

Linking Lifelong learning policies and the stakeholders. A view from the FLLLEX project

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Abstract

The FLLLEX project (The Impact of LifeLong Learning Strategies on Professional Higher Education) is an EU-funded project (1/2010-8/2012) with the objective of identifying challenges and implications of the incorporation of LifeLong Learning (LLL) into European higher education institutions (HEIs). A major output was a self-evaluation instrument for HEIs to test their flexibility and institutional strategy in terms of LLL. This was prepared via a survey of important stakeholders in LLL and a study of the relevant policies in 8 European countries.

Results will be presented from a study which revealed that HEIs could pay more attention to what has been termed 'policy hooks', being the link between their institutional policies for LLL and the regional policies. From a broad survey of learners and businesses, the FLLLEX project also gathered information on which type of supporting policies those stakeholders would need.

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Introduction

The main point emanating from the ET2020 framework and other European policy statements is that HEIs play an important role in supplying training actions to non-traditional adult students. The FLLLEX project is an EU-funded project with the objective of identifying challenges and implications of the incorporation of LifeLong Learning (LLL) into European higher education institutions (HEIs).

According to an EADTU project on "University Strategies and Business Models for Lifelong Learning (USBM)"¹, this implies a consequent need to invest more decisively in drawing those publics. This can be done through the creation of guiding services, the diversification of training supply, the development of distance education, the adoption of new pedagogical strategies, and implementation of new methods for assessment and validation of competences.

However many obstacles remain when it comes to implementation. For instance, the above mentioned USBM report states that HEIs seem to be failing to address the LLL agenda by not being sufficiently open to providing courses for students in later stages of life. It also notes the lack of accreditation/certification mechanisms, the absence of ICT competences or the insufficient use of e-learning within HEIs. Other obstacles are linked to the choices made by other stakeholders in LLL. For instance, the fact that employers tend to choose commercial providers of education that offer predominantly non-formal education in specific areas.

The FLLLEX project is specifically directed towards profession-oriented HEIs which mainly offer professionally oriented programmes and are engaged in applied and profession-related research. These degree programmes promise the student a direct link to the labour market and an excellent connection with practitioners in the work field. As such the HEIs offering the programmes should be able to detect needs on LLL and be able to quickly present matching offers.

The FLLLEX project intends to support the HEIs in setting out the lines for an institutional strategy for LLL. A starting point for such a strategy is to assess the role of professional higher education within the broader landscape determined by the European, national and regional policies. A review study was carried out on the intensity of Lifelong Learning policy implementation in FLLLEX countries². This resulted in a list of policy 'hooks' that can legitimise strategic actions by HEIs in their attempts to grow and develop their involvement in LLL. These policy hooks were incorporated in the *FLLLEX-Radar*³, a self-assessment instrument for the implementation of LLL in professional higher education.

In addition to assessing the policy context, a HEI needs to be aware of the needs and role of other stakeholders and partners in LLL: lifelong learners, employers and other LLL providers. To this end a survey of key stakeholders was conducted: learners, businesses, and LLL providers were asked about their expectations, motives and/or barriers to engage in LLL.

This paper presents some of the main findings of the FLLLEX project studies and discusses the implications for LLL-strategies on a regional or local level. But in order to interpret the present LLL policy, one must, of course, comprehend what is meant by LLL.

Lifelong Learning?

Our research looked into the link between the European level and the level of the member state. Interestingly enough, even at that level a discussion continues as to the definition of LLL and definitions seem to vary according to the perspectives and priorities of the policy makers at a given moment. LLL can be defined in a very broad sense as 'all' learning which takes place at any time throughout life⁴. The European Commission seems to have been keen on transforming this into more tangible categories and speaks about 'acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from the pre-school years to post-retirement'⁵. At the same time, the

¹ Watkinson, M. & Tinoca, L. 2010, *Showcases of University Strategies and Business Models for Lifelong Learning*, Heerlen: EADTU.

² Finland, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Flanders (Belgium), Scotland (UK), France, Turkey and Ireland.

³ <http://www.filllex.eu/Homepage/FLLLEX-Radar>.

Ryan, P. (2003) Potential and constraints with special reference to policies in the United Kingdom and Europe. Geneva: ILO <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/asro/bangkok/skills-ap/docs/wp15.pdf>

⁵ Commission of the European Communities (CEC) (2000) *A Memorandum of Lifelong learning*, Commission Staff working paper (SEC 2000 1832, 30.10.00). Brussels: EC.

EC is attempting to avoid that all LLL falls under the category of traditional education⁶. It is an attempt to stimulate the competence of 'to learn how to learn'⁷.

When thinking about strategies for Lifelong Learning, one should be aware that the term is, despite its frequent use, not always clearly defined⁸. It is very wide-reaching, may often be understood in different ways in different countries and may evolve as contextual factors change⁹ ().

In order to focus policies and to clarify terms for communication to the different stakeholders and thus attract more learners, FLLLEX recommends the EC to consider updating its definition of LLL. We propose to provide different definitions on LLL in function of the different profiles (background and motivation) of learners and forms of education. The same accounts for policy makers on local (national, regional) levels and for HEI's: when developing policy's for LLL they need to clearly define the scope of the LLL in terms of learner profiles and forms of education. For example, many higher education institutions may still equal LLL at their institution as continuous education for professionals holding a diploma from higher education. While this is of course a public in need of LLL, this definition cannot be applied to all lifelong learners.

Impact of policies?

Policies at the European level on LLL tend to come from different directions with the fields of Research, Employment and Education all having some interest in the topic. Policies are steered from the Europe 2020 strategy but also from the Bologna Process¹⁰. Clearly, the EC intends to strengthen the partnerships between HEIs and employers¹¹.

Driven by the European policy a large number of European countries developed explicit national lifelong learning strategies. According to the latest report on the implementation of the ET2020 framework (EC 2012), tools such as the European and national qualification frameworks, mechanisms to validate non-formal and informal learning and lifelong guidance policies have been implemented by a large number of European countries and their use shows that barriers for cooperation between education sectors can be overcome.

While European policy in the area of LLL has developed intensively over the last several years and its potential in influencing national policies has grown, it must be noted that European policy initiatives in the area of LLL can only ever go so far. It is still up to individual national governments to translate European initiatives on a national and sub-national level and it is evident that major gaps still exist in ensuring that current EU policies are developed and implemented at a national level¹².

The FLLLEX project identified LLL provision in higher education in the eight partner countries under scrutiny and identified gaps in implementation of European LLL policies. The most commonly found gaps are:

- Lifelong Learning is still not a horizontal priority in some countries;
- Inadequate funding support to learners (i.e. paid educational leave) and lack of diversification (i.e. public and private support schemes);
- Lack of flexibility in access and forms of learning (i.e. absence of part-time programmes);
- Limited mobility between education and training systems and levels;
- Absence or limited recognition of prior learning (i.e. access to information, guidance);
- Difficulty for learners to combine work, family and study;
- High drop-out rates.

⁶ Badescu, M. And M. Saisana (2009) *Participation in lifelong learning in Europe: What can be measured and compared*. JRC Scientific and Technical Reports 23511 EN http://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/Document/Badescu_Saisana_EUR23511.pdf

⁷ Commission of the European Communities (CEC) (DG Education and Culture) (2002) *European Report on Quality Indicators of Lifelong Learning*. Brussels: CEC <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Report.pdf>

⁸ Dehemel, A. (2006) Making a European area of lifelong learning? Reflections on the European Union's lifelong learning Policies, *Comparative Education*, 42 (1): 49-62.

⁹ Eurydice network, 2010.

¹⁰ We refer to the Report of WP 1 in the FLLLEX project: Stokes, A. and R. Thorn 2010 <http://www.filllex.eu/Homepage/Work-Packages/Work-Package-1>

¹¹ 'New Skills for New Jobs' is one of the driving forces behind this idea.

¹² Stokes and Thorn 2010.

Of course the situation varies a lot from one country to another and from one institution to the other. For instance in countries such as Scotland (UK) or Turkey we can observe a divide between newly founded universities and traditional ones as regards the recognition of prior learning.

The review resulted in a comparative matrix in which the progress and implementation of LLL policies was marked for each of the countries participating in FLLLEX. The intensity of policy implementation does not correlate in all countries with success in the achievement of European benchmarks. Another approach would be needed to establish a correlation between those the implementation and the achieved benchmarks. Yet, the matrix may be helpful 'for contextualising the experience of individual academics and administrators in HEIs as they attempt to engage with the LLL agenda'¹³.

Regional strategy development in alignment with policy

What strategic actions can be taken by HEIs and other stakeholders, organized on a local or regional level, to overcome the gaps that are described above and to develop their involvement in LLL? A key to answer these questions may be found in the so called *policy hooks* that were defined as a result of the FLLLEX project. By 'hook' we mean a state or EU policy, directive or piece of legislation that legitimises activities by a HEI. Fig. 1 considers the policy 'hooks' in the context of the freedom of action, we believe, an individual HEI could exert in their implementation.

For individual HEIs the type or intensity of response to a particular policy hook will vary depending on the extent to which it believes it has freedom of action in the policy matter. For example, it would be unreasonable to expect an individual HEI to fund individual LLL students in the absence of such provision by the state. In contrast, if the state has designated a particular set of institutions as being responsible for workforce education and provided resources to do so, it would be expected that this would be reflected in the mission and strategy statements by the said institutions as this matter is entirely within their control.

The practical implication of this is that for matters over which a HEI has a high level of freedom of action, even if its country implementation is weak, it may nonetheless undertake supportive activities. However, the relationship between high level policy and institutional action or strategy is seldom as clear cut as noted above and the degree of control or freedom of action is not as simple as 'it is possible' or 'it is not possible'. More likely the degree of freedom depends to a significant extent on how far a HEI is prepared to push the boundaries¹⁴. The relation of HEI with the legislative context is, of course, only one aspect of the context. The context can become more favourable when the HEI also has strong connections to other stakeholders in the region which may 'push' the HEI to make better use of the legal possibilities.

LLL strategies tailored to types of learners

A next step in defining strategies for LLL is to better understand the needs and expectations of the main target group: the lifelong learners. The FLLLEX project conducted a survey of adult students as lifelong learners in eight countries. In relation to the often broad and all-encompassing definition of LLL, we found that policies as well as the strategies from HEIs could only be successful if they clearly identified their intended target groups.

To better understand and analyse the motivations and expectations of lifelong learners the survey used the typology of adult learners in formal education as proposed by Hefler and Markowitsch¹⁵. This typology, presented in fig. 2, attempts to combine the life cycle approach of both education and work. A total of 1525 lifelong learners provided answers to a questionnaire¹⁶.

Some of the main results:

¹³ Stokes and Thorn 2010, 126.

¹⁴ Thorn, R. 2011, Institutes of Technology in Ireland: Strategic Position, Workforce Education and Societal Need, *Administration* 59 (1): 69-76.

¹⁵ Hefler, G. and J. Markowitsch 2010, Formal adult learning and working in Europe: a new typology of participation patterns, *Journal of Workplace Learning* 22 (1/2): 79-93.

¹⁶ De Jong, M., S. Nindl and K. Vansteenhuyse 2012, Typologies of Lifelong Learners in Professional Higher Education, *paper presented at EARLI 2012, Antwerp*.

- Based on their answers, the majority of the respondents in our survey can be characterised as *transforming* and *compensating* learners. This implies that for this majority there does not seem to be a strong relationship between their current job content and the study. The most important motive to study is to advance prospects for personal growth – however there are differences per country.
- For over half of the respondents financial support was a factor for importance influencing the decision to start the study. To support LLL for working adults the respondents wish for more allowance for employed students, and/or tax relief for HE from public authorities.
- Generally, the learners are satisfied with their actual study.
- Learners frequently experience a need for a better integration of higher education into their career plan, for information about company-internal support and for government support.
- The reduction of free time and stress are the main problems participants face.

The survey findings make clear that different lifelong learners have different motives for re-entering formal educations and they have different needs, depending on their background and reason for study. The typology of learners can serve as a useful frame for understanding these different types of learners.

Regional Partnerships for LLL

FLLLEX research among **employers** – as stakeholders in LLL - reveals there is a huge potential of progress in the development of partnerships between HEIs and companies. Especially on a regional level it is crucial to better understand the needs of nearby companies. However, employers in general seem not to be aware the offer (or possible offer) of HEI in LLL. Hence, in developing partnerships with businesses a HEI should tailor his offer and information strategy to both the needs and professional development policies of the company as well as to the motivations of individual learners.

In order to be able to position themselves and define their role within the regional landscape of LLL Providers, a HEI also needs to be aware of **other players in the field**. A definition of a HEIs role and unique selling point can serve as a starting point for making strategic decisions, e.g. on which target groups of lifelong learners the institution should focus and which ways of cooperation should be sought on a regional, national and international level.

In conclusion

This paper and the policy advice resulting from the FLLLEX project put three elements forward. First, the term 'Lifelong Learning' is comprehensive but very wide-reaching, may often be understood in different ways in different countries and may evolve as contextual factors change (Eurydice network, 2010).

Second, a review study on LLL policy in eight European countries shows that HEIs do indeed have opportunities to take initiative in stimulating LLL when they adequately use the existing policy hooks. Regional cooperation and partnerships will make these initiatives more effective.

Thirdly, when talking about LLL HEIs – as well as other LLL providers – will have to identify which type of lifelong learners they wish to cater for, as this choice will influence the policy, management and structure of the institution and organisation. Other stakeholders are the employers. In order to support partnerships between employers and HEI, employers need to be informed on the possibilities of LLL (and its financing) and also on the structure and benefits of qualification frameworks. National and regional governments may consider initiating and participating in partnerships.

Policy Hooks	Freedom of Action by Individual HEI	Observation
Legal framework/ legislation	Limited	
Participation rates	Limited	
Funding and investment	Limited	
Flexibility and access to learning pathways	Limited/Moderate	Depending on the legal arrangements governing the access, transfer and progression of students individual HEIs may have opportunities to enhance progression pathways
Link between education and work	Moderate	Depending on the mission of the HEI some opportunities exist to enhance the link between education and work
Transparency of qualifications system	Moderate	Where member states have introduced qualifications frameworks and enabling regulations/policies HEIs have significant freedom of control to publicise these developments
Public awareness and perception of Lifelong Learning	Significant	Individually or collectively through representative bodies HEIs can widely promote public awareness of Lifelong Learning
Link with wider EU developments	Significant	Individual HEIs have tended not to get involved in EU wide projects and other developments. Such involvement potentially greatly enriches the Lifelong Learning agenda within an HEI
Involvement and support of key stakeholders	Significant	Many opportunities exist at no cost to involve wide ranging groups of stakeholders into the Lifelong Learning agenda
Information and guidance for (potential) learners	Significant	Many opportunities exist for individual HEIs to significantly enhance the information flow to potential learners
Recognition of all forms of learning	Significant	RPL and APL are EU wide policy requirements and individual HEIs should have policies and practices in place to accommodate this aspect of Lifelong Learning
Cost of Education – support/ initiatives	Moderate	Although funding policy is outside the remit of HEIs, where LLL is regarded as of strategic importance flexibility exists to design counselling, guidance and mentoring initiatives that are low or no cost

Figure 1. Freedom of action of HEIs in relation to the identified policy hooks for LLL.

Focus	Main Type	Sub-types	Description	Relation Contents / Tasks	Start: before / after joining career
Education	Completing	Finishing	Working while studying without particular connection of work and education	Insignificant	Before
		Entering	Being hired in late phases by an employer in need of graduates	Strong, clearly visible relation	Before
	Returning	Returning	Returning to education and overruling a temporary transition to work	Insignificant	After
	Transforming	Trans-forming	General transformation using education as a basis	No relation	After
Work	Reinforcing	Progressing	Progressing in the current field by at least one step on the educational ladder	Strong, clearly visible relation	After (exceptional: before)
		Adapting	Making one step in the current field, in parallel to an existing one not relevant in the field	Strong, clearly visible relation	After
		Specialising	Completing one programme as a specialisation	Strong, clearly visible relation	After
		Peaking	Completing a formal programme designed for experienced professionals in the field	Strong, clearly visible relation	After
	Compensating	Compensating	Compensating the restriction of an existing pathway	Insignificant	After

Figure 2. A typology of lifelong learners.