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Towards a career perspective on lifelong development: applying a multiple-stakeholder approach to explore the concept

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Abstract

Purpose – In this study, we propose that a contemporary definition of lifelong development, based on scientific literature and qualitative research in 12 Dutch organisations, be applied. This definition integrates several different perspectives on lifelong learning.

Design/methodology/approach – To begin with, a conceptual definition was formulated in collaboration with partners and experts from the field. After that, 34 interviews were conducted consisting of one employee, one manager and one human resource (HR) officer from each participating organisation. This was done using an epistemic interview method.

Findings – From our findings, we conclude that lifelong development is regarded and practised differently by the various respondents; lifelong development is aimed at achieving personal or organisational goals and mutual interests are rarely addressed. However, there seems to be a growing recognition of the importance of integrating the two perspectives.

Originality/value – In order to promote a dialogue regarding stakeholder perspectives, we propose that a definition of lifelong development be applied, one that combines the economic and the more psychological meaning-making perspectives. In doing so, attention should not only be paid to current goals but also to the

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future goals of individuals and organisations so that future developments can be anticipated. This will then serve as a point of departure for further research and (inter)national, regional and organisational practice.

Keywords Lifelong development, Career perspective, Sustainable careers, Multiple-stakeholder approach, Epistemic interview approach

Paper type Research paper

Purpose

In the 21st century, lifelong development, or what is still often referred to as lifelong learning, has become an important issue in Western countries, particularly in Europe and North America (see, e.g. Evans *et al.*, 2023) and Oceania (e.g. Le *et al.*, 2023). Work and careers are now more unpredictable, and in the current labour market, workers need to be more flexible than ever before, as globalisation and digitalisation have instigated major developments in today's societies (Hirschi, 2018). Whereas in the past 20th century stable organisations provided a secure basis for building one's career, the 21st century has brought new social work arrangements that have led to the replacement of permanent jobs (Kalleberg *et al.*, 2006). In particular, careers that over the course of time reflect the continuous employment of individuals in their jobs are becoming increasingly rare. In today's work organisations people are continuously required to adapt and to develop further.

The objectives of this necessary development may vary depending on the perspective from which it is approached. An economic perspective emphasises the role of human capital in economic prosperity and development with the aim of economic growth (Becker, 1962). Today, we are witnessing this perspective in research and policy that is aimed at increasing participation in formal learning programmes in order to adapt to changes in work and to achieve organisational goals. Alongside the economic perspective, there is also a need to take the well-being of the individual into account. This psychological perspective emphasises more individual meaning-making as an important mechanism of personal development (Savickas *et al.*, 2009). However, in order to remain relevant to society and protect one's career sustainability (De Vos *et al.*, 2020), it is also important to contribute to the workplace and society (economic need) (Crane and Hartwell, 2018) and to pay attention to personal meaning-making (psychological need) in order to remain motivated and self-directed when following learning and career paths (Raemdonck, 2006).

In keeping with the European Commission's indicators on lifelong learning, the concept is defined and measured only in terms of (formal) education and training (Commission of the European Communities, 2000; Holford and Mleczko, 2013). Lifelong learning is seldom conceptualised beyond formal learning.

We argue that lifelong learning is not solely a means for building skills. Lifelong learning for sustainable development requires a shift towards learning as transformative learning which leads to capabilities or the ability to apply skills and competences within new contexts (cf. Frie *et al.*, 2019). This transformation requires the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and to change those circumstances in which people find themselves, based on their personal motivation and strengths. These capabilities are crucial in order to achieve sustainable development for both (inter)national economic prosperity and personal well-being.

Up until now, however, the definitions that have applied the concept of lifelong or sustainable development still seem to vary or otherwise, they lack coherence when trying to make them meaningful in practice (Fouarge and Künn-Nelen, 2018). Based on this diversity, we argue for a career perspective on lifelong development. Therefore, in this study we aim to explain the different perspectives on lifelong development, both economic and psychological, and we propose that a contemporary definition of the concept be employed, one that integrates these different perspectives into a single (i.e. integrative) career perspective. This definition will be based on academic literature, discussions with partners and experts from the field, and the subsequent validation of this definition in interviews with several stakeholders in working

organisations. We require this definition in order to promote a dialogue regarding current and desired perspectives on lifelong development in policy and practice.

Therefore, the following main research question has been formulated: How can lifelong development be defined when taking current theories and practices in work organisations into account?

The sub-research questions we address are.

(1) How is lifelong development perceived and described by three different stakeholder groups within organisations: operational employees, managers, and HR officers?

(2) To what extent can economic and meaning-making perspectives be discerned in these descriptions?

(3) To what extent can a preliminary definition of lifelong development from a career perspective be recognised and how can it be considered as a potentially meaningful approach to lifelong development according to the different stakeholder groups, and how can this definition be more finely attuned?

The results presented in this paper are based on our findings as described in a previous report in the Dutch context (Kuijpers and Draaisma, 2020).

Focus on lifelong development

The increasing focus on the importance of lifelong development has often been accompanied by a shift in terminology from lifelong learning to lifelong development. This shift reflects a broader approach that combines non-formal and informal activities with formal education and training (Clardy, 2018; Jeong *et al.*, 2018; Nijkamp *et al.*, 2019) across the entire career span. Simons and Schenning (2021) outlined the differences between these two terms, concluding that learning is typically associated with knowledge and skills, focusing on the short term, whereas development is more often related to talents and personal attributes, understood as a long-term process. In policy and research papers, either term is often used without clearly defining them. We argue that a better scholarly understanding of the phenomenon of lifelong development is needed to move the field forward, both in terms of theory and practice. Clarifying the definition of lifelong development based on research findings fosters the development of a shared language and dialogue in which various perspectives can be taken, providing a foundation for further advancements in both practice and research.

Up until now, the importance of lifelong development, as emphasised by policymakers and researchers, has not become fully apparent to employees. A qualitative study on lifelong development in the Netherlands (Nijkamp *et al.*, 2019) showed that employees often feel that instead of being change agents themselves and being able to influence and actually orchestrate these changes, the changes are happening to them in their work environment. Moreover, the expected changes in the labour market are often too abstract for employees to truly understand their impact and this contributes to a sense of urgency for lifelong development. More worryingly, other Dutch researchers (Grijpstra *et al.*, 2019) found that despite workers recognising that lifelong development is essential to achieve their personal goals, they only actually engage in developmental behaviours when they have a strong intrinsic motivation to do so. In addition, the authors cite examples of personal barriers to lifelong development, such as clinging to certainties and having no vision of future ambitions. In other words, although people recognise the need to develop their capabilities throughout their lives, many individuals struggle to meet the necessary requirements that enable them to be adaptive in a complex environment (Crane and Hartwell, 2018).

Despite the desire to that lifelong development be formulated at the national level, there is still a lack of coherence in translating national lifelong development policies into practice. A clear direction is needed, one in which lifelong development will be embedded in

organisational structures and thoroughly aligned with the prevailing needs of both working organisations and their employees (Aust *et al.*, 2020; Semeijn and Van der Heijden, 2021). Moreover, as lifelong development is not a given for most people, the relevant stakeholders, such as one's close colleagues, direct supervisor and HR representatives in the workplace, do play an important role in making lifelong development possible. In other words, lifelong development needs to be facilitated (Crane and Hartwell, 2018). The extent to which people develop depends on the opportunities and stimuli they encounter in their work situation (Malik and Garg, 2017). Given this dynamic between individual employees and their environment, it seems obvious that (HR) management within organisations has an important role to play in facilitating this process. Recent developments in the field of (sustainable) HR increasingly emphasise the importance of employee development and growth, not only for economic reasons, but also as an end in itself.

Based on the above outline, we argue that these challenges in today's work organisations should be addressed from a theoretical angle in order to stimulate the dialogue based on recent research insights. The pursuit of a shared definition can contribute to moving the field forward by actually addressing current societal challenges. To achieve this, we argue that a sustainable career perspective on lifelong development should be adopted, which comprises one that can help organisations to adopt and implement more sustainable HR management policies and practices so as to facilitate lifelong development.

Defining lifelong development from a vocational perspective

Lifelong development has often been approached from an economic perspective, as the basis for managing employability and productivity for the benefit of the employer or labour market. From an economic viewpoint, lifelong development is intended to maintain and promote a society's welfare. Well-trained employees are needed to realise these ambitions in the field of innovation, transition and growth, and to reduce and prevent labour shortages (e.g. Council of the European Union, 2021).

From a psychological and individual meaning-making perspective, lifelong development focuses on enhancing one's personal well-being by fostering growth and adaptability throughout life. This process enables individuals to become more aware of their needs, so that they can realise their potential and experience self-actualisation (Savickas *et al.*, 2009). By continuously developing, individuals are better equipped to manage personal and professional transitions, not just in response to external demands, but as part of their own journey toward fulfilment. Lifelong development allows people to connect more deeply with their purpose in life, offering them opportunities to align their personal values and aspirations with meaningful actions (Weeks and Schaffert, 2019).

Although policy papers mention that lifelong development is intended to fulfil both societal/economic needs as well as individual needs (e.g. European Commission, 2018), it has not been made clear how these needs can be aligned, and how agency for safeguarding both can be deployed and stimulated. More than 2 decades ago, a study on career competences was carried out, which adopted a career-related perspective of lifelong development, in which the employee is regarded as an actor who combines personal motives (i.e. interests and values) with the goals and motives of the work environment (Kuijpers, 2003; Kuijpers and Scheerens, 2006). More recently, the career-related perspective has been elaborated on in relation to the concept of sustainable careers. This, in turn, has led to more attention being paid to the well-being of the individual employee and the benefits experienced by the employer (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). In particular, De Vos *et al.* (2020) stated that a sustainable career is only possible if employees continue to add value to their work organisation and to society as a whole (i.e. productivity, which is the first indicator; Van der Heijden, 2005). At the same time, employees should be able to maintain their physical and psychological well-being (i.e. health, the second indicator; Van der Heijden, 2005) and to protect and, if possible, increase their happiness (the third indicator; Van der Heijden, 2005), which is also expressed in their sense of purpose.

As such, a career perspective on lifelong development can be used to reconcile the economic and psychological perspectives on meaning making, thereby facilitating the optimisation of the so-called social exchange relationship between employees and employers (Blau, 1964) (cf. Psychological contract; Rousseau, 1995). In this exchange relationship, the interdependence between employee and employer forms the underlying mechanism that guides policies and practices for lifelong development (Fugate *et al*., 2021; Hallier and Butts, 1999; Van der Heijden *et al*., 2020). By combining the economic perspective of the organisation and the individual perspective of meaning making, the need for people to be active agents in shaping their careers over time can be justified, while at the same time, the needs of their surrounding stakeholders (e.g. close colleagues, supervisor, employer, relatives) are also recognised.

Following this line of reasoning, we argue that lifelong development could be seen as a dynamic process that evolves over time and that takes the economic and meaning-making perspective into account. By building on our previous (empirical) work in this area (see in particular Kuijpers, 2003; Semeijn, 2017; Van der Heijden, 2005), and in close consultation with career experts, we have subsequently formulated a preliminary definition of lifelong development, following the notion of a career perspective. In this definition, lifelong development refers to "(pro)active development of qualities throughout life, based on one's own interests and values, for a sustainable contribution to society, one's health and happiness" (Kuijpers *et al*., 2019). In this definition, the qualities refer to personal strengths.

To summarise, we conclude that the term lifelong development can possess different meanings and that it can signify a myriad of goals for various stakeholders, all who have their own accompanying interests. The changing demands of the labour market, along with the view that employees be active participants in their own development, underscores the growing need for dialogue. This could foster a learning culture within work organisations, a culture which is necessary in order to protect and further enhance the career sustainability of all workers, and this learning culture can then play a role in how lifelong development is defined.

Methodology

In the methodology section, we will explain how we explored the perceptions and perspectives of lifelong development that are prevalent in contemporary work organisations, in order to determine the face validity of our preliminary definition and to find out whether this definition needs to be more finely attuned.

We have chosen a qualitative research method because we aimed for making a preliminary exploration of the perceptions and perspectives held by the stakeholders concerning lifelong development. We have been seeking examples that are both striking and inspiring as well as trying to sight pitfalls.

Sample and procedure

In order to explore the perceptions and perspectives used in relation to lifelong development, we chose twelve traditionally structured organisations as our exploratory research setting. The participating organisations are traditionally structured in the sense that they house an HR department and include mainly full-time or part-time operational employees who are directly managed by middle managers and who are responsible for specific teams and/or departments. We interviewed operational employees, middle managers and HR officers in each of these organisations about their vision of lifelong development within the context of their organisations. We chose these three categories to be our respondents because we expected that the operational employees would highlight the meaning-making perspective that was most relevant to them, and that the middle managers would highlight the economic perspective that was most relevant to their organisations. In addition, we expected the HR managers to act as bridge builders, as they would play a connecting role between the other parties (i.e. operational employees and middle managers).

In total, 34 interviews were conducted with 35 respondents (one duo interview was included). All participants gave their informed consent regarding the research. We chose to focus on professionals in healthcare and technology sectors in the Netherlands because of the differences in the nature of their work on the one hand, and the similarity in terms of the organisational structures of these sectors on the other (operational employees grouped in teams, managed by middle managers and supported by HR officers). In order to meet the demands of a rapidly changing labour market and to respond to staff shortages in these specific sectors, lifelong development has presumably become a crucial topic for healthcare and technology. Three employees from each of the twelve organisations were interviewed: an operational employee, a (middle) manager and an HR officer. Both large companies (≥250 employees) and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as secondary and higher vocational institutions were involved in the study (see Table AI in Appendix 1 for an overview of the respondents' demographics). Organisations were approached through the networks of the first two authors of this article. Altogether, twelve different organisations from the health and technology sectors and 35 respondents participated in our study.

Using a highly-interactive interview approach we collected the reflections of the different participating professionals regarding both common and exceptional examples of perceptions and perspectives on lifelong development. We ensured the quality of the interviews through active listening, being adaptable to respondents' responses, probing for more in-depth information, and maintaining a reflective approach (Creswell and Guetterman, 2018). In doing so, we sought to understand which perspective the interviewees adopted in relation to their vision of lifelong development and why. In order to advance the conceptualisation of the phenomenon of lifelong development, we related the definitions of the construct they described to the preliminary definition by Kuijpers *et al*. (2019) and asked them to reflect on the differences and similarities in their own definitions.

Data collection

For the qualitative study we conducted interviews in a way that not only the experiences and opinions of the interviewee are discussed, but in which the interviewer and interviewee develop new knowledge and insights through dialogue. To answer the question about the definition of lifelong development, a personal definition of the concept from the interviewees themselves was asked at the beginning of the interview. Respondents' answers were explored in depth by continually checking our assumptions about their perceptions and perspectives on lifelong development, and by asking for examples and detailed descriptions to support their answers. The researchers maintained a neutral role by simply asking questions and by refraining from steering towards particular formulations.

In the second part of the interviews, the definition by Kuijpers *et al*. (2019) was presented, discussed and compared with the respondents' own definition of lifelong development. In this way, insight was gained into the prevailing and sometimes, as a result of the dialogue, evolving visions of lifelong development.

The interviews were audio recorded. For all of the interviews, the anonymity of the interviewees and the participating organisations were guaranteed. The recordings of the interviews were fully transcribed by three student assistants, excluding information that might reveal the identity of the interviewees, and then they were destroyed. The interviews lasted between 20 and 30 min for each interviewee.

Data analysis

The 34 transcripts of the interviews were thematically analysed by the authors using the qualitative data analysis program NVivo 11. Thematic analysis focuses on identifying and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data, thus providing deep insights into the participants' perspectives (Creswell and Guetterman, 2018). To answer the research questions, an open coding approach was used to analyse the responses to the first and second questions

(Creswell and Guetterman, 2018; Mortelmans, 2014). In the first round of coding, all of the text fragments from the 34 interviews were categorised according to the research question to which they related and the specific theme that had emerged in the response. The second round involved a process of merging or splitting subcodes and fragments, and removing overlaps. All fragments were then analysed again and assessed for correct coding. A final coding scheme was then developed, showing the main codes (related to the interview questions), the subcodes (general nature of the perceptions and perspectives described) and the specifications of these perceptions and perspectives. See Appendix 1 for the final coding schemes that were developed (Tables A2 and A3), as well as example quotes that were integrated in the coding schemes, to illustrate our process of coding and analysing (Table A4).

In order to increase the validity of the coding process, the first and second authors discussed the operationalisation of the codes when necessary until a full consensus had been reached on all of the codes. This process was sometimes carried out by using literature on the topics discussed.

Findings

Perspectives on lifelong development (main code Table A2)

The first question during the interviews concerned the respondents' own definition of lifelong development, thus leading to a myriad of responses. The number of respondents who mainly took personal development as a point of departure roughly equals the number who took organisational development as a starting point, and it was equal to the number who emphasised the link between organisation and individual. The results therefore justify that a distinction be made between these three perspectives on lifelong development [i.e. (1) the organisational-economic perspective; (2) the personal meaning-making perspective; and (3) the sustainable career perspective linking the individual and his or her organisation. To enhance the understanding of each viewpoint, we used direct quotes from respondents.

The personal meaning making perspective (subcode Table A2). Those interviewees who mainly took the individual as the point of departure in describing lifelong development (one-third) occasionally said this in general terms, implying proactivity. Others were more specific, referring to the development of personal qualities, ambitions and interests throughout their lives (e.g. ID 28, manager). One respondent in the technology sector described lifelong development mainly in terms of health (ID 30, HR officer).

> That you get as much perspective as possible from primary school on what you like or don't like. That you discover your talents and that the next steps you take at school will lay the foundations for you to eventually enter the world of work. And as far as I'm concerned, that doesn't stop when you get older. (ID 28, manager)

> Eating and drinking healthily, being sport-minded, enjoying going to work and getting energy from it. (ID 30, HR officer)

These quotes reflect the variety within the personal development perspective, where growth is both proactive and holistic and in which it includes not only career ambitions, but an overall sense of well-being.

The organisational economic perspective (subcode Table A2). Those interviewees who took the individual's environment as the point of departure for lifelong development (one-third) spoke mainly about the work organisation's perspective. This perspective might refer to improving oneself in one's current job (e.g. ID 35, manager) or it could be about deepening and broadening one's outlook in order to be able to do one's job properly (e.g. ID 34 and 25).

> Continuously renew yourself personally within the work area. (ID 35, manager)

> You are constantly thinking about what you can learn. Reflecting on experiences and responding to new opportunities. Not so much from position to position, but within your own position. How you can do things differently in the role you have now. (ID 34, HR officer)

> Broadening your horizons by learning about work in different departments, not just your own. (ID 25, manager)

This perspective emphasises adaptability and continuous improvement in the workplace, suggesting that lifelong development benefits organisations as a result of their employees' development.

The career perspective: linking the individual and their organisation (subcode Table A2). In their definition of lifelong development, some interviewees made the link between the individual and their organisation (one-third). In these cases, personal strengths and motives were linked to the needs and ambitions of the organisation in question or of society as a whole (e.g. ID 24 and 9).

> What makes you happy and what does your environment desire from you? Because sometimes you have to go in a certain direction. (ID 24, employee)

> The world is always changing, so you have no choice but to evolve. My most important task as a manager is to put the right people in the right place and to do right by them. I try to get the best out of them and that includes their development, of course. (ID 9, manager)

Additionally, two respondents (ID 27, ID 28) elaborated on the difference between lifelong learning and lifelong development, noting that lifelong development focuses more on meaningful personal growth, whereas lifelong learning centres on the acquisition of job-related skills.

> In lifelong development, the employee is at the centre with his or her ambitions and possibilities, whereas lifelong learning has much more of a connotation of what does the employee need to be able to do in order to continue to do his or her job? (ID 27, HR officer)

> You can learn all your life, but that is not the same as development. Development has much more to do with the fact that at the end of the day you are increasingly doing what touches your core, what you are good at, what you want to relate to, where you want to be meaningful. (ID 28, manager)

Differences between stakeholders. The results showed no general differences in the perspectives regarding lifelong development between the three different categories of stakeholders (employees, managers and HR officers) or sectors, nor did they vary in terms of organisational size. However, whereas no general differences were found between the perspectives of the various stakeholders (employees, managers and HR officers), certain patterns emerged based on one's level of education. Employees who had received Higher Vocational Education and Training (HVET) tended to focus on formal training and courses (ID 29, employee), reflecting a more structured, formal approach to development. Vocational Education and Training (VET) employees described learning through their day-to-day experiences (ID 26, employee), indicating a more informal, hands-on approach to development.

> That you continue to develop and take courses and training programmes. Or at least you get the opportunity to do so. (ID 29, employee)

> You just learn from most of the things you do and act upon it. (ID 26, employee)

Feedback on the preliminary definition (main code Table A3)

In the second part of the interviews, respondents were presented with the preliminary definition provided by the Kuijpers and colleagues (2019). The vast majority of respondents recognised this definition as being aligned with their own perspectives on lifelong development, even if they had only partly expressed this in their previous responses. This suggests that the preliminary definition resonates across the board with the different interpretations of lifelong development.

General agreements with definition (subcode Table A3). Most respondents agreed with the key elements of the definition, particularly the importance of starting from an individual's interests and personal strengths (e.g. ID 28 and 24). Several respondents explicitly highlighted the appeal of the proactive development aspect in the definition. For them, proactive development is essential not only for individual growth, but also for fostering enjoyment in their work, which in turn contributes to their overall health and happiness—benefits that extend to the organisation and, by extension, to society.

> I think it sums up quite succinctly what we talk about all the time. So, it is 100 per cent my vision'. (ID 28, manager)

> I agree that you have to develop your qualities and focus on them. Because development is often seen as something you are not very good at yet. Your own interests are important, otherwise it is demotivating. The ability to work contributes to the quality of life. (ID 24, employee)

Several respondents highlighted the crucial role that health and happiness play in lifelong development. For them, enjoying work and deriving energy from it are essential components of development that contribute to personal well-being and career sustainability. See for example, what these interviewees had to say:

> And I particularly like health and happiness. I also think that when you develop, your work becomes easier and more enjoyable. Then you feel healthier and happier. (ID 26, employee)

> I think the addition of your own health and happiness is very important, because you spend a lot of time at work, so it has to give you energy and contribute to your own happiness and sustainability. When you regard your work in that way and derive happiness out of it, it also brings about beautiful developments at work. (ID 14, HR officer)

The same HR officer (ID 14) provided the following quote, suggesting that the employer can also take steps towards ensuring that his or her employees enjoy happier lives:

> If you see that people are no longer happy and if you see that they are not going to be happy here in the long term, but at the same time they find it difficult to choose another employer, you can help them to develop self-confidence. . . . This is also good for the organisation, because you know in the long term that if you keep these people in your organisation, it is not going to be the "ultimate match". (ID 14, HR officer)

Supply and demand on the labour market also determines the extent to which people can develop (e.g. ID 20). In addition, the organisation's capabilities and needs determine the extent to which you can manage a career based on interests (e.g. ID 14). Changes in society sometimes force professionals to look to the future (e.g. ID 16), which emphasises the importance of the longer-term aspect of sustainability (e.g. ID 15).

> Because lifelong learning actually means that you are doing something that will benefit you later, so there has to be a certain question underneath: what will be your added value, or how will you then capitalise on it, or how will you use your expertise? (ID 20, HR officer)

> Sometimes it makes sense to develop in certain areas that are not necessarily in your own interest, just because it makes your life easier, your work easier. (ID 14, HR officer)

> But I think society also more or less draws your attention to the fact that sometimes you have to look beyond. (ID 16, employee)

> Lifelong development is about the long term. (ID 15, manager)

Generally speaking, whereas respondents resonated with the Kuijpers and her associates' (2019) definition of lifelong development, many of the aspects that they agreed with were not always explicitly articulated in their own initial definitions. This demonstrates that even though the core components of lifelong development have been widely accepted, individuals may still frame these differently depending on their own personal experiences or organisational contexts.

Adjustment of definition is required (subcode Table A3). Although most people widely agreed with this preliminary definition, there were several nuances. In our respondents' replies, we recognise that certain aspects that were repeatedly mentioned in the interviews were not yet well reflected in our preliminary definition. In other words, our preliminary definition needs to be adapted and more finely tuned. This concerns the following aspects:

Possibilities. Some respondents mentioned that personal development is not only based on interests and values, but also on possibilities and opportunities in their work or private lives. They mentioned the reduction of physical abilities to do the job and the opportunities in their jobs given their education and barriers in their private lives. People need to have the opportunity to develop, i.e. their own ability and motivation is not enough; you need to be presented with opportunities in order to make development a reality.

> In an ideal world you can earn a living with it [working based on your own interests and values], but the world is not always ideal and people simply have to earn a living. (ID 9, manager)

Organisation. Most respondents mentioned the aspect of "work" or "the organisation you work for" in the context of lifelong development. Some explicitly stated that this was missing from the definition.

> I miss the organisation a bit in it [the definition]'. (ID 8, HR officer)

Therefore, the element of "organisation" was added to our provisional definition, in relation to one's work environment, as a more general indication.

The present and the future. Respondents mainly started from the present when describing lifelong development. Far fewer respondents explicitly emphasised the future in relation to lifelong development, which involves anticipating future changes and ambitions. Such responses suggest that anticipating future changes may be crucial for survival in a dynamic society. The following example of a future-oriented person's perspective on lifelong development concerns the achievement of personal, future goals and happiness:

> Then it's about: how do you feel, what do you want to achieve in your life, what is your goal in your life and how are you going to achieve that? So how do you go about being a satisfied person in your life? (ID 6, manager)

A future-oriented environmental perspective has to do with developing oneself so that he or she will be able to work in the future:

> That you retrain yourself during your career to ensure that you can still be employed in the same position in a few years' time, but possibly also in a new position. (ID 29, employee)

In cases where it involves the connection between a person and his or her environment, and when the focus is on the future, one respondent said:

> Because of the changes in the labour market, you are more or less forced to look further than what you are currently doing. And of course, you also develop your own interests. (ID 1, employee)

And another respondent said:

> It is important to have conversations about mobility, about ambition, about possible opportunities for development, both for the organisation and for the individual, so that you can find a common interest. (ID 2, HR officer)

As a result we have extended the definition to include the time adjunct "for now and in the future".

Conclusion and discussion

Lifelong development is primarily understood by the three different stakeholders within the organisation as a method of development aimed at achieving personal *or* organisational goals.

In the respondents' definitions there is either a focus on the organisational economic perspective (in about a third), on the meaning making personal perspective (also a third) or on the relationship between the two (about a third as well). In other words, the distinction between the three perspectives on lifelong development seems to be justified by the results. Even though some respondents mentioned both perspectives, cohesion between organisational and personal goals or a mutuality of interests does not seem to be the first association for most respondents when thinking about lifelong development (cf. Fugate *et al*., 2021). Although our sample size is small (35 respondents) and our research is qualitative in nature, it suggests that within the group of people we invited to talk about lifelong development, the respondents do not all lean towards one of the two perspectives.

Respondents gave their definitions in the first part of the interview and they were not yet influenced by the combination of elements included in our preliminary definition. However, when we presented our preliminary definition in the second part of the interviews, where the two perspectives were explicitly linked, almost all of the respondents supported this definition. However, in most cases, this preliminary definition was not a solid representation of the current situation in the respondents' organisation, but possibly a vision of lifelong development that the respondents considered necessary in the future. As such, it shows the progress made in their view of the concept of lifelong development between the beginning and the end of the interviews, and it emphasises the importance of discussing the concept in an interactive way. Formulating a definition, exploring the underlying reasons, and offering our own basic definition were all exercises in the light of structuring the interviewees' thoughts and developing ideas on how to view lifelong development. This exercise is therefore highly recommended if further alignment in the lifelong development of an organisation or team is desired.

Visions on lifelong development that have been shared with us have often focused on the present. As such, they have often been reactive to the present situation; at work at this moment. There has been less emphasis on the future, about anticipating future changes and ambitions. This is in line with the so-called employability or management paradox (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2011; Nelissen *et al*., 2017). Employers would like to promote employability, but preoccupation with their employees' current performance prevents them from engaging with this, and it even makes them fearful of losing their employees if they were to invest in their employability. This paradox seems to apply to lifelong development as well. It is viewed as being very important for the future, but in practice meeting the needs of the present situation remains a priority which prevents fair engagement and which even makes people reluctant to look ahead to the future.

Our preliminary definition was tested in practice and seems to require a few adjustments because several relevant concepts were interpreted differently or they have not yet been included. As explained in the Results section, these concerned the addition of *possibilities* for people to perceive opportunities for development, specifically mentioning *their work environment* in addition to society, and *for now and in the future* to anticipate changes that are yet to come and ambitions to be pursued.

Interests and values have been merged into the category of "motives" in line with the definition of the career competency "reflection on motives" as developed in the conceptualisation and operationalisation by Kuijpers (2003). The adapted definition of lifelong development can therefore now be formulated as follows:

> (Pro)active development of qualities throughout life, based on one's motives and possibilities, for a sustainable contribution to society, one's work environment, one's health and happiness, now and in the future.

Implications for the lifelong development practice for different stakeholders

The results of the study show that perspectives on lifelong development can be formulated and disseminated more explicitly at national, regional, organisational and individual levels than is currently the case.

At the national and regional level, we advise (local) governments to develop and promote policies that support lifelong development, emphasising both formal education and continuous learning opportunities throughout one's lifespan. Furthermore, by facilitating career transitions by providing individuals access to training and up- and re-skilling programmes, particularly in response to labour market changes, national policies could enable smoother transitions for employees when organisations cannot meet their long-term career goals. Moreover, national programmes could highlight the importance of personal well-being, career sustainability, and adaptability to labour market changes.

At the organisational level, top management and HR specialists should invest in both highly-skilled and less specialised workers to enhance their employability and career sustainability. A key aspect of this is fostering a learning culture, in which continuous development is encouraged for all employees. Interaction on these issues raises awareness and encourages reflection, creating a culture that values growth. When direct supervisors show genuine interest and provide tailored HRM support for career development, employees are more motivated to invest in their own learning and growth (cf. Van der Heijden, 2005). Building a strong learning culture not only supports immediate skill development, but it also reinforces long-term career sustainability. It then requires a tailored approach at the individual level, such as more personalised guidance and tailored actions in the organisational practice of lifelong development.

To sum up, core attention for lifelong development should have already started in early education. Besides governmental policies and practices aimed at lifelong development, schools and vocational institutions should pay ample attention to increasing the awareness among their pupils and students about the need for lifelong learning and development.

On the individual level, employees can take a proactive approach to their lifelong development by identifying and nurturing their personal strengths, ambitions, and interests. This may involve seeking out learning opportunities, both pertaining to formal courses, certifications, or on-the-job learning experiences. The findings suggest that individuals should focus on achieving a balance between personal happiness and professional development. Prioritising health and well-being in career choices, while adapting to external changes in the labour market and society, will contribute to long-term sustainability and satisfaction.

All in all, we recommend that lifelong development be explicitly addressed at all levels and among all stakeholders. Formulating or reflecting on a definition of lifelong development based on a career perspective can be helpful when guiding dialogue sessions. As its meaning is not set in stone, raising the issue will help to raise people's awareness and curiosity and challenge their current vision.

Limitations and recommendations for further research

This study has its limitations, primarily the small sample size, limiting its generalisability. Second, our findings are based on individual experiences and opinions (Creswell and Guetterman, 2018)), that have been even more influenced by the interactive interview technique, introducing a certain amount of subjectivity. Caution is therefore warranted in interpreting conclusions, which means we need to view them as a preliminary step towards making lifelong development a realistic concept for all of the different stakeholders. Third, this study was conducted in organisations that appeared to be open to the topic, and therefore these findings cannot be generalised to other organisations or countries without further validation in future research. At the same time, the volatile and competitive environment that is characteristic for the rapidly changing and global economic environment in which careers unfold (De Vos *et al*., 2020), make us believe that the tensions between the differentiated stakeholders, as reflected in the findings referring to the three distinguished perspectives (i.e. 1. the societal/economic; 2. Psychological/individual meaning making; and 3. career perspective) will be visible in other samples across organisations and countries, too. However, if we would like to conclude on a more guarded note, future research is needed and

ideally more sectors should also be considered and diverse professionals from a variety of occupational categories should also be included. As no differences were found between stakeholder categories, research could further explore the role of organisational learning culture on lifelong development. Moreover, further research on the differences in lifelong learning and lifelong development can contribute to the understanding of various perspectives. In addition, differences in perspectives were observed among the educational levels, thus warranting further investigation. Involving additional stakeholders (such as close colleagues, relatives, and representatives from within the institutional context) can enrich the. Various insights on how lifelong development can be further influenced and implemented.

Employing varied research methods, such as surveys or vignette studies, could enhance reliability. Future designs can place the focus on different outcomes of lifelong development, or make them more in-depth in regard to the interrelationship of motives and opportunities for development. Moreover, longitudinal studies are essential to monitor changes in perspectives and the organisation of lifelong development over time.

All in all, this study might lay the groundwork for a new research stream into lifelong development, one that would be relevant to us all, subsequently impacting both professional and personal well-being.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Appendix
Respondents (Table A1), final coding schemes for the interviews' part 1 and 2 (Table A2 and 3), and example quotes (Table A4)

Table A1. ID, gender, educational background, type of organisation, and role of the 35 respondents

ID	Gender	Educational background	Organisation	Role
1	Female	SVET[a]	Large Healthcare	Operational employee
2	Male	Unknown	Large Healthcare	HR officer
3	Female	Unknown	Large Healthcare	Middle manager
4	Female	HVET[b]	Large Healthcare	Operational Employee
5	Female	Unknown	Large Healthcare	HR officer
6	Female	Unknown	Large Healthcare	Middle manager
7	Female	SVET	SME Healthcare	Operational employee
8	Female	Unknown	SME Healthcare	HR officer
9	Female	Unknown	SME Healthcare	Middle manager
10	Female	HVET	Large Healthcare	Operational employee
11	Female	Unknown	Large Healthcare	HR officer
12	Female	Unknown	Large Healthcare	Middle manager
13	Female	SVET	SVET Healthcare	Operational employee
14	Female	Unknown	SVET Healthcare	HR officer
15	Female	Unknown	SVET Healthcare	Middle manager
16	Female	HVET	HVET Healthcare	Operational employee
17	Female	Unknown	HVET Healthcare	HR officer
18	Female	Unknown	HVET Healthcare	Middle manager
19	Male	SVET	Large Technology	Operational employee
20	Female	Unknown	Large Technology	HR officer
21	Male	Unknown	Large Technology	Middle manager
22	Male	HVET	Large Technology	Operational employee
23	Female	Unknown	Large Technology	HR officer
24	Male	Unknown	Large Technology	HR officer
25	Male	Unknown	Large Technology	Middle manager
26	Male	SVET	SME Technology	Operational employee
27	Female	Unknown	SME Technology	HR officer
28	Male	Unknown	SME Technology	Middle manager
29	Male	HVET	SME Technology	Operational employee
30	Female	Unknown	SME Technology	HR officer
31	Male	Unknown	SME Technology	Middle manager
32	Male	Unknown	SVET Technology	HR officer
33	Male	HVET	HVET Technology	Operational employee
34	Female	Unknown	HVET Technology	HR officer
35	Male	Unknown	HVET. Technology	Middle manager

Note(s): [a]SVET = secondary vocational education [mbo]
[b]HVET = higher vocational education [hbo]

Table A2. Final coding scheme for part 1: Perspectives on lifelong development

Main code	Subcodes Starting point	Subcodes Specified
Respondents' own definition of lifelong development		
	Personal meaning making perspective	General terms
		Specific descriptions
	Organisational economic perspective	Functioning within work-environment
		Participating in society
	Career perspective (link between personal and organisational)	Explicit connection between individual ambitions and work environment requirements
		Focus on development instead of learning

Table A3. Final coding scheme for part 2: Feedback on preliminary definition

Main code	Subcodes Reaction	Subcodes Specifically agreed with	Subcodes Desired Adjustments
Feedback on preliminary definition of lifelong development			
	Generally agreed with definition	Central place for meaning making	
		Starting from interests and qualities	
		Proactive development required	
		Enjoying your work contributes to health and happiness, organisation and society	
		Taking supply and demand in account	
	Adjustment of definition is required		Possibilities in work environment, personal life and society are required for development
			Organisation: work environment determines development directions
			Present (here and now) and future (anticipation on what may be) (environmental and/or personal

Table A4. Example quotes that show perspectives of respondents (part 1) and that show validation or additions to the preliminary definition (part 2)

	Example Quotes Respondents' own definition of LLD	Example Quotes Validation and additions
Personal meaning making perspective		
• General terms • Specific descriptions	"You are busy shaping yourself, but also giving your own direction"	"I agree that you have to develop your qualities and focus on them. Because development is often seen as something you are not very good at yet. Your own interests are important, otherwise it is demotivating. The ability to work contributes to the quality of life."
Organisational economic perspective	"That you get as much perspective as possible from primary school on what you like or don't like. That you discover your talents and that the next steps you take at school will lay the foundations for you to eventually enter the world of work. And as far as I'm concerned, that doesn't stop when you get older"	
• Functioning within work-environment • Participating in society	"Continuously renew yourself personally within the work area"	"I miss the organisation a bit in it [the definition]" "But I think society also more or less draws your attention to the fact that sometimes you have to look outside."
Career perspective (linking personal and organisational) • Explicit link between individual ambitions and work environment requirements • Focus on development instead of learning	"What makes you happy and what does your environment give you? Because sometimes you have to go in a certain direction" "In lifelong development, the employee is at the centre with his or her ambitions and possibilities, whereas lifelong learning has much more of a connotation of: what does the employee need to be able to do in order to continue to do his or her job?"	"Because lifelong learning actually means that you are doing something that will benefit you later, so there has to be a certain question underneath: what will be your added value, or how will you then capitalise on it, or how will you use your expertise?"
The time perspective • Present (here and now) or future (anticipation on what may be)		"It is important to have conversations about mobility, about ambition, about possible development sides, both for the organisation and for the individual, so that you can find the common interest in it"

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