



From University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) to Lifelong Learning Universities (LLLU)

BeFlex Plus: Progress on Flexibility in the Bologna Reform

Thematic Report

Pat Davies, on behalf of the project partnership



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Thematic report and recommendations to policy makers and managers
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1. Introduction and background

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 is 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

The project was managed by EUCEN; the project director was Pat Davies. The partners were: the Universities of Louvain-la-Neuve (BE), Oldenburg (DE), Deusto (ES), Helsinki (FI), Lille 1 (FR), Aveiro (PT), Lund (SE), Kaunas Technical University (LT), the London Metropolitan University (UK) and the Hogeschool van Amsterdam (NL).

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. The thematic reports draws on the data collected (questionnaires, case studies, visit reports) and on the feedback received during the various consultation processes and training events.

A short version of this thematic report is also available as an **Executive Summary**.

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, this report, the **executive summary**, the **technical report** and the **training materials** are all available on the website:

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

2. The State of Play

2.1 Diversity

The BeFlex reports pointed out this feature of the field of ULLL and the BeFlex Plus questionnaire surveys, the case studies, the visits, the consultations and discussions, and the experience of the European higher education community for ULLL, all confirm the diversity of this field. The diversity has not diminished but rather the reverse it has increased since our first survey. As the Bologna process has become more embedded more possibilities have opened up, while previous forms of activity have continued.

The diversity is apparent in all aspects.

- What ULLL is called varies between countries: in many countries (e.g. Austria, France, Portugal) it is 'continuing education', in others (e.g. Finland) it is 'adult education', in some (e.g. Spain) it is 'postgraduate studies', only in a few (e.g. UK) is it sometimes called 'lifelong learning'.
- What it includes varies between countries and between universities in the same country. In some countries/universities, it includes bachelors and masters for special target groups or with a professional orientation; in other countries these are not differentiated – a bachelors or a masters programme is a bachelors or a masters programme and no distinction is made between them (see Q12 Technical Report p10)
- The way it is delivered varies between universities in the same country and between countries: distance, on-line, blended, dispersed, customised, professionalised, re-timetabled and so on (see Q14 Technical Report p12)
- The services provided vary, in particular advice and guidance, and recognition of prior learning (RPL) (see Q13 Technical Report p11)
- The way it is organised and managed varies between faculties of the same university, between universities, and between countries (see Q18 Technical Report p16)
- Universities usually have more than one purpose in offering LLL and the purposes vary between institutions: 'responding to the employment needs of the labour market', 'stimulating personal development by providing personal development programmes for post graduates', 'encouraging participation of non-traditional learners, attracting new groups into the university', 'meeting the needs of citizens in all aspects of life' (see Q7, Technical Report p6)
- The target groups are diverse: individual learners, organisations of all kinds – public, private, not-for-profit, professional, cultural and so on, specific groups of learners – unemployed, women, migrants and so on (see Q8 Technical Report p7)
- In the range and number of courses offered as LLL (see Q15 Technical Report p13)

This diversity illustrates the great strength of ULLL for the learners and for other stakeholders: it is flexible in its forms of delivery, adaptable in its content, can be completely designed for the needs of a specific target group with specific needs, can vary according to local, regional or

national needs, can be integrated or not into the 'mainstream curriculum', may be part of a formal diploma or accumulated into a formal diploma, may carry formal credit or not. Within parameters set by the institution and/or the national authority, the possibilities are endless.

This diversity might also be a weakness from the point of view of official agencies or at the political level: how can such diversity be counted and measured on a national or European level? If it cannot be counted or measured easily, how can its impact be demonstrated? how can it be 'valued'? how can it be made accountable? how can its quality be assured? If it is for everyone, everywhere, anywhere, does it disappear in a mist? If it is 'all things to all men', how can it have a clear voice and how can that voice make itself heard? The answers to these questions are not always as obvious as for other forms of higher education.

So do we need a definition? If so what should it be?

The European Commission offers a definition of LLL:

All learning activity undertaken throughout life, which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills, competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons
(Cedefop, 2008, p123).

Based on the work of the BeFlex project, EUCEN proposed a definition of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), designed to be inclusive but also to encompass a number of characteristic that could be translated into indicators and thus used to measure ULLL:

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.
(Davies, 2007)

Some countries do not totally agree with all points of this definition, for example in the UK LLL often includes outreach work and special programmes which are below 'university level' in its strictest sense; and for example in Spain it always means postgraduate studies. However, we do not propose that all universities in all countries should strictly follow this definition but that it is sufficiently recognisable that all universities can relate to it and see themselves in most of it so that it can have some leverage in policy circles. We also suggest this definition since each element can be converted into an indicator of ULLL, an idea that we have developed in other projects. See for example in the Equipe Plus project:

<http://www.cfp.upv.es/webs/equipeplus/index/indicators.jsp?local=ind>

Rather than having a very precise definition, the project work shows the importance to the institution of having its own working definition that staff understand and share ownership. Although this is in place in many institutions it is far from being true everywhere for all institutions. Certainly our work shows that even if there is a university statement of policy or intent or mission, staff are not necessarily aware of it; and many institutions have not yet implemented their intentions or their vision of ULLL. In addition, ULLL is usually operating at the interface between the internal world of the university and the external environment of the economy, the labour market, the social and cultural life of the city or region. The essential point is that definitions are not an end in themselves but are useful tools, not fixed in stone but flexible and dynamic, and adapted to the changing context, policy and practice of the university. One that is fixed for the long term is probably not the best approach in such a fast changing and turbulent environment. Rather universities should develop their own definition of ULLL and most importantly should keep it under review so that it remains relevant .

Over the last few years since the original BeFlex survey, it is clear that there has been an increase in the number of higher education institutions that either have a policy or are in the process of preparing one (see Q5 and Q6 Technical report p5) – now an overwhelming majority, and in those saying that it is important along with other priorities. There has similarly been a decrease in the proportion of respondents saying that LLL was not a priority. It therefore seems that overall LLL is moving up the agenda in institutions and becoming more central to their mission, even if there is still some way to go and room for further development of comprehensive and coherent policies. In particular, universities need to examine and develop LLL as an aspect of organisational culture for all staff and students rather than a set of activities which, although slowly moving to the centre, remain focused on special target groups in special circumstances and relatively marginal in most universities.

As part of the project process, the partners presented interim results and draft recommendations to the EUCEN conference in Leuven in March 2009. The consultation which took place there and in other fora of the project further expressed concern that definitions should be flexible and dynamic and not suggest that uniformity is desirable. There was also considerable support for the idea of a major shift in the role of LLL in the policy and strategy of universities but also in the way those are implemented and translated into practice. This support grew as the debates and discussions progressed during the project into a clearer distinction between **University Lifelong Learning (ULLL)** and **Lifelong Learning Universities (LLLU)**. The former implies that LLL is an activity which may be more or less important; the latter implies that LLL is an integral part and one of the organising principles of the mission of the University, that is is embedded in the culture of the organisations and strategically very important. We will return to this point in the final section of this report.

Thus the recommendation that emerged brought together all these aspects:

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 recognize 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.**

Since research is essential to what it means to be a university there was considerable support for the idea that universities should develop research in LLL. This varies between countries – some arguing that such research should be developed; some arguing that there is considerable research undertaken but that its results are not taken on board by the institutions.

Thus the recommendation that emerged was:

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.

2.2 Institutional change

There are a number of wider societal changes which clearly impact on universities in general as well as ULLL in particular: demographic change, economic crisis and labour market change are extremely important; and for ULLL the specifics of the local and regional context are particularly relevant.

A number of contextual factors influence the way other changes impact on particular institutions in particular countries:

- The national policy context: differences in the control that is exercised by the Ministry of (Higher) Education over institutional change in general and the space that is available for local differences in ULLL; central or federal systems; the structure of the HE systems; the existence, role and strength of other providers (e.g. vocational training system, adult education)

- A national policy of merging institutions that has been underway in some countries (notably MT, IS and DK)
- The local or regional labour market and economic profile
- The profile of university (comprehensive, certain disciplines only, traditional roles and specialisms)

The Bologna process is also a driver for change but not necessarily the most important one and its impact on ULLL varies. For example, the University of Tarragona, ES, reported that the Bologna process had not had a significant impact on ULLL, but the University of Limerick in IE reported that it had been an important influence. In addition, the questionnaire data indicated that the Bologna reforms are predicted to have a lesser impact in the next 2 years than in the past 2 years; this is perhaps not surprising since the Bologna process has been on-going for some years now but it does indicate that it is nearing the end of the process of initial implementation and perhaps too its impact on LLL. In addition 71% of the respondents to the questionnaire reported that ULLL was becoming more integrated with initial higher education (see Q17 Technical Report p15).

There has been considerable change in the past 2 years and predicted in the next 2 years in terms of goals, curriculum, and target groups for ULLL – almost 60% of respondents to the questionnaire reported changes (see Q16 Technical Report p14) in these aspects of ULLL provision.

The case studies also illustrate some interesting trends: an increased interest in developing courses for seniors, for example in AT, CZ and PL; a continuation of the development of learning tools especially e-learning, for example in BIH, CZ, DE; and their replication in other disciplines this spreading the use, for example in FR.

However, there was still a strong push to complete the implementation of the Bologna process, further exploit the B-M-D structure for 'ULLL', and further integrate ULLL while sustaining the short courses and special courses that can address specific needs and provide a 'rapid response'.

The final recommendation that emerged was:

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.

Changes in the funding of ULLL were reported by only 40% of the questionnaire respondents and mostly these related to a reduction of funding support from within the university, and an increase of individual fees or charges to companies. The responses relating to government were somewhat ambiguous – some reporting that the funding was decreasing, some that it was increasing and some simply that the targets were changing (see Q22 Technical Report p21). However there is a general sense of uncertainty about the impact of financial crisis on funding, particularly funding for adult learners and the ‘LLL programme’. In general there was a consensus that universities should carefully monitor the sources of funding for the LLL programmes, seek new sources and a new balance between different sources of funding.

Organisational structures for the management of various aspects of ULLL are complex (see Q18 Technical Report p16-17) and there also seem to be some changes underway. Interestingly the changes seem to be moving in opposite directions: some institutions are centralising, some are decentralising and some are reinforcing a hybrid model of both central and decentralised functions (see Q19 Technical Report p17-18). In addition, several universities said that they were reviewing or considering changes, as yet undefined. However, overall there was not a great deal of change reported in the management structures for ULLL despite the changes in curriculum, target groups and goals (see below). This suggests either that management structures are very flexible and can cope with change or that we need to review the way in which ULLL is management and organised especially if it is to move to the heart of the mission of the university so that it becomes a LLLU rather than being an activity (or even a group of activities) called ULLL. In any event such review could not be a one-off exercise rather it is clear that universities need to keep under regular review the way in which ULLL is managed and organised to reflect the trends in the way in which it is delivered; the management structure should support the educational model rather than the other way around.

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

2.3 Curriculum in partnership

All universities collaborate in some way on some courses. It is clear from all our data collection exercises in BeFlex Plus – the questionnaire responses, the case studies, the training events and consultation conference – that this is a ‘normal activity’ for some part of most universities in Europe.

The case studies (see Technical report) demonstrate many different examples: partnerships with other universities, with other educational providers such as vocational training and adult education institutions, with employers, with professional associations, with cultural institutions.

Most partnerships focus on the development of professional/vocational/transversal/transferable skills and competences for specific groups, either professional groups (e.g. teachers, dentists, doctors, managers, musicians,) or social groups (e.g. immigrants, women, ethnic minorities

Most such partnerships seem to be for courses outside the B-M-D structure: some are 'masters' but not 'state/national masters' and therefore do not have the same value in terms of progression (although they may have a great deal more value in the labour market); they do not appear to use the language of learning outcomes; and only a minority give credits or 'points' and even here it is not clear that these are always 'real' ECTS points

Of the partnerships reported in the questionnaire and particularly in the case studies, very few (some notable exceptions) refer to the management arrangements for such partnerships; most seem to be dealt with at faculty or department level and to be outside the mainstream quality assurance arrangements, although some are the subject of external quality systems such as ISO. There was very little reference to any central coordination or monitoring of such arrangements.

Such partnerships raise a number of management issues, for example:

- What are the limits of the partnership: who has the ultimate say over the content or the learning outcomes? How are differences between the university and the partner managed?
- How long do these partnerships last? Are they short or fixed term or is there an expectation that they will continue? Do they mutate and develop?
- Where are the internal and external accountability, quality assurance and evaluations of impact?

Although it featured strongly in some of the visits, the issue of the management and quality assurance of curriculum partnerships was not a central topic in the work of this project but it seems clear that many institutions have no clear overall view of such arrangements and there was a strong sense in our consultation processes that universities should take steps to improve their understanding of the various partnerships that exist in their institutions.

In general there is also scope for further survey work at national and European level with in-depth institutional studies to understand the practices, the management issues raised by these partnerships, and the ways of dealing with these.

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.

2.4 Recognising non-formal and informal learning

The idea of giving credit in higher education for learning that takes place outside the university was first raised by the European Commission in the Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community as long ago as 1991:

'The mainstreaming of continuing education raises a number of essential academic issues which must be resolved. Foremost among these is the question of access and the basis on which continuing education students and mature students generally are admitted to higher education courses. The positive policies which are to be observed in some institutions and which give credit for maturity and for knowledge and experience gained in the labour market would need to be adopted on a wider scale, as would the provision of preparatory courses which supply the basic preparation relevant to embarking on a particular course of higher education.' (p24)

The Task Force on Human Resources, Education, Training, Youth, 1991

Since then the topic has appeared regularly in a wide range of policy documents from the European Commission (DGEAC) focusing on vocational training, higher education and lifelong learning. It has also appeared regularly – sometimes more strongly than others - in the biennial Communiqués from the meetings of the Bologna group of ministers. The most recent Communiqué from the Leuven meeting in April 2009 stated:

'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)

Interestingly this document was entitled: The Bologna Process 2020 – The European Higher Education Area in the new decade - Communiqué of the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven-Louvain la Neuve – 28-29 April 2009; and the quotation above appeared in section II – Learning for the future: higher education priorities for the decade to come.

So 18 years after the first reference by the EC, the recognition of prior learning by higher education is a priority for the next decade.

The evidence from this BeFlex Plus project shows that for most countries (with a few notable exceptions in particular France, Netherlands and the UK), the recognition of prior learning (RPL) especially non-formal and informal learning, does indeed remain an aspiration rather than a reality. Although there are clearly examples of good practice and in some countries experimentation is going on, in general there is still a lot of work to be done to implement such arrangements. In the questionnaire survey: 17% said there was no RPL for access to a course of study and 40% said there was RPL for 'some' courses; more than 28% said there was no RPL for part of a diploma and an additional 38.5% said RPL for part of a diploma was only available

in some courses (Q13 Technical report, p11). In another question about the organisation of ULLL, more than 18% reported that RPL was not offered (Q18 Technical report, p16). And we were astounded to see one response in the questionnaire: 'what is this?'

Nevertheless, there are some interesting case studies – notably from NL (see Technical report and BeFlex Plus website) - where RPL has been used to develop skills and competences of people already in the labour market, to upgrade their skills, to give them the opportunity to access further qualifications and generally to give benefit to the learners, the employers and the universities. Such cases are not without problems and the openness about that in the case studies has generated very lively debate and a great deal of interest in workshops, conferences and training sessions in the project. However, while some individual academics are often keen to develop RPL, there remains considerable scepticism among others and at institutional level. The scepticism has two main sources: the reluctance to accept that learning outside the academy can be equivalent to learning inside the academy; and a view that while it may be interesting for other institutions it is not an appropriate activity for a University. Although often couched in terms of an absence of tools, the cost, the lack of experience or expertise, or the lack of time to develop RPL, all of which have some reality in any department or faculty, such tools, expertise and cost effective models can easily be found. Thus it is clear that underneath the reluctance are deeper concerns which militate against the development of RPL unless there is strong leadership on the issue.

Nevertheless in the ULLL community of practice there is considerable support for RPL in some contexts and some situations; and at least an interest in exploring the possibilities and developing the services to support it.

It is clear that as experience of RPL has grown, so too has the importance of advice and guidance for the candidates at application through to the implementation of the decision of the institution and beyond. Our data indicates that universities are taking this on board: 53% of respondents reported that advice and guidance is available for all ULLL students; 19% reported that it was available for most; and 25% for some (Q13 Technical report, p11). The questionnaire did not probe in detail the kind of advice and guidance that was available or what 'available' might mean but it is clear that for RPL the kind of advice and support required at the various stages of the process differ and require different skills and competences from the staff involved who typically have had no specific training for these tasks. Staff development is an issue that emerged in this context, as in others, and we will return to this question.

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

2.5 Regional collaboration – models of practice

First it is important to point out that in the context of ULLL, 'region' is not a fixed geographical or administrative concept. For some purposes the administrative/political region is important – this is particularly the case for the funding of specific kinds of training or for specific target groups since the regional government often has legal competence over vocational/professional training, training related to changes in the labour market, or the distribution of funding from central government or European sources or both. However, in this project we used the term loosely so that those involved - partners, questionnaire respondents, case study providers, individuals and institutions involved in visits, consultation and training sessions – could explain the kind of partnerships and collaboration that they had 'locally' without constraints which might have excluded examples of innovative, best practice or interesting experimentation. The focus was on the purposes, activities, outcomes and impact rather than on a strict definition of a region. We use the term 'region' in the same loose sense in this text.

What was most striking in the data collected was that 92% of respondents reported more than one set/sort of partners and when asked to identify them, the responses are rather aptly summarised by two respondents: one said 'too many to mention'; one said that each programme has its own external collaboration for development'. More generally, they included: employers, enterprises, city and regional authorities, national government ministries, other training providers (schools, tertiary, vocational, adult, private, and public), other universities, social partners and trade unions, NGOs, community groups, Chambers of Commerce, social entrepreneurs, hospitals, employment agencies.

This is one of the key dimensions in the analysis of regional collaboration: the institutions involved in the collaboration. In the project we identified a number of different partners for the universities' collaboration:

- Other universities and/or universities of applied sciences
- Other educational providers: vocational training or adult education institutions, schools, private training organisations
- Professional associations
- NGOs, voluntary organisations, community groups
- Cultural institutions: museums, theatres, art galleries
- Employers – from large multi-nationals to SMEs and social entrepreneurs
- Groups of companies, through sectoral groups or chambers of commerce
- Local authorities, ministries, national government departments
- Regional groupings including several (or even many) partners across a range of different actors and stakeholders

The second key dimension in the analysis of regional collaboration is the purpose:

- Civil, social, citizenship
- Cultural

- Economic – labour market
- Economic – business development/entrepreneurship
- Equity
- Mobility
- Political

The grid using these two dimension was used both as a frame of analysis and a way of identifying case studies that illustrated the particular kind of collaboration; and it was useful in doing this – most examples fitted into one of the cells of the grid; and the two dimensions are the key aspects of the models as they shape the activity and the desired outcomes.

The picture that emerged from our data however, demonstrated very clearly that universities are involved in a range of different relationships and partnerships with different actors and stakeholders for different purposes so that this grid is applicable within an institution as well as across a region or country.

It should also be noted that the purpose of the collaboration and the objectives of the university are not necessarily identical. In our data, it was clear that from the universities' perspective the main objectives of the regional collaboration were related to their own mission to develop and deliver teaching and learning – the most important being to broaden the potential market for course and services developed. However, the second most important was rather more reciprocal: the participation in regional economic development, which obviously involves both costs and benefits for both the university and the regional economy.

Thus it is clear that collaboration is about developing ULLL courses (see also above the section on curriculum in partnership) but it is also about other issues related to teaching and learning. Respondents to the questionnaire (see Q25 Technical report, p22) and the case studies also cited:

- the analysis/forecasting of training needs
- the delivery of courses and programmes
- the organisation of work placements for learners,
- RPL
- the development of the teaching skills of staff
- the identification of target groups
- marketing, promotion, dissemination of information about courses and services
- evaluation of courses and services

And on each of these issues universities collaborated with a range of partners: employers, social partners, regional authorities and other training providers. Employers were reported to be the most frequent partners in all activities (apart from those related to teachers); regional authorities and social partners were also very important; and although there were fewer partnerships with other training providers, even here between 14% and 53% of respondents reported such partnerships.

This picture is consistent with the fact that much of ULLL is professionally oriented and clearly employers and social partners (particularly the relevant sectoral associations) are key players; also in many countries regional authorities have the responsibility for professional/vocational training.

Not surprisingly therefore the role of the university varied too but most frequently involved some kind of leadership or ownership of the process: leader, coordinator, proposer, owner, initiator, 'making things happen', and so on (Q30 Technical report, p25).

What emerged therefore is a very complex pattern of partnerships and collaboration and what was clear from the visits was that there was very little (if any) coordination or even awareness of the totality and complexity of these activities inside the institutions.

The issue therefore is: should universities have more central management or coordination of all these relationships and partnerships? If the partnership is formal and based on some form of contract then the office that looks after contracts has a list of such partnerships, but this is not the same as an overview of the activities. Of itself such a list provides no map of partnerships in relation to the mission, policy or strategy of the institution; it has no indication of the length or importance of the collaboration; it does not promote synergy between partnerships or between activities; it does not promote the widening of the collaboration internally to involve other activities (e.g. research, work placements for students, mobility for staff), or other departments. On the other hand such a model is probably the most open to rapid responses to need, to innovative experimentation and a cultural of creativity, and to the development of professional linkages between academic staff and external experts (who are often the agents of sustainability when development funding or project funding has ended).

We do not wish to advocate a particular approach to this issue, however, it is clear from our work that it is a topic that is not widely discussed and deserves to be so in order to improve understanding at all levels within the institutions.

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.

Many universities have an individual, or sometimes more than one individual, who is designated as Industry Liaison Officer (or a similar title) but despite this we repeatedly heard the complaint from employers, particularly SMEs or Chambers of Commerce, that they do not know who to contact in universities for help, advice, training and so on. While the large companies and the multi-nationals do not report this as a problem, it clearly remains one for smaller companies. In addition, enterprises, large and small, frequently have a very out-of-date view of what universities do and how they do it; and universities often communicate in the technical insider language of education which may be a barrier to effective communication.

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.

2.6 Regional collaboration – success factors

The analysis of the success factors and the obstacles to success was derived from the questionnaire data (Q31 and 32 Technical report, p26-27), the case studies and the visits.

The success factors identified fell into 4 categories:

- i. **Networking:** confidence, transparency, trust, personal relationships, good relationships, friendliness, flexibility, regular contacts, avoid customer/supplier type of relationship in favour of genuine partnerships, continuous dialogue, sharing good practice, good communications
- ii. **Management:** clear goals and clear allocation of tasks and responsibilities, shared objectives, genuine interest of the institutions, formalise relationships where necessary, clear agreements on the finances and the practicalities, sound finances, acknowledge and address competition issues, well prepared meetings and workplans, well-trained and well-prepared staff, build of the different strengths of each partner/complementary knowledge and competences, ensure quality, commitment and support from the senior management and leadership of the university, backed up by staff development, flexibility and adaptability, appropriate time allocated to the activity, planning for follow-up
- iii. **Knowledge:** of the region, of the needs of the target groups, of existing regional plans, analyses, actions and resources, of the political environment, the experience of LLL, the expertise in the specific area of knowledge, skills and competences
- iv. **Strategic position and reputation:** of the university, of faculties, of individual members of staff; the capacity to respond quickly and effectively,

The main obstacles fell into 4 categories:

- i. **Competition:** between universities, between universities and other providers, insularity, lack of communication between potential collaborators, 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 networking, too many players
- ii. **Lack of skills:** weak collaboration skills, academics not practical enough, lack of effective communication, unable to talk in different ways to different target groups, difficult to find ways of working, lack of marketing skills and how to reach key target groups, lack of didactic competences for LLL, lack of common language, lack of motivation, lack of expertise

- iii. **Environment:** lack of political support, 'govt officials know nothing', temporary or no funding, historically reliant on low skill economy, small size of companies and the region, excessive bureaucracy in public sector, in national government, in EU, negative economic forecasts which put off potential students from upskilling, employers want better prepared graduates but don't offer very good work experience, lack of interest from companies, lack of understanding of the university's real competences, lack of contacts between universities and companies, general economic climate, absence of well developed regional policies, too expensive for small organisations and small regions, employers lack vision of qualifications and competences needed, universities value research much more highly, too many overlapping initiatives, disjointed regional governance, unrealistic expectations, low interest
- iv. **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, lack of clear focus, varying objectives, requires an investment before the return comes in, not enough time given to academics to do it, 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, ULLL is too expensive, complexity not professionally managed, lack of clear time lines, benefits not clearly understood – often thought to be too deep, too long and too expensive, targets set too high, complicated procedures and too much bureaucracy

Clearly, the obstacles are the reverse side of the success coin. Management is key: too tight and it stifles success; too little and it leads to ambiguity and confusion; too loose and nothing is achieved; get it right and everyone benefits. Networking is effective; competition is not (at least not for collaborative working). A lack of understanding of the political, economic environment is not conducive to success; a clear and confident knowledge of the regional context and the strategic reputation and capacity of the university and its staff is a success factor. A recurring theme in the success factors and the obstacles is the importance of a shared language, shared understandings and staff development, in particular staff development with the partners in the collaboration – all have something to learn and something to teach – it should be a shared learning activity within the network.

Universities should:

- **develop a concept of a 'networked university' involving a range of external stakeholders – enterprises, other educational providers, professional associations and social partners, trade unions, local authorities and other regional (and national) partners**
- **develop platforms, joint staff development and funding streams to support the networking**

3. Towards 2020

We have set out above the current state of play in ULLL. ULLL is generally seen as a certain kind of activity: short courses, courses that do not lead to state diplomas, open, e-learning and distance learning courses, special vocationally oriented bachelors or masters; 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. Universities talk about 'lifelong learning courses', which frequently have less status than the 'mainstream' programmes in the eyes of teaching staff. They also talk about 'lifelong learners' (or continuing education students, or similar) as a separate group – almost always adults who are not accessing higher education in the 'normal way' i.e. straight from secondary level education with the usual university entry qualifications; the term non-traditional students is frequently used. While 'lifelong learners' is an improvement on previous labels which were implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, deficit models, describing them in terms of what they were not, it still suggests that other students in the 'mainstream' are somehow not lifelong learners, implying that they are not learning to learn, learning to love learning, thinking about learning all their lives, acknowledging that what they learn at 20 years old will not last them forever, 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.

We all use this kind of language because it is a convenient shorthand but 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, as the Leuven Communiqué of Bologna ministers suggested, what is the vision towards 2020? 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)?

This is of course a major subject for debate and one which will continue into the future but we set out here an attempt to describe the characteristics of a LLLU and the kinds of changes that might be needed to become a LLLU. We do not claim that this is 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 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 get 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.

Summary of recommendations

Universities should:

- 1.** 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 recognize 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
- 2.** 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
- 3.** 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
- 4.** Build a learner centred educational model of management for LLL integrating pedagogical, organisational and financial dimensions, and keep it under review
- 5.** 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
- 6.** 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
- 7.** 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
- 8.** 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
- 9.** Develop a concept of a ‘networked university’ involving a range of external stakeholders – enterprises, other educational providers, professional associations and social partners, trade unions, local authorities and other regional (and national) partners
- 10.** Develop platforms, joint staff development and funding streams to support the networking

About BeFlex Plus

BeFlex Plus updates our knowledge about how ULLL is developing in Europe and what has changed over the last 2 or 3 years; it promotes the development of policy and practice in ULLL and the use of the Bologna tools; and it supports universities in the development and implementation of regional strategies for ULLL.

Outputs and products: regional seminars/workshops, training and dissemination events in association with national networks, recommendations to the Bologna Follow-Up Group, a Training pack, a Thematic Report and Executive summary, and a Technical Report analysing the data collected. All these are on the project website:

www.eucen.org/BeFlexPlus/index.html

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