



Assessment of Lifelong Learning Needs in ... Abdullahi, A. K. (2026)

Assessment of Lifelong Learning Needs in The Later Life of Older Adults Enrolled in Continuing Education Programmes: A Comparative Study of Southern and Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

The number of the ageing population is increasing daily and has significantly impacted socio-economic status in both developed and developing countries. This calls for greater attention from the government and experts. Therefore, this study provides an X-ray of lifelong learning needs in the later years of older adults. The following research questions were answered: (i) What is the regional policy of lifelong learning in the later years of older adults in Nigeria? (ii) What factors motivate older adults' participation in continuing education programmes for learning in the later years? (iii) What are the challenges and prospects of lifelong learning needs in the later years of older adults? The study adopted a cross-sectional survey. The population of the study consisted of male and female older learners who are within the age range of 30-50 years. A total of thirty older learners were selected for the interview (qualitative data), and three (3) experts were selected for the interview in every programmes area namely: 1 course facilitator, 1 programme organiser, and 1 administrator, respectively. The purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used in selecting the older learners, while, the purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used in selecting three (3) experts. The study strictly adhered to ethical considerations guiding research conduct. The study found that factors motivating older adults' participation include: personal growth, career attainment, and health and well-being. This study recommends that the policy makers on education should design curriculum content on educational gerontology that will meet the learning needs of older adults in Nigeria.

Keywords: Lifelong learning needs, later life, older adults and continuing education

Introduction

Learning has been found to have a positive impact on behavioural change in the recipients. This is because learning is an indispensable part of human life. In this regard, lifelong learning is considered a prerequisite for imparting knowledge and skills to learners at any given time. Formosa (2021) argued that lifelong learning constitutes one of the pillars of active ageing on the basis that learning reinforces wellbeing and enables older people to stay healthy and engaged in society. Andreev (2022) reported that lifelong learning is a form of self-initiated education that is focused on personal development for young and older adult learners. The author further noted that lifelong learning enhances skill development, which includes interpersonal skills, creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, leadership, reflection, and adaptability. Lifelong learning is an area of priority and interest for the European Union and other developed countries. Yang (2015) observed that the development of lifelong learning policies in many UNESCO Member States has shown a growing demand by adults and young people for the knowledge, skills and competences acquired in the course of their life experiences to be made visible, evaluated and accredited within different contexts (work, education, family life, community and society). Learning in later years has taken centre stage as an area of priority and research interest across the regions of the world. The European Union's Green Paper on Ageing (2021) stresses the importance of addressing educational and lifelong learning needs of older adults at both national and regional levels. The policy underscores the importance of learning as a lifelong process, and older adults should be provided with opportunities to reskill and upskill in line with changing personal and societal demands (European Commission, 2021). In the same vein,



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Formosa (2012) noted that the European Union's policy on learning in later life has been subject to critical analysis. The author further noted that the EU recognizes the importance of lifelong learning for older adults; its approach has been criticized for being economically biased and ageist. The EU's vision for older adult education is primarily focused on employability and economic growth, neglecting other important aspects of late-life learning.

Furthermore, learning in later years is essential to meaningful living because learning is a continuing process throughout the lifetime. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019) reported that the fast-growing number of older adults during the last few decades across the globe has impacted significantly on the economic and social functions of societies in both industrialized and developing regions. Therefore, the learning needs of older adult and their well-being have become a global concern that calls for the greater attention of all and sundry. Learning in the later life of older adults has become a major topic of debate and public discourse in both developed and developing nations. In this wise, learning in later years has been interpreted in different ways. Schmidt-Hertha, Formosa, and Fragoso (2019) opined that learning in later life has entrenched itself as an integral part of adult education research, focusing on the diverse provision of late-life learning, the motivations and interests of older learners, and wide participation and emancipatory policies for older adult learning. Kulmus (2021) is of the view that learning in later years and further training are seen as essential for the self-determined design of a career in complex working and living conditions. Based on the assumption that knowledge and skills are imparted through further training that supports shaping learners' lives. Furthermore, Kulmus (2021) view that learning in later years can offer new opportunities for older adults to engage in learning and to take responsibility that allows them to remain functional throughout their lifetime. Thereby contributing to the workforce population, human capacity development, and career advancement.

Learning in later life has gained rapid recognition within the academic fields and policy circles in Nigeria. This recognition was influenced by the Policy Guideline for Adult and Non-Formal Education Nigeria (PGANE) and National Policy on Education (NPE). These policies were adopted to guide the operationalization of adult learning within the lifelong learning context in Nigeria, as well as to give adequate recognition to later life education of older adults through continuing education. The aforementioned policies have repositioned lifelong learning for capacity building of older adults in Nigeria. This assertion is affirmed by Obayan (2010) who postulated that lifelong learning is based on the personal and occupational needs, interests and learning requirements of individuals. Despite the increasing recognition of lifelong learning in later life. There are multifaceted challenges facing its adoption in Nigeria for bridging educational gaps and deficiencies among adult learner older adults. As it widely adopted in developed countries. Aina et, al. (2023) reported that Nigeria lack of separate policy for older adults, and this creates major challenges for the elderly population. Ageing in developing countries like Nigeria faces major challenges arising from poor financial resources, cost of enrolment, location of the centres, time frame, cultural norms, family and social commitment, and lack of institutional programme to support older adults.

Statement of the Research Problem

Despite the increasing recognition of lifelong learning as a component of active ageing and social inclusion, older adults in Nigeria face significant disparities in accessing and benefiting from continuing education programmes, ranging from cost of enrolment, location of the centers, time frame, cultural norms, and family and social commitment. The elderly population in Nigeria faces numerous challenges, including psychosocial issues, healthcare access, and economic stress (Animasahun & Chapman, 2017). These disparities are evident across the southern and northern



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regions of the country has hindered participation among older adults in continuing education. However, limited empirical research exists comparing the lifelong learning needs of older adults enrolled in continuing education programmes across these two regions. Understanding these regional differences is critical for designing inclusive, context-responsive educational policies and practices that promote equitable learning opportunities for ageing populations across Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study relates to a novel approach for addressing key research questions:

RQ1. *What is the regional policy of lifelong learning in the later years of older adults in Nigeria?*

RQ2. *What factors motivate older adults' participation in continuing education programmes for learning in the later years?*

RQ3. *What are the challenges and prospects of lifelong learning needs in the later years of older adults?*

Literature Review

This study presents a novel approach to reviewing literature on the current state of the art that has been highly discussed or debated in academic fields and policy circles. The literature, studies and research findings selected are relevant, current, and generalizable, drawn from peer-reviewed journals and official reports of some international organizations led credence to the current state of the art. The following databases were used: ProQuest, Web of Science, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). A large and growing body of literature has investigated lifelong learning. The OECD (2023) justified this claim that lifelong learning is crucial for addressing the challenges of rapid technological change and bridging the learning gap among adult learners. According to the OECD (2023) policy outlook, lifelong learning has become increasingly important as digital transformation and automation reshape learning. The policy buttressed that continuous learning throughout adulthood is essential for maintaining learning and adapting to new skill requirements in the digital age. In this regard, lifelong learning is considered a prerequisite for continuous learning and skills development, which are paramount for socio-economic survival for an individual to function throughout a lifetime in a knowledge-driven society. Zhi Yong et al. (2024) affirmed this assertion that lifelong learning is characterized by continuously pursuing knowledge, skills, and competencies beyond the first job. In this fast-paced, technological era, facilitated by globalization and the rise of the knowledge economy, governments, employers, and employees assign significant value to lifelong learning. The authors further buttressed that lifelong learning has risen as an essential cornerstone for developing people and society, with a particular focus on skills learning, and is vital in equipping individuals with the necessary competencies to navigate the dynamic demands of the modern workforce. In this wise, lifelong learning is a critical foundation for workforce skills development to navigate a technology-driven knowledge economy.

Furthermore, Kulmus (2020) conducted a study on positive age images in German adult education as a room for responsibility and commitment. The author found that learning through further education and training aims to promote the participation of older adults in lifelong learning courses and also to support them in maintaining and updating their skills, preparing them for new activities, and imparting new skills required for them. Similarly, Midtsundstad and Nielsen (2019) researched lifelong learning and the continued participation of older Norwegian adults in employment. Their study investigated the effects of lifelong learning on employment and labour market participation using a longitudinal study using individual register data from Statistics Norway. Although the effects of upgrading seem to vary according to older adults' participation in acquired basic skills or a degree from upper secondary school or tertiary school, the overall effect seems to be positive.



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Bora, Kim, and Baumgartner (2019) reviewed the literature on the informal learning of older adults in using mobile devices. The authors postulated that mobile devices are tools that adults use to engage in informal learning. Therefore, older adults learn better in a learning environment that affords self-paced instruction and satisfies their various learning needs. In recent times, mobile devices are becoming popular and ubiquitous, the research focuses on the uses of mobile devices for informal and lifelong learning of old adults. The literature reviewed by Jin, Kim, and Baumgartner is closely related to the present study because it aimed to explore how lifelong learning needs influence the later years of older adults for career attainment.

In addition, Abdullahi (2015) conducted a study on inclusive lifelong education in skill development and labour force performance in Nigeria. The study relied on cross-national survey data, and results from the analysis revealed that inclusive lifelong education had a great premium in the skill development of the labour force, who enrolled in adult education programmes. Abdullahi (2015) noted that lifelong learning remains a key driver for the social inclusion of older adults in the mainstream of society. For this reason, concerted efforts should be made to sustain and improve later-life learning for older adults. In this regard, lifelong learning is considered a prerequisite for the sustainable development and career aspirations of the citizenry of a nation.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided with two theories, namely:

Adult Learning Theory by Malcolm Knowles (1980)

Experiential Learning Theory by David A. Kolb (1984)

Adult Learning Theory: This theory is related to the study because adult learners have motivation towards learning such as personal goals and interests. Knowles' theory is well aligned with the learning needs of older adults enrolled in continuing education programme. Knowles' principles remain influential and align with the learning needs of older adults in modern learning practices, highlighting the need for tailored educational approaches for adults (Knowles et al., 2024). Adult learning in later life is viewed as an opportunity for spiritual growth and self-reconstruction. Andragogy theory is evident in its application to diverse learning contexts, including online environments and continuing education for older adults (Parrott, 2005). Knowles theory aims to answer the research question on motivating factors for older adults' participation in continuing education programmes for learning in the later years.

Experiential Learning Theory: Kolb's experiential learning theory is related to the lifelong learning needs of older adults enrolled in continuing education programmes. This theory shares a significant relationship with the preferences of older adults seeking lifelong learning opportunities for career goals. Older adults often have a strong desire to stay mentally active and learn new skills. Kolb's experiential learning theory provides a four-stage learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Gates, 2015). This approach is especially relevant for older adults in continuing education, as it emphasizes the importance of practical application and reflection on experiences (Lee & Kim, 2009).

The two theories discussed above are significant for exploring the interaction between the independent variable and dependent variable. Also, aim to guide the collection of qualitative data on the learning needs of older adults. The above theories strive to guide the collection of qualitative data on the experiences of employees with informal learning methods. Furthermore, this study goes beyond the state of the art to advance understanding of the impact of lifelong learning needs on older adults, as evidently shown in the literature reviewed and empirical findings and builds on the



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theoretical framework. The following were identified as the novelty of this study. No comparative study currently exists between Southern and Northern Nigeria on lifelong learning needs. This research seeks to fill this gap by developing a pioneering policy framework for integrating lifelong learning into the Nigerian curriculum. Moreover, there is no research examining older adults' participation and enrolment in continuing education using the Southern and Northern regions of Nigeria as a case study. This research aimed to address these gaps and promote knowledge transfer.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A cross-sectional research design was adopted for this study, anchored on an explanatory sequential design using qualitative data. This explains in sequence how issues in one finding lead to another finding. Thomas (2023) defines mixed-method research design as a process in which the researcher collects data from many different individuals at a single point in time, by observing variables as they occur without manipulation or influencing them. The justification for using a cross-sectional research design is to have in-depth information and knowledge about a population at a single point in time.

Sample Selection of Participants

The target population for the study consisted of male and female older adult age 40-60 years who enrolled in continuing education programmes at various institutions, colleges and adult education centres and were selected for one-on-one interviews (qualitative data). A multi-stage sampling procedure was used to determine the sample size, divided into four stages;; Stratified random sampling was used to select two regions of Nigeria, namely Southern and Northern.; Two states were purposively selected from each of the two regions. States selected includes Southern (Lagos, Rivers and Anambra States) and Northern (Kano, Borno and Kwara States). Making a total of six states.; The snowball sampling technique was used to select five voluntary participants (older adults) from each of the states earlier selected. Because there are few numbers or population of older adults enrolled in continuing education programmes. Making a total of thirty ($n=30$) respondents selected for one-on-one interviews (qualitative data), without bias for gender, age, or social status; A purposive sampling technique was used to select three ($n=3$) experts for the interview in every programmes area namely: ($n=1$) course facilitator, ($n=1$) programme organiser, and ($n=1$) administrator respectively.

Ethical Consideration

The researcher sought permission and approval to conduct the study from the authorities in the respective institutions, colleges and adult education centres across the six states selected. Consent of the participants was sought, in the course of the interview. This study adhered to all ethical considerations as well as complied with all regulations guiding the ethics of research. All information provided was treated with the utmost confidentiality.

Data Collection and Analysis

Key Informant Interviews (KII) were used for data collection. The interview questions were concise and aligned with the main research questions. All responses were recorded verbatim and transcribed for analysis. The essence of using qualitative data is to provide in-depth information and knowledge from the respondents. Psychometric properties of the interview guide were ascertained to ensure accuracy and consistency. The items in the Key Informant Interview (KII) guide were validated by experts in the fields of adult education, measurement and evaluation. The interview was carried out by the researcher and five research assistants who are familiar with the interview procedures. Qualitative data (interviews) were analyzed using NVivo software for systematic coding and thematic analysis to extract facts, in-depth information, and opinions of the respondents.



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Presentation of Results

This section presented a thematic analysis of the research questions on the general opinions of the respondents who participated in the study.

RQ1. What is the regional policy of lifelong learning in the later years of older adults in Nigeria?

The qualitative analysis of RQ1 revealed that there is no regional policy focus on ageing learners in Nigeria, other than the national policy of education (NPE, 2013) as expressed by experts in the interview conducted. This calls for policy advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and inclusive frameworks that acknowledge the unique learning needs of older populations across both regions.

RQ2. What factors motivate older adults' participation in continuing education programmes for learning in the later years?

Thematic analysis of responses from ($n=30$) participants revealed five core themes that explain the factors motivating older adults' participation in continuing education programmes across Southern and Northern Nigeria. A dominant theme was personal fulfilment and self-worth, economic empowerment, social interaction and community belonging and family encouragement, as expressed by older adults seeking learning to gain more knowledge. These themes highlight a complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that shape older adults' engagement in lifelong learning.

RQ3. What are the challenges and prospects of lifelong learning needs in the later years of older adults?

The interviews conducted with ($n=30$) respondents uncovered a dual narrative of challenges and prospects in meeting the lifelong learning needs of older adults in their later years. The following challenges were revealed includes: limited policy support and institutional neglect, inaccessible learning materials, high cost of enrollment, location of learning centers, Cultural beliefs that older adults are too old to learn, and complex lesson plans. These were extracted from the responses of the respondents during the interview. In addition, prospects and impacts of lifelong learning in the later years for older adults in Nigeria are: improved self-worth, cognitive stimulation, and social inclusion, while also empowering them economically through vocational skills, enhancing their civic engagement, promoting healthy ageing, and increasing health awareness.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding from RQ1 revealed that there is no regional policy focus on ageing learners in Nigeria, other than the national policy on education (NPE, 2013), as expressed by experts in the interview conducted. The absence of state policy on older adult learning is a particular problem facing their participation in any form of learning in Nigeria. This calls for policy advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and inclusive frameworks that acknowledge the unique learning needs of older populations across both regions. This finding support from the European Union's Green Paper on Ageing (2021) stresses the importance of addressing the educational and lifelong learning needs of older adults at both national and regional levels. The policy underscores the importance of learning as a lifelong process and older adults should be provided with opportunities to reskill and upskill in line with changing personal and societal demands (European Commission, 2021). This policy framework corroborates with the research found above and advocates for inclusive approaches to learning across the life course and encourages the development of regional policies.

The finding from RQ2, thematic analysis of responses ($n=30$) from participants revealed that personal fulfilment and self-worth, economic empowerment, social interaction and community belonging and



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family encouragement are factors that motivate older adults' participation in continuing education programmes for learning in the later years. This finding is supported by research conducted by Billet and Choy (2011), who explained that integrating lifelong learning and experiences in education settings could enable adult learners to enrich and extend their existing knowledge, access and learn knowledge that meet the learning needs required to function throughout the lifetime. In the same vein, Abdullahi (2015) also noted that lifelong learning provides a platform for acquiring knowledge, cultural transmission, and development of skills and understanding to enable the recipient to function throughout their lifetimes. Furthermore, Chua, Soo, & Raza (2024) reported that lifelong learning is fast becoming a natural route for adult learners to maximize their skills to remain competitive in this ever-changing job market. This assertion affirmed that adult learners are better equipped with 21st-century knowledge to enhance their skills, job security, confidence, and marketability as key benefits derived from enrolling in continuing education for lifelong learning; their studies must align with their occupational needs.

Findings from RQ3 revealed that the limited policy support and institutional neglect, inaccessible learning materials, high cost of enrollment, location of learning centers, Cultural beliefs that older adults are too old to learn, and complex lesson plans. The result was in line with the findings of Okoye (2012) noted that social changes, economic needs, and limited support for the ageing population further complicate the situation (Okoye, 2012). In the broader African context, adult learners struggle with adapting to new environments, technologies, and processes in formal learning settings. Additionally, identity and cognitive aspects pose significant challenges for adult learners (Zikhali, 2019). The prospects and impacts of lifelong learning in the later years offer older adults in Nigeria which includes: improved self-worth, cognitive stimulation, and social inclusion, while also empowering them economically through vocational skills, enhancing their civic engagement, promoting healthy ageing, and increasing health awareness. These findings align with the study of Narushima et al. (2016) who affirmed that lifelong learning plays a crucial role in promoting active ageing; participation in non-formal education can positively impact psychological wellbeing, even for vulnerable individuals (Narushima et al., 2016). Lifelong learning opportunities can help mitigate social isolation, cognitive decline, and age discrimination in later life (Formosa, 2021). To address these issues, policymakers should consider strengthening educational frameworks, providing supportive policies, and integrating sustainable development philosophies into education at all levels (Osunwusi, 2020). Overall, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for older adults can contribute significantly to active ageing and societal development.

Conclusion

This study compared lifelong learning needs in the later years of older adults enrolled in continuing education programmes in Southern and Northern Nigeria. Research has shown that lifelong learning has emerged as a critical mechanism for fostering behavioral change and enhancing the well-being of older adults in Nigeria, aligning with global perspectives on active ageing and social inclusion. Despite its recognized benefits, such as improved self-worth, cognitive stimulation, economic empowerment, and social engagement, significant barriers persist, including limited policy support, high enrollment costs, inaccessible learning materials, and cultural biases that deem older adults unsuitable for education. The absence of region-specific policies, as highlighted by the lack of frameworks beyond the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2013), underscores the urgent need for inclusive, region-sensitive policy frameworks that address the unique needs of ageing learners and promote equitable access to lifelong learning opportunities across Nigeria.

Recommendations



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Based on the findings of this study and the conclusion reached, below are the recommendations made:

1. The policymakers at both national and sub-regional levels should develop implementable lifelong learning policies that recognize the learning needs of older adults and should be embedded in state education development plans and aligned with global best practices such as the EU's age-inclusive learning frameworks.
2. The educational providers and adult education centers should leverage motivational factors such as personal fulfilment, economic empowerment, social interaction, religious engagement, and family encouragement to design flexible, relevant, and community-based learning programmes. Incorporating practical, interest-based, and vocational content into curricula can enhance participation.
3. The government and stakeholders should invest in learning facilities or infrastructure, mobile learning units, financial support, and accessible digital tools tailored to older learners. At the same time, NGO should be involved to encourage public-private partnerships to expand and sustain lifelong learning opportunities for Nigeria's ageing population.

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