From University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) to Lifelong Learning Universities (LLLU) BeFlex Plus Thematic Report
Executive Summary

THE STATE OF PLAY IN ULLL:

Diversity is still a strong feature of ULLL – it has not diminished in the last two years but increased as the Bologna process has opened up new possibilities in addition to existing provision. This diversity is reflected in what ULLL is called, in what it includes, in the way it is delivered, organised, managed, in the target groups and purposes, in the range and number of courses offered and the support services provided. The definition proposed in the first BeFlex Project is still valid:

ULLL is the provision by higher education institutions of learning opportunities, services and research for: the personal and professional development of a wide range of individuals - lifelong and lifewide; and the social, cultural and economic development of communities and the region.
It is at university level and research-based; it focuses primarily on the needs of the learners; and it is often developed and/or provided in collaboration with stakeholders and external actors.

However, definitions are not ends in themselves but are useful tools if they are flexible, dynamic, adapted to the changing needs of the institutions and their environments and reflect the present but also give a sense of the future direction.

Recommendation 1: Universities should:
Intensify the reflection at all levels in HEIs on what it means to become a lifelong learning organisation in practice. Each HEI is invited:
- to recognise and integrate LLL as an aspect of its institutional mission and culture;
- to elaborate its own dynamic definition of a LLLU (LifeLong Learning University);
- to develop a comprehensive and coherent strategy offering opportunities to ensure continuity in a more and more fragmented individual and professional life and an increasingly fragmented knowledge society and social environment;
- to implement its strategy in a participative, collective and cooperative way

There is not a great deal of research into ULLL and what exists is underexploited by ULLL managers and practitioners.

Recommendation 2: Universities should develop intensive and comprehensive scientific research in the field of LLL and use its results to support, feed and guide the implementation of a Lifelong Learning University

Institutional change is evident everywhere driven by demographic change, economic crisis, labour market needs and the specificities of the local and regional content. The Bologna process has also been important and its initial implementation is almost complete.

In addition, the use of the B-M-D structure has advanced, with more bachelors being developed alongside the existing masters for ULLL. However, there is still considerable potential for the Bologna reforms to be exploited for ULLL while retaining the diversity of current provision.

Recommendation 3: Universities should exploit the opportunities offered by the Bologna process (credit system, learning outcomes, recognition of prior learning and non formal and informal learning,…) to provide flexible learning paths and continuous guidance, to avoid fragmentation, to allow and encourage interdisciplinarity, to ensure continuity and progression without dead ends, and to promote widening participation, while sustaining a wide range of responses to local needs.

While it is clear that the activity of ULLL has been changing, continues to change and there is some uncertainty about future sources of funding, there is little evidence of change in the management arrangements for ULLL.   This suggests that either the management structures are very flexible or they are lagging behind the models of curriculum and delivery.

Recommendation 4: Universities should build a learner centred educational model of management for LLL integrating pedagogical, organisational and financial dimensions, and should keep it under review.

Curriculum in partnership is widespread and normal activity for universities, although it mostly takes place outside the B-M-D structure and outside the quality assurance arrangements for the 'mainstream' programmes. Such partnerships are sometimes problematic and raise questions about the balance of power between the partners over various aspects of the programme. It was also clear that many universities have no clear understanding of the number and range of partnerships that exist in the institution.

Recommendation 5: Universities should ensure that curriculum partnerships are part of the quality assurance arrangements of the university and that the diversity of learners, of the pedagogical objectives, of the modes of participation are all taken into account along with the needs of the partners.

Recognising non-formal and informal learning has been around in European policy since 1991but in the latest Communiqué from the Leuven meeting of the Bologna ministers it remains a priority for the decade to come: *'Successful policies for lifelong learning will include basic principles and procedures for recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes regardless of*

whether the knowledge, skills and competences were acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning pathways.' (para 11, p3).

It is clear that in some countries and institutions there is still considerable scepticism derived from a reluctance to accept that learning outside the academy can be equivalent to that inside; and from the idea that it is not an appropriate activity for a University. Nevertheless RPL has increased, there are many interesting examples of practice, and there is considerable support in the ULLL community for the idea of at least exploring the possibilities of RPL and developing relevant support services.

> *Recommendation 6*: Universities should develop RPL where it is not yet in place and further develop established practice, drawing on the tools, models, expertise and experience that exists; and increase the investment in services to learners: guidance and counselling, support programmes, e-learning

Regional collaboration is widespread and exists in a range of **different models**. Universities have more than one kind of partnership and more than one kind of partner: other universities, providers of professional, vocational, adult, secondary, private and public education and training; employers and social partners, NGOs, cultural organisations and local, regional and national government bodies. There exist for a range of purposes: civil, social, citizenship; cultural; economic for the labour market or for business development; equity; mobility; and political. Mostly the collaboration relates to the development of courses but it is also about other issues related to teaching and learning such as the development of teaching skills for staff, the analysis of training needs, RPL, and so on. Although the university role usually involved some aspect of leadership, other roles were also evident. Thus what emerges is a very rich and complex pattern of relationships and universities seem generally unaware of the complexity and rarely coordinate such activities. While this approach may foster creativity and innovation it may also mean a lack of synergy, lost opportunities to develop the collaboration in new ways or to spread best practice internally.

> *Recommendation 7*: Universities should improve their understanding of the various partnerships and collaborations that exist in their institutions in order to ensure synergies and maximum benefit for the learners, the stakeholders and the universities themselves

Frequently academic, administrative and support staff do not know what their colleagues are doing and a familiar complaint from businesses, especially SMEs, is that they do not know how to make contact with people who can give then advice and support their development.

> *Recommendation 8*: Universities should communicate more effectively – internally and externally – their new structures, reforms, services, policies and strategies to staff and students and to potential learners and external stakeholders

Success factors for regional collaboration fall into 4 categories:

Networking: confidence, transparency, trust, personal relationships, friendliness, flexibility, regular contacts, avoid customer/supplier type of relationship in favour of genuine partnerships, continuous dialogue, sharing good practice

Management: clear and shared goals, clear allocation of tasks and responsibilities, agreement on resources, formalised relationships where necessary, openness on competition issues, well prepared meetings and realistic workplans, well-trained staff, involve complementary strengths, knowledge and competence of each partner, ensure quality, commitment and support from senior management, staff development, flexibility, follow-up

Knowledge: of the region, the needs of the target groups, existing regional plans, analyses, actions and resources, the political environment, the experience of LLL, the expertise in specific areas of knowledge, skills and competences

Strategic position and reputation: of the university, of faculties, of individual members of staff; the capacity to respond quickly and effectively

Obstacles to regional collaboration fall into 4 categories:

Competition: between universities, between universities and other providers, insularity, lack of transparency and trust, poor mutual understanding, too many players in the market, a need to 'tear down the walls each institution has built up', different organisational cultures, lack of good networking

Lack of skills: weak collaboration skills and expertise, academics not practical enough, lack of effective communication, inability to talk in different ways to different target groups, lack of marketing skills and methods for reaching key target groups, lack of didactic competences for LLL, lack of motivation

Environment: lack of political support and resources, historical reliance on low skill economy, small size of companies and the region, excessive bureaucracy in public sector, government and EU, negative economic forecasts putting off potential students, employers reluctance to offer good work experience, lack of interest from companies, lack of understanding of the university's real competences, general economic climate, absence of well developed regional policies, cost, employers lack vision of qualifications and competences needed, universities value research much more highly, too many overlapping initiatives, disjointed regional governance, unrealistic expectations

Management: not enough effective marketing, lack of involvement of the university community in ULLL, lack of clarity/misunderstandings about roles of university and other actors, ambiguity of purpose, varying objectives, time lag between investment and return, not enough time given to academics, not enough internal support, diversity of institutional missions, long time scale for decisions, lack of resources (human, financial, time ....), research given priority, not enough focus on the learner, resistance to innovation, lack of co-ordination between overlapping initiatives, too many targets, complexity not professionally managed, lack of clear time lines, benefits not clearly understood, complicated procedures.

TOWARDS 2020

The discourse in universities and in the community of practice that is ULLL reveals a conception of ULLL as a certain kind of activity: 'lifelong learning courses', for certain kinds of people: adults, 'returners', 'second chancers', post-graduates, professionally experienced, 'seniors', for certain kinds of purposes: professional updating, transfer to new kinds of professions, management skills for musicians, and so on. All these are definitions which exist in European universities and make up a discourse which clearly indicates that LLL is not yet central to the mission of universities. While 'lifelong learners' is an improvement on previous labels which were implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, deficit models, describing individuals in terms of what they were not, it still suggests that other students in the 'mainstream' are somehow not lifelong learners, even though there is a general consensus that the knowledge acquired in bachelors and masters programmes will quickly be out of date and individuals will be obliged to return to study several times in their career in order to keep up with new developments .

While this kind of language is a convenient shorthand, it also hides and reinforces very traditional ways of thinking about universities' mission and the expression of that mission in their provision of teaching and learning. And it conveys to external stakeholders the incorrect idea that higher education has not changed or is not continuously developing for the 21st century.

So, would it not be better to describe LLL as a culture at the core of what it means to be a modern university for the 21st century? In other words would it not be better to talk of Lifelong learning Universities (LLLU) rather than University Lifelong Learning (ULLL)?

As we move to 2020, how could we characterise a LLLU?

We set out here an attempt to describe the characteristics of a LLLU and the kinds of changes that might be needed to realise this model. This is not a definitive statement or one which has been discussed and agreed but rather one which has emerged from our work and which might provide a fruitful agenda to stimulate that debate.

THE KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF A LLU

- Learning is shared, the distinction between teaching and learning is more blurred, students and staff learn together, from each other, from people and activities outside the university as well as inside it, universities are learning organisations
- Universities are open systems: accessible, supported, flexible, permeable at the boundaries, operating with a range of different rhythms
- Learning is valued wherever and whenever it takes place – it includes the recognition of prior, non-formal and informal learning – for entry, for part of a diploma, maybe for a whole diploma, the curriculum takes account of prior/other learning
- Assessment is varied (not just unseen and individualised examinations), a range of assessment methodologies are used for different skills, knowledge and competences
- Learning is lifelong and lifewide
- Learning is enjoyable and a rewarding experience

HOW DO WE MOVE FROM ULL TO LLLU?

Universities need leadership and need the idea of a LLLU at the heart of their mission with strategies and policies to make it a reality. These must include the involvement of stakeholders: regional authorities, employers, trade unions, professional associations and learners, and a language of communication between these 'worlds'. The language of 'learning outcomes' as a way of describing the curriculum is a useful starting point for this communication. Staff development is becoming recognised as more important but a career structure for academic staff with rewards and incentives for them to engage in LLL is not at present on the agenda. However, in recent years universities have become more autonomous and do have more control over their own management systems within a national framework of quality and accountability so there is now considerable space for them to set up organisational arrangements to promote a LLLU. The recent Charter for LLL in Universities also offers recommendations to governments as well as universities to promote such developments (EUA, 2008).

Let the debate go on.

About BeFlex Plus

The first BeFlex project produced important results that were eagerly awaited and well received, generating a lot of interest and debate as previously little was known about what is going on in University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) and how the Bologna reforms have affected development. The full reports of that project and an executive summary are available on the website: www.eucen.org/BeFlex/index.html

BeFlex Plus was a follow-up project which **aims** to:

- Update our knowledge about how ULLL is developing in Europe
- Promote the development of policy and practice in ULLL and the use of the Bologna tools
- Support universities in the development and implementation of regional strategies for ULLL

Activities:

- 150 questionnaires – 100 from universities involved in the first survey and 50 new ones
- 40 case studies – 30 follow-ups of experimental actions and 10 new ones
- 15 visits to universities with interesting examples of ULLL and regional involvement
- 5 regional seminars/workshops
- 4 training events
- A conference in Leuven/Louvain (Belgium), 26-29 March 2009: http://www.uclouvain.be/242847.html
- Training materials for staff development
- Papers and recommendations to inform the Bologna ministerial meeting in May 2009

Interim results and draft recommendations were presented to the EUCEN members and participants at the EUCEN conference in Leuven in March 2009, amendments were proposed and a further process of consultation took place in the training events, visits and seminars following that conference.

A number of reports have been published:

- The full version of the Thematic report of which this is a summary, draws on the data collected - questionnaires, case studies, visit reports - and on the feedback received during the various consultation processes and training events.
- In addition, there is a Technical Report which comprises an analysis of the three different data sources: the questionnaire, the case studies and the visits.
- A Training Pack based on these themes is also available, targeted at practitioners and managers concerned with developing their universities as Lifelong Learning Universities. The pack contains materials drawn from the questionnaire survey, the case studies and other project activities; it follows the themes of this report and is designed to be used as a basis for short staff development sessions or combined into longer programmes.

More information about the project, the full **thematic report ,** the **technical report** and the **training materials** are all available on the website:

http://www.eucen.org/BeFlexPlus/index.html

The project was managed by EUCEN; the project director was Pat Davies.

The partners were:

- Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve (BE)
- University of Oldenburg (DE)
- University of Deusto (ES)
- University of Helsinki (FI)
- University of Science and Technology, Lille 1 (FR)
- Kaunas Technical University (LT)
- Hogeschool van Amsterdam (NL)
- University of Aveiro (PT)
- Lund University (SE)
- London Metropolitan University (UK)

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