

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 20

Lifelong Learning: implications for Universities

Context of the Research

In recent years Lifelong Learning has become a fundamental goal of education policies, both at a national and international level. It is often advocated as a way to achieve socio-economic development and as a tool to promote the 'information' and 'knowledge based' society.

Although often cited in policy statements Lifelong Learning is a rather nebulous and multifaceted concept, where hardly any detailed research has been conducted, especially concerning the involvement of the universities in its provision. This project has started addressing this issue by studying understanding of the concept and how it is implemented in the universities in seven European countries (France; Germany; Greece, Spain, Sweden, UK and Norway). The study sampled four universities in each of the countries.

Key Conclusions

These following conclusions were drawn: -

1. As no universal definition of Lifelong Learning exists the following was adopted and proposed: - "Those novel forms of teaching and learning that equip students (learners, individuals) to encounter with competence and confidence, the full range of working, learning and life experiences".
2. Lifelong Learning addresses three fundamental objectives of education:
 - Personal development
 - Social cohesion
 - Economic growth

These objectives are not necessarily reconcilable.

3. The term "Lifelong Learning" is often used as a synonym with adult education, permanent education and/or continuing education. In France, Germany and Spain, for instance, "permanent" or "continuing education" is used instead of Lifelong Learning. In some cases, Lifelong Learning is seen primarily as entailing distinct forms of provision for distinct groups of people. In others, it is more integrated in the totality of higher education.

4. There is a common historical pattern of provision in most countries from adult education to continuing education to Lifelong Learning. On the whole universities seem open and well disposed to Lifelong Learning but its provision on a very wide scale would entail a revolution in university education. The signs of such revolution do not anywhere in sight.
5. The take-up of Lifelong Learning policies in universities varies between countries. This is partly due to differing constitutional, policy-making and administrative traditions, and how far higher education has been incorporated into an institutional and legal framework.
6. Responsiveness to European Union policies varies between countries and depends on the extent to which national educational systems have a linear managerial relationship with universities.
7. Relationships and partnerships with economic or public service organisations already exist in most universities. These relationships improve links between university and business, and can generate funds to support training places.
8. Lifelong Learning is still seen as a marginal activity in many universities but there is an awareness for the need of its development amongst academic staff and there are embryonic or developed structures for its provision.
9. To encourage the development of Lifelong Learning, some universities have created central co-ordinating offices and vice-rector roles that include Lifelong Learning amongst their responsibilities.
10. Most Lifelong Learning is directed at employment, career opportunities and continuing professional education for both employed and unemployed. This includes updating or re-training to acquire or extend knowledge and skills or qualifications for new roles.
11. The focal point of Lifelong Learning teaching is on the learner rather than the institution and aims to help students take more responsibility for their learning. This shift from teaching to learning and from supply to demand-led provision is widely accepted in all the counties studied, but in practise most academics still control and determine the programmes and the curricula.
12. Distance learning is well established through Open Universities in the UK, Spain, France, Germany and in Greece but students can struggle with the amount of self-learning, and technology required for these courses. It can be economically viable but requires very large student groups.
13. Access is fundamental to Lifelong Learning; this includes flexible funding for courses, variable and flexible entry requirements, acceptance of life experience as a qualification, wider social inclusion and hours to suit students who are employed or unemployed.

Key Recommendations

The following recommendations are directed at various levels: -

At national level: -

1. The multiple objectives (economic, social, political, cultural, individual) and definitions of Lifelong Learning policies should be recognised and a debate on their social and educational implications and the prioritisation of costs and benefits should be encouraged.
2. Lifelong Learning “packages” must be flexible and not inhibited by existing systems, structures and regulations. Reviews are also necessary to ensure that regulations, systems and structures provide adequate incentives and guidance for the further development of Lifelong Learning.
3. Central authorities need to clarify policies and funding allocations for Lifelong learning. Minimum criteria and training needs for a commonly recognised accreditation system should also be established, along with common admissions criteria and regulations to guarantee quality. In addition, trends and Lifelong Learning interests in the socio-economic environment need identifying, and legislation for the regulation of Lifelong Learning teaching time also needs clarification.
4. Additional resources are required for Lifelong Learning but there is a need for clarification as to whether these will come from the state, employers or the students.
5. Fee income, though unlikely to solve funding problems, must be optimised without sacrificing other Lifelong Learning objectives.
6. Regulations are needed to ensure that relationships between universities and economic or public service organisations are beneficial to all involved.
7. Entry requirements and assessment procedures must be reviewed to suit the educational characteristics of different groups of students.
8. Clearer distinctions between the Lifelong Learning functions of higher education and the functions of further education are necessary to dispel uncertainty about the extent to which university specialist resources are used in the provision of training.
9. Teachers should be provided with training facilities that encourage new thinking about the curriculum. The costs and education benefits of information technology also need to be evaluated.

At institutional level: -

10. Lifelong Learning policies need to be defined within mission statements and university plans. Adequate university roles and structures (e.g. Vice-rector and inter-faculty committees) must be created to ensure these policies are implemented. When appointing staff to these roles faculty skills in Lifelong Learning should be identified.
11. Training priorities for each professional field must be identified and a framework created to apply structure and context to training activities.
12. Reward systems for those developing and operating Lifelong Learning practises need reviewing to ensure continuous developments in this field.
13. The range of courses must be adapted to suit the needs of external users of the university and company-training contracts need to be won.

At university departmental level: -

14. The mutual benefits between Lifelong Learning and conventional university programmes need further consideration.
15. A more calculative approach to time allocation between standard teaching, research, general administration and Lifelong Learning should be adopted.

At all levels: -

16. Further research is needed into a variety of areas, including legal and regulative frameworks, the curriculum, access, resources, budgets, cost, student support, partnerships and quality assurance.

Further Information

Full title of project - "Lifelong Learning: the implications for the universities in the EU" with the final report produced on 20 March 2001.

The results of the study, at national and collective comparative level, were published at:

"Lifelong Learning in European Universities: a preliminary assessment" *European Journal of Education*, vol.35, number 3, Sept 2000 pp. 253-375;

"Lifelong Learning in European Universities: Institutional Responses" *European Journal of Education* vol. 36, number 3, September 2001 pp. 249-395

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