

# **LIFELONG LEARNING – AN ESSENTIAL CONCEPT OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM**

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At the Lisbon European Council (March 2000), the governments representatives set a fundamental objective for the EU, to be accomplished until 2010: to become “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustained economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”. A central element of this strategy is *lifelong learning*, not only to competitiveness and employability, but also to social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development.

In a Communication from the European Commission, adopted on November 21, 2001, it is formulated the common goal of a *European Area of Lifelong Learning*. Its aim is “to empower citizens to move freely between learning settings, jobs, regions and countries, making the most of their knowledge and competences, and to meet the goals and ambitions of the European Union and the candidate countries to be more prosperous, inclusive, tolerant and democratic”. The achievement of this goal demands the existence of a lifelong learning framework to bring together education and training, important elements of existing European level processes, strategies and plans concerned with youth, employment, social inclusion, and research policy. The document also gives a lifelong learning concept definition: the process of learning from pre-school to post-retirement that should encompass the whole spectrum of formal, non formal and informal learning. Among the major objectives of lifelong learning are: active citizenship, personal fulfilment and social inclusion, as well as employment-related aspects. The principles which underpin lifelong learning refer to: the centrality of the learner, the importance of equal opportunities and the quality and relevance of learning opportunities.

## **1. Lifelong learning: from idea to a higher education reality**

*Trends V* report, issued by EUA (European University Association), is a fundamental document of the education reform developed by the Bologna Process. Published in 2007, this has a double merit: on the one hand, it offers a comprehensive image of the European higher education, presenting the outcomes obtained by universities in the Bologna reforms, on the other hand, it points out the main challenges to come and draws up the process priorities. Approaching topics of major importance for the European higher education reform (*Structural reform: implementing the three cycles, Bologna tools for mobility and recognition, Student support services and student participation, Quality assurance*), *Trends V* reserves a chapter to lifelong learning – *Lifelong learning and widening access*. This proves the lifelong learning process importance within the fundamental change under the Bologna Process, aiming to create, until 2010, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA), as the foundation for the knowledge-based society, the essential goal of the Lisbon Agenda. The report focuses on some major interest issues: the priority of lifelong learning in European higher education institutions, lifelong learning practices at European higher education institutions, lifelong learning – widening access and the social dimension, lifelong learning and the qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area, lifelong learning and recognition of prior learning. The *Trends V* analysis gives a good image of how the lifelong learning process is perceived, assimilated in the national education systems and policies and implemented by the higher education institutions. By their vocation, universities are the most appropriate

institutions to develop, beside the traditional academic provision, new educational forms, on the background of the needs for widening social access to quality higher education.

According to the report, despite the expectations situating lifelong learning at the centre of the reform processes, this remained rather on the periphery of the institutional strategies. Nowadays, when the economic development reasons and the achievement of the knowledge society demand an effective workforce, lifelong learning becomes a major issue. The demographic changes, the ageing population, the declining younger generations, the increase in representation of women in the student population are set to have a major impact at European level. In this context, some institutions may merge or close, but many may diversify their educational offer and target different profiles of students. That is why the lifelong learning agenda challenges institutions to reorient their offer to give a broader range of persons the opportunity to fulfil their potential. A central element of this agenda is widening access. The experiences of the European institutions show a certain lack of coherence concerning the understanding and implementation of lifelong learning, although some of them realize that lifelong learning represents a space of growth, with diversified funding sources, with important possibilities for the regional cooperation and development. Universities have a variety of offers from the non-formal or informal education range together with offers of professional education. The education offers and practices differ among countries and include: full-time mature students, general adult education, part-time degrees, diplomas for those in work (post-experience), continuing professional development and training courses, staff development, open access courses, regional development through open and distance learning, and networks of partnerships and collaboration with local stakeholders. Some institutions have developed innovative practices in this area. “Junior” university courses prepare or motivate young people to take an interest in higher education. There are also courses addressing to specific secondary schools in order to attract the best students in universities. The report shows, in turn, the lack of access courses directed specifically towards socially disadvantaged students. In the context of a diversified education offer, there are instead “senior” university courses, many of them being of a “self-improvement” character, addressed to the persons over 55 years or to the retired population. An increasingly important role, in a large number of universities, have the part-time students, an important possibility for institutions to diversify both access and funding, as these students pay for their study programmes or the costs are paid, at least in part, by employers. In the UK, 40% of the students are part-time, and the government intends to take measures for funding this student category.

The report notes that increasing the student diversity is not a priority for institutions. There are few incentives to encourage widening access, and future funding seems dependent on demonstrable “academic quality”. In these conditions, many institutions focus on increasing their competitiveness, trying to attract the best students, than on improving the diversity of the student base. The lifelong learning agenda does not imply only the widening of access, but also the diversification of the educational offer, more funding opportunities with the goal of improving employability. In the debate on the relationship between quality and diversification, many consider that diversifying the student body means lowering quality. In the future, the quality of education will be perceived in relation to institutions’ capacity to respond to the diversity of citizen needs. Widening participation demands measures related to the career structures, so that not only excellent research is rewarded in academic careers, but also excellent teaching and student success. Although widening of participation in non formal or informal programmes is not a priority for institutions, yet both increasing and widening the participation in higher education are key elements for the creation of a European knowledge society. A lot of things are to be done to open up access to learning opportunities for citizens throughout their lives. In the process of reconsidering their traditional curriculum on the actual societal needs background, institutions must take into account the fact that learning takes place in several contexts, which has implications on the study programmes structure, on teaching and assessment. It is necessary therefore that such means as flexible learning paths, the accreditation of work placements, blended learning, company in-house training, distance education, e-learning and learning through work

schemes to be developed and formally integrated in the higher education provision. Though such issues have been considered only on the margins of institutional strategic development, yet the introduction of flexible learning paths is essential for the European Higher Education Area, while combining the different tools developed through the Bologna Process gives the potential for major innovation and transformation. Implemented in a simple and flexible way, these instruments could determine the development of the education offer for a diverse population. Among the means which sustain flexibility, transparency, mobility and academic quality are a range of tools and processes to recognise prior learning: Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL), Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) and Work-Based Learning (WBL). It is expected that these tools to be combined with ECTS for expressing prior learning outcomes through credits and linked to the different levels of qualification frameworks. At the centre of an increasing number of processes and needs addressed to the higher education and lifelong learning, universities must make efforts to connect these processes in a coherent approach, in the direction of some clearly defined goals.

The conclusions drawn by *Trends V* are critic and express in essential terms the situation of lifelong learning in Europe. According to them, dialogue on lifelong learning provision with employers and other societal stakeholders is currently lacking. Excellence in all higher education missions needs to be rewarded, as institutions require greater incentives to respond to the challenges of broadening their educational offer to “non traditional” students. National qualification frameworks are currently an aspiration rather than an actual tool for most systems. To be effective, they should be designed coherently with broad societal consultation and strong involvement of higher education institutions. In the process of reconsidering their traditional curriculum institutions need to give a higher priority to lifelong learning and to consider this agenda as a central element of institutional strategic development.

## **2. European Universities’ Charter on Lifelong Learning**

In a EUA seminar on lifelong learning in the Sorbonne (December 2007), it was affirmed the necessity of a Charter on Lifelong Learning for Europe’s universities and for society in the future. The document has been adopted by the Rectors’ National Conferences in the EUA Council of 4 July 2008, and launched in the EUA Conference *Inclusive and Responsive Universities ensuring Europe’s competitiveness*, held in Rotterdam in 23-25 October 2008. The Charter has appeared in a complex and dynamic context for the European higher education, as universities are involved in the process of making the knowledge-based society. In the Preamble, it is shown that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, European universities confront with increasing expectations and needs from society, while the entire process of social and economic development evolves around the concept of *Europe of Knowledge*. The achievement of this goal needs strong, autonomous, inclusive and responsive universities, able to offer research-based education and learning. The actual social and economic challenges are determined by the increasing speed of globalisation, Europe’s demographic ageing, the fast technological progress. All these evolutions influence the whole society and have a powerful impact on the labour markets, involved in a dynamic adaptation to the new conditions. In this process, universities have the central role, since they are the pillar of the knowledge society, the fundamental goal of the Lisbon Agenda, assumed and developed within the Bologna Reform.

The higher education reform in Europe, started under the Bologna Declaration (May 25, 1999), has set two major goals: the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) and the *European Research Area* (ERA). Until now, in the European higher education, a series of changes and evolutions have taken place, which need to be consolidated and developed to respond to the lifelong learning challenges. In this context, the achievements and the good practices of the European universities concerning the diversified student communities must be taken into consideration. As regards the *lifelong learning* notion, it embraces many concepts: initial education for disadvantaged groups, continuing education and training for well-qualified

graduates, post-retirement opportunities for cultural enrichment. At the same time, lifelong learning can be organized at local, regional and national levels.

For developing lifelong learning in Europe, the education policy set among its major objectives to achieve a *culture of European inclusive and responsive universities*. The 21<sup>st</sup> century university, a central institution of the knowledge society, must be *inclusive*, that is to address by its study programmes to all the social categories with the potential to learn and develop through education, to include in these programmes students who have not taken benefit from the higher education learning opportunities, young people or adults willing to continue the studies, improve their training or be initiated in new areas of knowledge. In the new metamorphosis, university must also be *responsive*, therefore to respond to the societal needs, to assume an active and reactive role in relation with diverse population categories and with their diverse needs, being this way a key-factor in achieving social cohesion, in education and development in the spirit of knowledge, qualification, competitiveness and performance. In the area of institutions able to develop lifelong learning, universities rank the first, since they offer research-based higher education.

As for the participation rates in the higher education, Europe is not too well situated as compared with other world regions. Therefore, one of the reform major objectives is widening access to higher education, its opening to more social categories and areas. This widening must be understood not as integrating less qualified students, as a lowering of the quality standards for favouring everybody's access, but as a support for all with the potential to take advantage from the access to the higher education, who can bring benefits to society. Having in view the increasingly broad range of learners, their diverse motivations and interests, the university offer must refer, on one hand, to programmes for professional development adapted to a fast-changing labour market and, on the other, to the growing need for personal development opportunities through cultural university offer.

The transformation of the academic institutions in inclusive and responsive universities, open to the societal needs, is a process included in the European higher education reform evolutions, in the spirit of quality, performance, competitiveness in education and research. Within this process, lifelong learning has a double mission: to offer a wider range of educational services to the new candidates or to those willing to continue their study experiences and to ensure the continuity of the learning opportunities during the entire life. For universities, widening the social access to the lifelong learning programmes becomes, in these conditions, a priority. The establishment of systems for fair assessment and validation of all forms of prior learning, the achievement of relevant, creative and innovative educational programmes are also priorities of lifelong learning. For reaching the goal of an extended access to wider social areas with a learning potential, universities must reinforce dialogue with society more broadly than until now. The employers and employee organisations, parents and students are categories with a special relevance to the higher education and lifelong learning institutions. One of the most appropriate and effective ways in achieving this aim are the partnerships, especially those at the local level, where individual and social needs are better defined and expressed.

In the Charter, the European universities take ten *commitments* for lifelong learning development, as a “decatalogue” of the higher education reform. Universities commit to: 1. Embedding concepts of widening access and lifelong learning in their institutional strategies; 2. Providing education and learning to a diversified student population; 3. Adapting study programmes to ensure that they are designed to widen participation and attract returning adult learners; 4. Providing appropriate guidance and counselling services; 5. Recognising prior learning; 6. Embracing lifelong learning in quality culture; 7. Strengthening the relationship between research, teaching and innovation in a perspective of lifelong learning; 8. Consolidating reforms to promote a flexible and creative learning environment for all students; 9. Developing partnerships at local, regional, national and international level to provide attractive and relevant programmes; 10. Acting as role models of lifelong learning institutions.

Each of these commitments is sustained in the Charter by a series of arguments. Starting with the first one, universities must understand the opportunity to develop lifelong learning as a central element of their mission and strategy and as part of a wider definition of excellence (1). European universities must respond to the increasingly diverse demand from a broad spectrum of students for high quality and relevant higher education throughout their lifetime. This public includes post secondary students, adult learners, professionals who seek to up-grade skills for the workplace, senior citizens with cultural interests and others. Diversification of the student categories and of the education forms is an important premise in the achievement of a *culture of success and innovation* in institutions and society. A challenge addressed to universities is to create the conditions for interaction among the diverse student categories within a supportive mutual learning environment (2). For all the possible learners to access and succeed in higher education in all its different forms, flexible and transparent learning paths are necessary. Universities have also the responsibility to ensure their educational offer high quality. In the conditions of the learner needs diversity, universities – which have an important role in promoting widening participation and continuing education – have the responsibility to adapt their programmes and ensure the development of appropriate outcomes in a learner-centred perspective (3). Universities must offer all the students – of all ages and from all the social and cultural environments – relevant academic and professional guidance, as well as other psychological counselling (4). It is very important for the universities to create systems to assess and recognise all forms of prior learning, in order to ensure the access of all with the potential to benefit from higher education provision. This is essential in the context of lifelong learning in the globalisation era, when knowledge is acquired in many different forms and places (5). Europe's universities have taken important steps in developing internal quality culture, assuming prime responsibility for the quality of their provision. This process has to adapt to an evolving framework for lifelong learning in order to ensure the provision of appropriate support services for an increasing number of more diverse learners (6). Universities' research and innovation missions can be strengthened through lifelong learning strategies, while universities' specific contribution to lifelong learning must be sustained by research. A good example of lifelong learners are researchers, whose own educational needs are continually evolving, also taking account of the changing skills required by the labour market. At the same time, lifelong learning can be a source of new research methodologies and topics (7). Universities need to exploit the potential of the reform processes and their tools (ECTS, Diploma Supplement, European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, Qualifications Frameworks etc.) to enhance the development of a creative lifelong learning environment, open to a more diverse population of learners. The full integration of lifelong learning in the mission of universities is essential to develop the creativity and innovation profiles of institutions (8). Institutions cannot provide on their own a relevant educational offer in a lifelong learning context. They need partnerships for a flexible and innovative offer to meet the society needs. The partnerships can be done with a range of other educational institutions, employers, employees' organisations (trade unions) and other stakeholders (9). Providers of higher education and research, universities are also major employers. Therefore they have the potential to act as role models in society by offering lifelong learning opportunities for their own employees – academic, administrative, technical and auxiliary staff. Universities must also be key actors in promoting coherent policy development in national systems (10).

For these commitments to become reality, governments and regional partners must take concerted actions in providing appropriate legal environments and funding. That is why the Charter provides ten more *commitments* which governments should assume in order to create suitable environments for universities to develop their contribution to lifelong learning. Here are the commitments universities expect from governments: 1. Recognising the university contribution to lifelong learning as a major benefit to individuals and society; 2. Promoting social equity and an inclusive learning society; 3. Including lifelong learning objectives in the missions and work of national QA agencies and systems; 4. Supporting the development of appropriate guidance and counselling services; 5. Recognising prior learning; 6. Removing

specific legal obstacles that prevent many potential learners from returning to higher education; 7. Ensuring autonomy and developing incentives for lifelong learning universities; 8. Encouraging partnerships at regional level with local authorities, employers and agencies; 9. Informing and encouraging citizens to take advantage of lifelong learning opportunities offered by universities; 10. Acting as role models of lifelong learning institutions.

As for the second “decatalogue”, the Charter also brings a series of arguments and essential explanations for each of the designed commitments, expected to be assumed by European governments. Accordingly, governments have the responsibility to ensure that universities are valued for their contribution to lifelong learning, which must not be understood as a minor addition to the roles of higher education institutions (1). Governments must make efforts to ensure that lifelong learning is valued by individuals, public and private employers and other actors, and that a culture of learning throughout life is seen as a common societal goal. Citizens need information on accessing lifelong learning educational opportunities, and universities need support to ensure that such opportunities are accessible to all who have the potential to benefit from higher education any time in their life (2). Attention to issues of lifelong learning in quality assurance processes is necessary to ensure that lifelong learning is recognised as a national priority (3). Professional academic guidance, careers advice are essential for all learners, but particularly for those exposed to the risk of failing to complete higher education programmes, who do not benefit of support. Such services are important for the students of all ages, from all the social and cultural environments (4). Governments have the responsibility to support and motivate institutions in recognising all forms of prior learning. This can be facilitated through the provision of appropriate incentives to institutions and by full integration of prior learning in qualifications frameworks (5). Governments must remove the systemic obstacles that discourage many potential learners from taking advantage of lifelong learning opportunities. These obstacles refer to: social security rights, precariousness of employment rights, lack of financial support for lifelong learning and loss of pension contributions during periods of study (6). Governments have the responsibility to ensure that universities have sufficient autonomy, but also sufficient incentives to be rewarded for developing this key mission. Such a framework of autonomy and incentives strongly influences the progress in developing lifelong learning provision (7). Regional partnerships with higher education institutions and social partners need to be developed, since they are vital to the successful planning and delivery of lifelong learning educational services (8). An essential aspect of the implementation of national lifelong learning strategy, governments have a special responsibility to ensure that citizens are informed on the diverse opportunities of university based lifelong learning provision (9). Like universities, governments can set standards in society by acting as role models for the policies they develop. Governments must ensure that public sector employees are encouraged to benefit from the lifelong learning opportunities offered by universities and other providers (10).

### **3. The importance of lifelong learning for the knowledge society**

A recent EUA publication, *European Universities’ Charter on Lifelong Learning* represents a major contribution to the higher education reform process in Europe. It is an essential document for the continuation of the education reform, which offers a coherent perspective on lifelong learning and draws the fundamental evolution directions of this process for the years to come. The Charter succeeds in bringing together the most important lifelong learning issues and integrating them in a systematic essential approach which, from now on, will form the basis of the European evolutions in this area.

The *lifelong learning* idea generates a change of philosophy in the concept of learning. The development of the lifelong learning notion and process determines a revolution in the idea of university and post-university education. A remark should be made in this point: the fact that learning is a permanent necessity of the human being affirms a truth well known from the ancient periods of thinking, from the Greek philosophers to the present moment. Therefore the idea is not new in itself, since it translates an

eternal truth of the human being, whose existence – according to Descartes – is defined by two fundamental attributes: doubt and thinking. New is the recovery of this idea in a system of thinking, its promotion as an essential need of the individuals and of the society, confronted with unprecedented challenges. The lifelong learning reform in Europe, having at the centre of its philosophy the human need to learn throughout the lifetime, makes an essential movement from idea to action, from a generally accepted truth to a complex process, in a coherent, open to the future conceptual and administrative context.

The lifelong learning concept brings a new perspective upon the mission of university as higher education institution, addressing, in a pyramidal hierarchy, to elites. In a period of tough competition at a world scale, in the context of a fast globalisation process, knowledge becomes a priority for all nations, since it provides the force that generates change, competitiveness and prosperity. The knowledge society is to be achieved through education and research, in modern higher education institutions able to enhance quality, excellence and performance, to respond to the economic and societal challenges. In this context, the 21<sup>st</sup> century university must change itself and become an inclusive and responsive institution able to address to a diverse student population and to actively respond to the changing needs of society. In the new condition, in the spirit of widening access to education, the inclusive and responsive university opens its educational provision to all the social categories with the potential to learn and to take benefit from learning. The two attributes of university, *inclusive* and *responsive*, enhanced in its adaptation process to the society demands, are fundamental elements for the lifelong learning achievement. The lifelong learning idea extends the university mission on three dimensions: *social*, *temporal* and *spatial*. In the first situation, university educational provision addresses to a more diversified population, to all those who haven't accessed higher education or to the persons willing to continue their education and training on an existing educational background. Secondly, the university learning provision exceeds the traditional student age and practically abolishes the temporal limits as regards its targeted population, particularly focusing on the 30 to 50 groups, but addressing to younger or older students as well. In the third case, through the prior learning recognition, through the Bologna processes and tools – mobility, ECTS, Diploma Supplement, European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, Qualifications Frameworks etc. –, the personal educational experiences, irrespective of the place where they have been achieved, are recognised and integrated in the student academic education.

Widening social access, inclusive and responsive universities, many and diverse education offers, in relation with the student population diversity, within the lifelong learning process, all these innovations must not be equated – according to some fears expressed across Europe – with lowering quality in university education. Through its very philosophy – to respond to the social and economic needs and to take part in the creation of the knowledge society – the lifelong learning process associates itself with the idea of quality in education and training in the sense of competence, competitiveness and performance. In this context, universities remain the key institutions in the lifelong learning area, which can ensure, by their mission, a substantial, flexible and pragmatic education, according to all the higher education quality standards, engaged, through the Bologna Process, in changing Europe into “the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world”.

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