

# **Lifelong Learning an opportunity for All**

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Abstract: There is an urgent need to overcome the challenges such as illiteracy, poverty, malnutrition, AIDS/HIV and war, which our societies are facing today. The acquisition of key competences such as literacy, numeracy and vocational skills needed for living and working in our fast-changing societies must be made available through all channels of learning and education, be they formal, non-formal or informal. While formal and non-formal education systems are currently mostly viewed as being mutually exclusive, the lifelong learning approach proposes that in fact they form a “life-wide learning continuum” which can be bridged by recognition and validation practices. Another aspect is that of quality learning – an issue that every country will have to address, especially by improving teacher training. Since open and distance learning can reach a larger number of individuals beyond the borders of space and time, the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is also becoming increasingly important. In UNESCO’s view, ICTs are a force for both the development and the democratisation of education. However the vision of universal access to education and learning will remain unattained as long as there is a gap between technological “haves” and “have nots”, leading to exclusion of a large number of people from sharing the advantage of the new global communication channels. The article concludes with four messages: (1) Lifelong learning should be considered as an investment not only for employability but also for individual personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social cohesion, inclusion and sustainability; (2) Making lifelong learning a reality implies not only integrated, sector-wide and cross-sectoral educational reform, but also the recognition, validation and accreditation of learning opportunities in all settings and modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) for people of all ages; (3) While open and distance learning operate in a global environment, attention must be paid on respecting the needs of every individual, country and culture and it should be stressed that a global solution cannot be adapted everywhere; and (4) Facing the educational challenges of the 21st century, UNESCO continues, through its support of open and distance learning, to contribute to the construction of knowledge societies in a lifelong learning context.