.ua/ua/>

<sup>4</sup> URL: <https://sites.google.com/karazin.ua/dist-karazin-ua/>

A promising direction in this context is the creation by universities of adaptive educational ecosystems, which integrate formal, non-formal and informal forms of education. This will allow each person to form their own educational trajectory depending on their life circumstances, career plans and social conditions. To achieve this goal, Ukrainian universities need to develop not only technological infrastructure (online platforms, adaptive digital environments, use of artificial intelligence), but also to form a teaching staff that is ready to use the principles of andragogy and transformative learning in practice.

In addition, an important prospect is the strengthening of partnerships between universities, business and the state, which will not only increase the relevance of educational programs, but also form an understanding among citizens of the value of continuous self-development and learning. Another promising area is the development of a system of micro-qualifications and digital certificates that will ensure the mobility and competitiveness of Ukrainians in the international labor market.

Particular attention should be paid to ensuring the availability and quality of continuous education for those categories of the population that have faced the most serious challenges – internally displaced persons, war veterans and people affected by the crises of recent years. Universities can take on the mission of social adaptation of these groups by offering educational programs aimed at psychological support, professional retraining and integration into the new social reality.

Finally, today such a function of universities as critical reflection is in demand more than ever – in relation to the whole society and themselves. Of course, the war does not contribute to the implementation of this function, but it does not justify the universities' refusal to perform it. Critical reflection excludes the servile nature of the interaction of universities with political power and the state apparatus; it also excludes the mechanical indulgence of primitive demands formed

by the modern media sphere under the guise of public opinion. Full implementation of this function requires a transition from postulating one's autonomy to its implementation beyond administrative and ministerial reports. Without implementation of this function, the development of lifelong learning will be reduced to formal-structural transformations within the framework of catching the trend. There is no doubt that the drying up of the trend will lead to the same withering away of these formations, as the modular system, which was actively promoted within the framework of the Bologna process, was reduced in its time.

Thus, in order for Ukrainian universities to become full-fledged lifelong learning centers, they need to overcome not only technical and organizational challenges, but also carry out deep cultural changes – from the paradigm of one-time training to a culture of continuous self-education based on the principles of andragogy, transformative learning and critical reflection. In the long term, this will allow universities to play a key role not only in the development of the knowledge economy, but also in the formation of a civil society that is resilient to the challenges of the 21st century.

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