

# Factors Supporting and Preventing Academics from Becoming Lifelong Learners

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## Abstract

In present circumstances, it has become inevitable for individuals to continue obtaining new information and skills throughout their lives. Having learned to learn and information literate individuals are able to meet their learning needs both in career and personal terms by themselves. The important aspect is the individual feels the need to learn and knows how and where to meet these needs. Feeling those can be considered as the basic requirement to make efforts in order to meet them. However, the surrounding circumstances may support or prevent meeting these needs. Since the situation of being a lifelong learner will be examined based on the present working conditions, the study is designed as embedded multiple case study. Maximum variety is ensured in the study group by taking into account the various academic titles, gender, and fields of study. The interview form is developed based on the literature and revised according to the opinions of specialists. The data has been collected by doing individual interviews with academics and a content analysis has been performed. In conclusion of the analysis performed, such themes as the need to become lifelong learners, the factors supporting to become lifelong learners and the factors preventing from becoming lifelong learners have been reached.

**Keywords:** lifelong learning, lifelong learner, academics

## 1. Introduction

Approximately a period of 15-20 years of a human life, starting at preschool and continuing until graduation from the university, passes in educational institutions under control. However, in present circumstances, it has become inevitable for individuals to continue obtaining new information and skills throughout their lives outside of school period, as well. The achievements, expected from an individual or desired by the individual himself or herself are not only limited to formal and non-formal education thanks to the development of technology. Having learned to learn and information literate individuals can meet their learning needs both in career and personal terms by themselves. The important aspect is the individual feels the need to learn and knows how and where to meet these needs.

All learning activities, oriented at improving the information, skills, and capabilities for personal, social or professional reasons taken on throughout life by the individual are defined as lifelong learning (European Commission, 2005). Lifelong learning refers to the learning process continuing everywhere throughout life in order to adapt to constantly evolving conditions in contrast to education and learning skills limited to a certain period of life. It also stands for creating new opportunities for persons and providing an advanced level of learning possibilities (Soran, Akkoyun, and Kavak, 2006). While lifelong learning contributes to the increased efficiency of an individual, and the adaptation to innovations in the business world, it leads to becoming a part of the society, as well (Berberoğlu, 2010; Demirel and Yağcı, 2012). What's more, lifelong learning properties provide the individuals with more flexible ways to continue learning (Mwaikokesya, Osborne and Houston, 2014).

Being brought to agenda as the policy of UNESCO in the 1970s, the concept of lifelong learning refers to the personal development and the continuity of education in the report published by the OECD in 1973. 1996, announced as the year of lifelong learning in Europe; 2000, emphasized the lifelong learning as the main elements of the European Union; and 2006, the key competencies of lifelong learning were published, are important years in terms of the concept itself. In Turkey, the works started in the 2000s accelerated thanks to the "Lifelong Learning Strategy Document" published by the Ministry of National Education in 2009 and the establishment of "Directorate General for Lifelong Learning" within the body of the Ministry of National Education in 2011.

It is important for the individual to become aware of his or her need to learn and to have an effort for meeting this need related to lifelong learning. At this point, it is necessary first to establish circumstances to ensure that individuals feel the need to develop themselves in different fields and to raise this awareness. This requirement emerges sometimes based on individual interests and needs, sometimes for keeping up with the innovations and developments, a profession requires, sometimes for adapting within a social structure. According to Dowling et al. (2004), lifelong learning in a personal context aims to ensure a better performance of the individual in an area in which she or he is interested, and his or her self-improvement. Lifelong learning in social context aims to bring together a group for a certain purpose in order to share information and improve the existing information. In this process, an individual makes contact with other individuals by improving his or her social skills. Lifelong learning in occupational context aims to improve the functional knowledge in order for an individual to perform better in a profession (cited in Günüç, Odabaşı and Kuzu, 2012).

An individual is expected to be a lifelong learner in order to continue his or her multi-directional development. The key competencies of lifelong learning in order to become a lifelong learner, have been defined by the European Commission (2005). These key competencies are listed as: Communication Competence in Mother Tongue, Foreign Language Competence, Basic Competence in Science and Technology, Mathematical Competence, Digital Competence, Learning to Learn Competence, Responsibility Competence and Cultural Competence. Possessing these competencies by individuals supports the learning process and the continuity of learning. According to Mayhew, Wolniak & Pascarella (2008), the motivation for lifelong learning and the competence to productively participate in society are the critical compounds for professional and personal success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The circumstances surrounding an individual can support or prevent feeling and meeting the need to learn. Institutions can make arrangements aimed at ensuring the orientation of new employees and increasing the qualifications of the existing employees. However, even if there are no institutional arrangements, individuals are expected to be lifelong learners for supporting both their career and personal developments. However, it should be considered that meeting these needs, in other words, having lifelong learning competencies will not be possible through a short-term training or meeting. Becoming information literate and learning how to learn for an individual require longer studies, integrated applications, and appropriate role models.

Within the scope of the curriculum implemented in the formal education institutions in Turkey, there are skills referring to the key competencies of lifelong learning. However, the perspective, attitude, and even, the situation of possessing these skills by the teachers, who are the implementers of this curriculum, can play a decisive role in the development of these skills. Furthermore, this can affect the qualities required of students by the world, and thereby, the social development as part of the society in the long term.

As a direct or indirect factor for an individual to, teachers should have the awareness and attain the required skills related to lifelong learning at least in the pre-service training period. There are achievements regarding raising this awareness in the teacher training programs, as well. However, lifelong learner characteristics of the academics, responsible for the teacher training, and their reflections on the class will be more influential in the prospective teachers. According to Kennedy (2004), if the academics attain the lifelong learning skills and reflect those of the course material, we can bring up students with lifelong learning skill.

An academic working in the faculty of education in Turkey is expected to both teach and make research. However, as the student population in faculties of education is so high in Turkey, the academics have too much course load. Institutions can not structure any policies for the development of the individuals except academic promotion. This lead to a personal effort for the academicians in Turkey to develop themselves in terms of lifelong learning key competencies. Whereas, in order to increase the quality of education and to train individuals suitable for today's needs, teacher training academicians are also required to have qualifications to meet these needs. Only then they can be a role model for the pre-service teachers by transferring these competency fields to their life and teaching environments.

Within the context of hidden curriculum, the literature points out that the behaviors of academics have more influence on students than formal curriculum. Therefore, becoming lifelong learners for the academics will be more influential in the prospective teachers in terms of being a role model along with improving their professional and personal characteristics. In this sense, this study tries to answer the following questions: (1) what are the factors supporting academics working in the faculty of education to become lifelong learners? and (2) what are the factors preventing academics working in the faculty of education from becoming lifelong learners?

## 2. Method

Since the situation of being a lifelong learner will be examined based on the present working conditions, the study is designed as embedded multiple case study. Factors supporting and preventing academics from becoming lifelong learners constitute the units of analysis separately. These units of analysis will be examined in the context of academics. The fact that academics have different fields of study and titles is addressed as multiple cases.

### 2.1 Participant

The study group of this research consists of academics working in the faculty of education of a state university in Turkey. The various academic titles, gender, and fields of study were taken into account to ensure the maximum variety in the determination of participants. A total of 10 participants (5 Female, 5 Male) had the following titles: Professor (3 persons), Associate Professor (2 persons), Assistant Professor (3 persons) and Lecturer (2 persons).

### 2.2 Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview form related to the literature has been prepared. As a result of expert opinions and tests, the data collection tool has been put into its final form. Some of the questions are as follows.

- In what areas do you feel the need to improve yourself?
- What do you do in order to improve yourself in those areas?
- Are there any areas in which you want to improve yourself but you are not able to meet this desire? Why?
- What are the factors that support your effort to develop yourself?
- What are the factors that prevent your effort to develop yourself?

### 2.3 Collection and Analysis of Data

First of all, the academicians were reached and informed about the scope and aim of the study. Then volunteer academicians were visited in their offices and individual interviews were made with each academician. In order not to cause any data loss, the interviews were recorded after the permission of the participants.

The data obtained has been primarily analyzed, put in writing, and the themes have been reached through open coding (Strauss&Corbin, 1990). Within the frame of themes, the codes have been reviewed, and internal homogeneity and external inhomogeneity have been taken into account and the theme-code relation has been put into its final form.

### 2.4 Validity and Reliability

In order to ensure the validity of the study, purposeful sampling has been selected and the participants are defined. Moreover, the research data have been presented to the reader by describing in detail, and direct quotations are frequently employed. In order to ensure the reliability of the study, the data set has been coded by two different researchers, and reliability coefficient has been calculated as .92 by using the formula proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Furthermore, recordings, coding and all the other reports and analyses are kept in order to present them to the confirmation review.

## 3. Findings

In conclusion of the analysis performed, such themes as the need to become lifelong learners, the factors supporting to become lifelong learners and the factors preventing from becoming lifelong learners have been reached.

### 3.1 Need for Lifelong Learning

One of the main factors which ensure becoming a lifelong learner is the fact that individuals feel the need to learn. There may be many different reasons affecting the emergence of this need. Within the scope of this study, positive attitude of individuals towards learning, supporting the career development or personal interests are considered as the reasons for the emergence of the need to learn.

Positive attitude towards learning is considered significant for feeling the need for lifelong learning. While one of the interviewees, K1, described his/her opinions on this matter as "I want to improve myself in every aspect. I want to improve in my field of study, education, etc. For example, if they offered me to be a student again, I would love it, because learning new things, acquiring new knowledge and using those in my own field makes me happy", the other participant, E1, stated that "my family has supported me to study and be a great man. In order not to make a liar out of them, I studied back then. This situation made me someone who wants to learn everything. Learning new things have always appealed to me." Similarly, K2 has expressed his/her positive attitude towards learning by saying "I

really like learning and teaching. This motivates me in terms of improving myself. My biggest desire stems from this."

Individuals' need to improve and renew themselves also supports becoming a lifelong learner. Academics express that they feel the need to improve themselves in fields which might directly or indirectly contribute to themselves when carrying out the requirements of their profession. The opinion of E4 on this matter "For example, I may need a graphic in an article, I start from asking myself how I could draw this graphic in the best way possible, then I find a software and I try to learn it." and the opinion of E3 "I want to improve my foreign language skills. In particular, I want to read a foreign academic article fluently." refer to the areas which would directly contribute to their career development.

The opinion of K1 "It is sufficient for bachelor degree students but I have graduate students, as well and sometimes I feel I'm not sufficient in terms of researching and thesis writing and I'd like to mentor them as much as a pedagogics scientist can. I can teach everything I know but I have to learn first." refers to the occupational contribution in terms of performing the mentorship duty of the academics.

Individuals feel the need to learn with the aim of both enriching their lives and improving themselves in different areas. The opinion of E2 "Apart from my lectures, I carry out studies on security in which I'm interested. I want to learn how and why it's done, and what are the security vulnerabilities are, I try to reveal these." and the opinion of K3 "I'm interested in cooking. I'd like to attend a course on cooking or pastries" illustrate how personal interests orient an individual's learning. The opinion of K5 "I'd like to learn things related to my field but in general everything. For example, I make an effort to use technology more efficiently." and the opinion of K2 "I read and research about maternity and cooking. When I have a need for something that would make my life easier, I learn those." can be given as examples to creating a need to learn by bringing together factors which would make life easier and which are related to the personal interests.

### *3.2 Factors Supporting to Become A Lifelong Learner*

In order to become a lifelong learner, it is expected to make an effort to meet the need to learn after feeling this need. Internal motivation, the attitude of colleagues and lecture diversity are the factors supporting an individual to become a lifelong learner.

The internal motivation of the academics oriented at learning supports them in becoming a lifelong learner. In this respect, the opinion of E3 "Actually, there is no support. No one is asking me to improve myself but I'm the biggest supporter of myself. I believe I will be happy if I do those and that's my biggest support." and the opinion of K4 "I have always enjoyed learning new things. Regardless of what it is, learning new things motivates me." refers to the internal motivation for the desire to learn. In this respect, the opinion of K2 "I love learning since I was a child. I have always wanted to be well-informed, I grew up with a hunger for information. The area we lived in was a hard place for someone to improve himself/herself in terms of education. I made efforts to reach one step further in spite of all those. I always felt insufficient and this feeling helped me advance even further." and the opinion of K3 "Since childhood, I have been someone who thinks I have to carry out my responsibilities. I have become a Professor but I'm not perfect. I must continue to refresh myself as long as I am in this profession. This is not because someone forces me but I want to do it myself." reflects that the positive attitude towards learning starts to emerge since early childhood. In addition, the opinions of K5 "We tell students to be curious and to make researches but if I am not curious myself, and if I don't share this with students, I cannot make sure that they will be curious, as well. I already wonder about everything and I try to learn. I reflect this on students in order to be a role model to them." reveal that internal motivation is also significant in terms of being a role model to students apart from supporting to learn.

The colleague sharing is one of the matters emphasized in terms of supporting to become a lifelong learner. The opinion of E1 "For example, there are sharing among colleagues. We realize different perspectives academically during a conversation and we can have a talk about that subject." and the opinion of K1 "I have friends, when we need to ask a question, they never refuse." point out the support of colleague sharing.

The lecture diversity, carried out by academics, also supports the learning process. While the opinion of E5 "Giving different lectures and preparing for those improve someone and create a different perspective." refers to a voluntary learning process; the opinion of K2 "My lecture load is both excessive and is not related to my field. It resorts me to improve myself in areas which will not help me in my field and academic career. This might be called lifelong learning, as well but it's not in my guidance and not in line with my desires. I learn just because I have to." expresses a mandatory learning process.

### 3.3 Factors Preventing from Becoming A Lifelong Learner

Even if individuals have lifelong learning need, sometimes the appropriate conditions to meet this need may not emerge. Lecture load, administrative duties, family responsibilities, negative attitude of colleagues, economic reasons and pre-learning insufficiency are considered as obstacles against lifelong learning by academics.

It is considered that weekly lecture hours of academics are the most stressed obstacle. The opinion of E5 "since I have the lowest academic title in the department, my lecture load is more. I have to give 40 hours of lecture weekly" and the opinion of E2 "I give at least 36 hours of lecture weekly. It doesn't leave me any time to do something else" refer to this situation. Moreover, within the context of other responsibilities related to lectures, the opinion of K4 "The biggest problem is time, you cannot find time for everything, especially if you are an academician, there is no time at all. You have to prepare for classes, you have to give feedback on student homework. Sometimes, you spend all your day on giving feedbacks. Since I am both an administrator and I have a tight schedule of lectures, I can't spare time for many things I want to do." and the opinion of E1 within the context of graduate mentorship activities "graduate students take up too much time. Works such as reading their theses, revising them, meeting the students, who finished their classes, for determining their thesis subjects take up too much of my time." illustrate the time problems of academics.

The more responsibilities an academic has, the less time they can spare for meeting their learning needs. In this context, administrative duties are considered as obstacles causing more workload for individuals in addition to academic duties. The opinion of K3 "I have two administrative duties. It's all about matters on solving the problems such as signatures, decisions etc. I have to attend meetings during the day. It's like this almost until 5 pm." and the opinion of E1 "Administrative duties such as assignments, leave of absence, commissions, meetings, etc. take up too much time. We frequently receive documents for academic promotions from other universities, which alienate me from classes. I feel as if I were a reporter professor." are noteworthy.

It is considered as an obstruction for academics to spend their weekends on house and family responsibilities. The opinion of K2 "In fact, being a woman and a woman academic is an obstacle in itself. Even if you are an academic, you still have other responsibilities at home. Trying to balance this tires me even more.", the opinion of E3 "Since my partner works at weekends, Saturdays, I am responsible for the whole house and the children, which takes up my time for all day." and the opinion of E5 "Even though it's weekend, we have to wake up early because of children. All weekend is spent on shopping, the children's needs, and family visits. During weekdays, family responsibilities do not leave any time." can be given as examples to the source of the obstacle.

Negative attitude of colleagues is considered significant in terms of encouragement for some of the participants and in terms of collaboration for some others. The opinion of K2 "Not having any support academically. I'd like it if our professors supported us. When I go to them for a study, I'd like to hear sentences like it looks good, you begin and I'll support you or encouraging statements. Instead of supporting, hearing abrasive statements such as no need for this, not a big deal, etc. causes losing my motivation. I'd like to be in a teamwork, however, there is none of that, here.", the opinion of E2 "The person with whom you can work is of crucial significance. When you can't communicate or when they are not open to you, it doesn't lead to any improvements." and the opinion of E4 "I sometimes obstruct myself for fear of being required to defend myself for something I did." represent that the negative attitude of colleagues is perceived as an obstacle.

As a factor preventing from becoming a lifelong learner, the opinion of K5 "I have courses I want to take but they compel me economically and this obstructs me from improving myself" expresses the economic reasons while the opinion of E5 "For example, I'd like to study in a department on software and associate it with my field of study. However, since I do not have the background, I cannot do that." expresses the pre-learning insufficiencies.

## 4. Discussion

Although lifelong learning became popular conceptually after the 1990s, self-improvement for an individual throughout life is a natural process. However, as the significance and necessity of being a lifelong learner increased, societies both supported individuals' self-improvement and diversified the opportunities through theoretical arrangements.

It can be considered that feeling a need to learn in any area, knowing the means to meet this need and utilizing these are important steps in the process of becoming a lifelong learner. In this context, feeling the need to learn for an individual can be the basis for realizing the learning. There may be many different personal, occupational and social reasons for the emergence of this need. Within the scope of this study, it is viewed that the positive attitude of the individual towards learning, in other words, the desire to learning to learn is a significant factor in the emergence of

the need for lifelong learning. Yavuz-Konakman and Yanpar-Yelken (2014) concluded in their study that academics view possessing the lifelong learning competence as a requirement. According to Zorga (2002), individuals should continue lifelong learning for self-improvement and success in career, and thus, contribute to the success of the institution he/she is working in.

Another result of the current study is that the desire to improve one's self in the current career employed or making efforts to fulfill personal interests are also significant in the emergence of the need to learn. Similar studies also point out that academics have the desire to learn and improve themselves continuously (Ayçiçek, 2016), and they attach importance to lifelong learning in order to continue their professional self-confidence and renew their academic knowledge (Haseski&Odabaşı, 2016). In a similar way, Lederman (1998) resulted in his study that the reasons for professional development are internal needs and desire to follow the current affairs. Meanwhile, subject title and specialties are found out to be influential in determining the learning activities.

Although the individual is in need of learning, the surrounding circumstances can support or prevent meeting this need. Accordingly, the current study reached the result that independently of external factors, the internal motivation of an individual is an important support source for becoming a lifelong learner. According to Deci and Ryan (2008), internal motivation is that individuals engage in an activity in line with the positive feelings originating from their own selves and the activity is discovered to be satisfying by itself. In the study by Haseski and Odabaşı (2016), the motivation source is underlined by the academics stating that lifelong learning is a lifestyle for them. Furthermore, it many of the studies emphasized the motivation as one of the factors affecting lifelong learning (Crow 2006; OECD 2000; Scales 2008; Tan and Morris 2006). Moreover, McCombs (1991) stated that human behavior is mainly motivated by the needs of self-improvement and self-determination.

As much as our internal processes, the attitudes and behaviors of other people may be influential in our learning process as a social being. It is concluded that if the colleagues are open to learning and teaching, and pave the way for sharing information, this situation supports becoming lifelong learners. Sometimes, responsibilities (such as different lectures) with which an individual is burdened support the learning process. According to Alparslan (2014), if the employees meet for different reasons in social environments outside of academic areas, spend social time, volunteer to help one another, and cooperate for a common action with the spirit of collaboration in the name of the institution, they get more satisfaction from their work. The positive role models around individuals (Stewart, 2009), the social relations established by adults (Jarvis, 2012), the information sharing with colleagues (Jivanjee, Pendell, Nissen & Goodluck, 2015), and the tendency of colleagues to improve themselves (Haseski & Odabaşı, 2016) influence the participation in lifelong learning positively.

Despite the feeling the need for self-improvement in personal and social areas, some of the responsibilities and necessities in our life can be an obstacle against our self-improvement. According to Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua and Stough (2001), academics are expected to carry out many different activities such as lecturing, research, administrative duties in universities at the same time. In this study results clearly outlined that necessities such as lecture load and administrative duties, and responsibilities related to family life influence becoming lifelong learners negatively. Similarly, related literature point out lecture load and administrative duties (Haseski and Odabaşı, 2016; Clapper, 2010; Jivanjee, Pendell, Nissen and Goodluck, 2015; Çolakoğlu, 2005; Visakorpi, Stankovic, Pedrosa & Rozsnyai, 2007), and family responsibilities (Haseski and Odabaşı, 2016; Gouthro, 2005; Kåle, 2011) are preventing individuals from lifelong learning. Furthermore, negative attitude of colleagues is also one of the obstacles preventing lifelong learning. This conclusion is in line with the conclusions of studies carried out Haseski and Odabaşı (2016), İnandı, Tunç and Uslu (2013) and Stewart (2009). Tuzgöl-Dost and Cenkseven (2007) also revealed that the negative interpersonal relationships have also a negative influence on the attitudes of academics.

In conclusion, variables such as the internal motivation of academics towards lifelong learning, working conditions and family responsibilities can influence their lifelong learning competencies. It can be recommended to adjust the working conditions of academics, especially their lecture loads, in a way that it will enable them to experience new learnings. Moreover, academics can reduce the other workload required from their profession if the responsibility of administrative duties and the time they might consume are taken into account. The current research is limited to the opinions of academics working in the faculty of education of a state university. Similar studies might be carried out with the academics in different universities or faculties.

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