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Lifelong learning as a response to the instability of the modern labor market

Uczenie się przez całe życie jako odpowiedź na niestabilność współczesnego rynku pracy

Abstract

The modern labour market is undergoing dynamic changes driven by technological advancement, digitalization, globalization, and socio-economic transformations. These processes lead to increased employment uncertainty and the need to continuously adapt professional competencies to changing environmental demands. The aim of this article is to analyze the significance of the lifelong learning concept as a response to the instability of the contemporary labour market. This theoretical review is based on an analysis of academic literature and strategic documents from the European Union, OECD, and UNESCO published between 2020 and 2025. The analysis demonstrates that lifelong education plays a crucial role in developing future competencies, enhancing employability, supporting reskilling and upskilling processes, and building the professional resilience of individuals. At the same time, lifelong learning fulfils an important social function by contributing to the development of social capital, civic engagement, and social integration. The findings lead to the conclusion that lifelong learning is a fundamental mechanism enabling individuals to function effectively amid the permanent change and uncertainty characteristic of the modern labour market.

Keyword: lifelong learning, continuing education, labour market, future competencies, employability, upskilling, reskilling

Streszczenie

Współczesny rynek pracy podlega dynamicznym przemianom wynikającym z postępu technologicznego, cyfryzacji, globalizacji oraz transformacji społeczno-gospodarczych. Procesy te prowadzą do wzrostu niepewności zatrudnienia i konieczności ciągłego dostosowywania kompetencji zawodowych do zmieniających się wymagań otoczenia. Celem artykułu jest analiza znaczenia koncepcji uczenia się przez całe życie jako odpowiedzi na niestabilność współczesnego rynku pracy. Opracowanie ma charakter teoretyczno-przeglądowy i zostało oparte na analizie literatury naukowej oraz dokumentów strategicznych Unii Europejskiej, OECD i UNESCO opublikowanych w latach 2020–2025. Przeprowadzone analizy wskazują, że edukacja ustawiczna odgrywa istotną rolę w rozwijaniu kompetencji przyszłości, zwiększaniu zatrudnialności, wspieraniu procesów reskillingu i upskillingu oraz

budowaniu odporności zawodowej jednostek. Jednocześnie *lifelong learning* pełni ważną funkcję społeczną, przyczyniając się do rozwoju kapitału społecznego, aktywności obywatelskiej i integracji społecznej. Wnioski z przeprowadzonych analiz pozwalają uznać uczenie się przez całe życie za jeden z podstawowych mechanizmów umożliwiających jednostkom skuteczne funkcjonowanie w warunkach permanentnej zmiany i niepewności charakterystycznej dla współczesnego rynku pracy.

Słowa kluczowe: uczenie się przez całe życie, edukacja ustawiczna, rynek pracy, kompetencje przyszłości, zatrudnialność, *upskilling*, *reskilling*

Introduction

The first decades of the 21st century have brought profound social, economic, and technological transformations that have significantly altered the functioning of the labor market. The dynamic development of digital technologies, the automation of production and service processes, economic globalization, and demographic shifts make modern career paths increasingly unpredictable. Stable employment within a single profession or organization is giving way to models based on flexibility, mobility, and continuous adaptation to changing socio-economic conditions.[1]

Academic literature emphasizes that the contemporary labor market is characterized by a high level of uncertainty. This creates a necessity for the continuous updating of knowledge and competencies.[2] The advancement of artificial intelligence, robotics, and information and communication technologies leads to structural transformations in employment. Consequently, certain professions are disappearing, while new occupations requiring different qualifications are emerging.[3]

In response to these processes, the concept of lifelong learning plays a particularly important role. For several decades, it has been a primary direction in the educational policies of the European Union, the OECD, and UNESCO.[4] Today, *lifelong learning* is viewed not only as a strategy for upgrading professional qualifications but also as a foundation for personal development, active citizenship, and social participation.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the significance of lifelong learning as a response to the instability of the modern labour market. An attempt is made to illustrate the relationship between the transformations in the world of work and the need for continuous competence development. Furthermore, the article points out the role of continuing education in building the professional and social security of individuals.

This article takes the form of a theoretical review. The primary research method employed is a critical analysis of academic literature, alongside an examination

[1] Z. Bauman, *Płynna nowoczesność*, Kraków 2021, pp. 11–18.

[2] U. Beck, *Społeczeństwo ryzyka. W drodze do innej nowoczesności*, Warszawa 2020, pp. 25–31.

[3] World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report 2023*, Geneva 2023, pp. 36–39.

[4] European Commission, *European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience*, Brussels 2020, p. 5.

of strategic documents related to continuing education, the labour market, and competence development.

The research material consists of three main groups of sources. The first group comprises academic publications in the fields of pedagogy, andragogy, the sociology of education, labour economics, and management sciences. Special attention was given to studies on the concepts of lifelong learning, human capital, employability, and the transformations of the modern labour market.

The second group of sources includes reports and documents from the European Commission, the OECD, UNESCO, the International Labour Organization, and the World Economic Forum, published between 2020 and 2025. The third group consists of Polish publications concerning continuing education, future competencies, and labour market policies.

The analysis was conducted using a problem-oriented approach. First, the most important theoretical concepts relating to lifelong learning were identified. Next, the main sources of instability in the modern labour market and their impact on the competency requirements for employees were examined. In the subsequent sections, an attempt was made to determine the significance of continuing education for the development of employability, professional resilience, and social capital.

Theoretical foundations of the lifelong learning concept

The concept of lifelong learning is currently one of the most important categories in contemporary pedagogy, andragogy, and educational policy. Its significance stems both from the changes occurring within social and economic systems and from the evolving perception of the educational process itself. Unlike the traditional educational model, which confined learning to specific stages of a person's life, the idea of lifelong learning assumes the continuity of the learning process across all phases of human development.[5]

The UNESCO report *Learning to Be*, edited by Edgar Faure,[6] is considered one of the most important documents shaping the contemporary understanding of permanent education. The authors of the report argued that education cannot be limited to preparing a person for a specific profession. Instead, it should support their comprehensive development and ability to function in a dynamically changing world.

Another breakthrough document was Jacques Delors's report, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, which formulated the four pillars of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be,[7] These pillars indicate

[5] P. Jarvis, *Learning to be a Person in Society*, London–New York 2021, p. 42.

[6] E. Faure, *Learning to Be. The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*, Paris 1972, p. 181.

[7] *Edukacja: jest w niej ukryty skarb. Raport dla UNESCO Międzynarodowej Komisji do spraw Edukacji dla XXI wieku*, ed. J. Delors, Warszawa 1998, p. 35.

that education encompasses not only professional development but also social, cultural, and civic growth.

An essential element of the contemporary *lifelong learning* concept is the recognition of the equal value of formal, non-formal, and informal education. Formal education takes place within institutional educational systems. Non-formal education includes courses, training sessions, and workshops. Informal education, meanwhile, occurs spontaneously in the daily life of an individual.[8]

Contemporary interpretations of *lifelong learning* also increasingly draw upon human capital theory. Gary Becker pointed out that knowledge, skills, and competencies constitute a specific form of capital that influences both individual productivity and the economic development of society.[9] In a knowledge-based economy, the importance of human capital steadily increases. Consequently, the ability to continuously develop competencies becomes a fundamental condition for professional success.

Andragogy has also made a significant contribution to the development of *lifelong learning* theory. Malcolm Knowles emphasized that adults learn differently than children because they possess rich life experiences and a higher level of autonomy. Therefore, adult education should be based on active participation, partnership, and the utilization of experience as a source of knowledge.

These theoretical foundations provide a basis for the subsequent analysis of the modern labour market. They also serve to evaluate the significance of continuing education as a response to growing employment instability and changing competency requirements.

The modern labour market and the sources of its instability

One of the most defining characteristics of the modern labour market is its high dynamism and unpredictability. In contrast to the industrial society's labour market-which relied on relatively stable forms of employment and predictable career paths-the contemporary professional environment undergoes continuous transformation. These changes are driven by technological development, globalization, and socio-demographic shifts.[10] As a result, employees increasingly operate under conditions of uncertainty, requiring them to constantly adapt their competencies to new economic realities. Technological advancement is among the primary sources of instability in the modern labour market. Automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence affect the structure of employment. They lead to the obsolescence of

[8] T. Aleksander, *Andragogika. Podręcznik akademicki*, Radom–Kraków 2009, pp. 218–248.

[9] G.S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*, Chicago 1993, p. 17.

[10] U. Beck, *Społeczeństwo ryzyka*…, pp. 25–34.

certain jobs while simultaneously creating new professions that demand different qualifications. In many sectors of the economy, routine tasks are being replaced by technological solutions. This forces employees to develop competencies that are difficult to automate, such as creativity, critical thinking, and the ability to collaborate. Globalization also remains a significant driver of change. The international flow of capital, technology, and information increases competition in the labour market. It also elevates the importance of competencies that enable functioning in a multicultural environment. Today's employees often compete not only with individuals from their own region or country but also with candidates operating within the global economic space.

Demographic shifts present an additional source of uncertainty. The aging of European societies leads to extended periods of professional activity and increases the importance of education for adults and seniors. The traditional model, based on acquiring education in youth and applying it throughout one;s entire professional life, proves insufficient given the need for multiple competency updates.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a profound impact on the labour market. This crisis accelerated the digitalization process, popularized remote work, and highlighted the importance of adaptive and digital competencies. At the same time, it exposed existing social and educational inequalities regarding access to technology and opportunities to participate in learning processes.

The modern labour market is increasingly described as a market of permanent change. This means that professional security no longer stems primarily from employment stability. Instead, it comes from possessing competencies that allow for effective responses to ongoing changes. Under these conditions, continuing education takes on special significance, enabling individuals to maintain their adaptability to new professional demands.

Future competencies and employability in a knowledge-based economy

Transformations in the modern labour market are changing the way professional competencies are perceived. Universal competencies, which enable functioning in volatile and uncertain conditions, are gaining importance alongside specialized qualifications. In academic literature, these are referred to as "future competencies."[11] Future competencies comprise a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable effective functioning in a knowledge-based economy. The most frequently cited include digital skills, creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, teamwork, and the readiness for continuous learning.[12] The competency of learning

[11] S.M. Kwiatkowski, *Kompetencje przyszłości*, Warszawa 2018, pp. 14–20.

[12] J. Lamri, *Kompetencje XXI wieku. Kreatywność, komunikacja, krytyczne myślenie, kooperacja*, Warszawa 2021, pp. 25–120.

itself holds a particularly special place. Today, it is recognized as one of the most vital key competencies, as it facilitates the development of all other skills. Given the rapid accumulation of knowledge and technological progress, the ability to independently acquire new information is becoming more important than possessing a specific body of knowledge.

Modern organizations expect their employees to demonstrate flexibility, autonomy, and a willingness to take on new challenges. This translates to a growing importance of social and emotional competencies. Interpersonal communication, teamwork, empathy, and emotional intelligence are increasingly viewed as essential components of professional effectiveness.[13] The growing importance of future competencies is closely tied to the concept of employability.[14] Today, employability is understood as an individual's ability to gain, maintain, and change employment thanks to their possessed competencies, qualifications, and attitudes. It signifies not just the ability to find a job, but also the capacity to navigate the changes occurring in the labour market.

OECD research indicates that individuals actively participating in continuing education exhibit higher levels of employability and greater resilience to the impacts of economic shifts[15]. Consequently, developing future competencies has become a fundamental objective of modern education and labour market policy.

Reskilling and upskilling as adaptive strategies to labour market transformations

Processes known as *reskilling* and *upskilling* represent one of the most critical practical dimensions of implementing the lifelong learning concept. They serve as a response to the need for continuously updating professional qualifications amidst dynamic technological and social changes.[16] The concept of *upskilling* refers to developing and deepening already possessed professional competencies. Its goal is to adapt an employee's qualifications to the new requirements of their position and the changes occurring within the organization. This process does not lead to a change in profession; rather, it enables the individual to perform their current duties more effectively.[17] Conversely, *reskilling* means acquiring entirely new competencies

[13] *Pozytywna psychologia pracy i organizacji*, eds. P. Fortuna, A. Czerw, Warszawa 2026; J. Smoleń, *Relacje międzygrupow*e, "Socjologia i Psychologia Polityki" 2024, Vol. XVI, pp. 281–297; J. Smoleń, J. Iskra, *Inteligencja emocjonalna drogą do pokojowego budowania relacji przyjacielskich*, "Społeczeństwo. Edukacja. Język" 2023, No. 18(6), pp. 75–88.

[14] U. Jeruszka, *Zatrudnialność w perspektywie pedagogiki pracy*, Warszawa 2019; A. Solak, *Nowe kompetencje pedagogiczne pracowników służb społecznych wyzwaniem współczesnego świata*, "Szkoła – Zawód – Praca" 2013, No. 5/6, pp. 41–52.

[15] OECD, *Skills Outlook 2021. Learning for Life*, Paris 2021, pp. 9–12.

[16] European Commission, *European Skills Agenda*…, pp. 9–12.

[17] Cedefop, *European Skills and Jobs Survey 2023*, Luxembourg 2023, p. 18–21.

that enable an individual to pursue a different profession or take up work in a new economic sector. This process is particularly important when specific qualifications lose their value due to automation or structural changes in the labour market.[18]

The growing importance of *reskilling* and *upskilling* stems from the fact that professional competencies are becoming obsolete at an accelerated rate. In many industries, the lifecycle of knowledge has shortened to just a few years, necessitating regular qualification updates. A modern employee cannot base their professional standing solely on the education acquired at the beginning of their career. Employers play a significant role in competency development processes. An increasing number of organizations are investing in training, specialized courses, and mentoring programs. They view the development of human capital as a fundamental condition for maintaining competitiveness. Simultaneously, there is a growing reliance on education delivered via digital platforms, which facilitate the rapid acquisition of new skills.

The expansion of *reskilling* and *upskilling* processes is also a crucial element of social policy. The European Commission, the OECD, and the International Labour Organization emphasize that investing in skills development is one of the most effective methods of combating structural unemployment and professional exclusion.[19]

Therefore, *reskilling* and *upskilling* can currently be considered some of the most vital tools for realizing the idea of *lifelong learning*. They allow individuals not only to remain professionally active but also to build resilience against changes taking place in the economy and society.

Lifelong learning in the policies of the European Union, OECD, and UNESCO (2020–2025)

The rising prominence of lifelong learning is reflected not only in academic discourse but also in the strategic documents of major international organizations. In recent years, the European Union, the OECD, and UNESCO have all recognized the development of citizens' competencies as a key prerequisite for building social and economic resilience against the challenges of the 21st century. The issue of lifelong learning gained particular traction following the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which underscored the necessity for individuals and institutions to rapidly adapt to changing social and professional conditions.[20]

In the policies of the European Union, lifelong learning serves as a pillar for constructing the European Education Area and achieving goals related to the

[18] ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2024*, Geneva 2024, pp. 42–48.

[19] European Parliament, *Lifelong Learning for Employability and Social Inclusion*, Brussels 2022, pp. 11–16.

[20] OECD, *Skills Outlook 2021*…, pp. 15–22.

digital and green transitions. "The European Skills Agenda", adopted in 2020, plays a significant role. It aims to develop citizens' competencies by expanding access to continuing education, supporting upskilling, and creating frameworks that facilitate the reskilling of workers.[21] The European Commission stresses that the success of the European economy will depend on the ability of its citizens to continuously develop their skills and actively participate in lifelong learning processes. Special emphasis is placed on digital, entrepreneurial, and social competencies, as well as those associated with the green transformation of the economy.[22] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) presents a similar stance, having long highlighted the strong correlation between skills development and economic growth. Reports published after 2020 pay particular attention to the labour market consequences of the digital and ecological transitions. The OECD emphasizes that modern educational systems should prepare citizens not merely to perform specific jobs, but primarily to function in an environment of constant change.[23] OECD documents increasingly feature the concept of a learning society, which posits that competence development should occur throughout life and encompass all social groups. Great importance is attributed to developing skills related to information analysis, critical thinking, problem-solving, and the ability to learn.

Meanwhile, UNESCO primarily accentuates the humanistic dimension of continuing education. The report *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* underscored that education should support not only economic growth but also the building of societies based on solidarity, democracy, and social responsibility.[24] According to UNESCO, lifelong learning is a fundamental condition for active human participation in social and cultural life. The organization draws attention to the need for cultivating a "culture of learning," wherein education becomes an integral part of the daily life of both individuals and local communities.

An analysis of the strategic documents from the European Union, the OECD, and UNESCO reveals a shared trajectory in the development of modern educational policy. All three organizations recognize lifelong learning as one of the most critical instruments for supporting human capital development, strengthening employability, and building social resilience against the challenges of the contemporary world.

[21] European Commission, *European Skills Agenda*…, pp. 5–11.

[22] European Commission, *European Education Area Progress Report*, Brussels 2023, pp. 18–24.

[23] European Commission, *Council Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability*, Brussels 2022, pp. 3–7.

[24] UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, Paris 2021, pp. 12–18.

Discussion

The analysis of academic literature and strategic documents from international organizations demonstrates that lifelong learning has become a core component of modern social and economic development strategies. In the context of advancing technological transformation, digitalization, and rising employment uncertainty, continuing education is no longer viewed as a supplementary developmental activity. Rather, it is increasingly treated as a prerequisite for active participation in professional and social life.

The findings of this analysis validate the assumption made in the article's introduction, according to which lifelong learning constitutes a vital response to the instability of the modern labour market. Contemporary economic shifts mean that traditional career models, rooted in relative employment stability, are becoming obsolete. Individuals increasingly find themselves in situations that demand multiple qualification updates, role changes, and sometimes even complete career shifts.

The presented reflections indicate that in a knowledge society, the primary source of professional security is not the permanence of a job, but rather the capacity to continuously develop competencies. This represents a fundamental shift in how individual economic security is understood. Today, professional security increasingly relies on human adaptive potential, the readiness to learn, and the ability to apply newly acquired knowledge in novel professional contexts.

Simultaneously, the analysis of documents from the European Commission, the OECD, and UNESCO reveals that continuing education is perceived as a tool for achieving numerous social and economic goals. On the one hand, it is meant to enhance economic competitiveness and prepare workers to navigate the digital and ecological transitions. On the other hand, its role in building social cohesion, promoting active citizenship, and combating social exclusion is strongly emphasized.

It is worth noting a certain interpretative tension between the economic and humanistic approaches to lifelong learning. The economic perspective primarily focuses on developing competencies that boost individual productivity and employability. Education is thus treated as an investment in human capital, aimed at increasing the efficiency of the economy. Conversely, the humanistic approach highlights the significance of education for comprehensive human development, community building, and the strengthening of democracy. However, the conducted analyses suggest that these two approaches need not be mutually exclusive. The modern labour market increasingly rewards competencies that hold both professional and social value. Creativity, teamwork, interpersonal communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills serve both as factors increasing employability and as competencies supporting active participation in social life.

The issue of inequality in access to continuing education is also of critical importance. Studies by the OECD and the European Commission indicate that individuals with higher education participate in various forms of lifelong learning far more frequently than those with lower qualifications. This creates a risk of exacerbating existing social and economic disparities. Paradoxically, the groups most vulnerable to the impacts of labour market transformations are often the least likely to utilize opportunities for competence development.

In this context, the role of the state and public institutions in creating environments conducive to citizen participation in continuing education becomes crucial. It is necessary to develop financial support systems, flexible forms of learning, and mechanisms for validating the outcomes of non-formal and informal education. Such measures can help increase the accessibility of education and mitigate the risk of educational exclusion.

Another important issue requiring further reflection is the development of artificial intelligence and its impact on educational processes. On the one hand, new technologies offer vast opportunities for personalizing learning and expanding access to knowledge. On the other hand, they raise questions regarding the quality of education, future competencies, and the relationship between humans and technology. It appears that in the coming years, continuing education will need to focus increasingly on cultivating competencies that remain resistant to automation, such as creativity, reflexivity, empathy, and ethical responsibility.

In summary, it can be concluded that modern labour market conditions amplify the significance of continuing education as a strategic asset for both individuals and societies. Lifelong learning acts as an adaptive mechanism, enabling responses to technological and economic shifts, while simultaneously remaining a vital tool for supporting social, civic, and cultural development. It is precisely the multidimensional nature of continuing education that makes it one of the most critical elements of contemporary human and social development strategies.

Conclusion

The theoretical analyses and review of contemporary strategic documents lead to the conclusion that lifelong learning is one of the most essential mechanisms enabling individuals to function amid the instability of the modern labour market. Dynamic technological advancements, economic digitalization, the rise of artificial intelligence, globalization processes, and the ecological transition are rendering traditional career models based on relative employment stability obsolete.

The objective of this article was to analyze the significance of the *lifelong learning* concept as a response to the instability of the contemporary labour market. The discussions presented herein allow for the positive verification of the adopted

research assumption, according to which continuing education is a significant factor in enhancing individuals' capacity to operate under conditions of professional uncertainty and dynamic socio-economic transformations.

The analysis demonstrated that lifelong learning currently serves multiple, mutually complementary functions. First, it supports the development of competencies that help maintain employment and increase occupational mobility. Second, it is a crucial component in building professional resilience, understood as the ability to effectively respond to changes occurring in the work environment. Third, it contributes to the strengthening of social capital, civic engagement, and social integration. Future competencies-including the ability to learn, digital skills, creativity, problem-solving, and socio-emotional competencies-are of particular importance. The modern labour market increasingly prioritizes these exact skills, as they enable functioning in unpredictable and permanently shifting environments. Consequently, continuing education becomes not just one possible developmental pathway, but a prerequisite for maintaining professional activity and participating in a knowledge society.

The conducted analyses also indicate that effectively implementing the idea of lifelong learning requires the collaboration of multiple stakeholders. The responsibility for skills development cannot be placed solely on the individual human being. Educational institutions, employers, social organizations, and the state play a vital role, and they should foster conditions that encourage citizens to engage in lifelong education.

It should be emphasized that this study takes the form of a theoretical review, which constitutes its primary research limitation. The analysis relied predominantly on academic literature and strategic documents from international organizations. It did not encompass empirical research conducted among continuing education participants or employers operating in the modern labour market.

It must be concluded that lifelong learning is becoming one of the modern individual's most critical assets. Amidst an unstable labour market and accelerating civilizational changes, the capacity for continuous competence development forms the bedrock of professional security, social engagement, and quality of life. *Lifelong learning* should therefore be viewed not as a temporary adaptive strategy, but as an enduring element in the functioning of individuals and societies in the 21st century.

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