



BeFlex – Benchmarking Flexibility in the Bologna Reforms - was funded by the Socrates programme for Europe-wide participation projects contributing to the realisation of the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Process).

The project set out to map and build a picture of the state of play at present in university lifelong learning (ULLL), to explore the impact of Bologna on ULLL and the extent to which the potential flexibility of the bachelors-masters-doctorate (BMD) structure was being exploited for ULLL. The study was also designed to provide a baseline for monitoring future developments and to provide recommendations for action– this represents part one of the report.

In addition, we have considered the trends which indicate the future direction of ULLL within the Bologna process and wider global influences and provide a commentary on these trends – this represents part two of the report.

Both parts are summarised here. The full thematic report and the 3 supporting technical reports can be downloaded from the website:

www.eucen.org/BeFlex/Index.html

Part 1 – The state of play

Lifelong learning policy in universities

In our questionnaire survey, 56% of our respondents said they had a LLL policy or strategy and a further 23% said that one was in preparation. However, only 15% reported that LLL had a high priority (a figure very similar to that found in the Trends survey), with 10% saying that it was unlikely to become one, and 46% saying it was important but along with other priorities. Nevertheless 30% said that it was not yet a high priority but may become one. Thus it is clear that ULLL policy development remains patchy and the examples of best practice are in the minority; they are interesting almost because of their relative rarity.

ULLL policy largely tends to focus on local and regional needs and is an important part of universities' support for social, cultural and economic development in the region. Collaboration with regional actors is invariably a key element of this aspect of policy. However, as yet there is little evidence that the Bologna tools are being actively exploited to promote these relationships and to implement the institutional policies. ULLL policy tends to be a reflection of current practice and what is possible in the short term rather than part of a vision of a LLL university or of ULLL as a central plank of the university's mission for the future.

Despite staff development provision in most universities it is clear that there remains a huge unmet need for staff development for academics and administrative personnel

on LLL related themes if policy is to be effectively developed and implemented.

Recommendations

1. *More work should be done at all levels to promote the development of ULLL policy and practice in all universities in Europe. This work should be supported by the European Commission and the European networks as well as the competent national agencies, networks and stakeholders.*
2. *More attention should be given in the Bologna process to the place of ULLL in the mission of universities and to the use of the Bologna tools in promoting ULLL and facilitating regional development.*
3. *Universities should clearly recognise the potential of LLL to be a major source of continuous, internal and external innovation, within their mission, policy and strategy.*
4. *Universities should pay more attention to the staff development needs of the whole institution particularly in the areas of learning outcomes and the recognition of prior learning, and make more use of the expertise that exists among ULLL staff in their own and other institutions.*
5. *Examples of good practice and interesting cases of ULLL policy development and implementation should be disseminated and shared at national and European level*

Diversity: a definition and indicators

ULLL is a field of enormous complexity and diversity – this is its great strength but makes international measurement difficult. What counts as ULLL varies between universities in the same country, between countries and sometimes between faculties in the same institution. The management and organisation similarly varies with different structures and arrangements. The provision of services to support learners following different and flexible paths into and through the institution is extremely patchy and variously organised. In order to measure future progress a definition is required that reflects this diversity in the present situation. We propose the following:

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.

This definition is designed to generate a bank of indicators to be used selectively in order to capture the diversity and to serve the range of purposes for measurement.

Recommendations

6. *A definition of the present characteristics of ULLL should be adopted, which is inclusive and encompasses diversity – the EUCEN definition is proposed*
7. *The various stakeholders in ULLL should collaborate to develop a bank of indicators that are transparent and can be used flexibly and selectively, combining qualitative and quantitative indicators differently for different purposes at different levels: European, national, institutional, individual.*
8. *Indicators for ULLL should be linked to appropriate professional standards, take account of the interests of stakeholders and of existing work at national and European level for higher education and other forms of LLL. They should also reflect the needs of learners.*

Flexibility in courses

The traditional 'short course' provision of ULLL remains largely unaffected by the Bologna reforms and there is at present very little evidence of a perceived need for the use of ECTS in ULLL short courses.

The incentives and barriers to the further integration of ULLL into the BMD structure are not yet clear and the structure is not yet being used to any great extent for bachelors programmes targeted at adults and working professionals. It has however, been exploited for the development of new masters programmes aimed at new target groups, particularly addressing professional practice and the needs of the labour market but there is considerable disquiet and uncertainty about the value of a masters course in the new diverse landscape of masters provision.

Recommendations:

9. *Policy makers at institutional, national and European level should promote further discussion and debate about the use of the Bologna tools to promote flexibility in ULLL; these debates should involve the learners and external stakeholders - employers, social partners, professional bodies and regional authorities.*
10. *EUCEN should carry out further work at European level on:*
 - *Exploring the facilitating factors and the obstacles to the development of flexibility in new BMD programmes for ULLL*
 - *Disseminating examples of best practice and innovative approaches to credit rating and accreditation of ULLL, exploiting the ECTS tools of Bologna*

- *Generating more discussion about the idea of individualised learning pathways*
- *Developing strategies to ensure the transparency and value of all masters diplomas.*

Flexibility in services for learners

It is clear that most universities offer a range of services for learners and that ULLL departments often play a leading role in providing them, especially in special support courses and in ODL/e-learning. Perhaps not surprisingly, mentoring and tutoring during a course is mostly provided by the faculties. While most services are already in place in some way or planned in the future, it is interesting that the two services least likely to be developed are RPL for entry and RPL for part of a diploma – precisely the services that the Bologna communiqués have mentioned most frequently. It is also evident that although most institutions offer advice and guidance and professional career guidance in some form it does not seem to be a priority and there is no clear pattern in the provision.

Recommendations:

11. *The Bologna Follow-Up Group should make the development of services for learners, especially RPL and advice and guidance, a more significant part of the workplan for the next period of the Bologna process*
12. *EUCEN should promote and support further work on arrangements to promote flexibility in programmes and services of learners, especially advice, guidance and counselling and RPL services, including:*
 - *collaborating with Bologna promoters to amend the Diploma Supplement to focus on learning outcomes rather than content of programmes*
 - *training opportunities for policy makers, managers and practitioners*
 - *consolidation of the networks of experts and activists across all sectors and stakeholders, so that these can be continued and exploited for further development*
 - *an observatory where the vast range of documentation that is already available – articles, books, tools, project reports, quality arrangements, surveys and analyses – can be made accessible to a wider audience*

Separation-integration

Separation-integration is an overarching theme in the results of the project. It relates to the management of ULL and the relationship with stakeholders and regional collaboration: these may be integrated into the faculty structure, organised separately within the university by a central unit or separately by some external foundation or company owned by the university. There are also examples of various hybrid versions of these strategies.

It also relates to models of pedagogy and services for learners:

- the traditional, 'separatist' model for university teaching with young people, on academic (state) diploma programmes (now BMD) in full-time, day-time, uninterrupted years of study, and with adults in special courses, non-accredited, university diplomas, evenings or weekends, and part time.

- a 'strong integration' or 'full integration' model with more professional as well as academic orientation in all or most programmes, mixed groups of young people and adults in the same programmes taught together, the possibility for all learners to study selected units/credits and parts of a diploma, intermediate awards (certificates etc) available for all learners; delivery and pedagogy are integrated: blended learning for all, flexible timing for all.

- a 'weak integration' or 'partly integrated' model with separate diplomas for different age groups and different professional groups, customised programmes for special (small) groups, new special masters (many are emerging), new special bachelors (only a few at present), the credit-rating of short courses; all pedagogy tends to more active and professionally oriented but traditional teaching methods are still more prevalent in 'mainstream' courses for young people; the BMD structure is used but the delivery is separate.

- a hybrid model where there is 'strong' and 'weak' integration in different faculties, disciplines or institutes.

What is 'best practice' is a complex question with no easy or definitive answer: all have their strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages and much depends on local circumstances and culture. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is a tendency to move away from the traditional model with many universities at present operating a 'weak integration' model.

Recommendations:

13. EUCEN and the national networks for ULLL should:

- *monitor the development of different models of management and organisation and their impact on the overall provision of ULLL and the participation and experience of learners*
- *lead the debates around the strengths and weaknesses of different models of pedagogy and the delivery of services*
- *disseminate best practice in the management and organisation of ULLL.*

Part 2 - Future directions

What is ULLL at present in European universities?

There are 4 broad approaches to LLL in universities at present:

- **a holistic approach** in which all aspects of university teaching and learning are seen through the filter of lifelong learning with a different pathways for personal, social, academic and professional development;
- **a labour market approach** in which ULLL is largely a response to the needs of the economy and labour market in general and more particularly to the professional life of individuals;
- **a social inclusion approach** which focuses largely on widening participation and opening up university study to new target groups and 'non-traditional' learners;
- and finally those universities where LLL remains a **slogan** without a great deal of substance.

At present, it seems that in most institutions the labour market approach is dominant; second is the social inclusion approach; and thirdly (and still very rarely) is the holistic approach. Unfortunately, the 'slogan approach' is also evident rather more than we would wish.

There is currently a strong concern at institutional, national and European level with 'international excellence', particularly research excellence which is tending to detract from other missions. We do not believe that international research excellence is incompatible with the idea of a lifelong learning university (LLLU) or with a strong regional role for institutions. Indeed technology transfer and knowledge transfer are important elements of research excellence and can operate at regional, national and international levels; and strong LLL universities can be attractive to learners internationally as well as regionally. Thinking globally does not preclude acting locally and indeed the two can reinforce each other. However, at present this does not seem to be a widespread view even though these broad classifications mask an enormous diversity of policy and practice.

Despite this, the current situation is undoubtedly transitional and there is evidence of an important, if still embryonic shift to a holistic approach: from university lifelong learning -ULLL- to lifelong learning universities -LLLU. EUCEN supports this shift in general, while recognising that it constitutes a major long term development which is not without its problems and which merits considerable debate over the coming years.

Lifelong learning universities – LLLU

We propose a model here for discussion. Lifelong Learning Universities would:

- have the social and regional mission of the university at the heart of its policy and strategy as part of an aspiration to international excellence
- embed the idea of lifelong and lifewide learning in its provision for all learners whatever their age or experience

- embed learning and the needs of learners as an organising principle for all its provision
- offer flexible and permeable programmes of study at all levels in the BMD structure so that learners can enter at different points with different backgrounds, experience and qualifications and achieve whole or parts of the diploma according to their needs and aspirations
- offer flexible timing in the delivery of diplomas within the BMD structure in order to maximise access for those active in the labour market or with other constraints on their time
- have arrangements for blended learning for all learners but especially for those in rural areas or with other constraints on attendance
- use learning outcomes as a basis for the development of all programmes of study
- offer responsive and innovative short courses that can be accessed by learners who can demonstrate a capacity to benefit
- make the award of credits for short courses available to learners who want or need them
- provide robust and proactive services for learners to promote and support their access to and success in the wide range of learning opportunities offered and to ensure that their needs are met effectively; in particular advice and guidance and RPL
- ensure innovative and creative approaches to the development of new courses and services, including links to research and technology transfer
- have dynamic management structures that both lead and respond to new opportunities and possibilities for mobilising the resources and expertise of the university for lifelong learning
- have a vibrant programme of staff development for academic and administrative personnel to enable them to face and embrace the challenges of a LLLU

We see these features as the elements of the aim and the basis of a workplan for the next two years up to 2010, and beyond, to move from university lifelong learning -ULLL- to lifelong learning universities -LLLU.

About the project

The project was coordinated by EUCEN with the universities of Louvain-la-Neuve (BE), Lille 1 (FR), Helsinki (FI), Oldenburg (DE), Limerick (IE), Aveiro (PT), and Lund (SE).

The project team collected 150 questionnaire responses, 52 case studies and conducted 20 site visits. Three consultation events were held in Poland, France and Slovenia and national dissemination seminars held in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, and Sweden. Presentations have been made at international conferences in Trondheim (Norway), Krems (Austria) and Hanover (Germany). Feedback from these events has been reflected in the final reports.

A thematic report which elaborates this executive summary, and three technical reports have been produced. All working papers, reports and presentations can be found on the website: <http://www.eucen.org/BeFlex/Index.html>

The study provides a base-line for monitoring future developments and EUCEN has been successful in obtaining a follow-up study -BeFlex Plus- to do just that for the Leuven meeting of the Bologna Follow-Up Group in 2009.

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Pat Davies (EUCEN), on behalf of the project partnership.

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