



# The Impact of LifeLong Learning Strategies on Professional Higher Education

FLLLEX

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Report on Work Package 7  
Review of self-assessment



## Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Background	3
3. Methodology and approach	4
4. Results of Work Package 7	7
5. Conclusions	10
6. Next Steps	10



## 1. Introduction

This report presents the results of work package 7 of the FLLLEX project that investigates the impact of lifelong learning strategies on professional higher education (PHE). This work package contributes to the project's objectives by providing a review of the institutional self-assessment exercises undertaken by the eight institutions of PHE that were partners in the project, by evaluating the effectiveness of the FLLLEX self-assessment tool that was developed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and by making recommendations emerging from these activities.

The report is aimed at three distinct audiences:

- a) the project's 24 partners comprising individual institutions of PHE in eight countries, national organisations for PHE in the same eight countries, the project's five structural partners and the members of its advisory board;
- b) staff and external experts with the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency;
- c) and others with no direct link to the project who may be interested in it.

It is anticipated that the audiences listed at (a) and (b), above, will be interested in reading this report in its entirety but it is acknowledged that those with a less direct interest and other casual or time-poor readers would find a shorter summary of key findings more useful. In order to accommodate this, Annex I is a Headline Report of the work package's findings.

The report covers the approach and methodology deployed in work package, a review of the work package's activities, a presentation on the external experts who were the work packages most significant actors and lists the results that emerged and ensuing recommendations for sustaining progress.

The report has been compiled by the work package leader, Dugald F CRAIG. He is International Development Manager with West of Scotland Colleges' Partnership, a member of the United Kingdom's team of Bologna Experts and a member of the Council of the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE).

## 2. Background

The FLLLEX project (The Impact of LifeLong Learning Strategies on Professional Higher Education) is project funded under Key Activity 1 of the EU's Lifelong Learning programme. It started on the 1 January 2010 and will run until 31 August 2012. The consortium realising the project includes 24 partners from 10 European countries.

The project addresses the challenges and implications of incorporating lifelong learning into higher education institutions, in Europe, specialising in the provision of professional or advanced vocational education. During the project's lifecycle, the partners sought to explore the role of higher education in the wider lifelong learning landscape, the institutional challenges emerging from the European and national lifelong learning agenda and the degree of flexibility exhibited by institutions of PHE in anticipating and responding to lifelong learning.



The growing prominence of lifelong and lifewide learning offers a multitude of new opportunities for institutions of PHE but the organisational impact of these remains understudied. The FLLLEX project aims to formulate a strategy on the incorporation of lifelong learning in PHE that will be useful to institutions in this specialist sector and to highlight the policy implications that flow from this to relevant national and European players.

### 3. Methodology and approach

Work package 7 focused on reviewing the applicability of the FLLLEX self-assessment tool and the results of the self-assessment exercises, carried out in seven of the project's partner institutions. The methodology adopted was based on recruiting three external experts in lifelong learning in higher education and tasking each of them with the responsibility for leading an expert review panel at each of the partner institutions. Each expert review panel comprised one of the external experts, a peer reviewer from another partner institution and a policy representative from a relevant regional or national body in the host country. The expert review panel considered the results of the self-assessment exercise undertaken in the host institution and offered objective feedback on it and reviewed the applicability, usefulness and fitness for purpose of the FLLLEX self-assessment tool.

The original plan was that the FLLEX self-evaluation instrument would be piloted in all eight of the projects partner higher education institutions. This did not occur because Cardonald College, a partner institution in Scotland, was unable to undertake the institutional self-assessment exercise due to an institutional reorganisation that coincided with the dates that had been set aside for this exercise. In an effort to overcome this, the leader of the work package identified a replacement institution in Scotland, Clydebank College. However, their participation was totally compromised by an institutional inspection by the national education authorities that diverted and fully occupied the staff who would have participated in the FLLEX self-assessment.. At the time of the production of this report, ongoing discussions are in place to try and secure a relevant input from Scotland. Should a successful outcome materialise, this will be incorporated as an addendum to this report, prior to 31 August 2012.

Figure 1, below, summarises the programme of review panels undertaken in work package 7.

Date of expert panel	Venue of expert panel	Membership of expert panel
10 June 2011	Letterkenny Institute of Technology (IE)	Dr Rob Mark, Outi Kallionen (Peer Panel Member, Laurea University of Applied Science) and Peter Brown (Higher education Authority of Ireland)
20 June 2011	Yasar University (TR)	<b>Michal Karpíšek</b> , Klaas Vansteenhuyse (Peer Panel Member, Leuven University College)
28 June 2011	Hanzehogeschool, Groningen (NL)	<b>Michal Karpíšek</b> , Jolanta Preidiene (Peer Panel Member from Vilnius University of Applied Sciences)
26 August 2011	Leuven University College (BE)	<b>Dr Rob Mark</b> , Oran Doherty (Peer Panel Member, Letterkenny Institute of Technology and Erwin Malfroy (Policy Designer, Higher Education Policy, Flanders Government)



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21 October 2011	Vilnius University of Applied Sciences (LT)	<b>Dr Rob Mark</b> , Ronald Guillen (Peer Panel Member, IUT St Nazaire)
4 November 2011	IUT de Saint Nazaire (FR)	<b>Professor John Storan</b> , Gokay Ozerim (Peer Panel Member, Yasar University) and Marc Mathelier (Head of Continuing Education, IUT Saint Nazaire)
7 December 2011	Laurea University of Applied Science (FI)	<b>Professor John Storan</b> , Dr Katariina Raji (Director, Research CIDE) and Dirma Manty (Development Manager, eLearning)

Figure 1: Schedule of Expert Review Panels

The information in the third column of figure 1, on the membership of the Expert Panels, shows that it was not possible for some institutions to secure the presence of a representative from the relevant national ministry or policy-making body. This is something for which compensatory action will be required during the project's dissemination phase. On completion of each expert review panel, the External Expert who chaired it produced a report on the proceedings and these are available as annexes to this report (Annexes II to VI).

The identification and recruitment of the three credible External Experts was a crucial component of work package 7. The project was assisted by the fact that at the time that this issue was being considered, the work package leader was managing two studies for DG EAC and EACEA into the analysis and exploitation of two Grundtvig measures (EACEA/2009/04). A feature of the work associated with these studies was the identification of experts in the field of lifelong learning across the 31 countries eligible to participate in the EU's Lifelong learning Programme. This led him to propose the individuals presented in Figure 2, below – Dr Rob Mark, Professor John Storan and Mr Michal Karpíšek - for the roles of External Expert in the FLLLEX project.

Professor Storan and Dr Mark were selected identified as candidates for the role of External Expert because of their prominent positions in relevant European networks, their extensive experience and research interests in the field of lifelong learning and their experience and knowledge of self-assessment in quality systems in higher education. The fact that they were based in the traditional university sector was perceived as a further asset as it would demonstrate the project's openness to observation and critical review by representatives from a sector to which PHE is often, erroneously, deemed inferior. Michal Karpíšek was selected for the depth of his knowledge of the PHE sector in Europe, his position as a Vice-President of EURASHE and because it was he who initiated the discussions that led to the development of the FLLLEX project.

This information on the External Experts was presented to a meeting of the FLLLEX partners in Helsinki in December 2010. The twin objectives were to introduce the proposed External Experts to the institutions that would be undertaking the self-assessments and to demonstrate their track records and wider credibility to the other partners. Due to the impact of severe weather on flights throughout Europe, at that time, the number of partners attending this meeting was significantly lower than had been anticipated. Fortunately, the content and format of the presentation was sufficiently flexible for it to support virtual presentations to those who were absent from the face to face sessions.



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The meeting of project partners and subsequent virtual consultation did not elicit any challenges, requests for change or alternative nominations to the team of External Experts, which was, subsequently, presented to and endorsed by the project's Advisory Body.

Pen portrait	External Expert
<p><b>Dr Rob Mark (UK)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director of Lifelong Learning, University of Strathclyde, Scotland</li> <li>• Recent, long-serving member of EUCEN Steering Committee</li> <li>• Has co-ordinated a number of EU-Funded projects in area of LLL in HEIs (ALPINE, EULLearN, EQUIPE)</li> <li>• Wide professional expertise, including non-university sector</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Michal Karpíšek (CZ)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vice-President of EURASHE</li> <li>• Executive Officer at Czech Association of Schools of Higher Education</li> <li>• Father of fLLEX Project</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Professor John Storan</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High profile in widening access to LLL in HEIs</li> <li>• Established track record in promoting collaboration and innovation among providers</li> <li>• Chair of a large multi-sector network that promotes good practice, attempts to inform policy and undertakes lobbying and representation</li> <li>• Links with the European Access Network (EAN)</li> </ul>	

Figure 2: presentation of Expert Review Panel

On confirmation of his nominations being adopted as the project's External Experts, the work package leader arranged a collective group briefing via Skype and follow-up individual discussions with each of them to clarify their role, the tasks that they would be expected to undertake, the outputs that they should generate and the administrative arrangements for their engagement and payment. This was supplemented by a short MS PowerPoint presentation that the work package leader prepared for the External Experts to use at each of the Expert Panel Reviews. This is included in Annex VII.

The institutions that were undertaking the self-evaluation and were hosting the Expert Panel Reviews were advised of the expectations upon them with regard to the latter through the



provision of email briefings, explanatory letters and a model agenda produced by the work package leader. These are available in Annex VIII. Subsequent feedback, gathered in questionnaires devised and distributed to the FLLLEX contact person in each institution indicates that the level and volume of information provided was sufficient for them to perform the functions that were required for the successful implementation of the Panels. These questionnaires may be found in Annex VIII.

The work package leader, also, issued questionnaires on the conduct of the Expert Review Panels to the External Experts and other participants in the process. The rate of return from the latter was at a significantly lower level than that for which he had hoped. Whilst the volume of information gathered is relatively insignificant, there is nothing within that contradicts the views expressed by the External Experts or the FLLLEX contact in each institution. Copies of these are available at Annex IX

## **4. Results of Work Package 7**

The key results of work package 7 are the aggregated conclusions of the institutional self-assessments and a review of the applicability and utility of the FLLLEX self-assessment instrument. In the process of collecting the data that informs these results, the work package leader discovered other interesting points with respect to the process of implementing this work package and these are included in this section of the report, too.

The information that appears in this section of the report was gathered from:

- a) a review of institutional self-assessment reports submitted by partner institutions;
- b) feedback provided by the three External Experts who led the expert panel sessions in the participating institutions;
- c) additional feedback on the utility and effectiveness of the self-assessment tool gathered independently of the expert panel sessions, from key staff in the partner institutions;
- d) and feedback on the institutional self-assessment exercise from members of participating focus groups in the partner institutions.

Without exception, the External Experts report that they were pleasantly surprised at the energy and effort that each institution had invested in undertaking the self-assessment process, the gravity with which they approached the Expert Panel Reviews and the open and honest discussions that took place during these sessions. As a consequence, the Panels stayed true to being formative evaluations within a quality improvement context rather than straightforward audits of conformity.

The only issue of concern, noted by the work package leader is that securing the presence of relevant national ministries or regional policy-makers in the Panels proved to be rather difficult. This is something for which compensatory action will be required during the project's dissemination phase.



## **(i). Results of the Institutional Self-Assessment**

Feedback from the individual institutional self-assessment reports and the Expert Panels indicates that the partner institutions are, with due regard for their national and operational settings and respective experience of lifelong learning, addressing all of the topics that frame the FLLLEX project: "The Impact of Lifelong Learning Strategies on Professional Higher Education". It is clear that the learner populations that all of the institutions serve stretch, in varying degrees, beyond the traditional school-leaving higher education student to embrace older learners who are working or who are taking time out to upgrade their knowledge and skills, learners who are pursuing alternative routes to first and second cycle higher education qualifications, SMEs and larger employers who wish to improve their businesses through accessing the research and training resources of the institutions and local, regional and national authorities who see the institutions as engines of economic growth and improved social cohesion.

In anticipating and responding to the challenges which emerge from incorporating a lifelong learning model into PHE, the institutions have initiated and sustained activities to support the recognition, accreditation and certification of prior learning, adapted their learning programmes to learning outcomes and credit-based approaches that support part-time, open, project and work-based learning. Partnership working and collaboration is a natural feature of the operational reality for the majority of the institutions and the remainder are positive about opening their institutions up to this. Given that institutions of PHE have substantially less discretion and autonomy than traditional universities, it is unsurprising that all are aware of the regional and national policy imperatives that set the operating terrain upon which they must succeed. It could, legitimately be argued that European policy drivers should be of less concern to these institutions but all that are associated with the FLLLEX project are alert to these and are extremely receptive to European cooperation and networking and learning from interesting and sector-leading practice beyond their national boundaries.

Institutional evolution to incorporate lifelong learning is not confined to welcoming a more diverse learner population, other impacts include alterations to premises, estates and hours of opening; increased variety and flexibility in learning pathways, access routes and articulation; investment in the development of teaching and support staff and the smart use of learning technologies; increased provision of learner-centred services like information, careers guidance and student counsellors; greater engagement with and a more influential role for learners and external stakeholders; a more acute awareness of the costs and pricing of learning; better promotion of lifelong learning and the institutions' respective offers; more transparent and accountable quality assurance procedures that are better aligned to future planning and improvement and a more forward-looking approach to curriculum planning development and design.

## **(ii) Applicability and Effectiveness of the FLLLEX Self-Assessment Tool**

The participating institutions share a range of similarities, not least in the fact that they offer vocational programmes ranging from EQF levels 5 to 7. However, the variation in legal, historical, financial and regional factors which impinge upon their individual operating contexts means that the settings within which the FLLLEX self-assessment tool was piloted are not homogeneous. Its application in such a diverse context would suggest that it is comprehensive with some scope for flexibility in its application.



Feedback from the institutional self-assessment reports, the Expert Panel Reviews and key staff in the participating institutions indicate that the tool displayed a general fitness for purpose in terms of supporting informed self-assessment of policy and practice in the incorporation of lifelong learning in an institution of PHE. Indeed, its underpinning methodological approach is regarded as being similar to that which is in the EFQM and compatible with some other national systems for self-assessment in quality assurance. This was useful in fostering an appreciation of the tool's features and promoted confidence in its use. The resultant effect is that it provided a framework and setting for transparent and inclusive discussion and reflection on the institution's current position with respect to the incorporation of lifelong learning.

All participating institutions remarked positively on the tool's capacity to stimulate discussion that led to an accurate indication of the organisation's current situation with regard to the incorporation of lifelong learning. The use of focus groups was, generally, perceived as a positive feature in facilitating the input of perceptions and opinions of core stakeholders in the process – management, teaching and support staff, learners and consumers, external collaborators and key influencers in regional development. It was interesting that these views were shared by all institutions, regardless of their depth of experience in institutional self-assessment or incorporating lifelong learning.

Despite its length, the tool was regarded as providing clear guidance on its use, being relatively easy to follow and offering comprehensible definitions of the composition, tasks and responsibilities of the focus groups.

However, a number of substantive concerns have been expressed about it being too comprehensive, overly complex and time-consuming for it to be attractive enough to sustain interest in its current form, beyond the FLLLEX project. All institutions were required to devote substantial staffing resources to the preparatory, implementation and reporting phases of the self-assessment exercise and, perhaps, unsurprisingly, significant doubt is expressed about such levels of resources being available for subsequent self-assessment exercises with the tool.

Whilst all institutions record that the tool's questions – structure and content – were eminently suitable for the management focus group and were reasonably accessible to the staff focus group, there is a widely held view that the questions are unsuitable for the learners' and external stakeholders' groups. Furthermore, the repetition of some questions, in the tool, was a source of some frustration for most of those responsible for promoting its use.

Although the tool generated a helpful picture of the current institutional position with respect to lifelong learning, it was felt that too many of its questions related to the past and present performance of the institution. There was a clear feeling that the tool placed insufficient explicit emphasis on the institution's aspirations and future plans and failed to include a section on plans or proposals for improvements to the current situation.

A more structural criticism of the tool was that some felt that the tool didn't effectively lend itself to evaluating the institution's contribution to national, European or international policies with regard to lifelong learning.

The evaluation of the self-assessment tool has generated a number of suggestions for its development and improvement and these are presented in section ?? of this report.



## 5. Conclusions

The EU has deployed a range of slightly varying definitions of lifelong learning since 1992. In 2003 the Europa website defined it as “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”. In the same year, in the Glossary on the Berlin Communiqué, ENQA (2003) remarks that lifelong learning comprises all phases of learning, from pre-school to post-retirement, and covers the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning. These inclusive life-wide definitions of lifelong learning reinforce that it covers a broad spectrum of learning, learners, contexts and motivations for learning. However, in recent years, the EU’s focus for lifelong learning has shifted to emphasise employability, (occupational) skills development and (upward) labour mobility. This perspective is clearly articulated in the (European) Council conclusions on the role of education and training in the implementation of the ‘Europe 2020’ strategy (2011/C 70/01) that were published in March 2011. In considering one of the flagship initiatives within the ET 2020 Framework - the ‘Agenda for new skills and jobs’ initiative, which highlights the need to upgrade skills and to boost employability – the Council notes that “Progress has to be made to improve the identification of training needs, increase the labour market relevance of education and training, facilitate individuals’ access to lifelong learning opportunities and guidance, and ensure smooth transitions between the worlds of education, training and employment. Achieving this calls for closer collaboration and partnerships between public services, education and training providers and employers at national, regional and local level. The transition towards learning outcome-based qualification systems and greater validation of skills and competences acquired in non- formal and informal contexts are also of great importance in enhancing employability.”

The results of the institutional self-assessment exercises carried out in the FLLLEX partner institutions offer evidence that these professionally oriented higher education institutions are making significant progress in incorporating and developing the approach to lifelong learning that is promoted within the ‘Europe 2020 Strategy’ and the ET 2020 Framework. It is evident, from the institutional self-assessment reports and their subsequent evaluations in the Expert Panel Reviews that all of the institutions are, each in their own way, addressing the six essential elements for coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies enumerated in the European Commission’s Memorandum on Lifelong Learning: partnership working, insight into the demand for learning, adequate resourcing, facilitating access to learning opportunities, creating a learning culture and striving for excellence.

## 6. Next Steps

The next steps for the FLLLEX partner institutions are beyond the remit of this report. However, feedback from the Expert Panel Reviews and the institutional self-assessment reports supports an optimistic forecast that these institutions of PHE will continue to identify ways in which they may sustain developments to incorporate lifelong learning in their institutional offer. This prediction is sustained by the regional, national and European strategic imperatives flowing from the policies highlighted above and responses to the economic crisis which are coalescing around the need for more flexible delivery mechanisms to ensure the upgrading of skills for job-seekers, labour market entrants and those in employment, regardless of their age or existing levels of qualification.



The outputs from Work Package 7 have produced some concrete proposals for refining the FLLLEX self-assessment instrument. Firstly, the tool would benefit from having its functionality being extended from being, essentially, a stocktaking tool auditing to a more organic planning instrument that uses an evaluation of past and current practice to chart a course for the future. At the same time, the instruments's content and length should be reviewed with a view to identifying simplifications, eliminating duplications and streamlining the document and associated processes for its deployment. In order to support such improvements, it would be useful to develop some briefer and clearer instructions for its use, some exemplar/illustrative responses to questions and questionnaires to help the focus groups for learners and external stakeholders understand the process better so that they make fuller contributions to the process. In addition, serious consideration should be given to developing an accompanying training course and pack for new and ongoing users.

A final observation is that if the FLLLEX self-assessment instrument is to create a space for itself in the quality assurance systems of the participating institutions of professional higher education and beyond, it needs to be able to demonstrate how it fits with an adds value to their existing tools, systems and processes.