

## DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN CONTINUING EDUCATION: ADDRESSING REGIONAL ACCESS CHALLENGES IN ARMENIA

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**Abstract:** This article examines the urban-rural dimensions of access to continuing education in Armenia, with particular attention to how digital transformation risks deepening rather than resolving existing geographic inequalities. Without deliberate equality measures digital expansion can substitute one form of exclusion for another. Drawing on academic research into continuing education management in Armenia and practitioner evidence from program implementation across the country's regions, the analysis documents how geographic inequality in continuing education access is shaped by factors that digital transformation alone cannot resolve. The data-monitoring and governance approaches of European countries, Estonia and Finland in particular, China's experience with scaled digital delivery, and Georgia's parallel challenges as a comparable post-Soviet context are examined for what they offer the Armenian case. The article argues that effective regional access to continuing education requires a holistic policy approach—one that addresses digital infrastructure, local conditions

including device access, connectivity, and people's everyday constraints, as well as rural development together rather than separately. It closes with conclusions that point toward joined-up policy action grounded in a clear understanding of the barriers facing rural populations and those with the least access to resources and time.

**Keywords:** continuing education, lifelong learning, additional education, professional education, regional access, digital divide, rural education, digital transformation, urban-rural inequality, Armenia.

**JEL code:** A39

**Research aims:** This article aims to identify the structural and digital barriers to equitable regional access to continuing education in Armenia, and to derive actionable governance recommendations through analysis of international best practices in digitally transforming continuing education systems.

**Research novelty:** This article is the first systematic analysis to apply a regional equity and digital access lens to Armenia's continuing education landscape. It combines comparative international evidence with practitioner insight drawn from large-scale program implementation across Armenia's regions, bridging a gap between policy analysis and operational practice that the existing literature has not addressed.

## Introduction

The twenty-first century has fundamentally recast the meaning of education. In an economy shaped by rapid technological change and deepening labor market complexity, the ability to learn

continuously, across the lifespan and beyond the formal schooling has shifted from personal aspiration to structural necessity. Lifelong and continuing education now occupies a central place in national human capital strategies worldwide, and the digital transformation has become one of the critical policy challenges of nowadays.

Across OECD member states, digital technologies have reshaped the design and delivery of continuing education, accompanied by significant investment in platform-based learning, competency frameworks, and inclusive policy architectures (OECD/UNICEF, 2021). Global monitoring frameworks have drawn consistent attention to the uneven distribution of these gains, especially for learners in lower-income and rural settings (UNESCO, 2023). Evidence from transitional economies illustrates how post-Soviet educational systems encounter significant challenges, including institutional fragmentation, inadequate quality assurance mechanisms, as well as difficulties bridging policy goals with implementation realities (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008; OECD/UNICEF, 2021).

Armenia sits within this regional picture while also facing challenges that are distinctly its own. The system of continuing education and non-formal education remains legislatively ambiguous, institutionally fragmented, and chronically underfunded (Ispiryan & Vardanyan, 2022; Khachatryan, 2025; Sahakyan, 2025). Digital infrastructure is expanding; at the same time, it reveals sharp disparities between the capital and the provinces. The European Training Foundation confirms that while basic digital skills are spreading, structural inequalities in online learning participation remain sustained (ETF, 2021). In Armenia,

rural communities face digital inclusion challenges not simply due to access, but due to gaps in effective use. Despite high levels of connectivity, a significant share of the population remains offline which speak of the barriers such as limited digital literacy and socio-economic constraints (International Telecommunications Union, 2023).

The article adopts a qualitative policy analysis approach, combining comparative literature review with practitioner-informed institutional insight. Implementation experience from large-scale continuing education programs across Armenia including regions is used not as generalisable empirical data but as analytically interpreted evidence to complement and contextualize findings from existing literature. The article's contribution lies in offering the first systematic application of a regional equality and digital access framework to Armenia's continuing education landscape, integrating comparative international evidence with contextualized practitioner insight. In doing so, it advances three analytically original arguments: that digital transformation without deliberate equity measures risks substituting one form of exclusion for another rather than eliminating it; that the absence of geographically disaggregated continuing education data constitutes a governance failure, not just a measurable gap, and that sustainable regional access requires treating digital infrastructure, institutional capacity and rural development as a coherent policy package rather than sequential concerns. The central argument is that Armenia's continuing education system stands at a crossroads: while international evidence provides valuable adaptable lessons, their effective implementation demands confronting structural barriers

to regional access equity head-on, rather than bypassing them.

## **Continuing Education in the Digital Era: Conceptual and Methodological Framework**

Continuing education, used interchangeably in the literature with lifelong learning and non-formal education, encompasses all organized learning activity that is undertaken after formal school education. How different national systems reorganize, regulate and fund them varies to considerable extent (Ispiryan & Vardanyan, 2022). Equitable lifelong learning depends on several interlocking conditions: supportive policy frameworks, recognition of non-formal learning, equity measures that ensure access is meaningful rather than merely formal (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004).

Digital technologies have considerably expanded the potential reach of continuing education by decoupling learning from physical location allowing institutions to serve learners who are excluded by a number of factors which include but not limited to geography, work schedules, financial constraints. Yet UNESCO's (2023) Global Education Monitoring Report demonstrates that technology in education is not a neutral tool. The effects of the latter are shaped by existing inequalities, governance capacity, the conditions under which digitisation is introduced. The most disadvantaged learners are typically the least likely to benefit from education technology, a pattern that is consistent across income levels and regions.

The analytical framework employed in this article operates across three levels: Macro (policy and legislative), meso (institutional capacity and delivery models), and micro (individual access, motivation, and participation). Geographic location runs as

a cross-cutting variable throughout. This qualitative policy analysis draws on comparative literature review, secondary data, and practitioner-informed observation from program implementation in Armenia including the regions, to identify the recurring system-level patterns and constraints. Romero (2024) adds a forward-looking dimension where he argues that accelerating AI integration raises the stakes of equitable continuing education access considerably. This is a point that brings urgency to the present analysis.

The study employs qualitative comparative policy analysis as its primary methodological approach. Systematic review of peer-reviewed literature, institutional and intergovernmental reports, national policy, documents and legislative texts provides the evidence foundation with sources selected for their direct relevance to continuing education governance, digital access, regional equity in post-Soviet and developing economy contexts. Comparative case analysis draws on documented reform experiences from Estonia, Finland, China, New Zealand, Georgia in order to identify transferable governance principles rather than replicable models. Practitioner-informed observation, drawn from program implementation experience is used as a contextualising instrument that helps to interrogate theoretical claims against operational realities rather than to generate primary empirical data. The article's limitations follow from this design: findings are analytical rather than statistically generalisable, and the absence of original fieldwork data means that system-level patterns are inferred from secondary sources and interpret implementation evidence. These constraints are acknowledged as the basis for further primary research.

## **International Best Practices: What Works and Why** ***Policy and Legislative Frameworks***

Research from advanced economies indicates that successful continuing education systems rely on a unified legislative and policy framework. Across OECD member states, lifelong learning is integrated into competency frameworks, quality assurance mechanisms, and funding structures that create institutional continuity and accountability (OECD/UNICEF, 2021). Advanced digital education ecosystems in Singapore, Finland, and Estonia share a defining characteristic: digitisation was implemented as an integrated component of broader educational reform rather than as a standalone technology project (OECD/UNICEF, 2021; European Commission, 2020). The European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) establishes this integration at policy level, treating digital skills, inclusive access, and quality assurance as a single legislative and investment agenda (European Commission, 2020).

The most transferable lessons from advanced systems are not specific platforms but governance principles which imply to clarity of mandate, stakeholder inclusion in design, iterative evaluation frameworks that allow policy to adapt to implementation realities (OECD/UNICEF, 2021; European Commission, 2020). Georgia's experience is valuable: while reforms improved quality assurance and teacher development, institutional resistance and financing gaps limited their impact in rural and mountainous regions (Li et al., 2019).

## ***Technology-Enabled Delivery and Inclusive Approaches***

China's experience serves as a significant example of digitally scaling continuing education. UNESCO (2023) has documented how Chinese institutions leveraged large online platforms to reach working adults and geographically in remote learners. They combined different learning formats with competency-based assessments which were aligned with labor market needs. The international literature on blended learning is consistent on one point: delivery models that mix online content with face-to-face support consistently outperform purely remote approaches. This is especially true when digital skills vary and learners lack (UNESCO, 2023; OECD/UNICEF, 2021). For countries like Armenia which have big differences in infrastructure between urban and rural areas, purely online learning models risk repeating these inequalities rather than overcoming them.

UNESCO (2023) draws specific attention to the risk of technology-driven exclusion: situations in which the digitisation of education formally broadens access while practically deepening inequalities for learners who lack the devices, connectivity, or digital competencies to participate. Countries that have made significant progress in adult skill development among which are Estonia, Finland, and New Zealand, design programs focused on clear competency outcomes. These outcomes are developed closely with employers and civil society. Their approach emphasizes skills rather than credential accumulation (OECD/UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Yu et al. (2024) extend this to the rural development context and demonstrate that programs combining agricultural, digital, and

management competencies in one framework achieve significantly better outcomes in rural communities than narrowly sectoral approaches.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **The Armenian Context: Institutional Landscape and Structural Constraints**

#### ***State of Continuing and Non-Formal Education***

Armenia's system of continuing and non-formal education occupies an unclear and underdeveloped position in the country's broader educational architecture. Ispiryan and Vardanyan (2022) describe the landscape characterized by legislative gaps, the absence of a unified national framework for recognising and accrediting non-formal learning, and a pronounced disconnect between supply which is mostly driven by private providers and civil society, and the actual learning needs of the adult population. Khachatryan (2025) notes that Armenia's higher education and non-formal education sectors operate under frameworks not designed with continuing education in mind, leading to confusion over program status, provider qualifications and learner rights. Sahakyan (2025) highlights the funding dimension: non-formal education in Armenia suffers chronic underfunding due to the lack of a coordinated financing system where individuals, employers, the state and civil society each play a clear and sustainable role.

This fragmentation has persisted despite successive waves of international reform support. Evidence from large-scale capacity development initiatives illustrates the structural limitations of Armenia's continuing education ecosystem: programs have

demonstrated strong participant engagement and measurable short-term capacity gains, but in the absence of a legislative or institutional architecture to incorporate these outcomes, gains have not been systematically sustained beyond project funding cycles. This pattern where externally funded programs that produce individual-level outcomes but fail to create sustained system-level change without enabling legislative and institutional frameworks is documented in the comparative literature (Milovanovitch & Lapham, 2018).

A potentially significant legislative development occurred in September 2025, when Armenia adopted a new Law on Higher Education and Science. While its primary scope addresses higher education governance, non-formal and continuing education remain without a dedicated legislative framework. How the new Law's provisions interact with, or create opportunities for the recognition of continuing and non-formal learning pathways will be an important question for implementation (Republic of Armenia, 2025).

### ***Digital Infrastructure and Readiness***

Armenia's digital infrastructure has expanded considerably over the past decade. The European Training Foundation's factsheet presents a more nuanced picture: meaningful participation in online learning requiring not just connectivity but sufficient bandwidth, appropriate devices, digital literacy, and confidence, remains unevenly distributed (ETF, 2021). Harutyunyan et al. (2024) find that digital literacy strongly correlates with age, education level, urban location, and employment sector, which means the groups

most in need of continuing education are precisely those with the weakest digital foundations.

Operational experience from regional program delivery outside the capital's relatively well-connected urban environment consistently surfaces a common pattern: learners enrolled through regional settings face greater challenges engaging with online and hybrid program components not because of a deficit in program quality, but because of the foundational conditions of access namely limited device availability, unreliable connectivity, and, in many cases, no prior experience with digital learning platforms. These constraints translate into lower persistence and completion rates relative to Yerevan-based participants. Arion et al. (2024) confirm this on a larger scale: ICT adoption in rural communities faces limits from both infrastructure gaps and demand-side such as low perceived value of digital tools.

## **Regional Access Challenges and the Urban vs Rural Digital Divide**

### ***Structural Geography of Educational Inequality***

The structural inequalities in Armenia's continuing education landscape are particularly visible when viewed geographically. The World Bank identifies regional gaps in education quality and outcomes as a major barrier to human capital development (World Bank, 2024). The DVV International study documents that the overwhelming majority of continuing education providers are concentrated in Yerevan and, to a lesser extent, in Gyumri and Vanadzor (Mazhinyan et al., 2021). Outside Yerevan and the secondary cities, the infrastructure for organized adult learning

including trained facilitators, appropriate venues, reliable connectivity, institutional continuity, has historically been absent or weak, requiring each program to rebuild basic capacity from scratch. This pattern is consistent with what Silova and Steiner-Khamsi (2008) note more broadly for the Caucasus and Central Asia: geographic location strongly predicts continuing education access, regardless of personal motivation.

### ***The Digital Divide in Rural Areas***

In principle, digital transformation holds the potential to overcome geographic barriers by freeing learning from physical locations. In practice, the rural-urban digital divide in Armenia is deep enough that digitizing services risk substituting one form of exclusion for another. Arion et al. (2024) mention in their empirical assessment that the internet connectivity in rural areas is unreliable and frequently insufficient for video-based learning; device ownership is significantly lower than in urban areas; and the digital skills necessary to navigate online learning platforms are absent or fragmentary among large segments of the rural adult population. Harutyunyan et al. (2024) identify rural residence as one of the strongest factors independently linked to low digital literacy in Armenia.

Community-based non-formal programs have demonstrated that high engagement is possible where formal provision is absent. However, each program cycle has run into the same foundational barriers: limited infrastructure, absence of trained local facilitators, insufficient organisational capacity to sustain learning beyond the life of the project itself. As Mazhinyan et al. (2021) document,

reliance on donor funding creates a real vulnerability and often leads to discontinuity. Without a stable, government backed policy environment, impact tends to plateau rather than deepen.

These are minor technical gaps – they reflect the pattern of unequal investment in education across regions over decades. More importantly, they are not inevitable. The conditions that make purely online delivery fall short in rural Armenia today are the same ones that deliberate, targeted investment in connectivity, device access, and digital literacy support is meant to change (Arion et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2024).

### ***The Data Gap and Comparative Perspective***

Effective policy begins with reliable data: mapping what provision exists against what is actually needed, tracking participation by geographic area, and identifying communities that are consistently left behind. When effective national digital education strategies are compared, a clear pattern emerges: the best-performing systems monitor participation data in real time. Estonia and Finland are frequently cited examples of having built real-time data systems so they can track participation closely enough to spot equity gaps as they appear and act on them quickly (European Commission, 2020; OECD/UNICEF, 2021). Armenia appears to lack a comparable data infrastructure for continuing education, and this absence is itself a governance gap. Without reliable disaggregated data of participation, policy makers lack the evidence base needed to design effective interventions, direct resources to the right places, or assess whether equity measures are actually working.

Armenia's regional access challenges are among the broader and well-documented patterns across Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The OECD/UNICEF (2021) regional assessment identifies geographic disparities in educational quality and participation among the most persistent structural features of post-Soviet educational systems. Georgia's experience offers an interesting example: to address the geographic disparities, the country invested in mobile educational services and digital connectivity, at the same time adopting a quality assurance framework that set national standards while allowing flexibility in local delivery (Li et al., 2019). Yu et al. (2024) argue that sustainable progress requires education policy to be integrated with broader rural development strategy, addressing connectivity, economic opportunity, community institutional capacity as a coherent package rather than as separate concerns to be addressed one after another.

## **Bridging the Regional Divide**

The analysis above points to a set of interdependent priorities. These are not sequential steps but parallel requirements, each reinforcing the others.

The most foundational requirement is a dedicated legislative and policy framework for continuing and non-formal education that directly addresses regional equity. The Law on Higher Education and Science, adopted in September 2025 creates a potential legislative opening for continuous education, though whether this is acted upon will depend on subsequent regulation (Republic of Armenia, 2025). Colardyn and Bjornavold (2004) demonstrate that countries making sustained progress on lifelong learning treat

recognition frameworks, financing mechanisms, and equity measures as a parallel rather than sequential agenda - a sequencing principle with direct relevance to Armenia's current reform moment.

Investment in digital infrastructure and development of digital literacy must be treated as education policy requirements rather than delegated entirely to the telecommunications sector to resolve. The evidence from Armenia's rural context is clear: no amount of program quality can compensate for unreliable connectivity and insufficient digital competencies (Arion et al., 2024; Harutyunyan et al., 2024). Targeted measures that include subsidising device access, extending broadband infrastructure to underserved communities, embedding digital literacy development within continuing education are fundamental design requirements rather than optional enhancements.

Blended delivery models which integrate online content with locally supported face-to-face engagement consistently outperform purely remote approaches where digital literacy is uneven and learner confidence is low (UNESCO, 2023; OECD/UNICEF, 2021). For Armenia's regional communities, this means investing in community learning centres, training local facilitators, designing programs around the connectivity constraints that rural participants actually. Civil society organisations already reach communities that formal institutional systems fail to serve, and this reach is a resource worth building on. The challenge and the policy requirement is not to position NGOs as substitutes for state provision – that model produces fragmentation and sustainability problems - but that they are integrated into a coordinated multi-stakeholder framework with

clearly defined roles and sustainable funding (Mazhinyan et al., 2021). The integration of continuing education policy with rural development strategy, as Yu et al. (2024) advocate, provides a governance framework capable of addressing the interconnected conditions of regional access as a coherent package. Finland's experience of mobile educational services and flexible local delivery with real-time data monitoring systems offer transferable models.

Finally, building a national data infrastructure for continuing education, one that tracks provision and participation by geographic unit and enables targeted intervention when equity gaps emerge is a governance precondition for a credible regional equity strategy. Without granular, geographically disaggregated data, it is structurally difficult to design, target, or evaluate regional measures with precision (Mazhinyan et al., 2021; World Bank, 2024). Investing in this data infrastructure is a strategic prerequisite.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined regional access as a defining challenge of digital continuing education in Armenia, drawing on comparative international evidence and practitioner-informed institutional insight and experience. The picture that emerges is of a system not without foundations or potential, but constrained by geographic concentration of provision, legislative underdevelopment, as well as equity gaps that have deepened in the absence of strategic policy attention.

The international evidence is simultaneously encouraging and cautionary. Countries starting from institutional positions have achieved meaningful progress through combinations of legislative

reform, targeted financing, blended delivery models, and deliberate regional equity strategies. The comparative evidence also carries a cautionary element. Successful reforms and progress have depended on political commitment, governance coordination, and sustained investment in foundational conditions such as digital infrastructure, community institutional capacity, rural development integration, without which technology-enabled provision cannot deliver equitable access in (OECD/UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO, 2023).

The regional access dimension is urgent. The geographic concentration of continuing education provision in Yerevan, combined with the depth of the rural digital divide (Arion et al., 2024; Harutyunyan et al., 2024), means that without deliberate regional equity measures, any national continuing education strategy will in practice serve primarily those who already have the greatest access. Adding to this is the absence of a national data infrastructure for continuing education. Without granular, geographically disaggregated participation data, it is structurally difficult to design, target, or evaluate regional equity measures with any precision. Regionally based institutions, hybrid delivery adapted to rural connectivity conditions, and a national digital literacy program for rural adults are preconditions of a successful national (Yu et al., 2024; Mazhinyan et al., 2021).

Romero (2024) notes that the urgency of this challenge is only as artificial intelligence reshapes the labor market competency demands at accelerating speed, the population lacking access to quality continuing education faces not merely a skills gap but progressive marginalisation from the knowledge economy. For Armenia, where human capital is the primary development asset,

getting continuing education right - for all Armenians regardless of geography, is therefore a matter of national strategic consequence. Armenia's experience, while shaped by its own institutional history and geographic circumstances, speaks to a wider constituency of transitional economies navigating similar convergence of digital transformation and education reform.

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**ԹՎԱՅԻՆ ՓՈԽԱԿԵՐՊՈՒՄՆԵՐԸ ՇԱՐՈՒՆԱԿԱԿԱՆ  
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**Անուշ Եղիգարյան**

Եվրասիա միջազգային համալսարան, հետազոտող

**Բանալի բառեր** - շարունակական կրթություն, ցկյանս ուսուցում, լրացուցիչ կրթություն, մասնագիտական կրթություն, տարածաշրջանային հասանելիություն, թվայնացում, թվային հասանելիություն, թվային փոխակերպում, Հայաստան:

Հոդվածում քննարկում է Հայաստանում շարունակական կրթության հասանելիության քաղաքային-գյուղական հարթու-

թյունը՝ առանձնահատուկ ուշադրություն դարձնելով այն հարցին, թե արդյոք թվայնացումը խորացնում, թե հաղթահարում է առկա աշխարհագրական անհավասարությունները: Առանց նպատակաուղղված հավասարության միջոցների, թվային ընդլայնումը կարող է մեկ տեսակի բացառումը փոխարինել մյուսով: Վերլուծությունը փաստում է, որ շարունակական կրթության հասանելիության աշխարհագրական անհավասարությունը ձևավորվում է այնպիսի գործոններով, որոնք թվայնացումն ինքնին չի կարող վերացնել:

Հետազոտությունում քննարկվում են եվրոպական երկրների, մասնավորապես Էստոնիայի և Ֆինլանդիայի տվյալների մոնիտորինգի և կառավարման մոտեցումները, Չինաստանի փորձը թվային կրթության լայնածավալ տրամադրման ոլորտում, ինչպես նաև Վրաստանի փորձը՝ որպես հետխորհրդային համադրելի համատեքստ:

Համոզմունք է հայտնվում, որ շարունակական կրթության տարածաշրջանային հասանելիության ապահովումը պահանջում է համապարփակ քաղաքականության մոտեցում, որը միաժամանակ անդրադառնա թվային ենթակառուցվածքին, տեղական պայմաններին, այդ թվում՝ սարքերի հասանելիությանը, կապակցությանը և մարդկանց առօրյա սահմանափակումներին, ինչպես նաև գյուղական զարգացմանը: Եզրակացություններն ուղղված են համակարգված քաղաքականության գործողություններին՝ հիմնված գյուղական բնակչության և ռեսուրսների ու ժամանակի առումով առավել սահմանափակ հնարավորություններ ունեցող անձանց առջև ծառայած խոչընդոտների ըմբռնման վրա:

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