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The Role of Lifelong Learning in the Creation of a European Knowledge-Based Society

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INTRODUCTION

The dominant discourse in education and training policies, at the turn of the millennium, was on lifelong learning (LLL) in the context of a knowledge-based society. As Green points (2002, pp. 611-612) several factors contribute to this global trend:

- **The demographic change:** In most advanced countries, the average age of the population is increasing, as people live longer;
- **The effects of globalisation:** Including both economic restructuring and cultural change which have impacts on the world of education;
- **Global economic restructuring:** Which causes, for example, a more intense demand for a higher order of skills; the intensified economic competition, forcing a wave of restructuring and creating enormous pressure to train and retrain the workforce

In parallel, the “significance of the international division of labour cannot be underestimated for higher education”, as pointed out by Jarvis (1999, p. 250). This author goes on to argue that globalisation has exacerbated differentiation in the labour market, with the *First World* converting faster to a knowledge economy and a service society, while a great deal of the actual manufacturing is done elsewhere.

People are the most important asset in a “knowledge based/learning economy”, because “what is at stake in this is the capacity of people, organizations, networks and regions to learn” (Lundvall and Johnson, 1994). People are Europe’s most important asset for economic growth. The successful creation of a knowledge-based society as foreseen in the Lisbon strategy, “relying pri-

marily on the use of ideas (...) and on the application of technology” (World Bank..., 2003, p. 1), requires that every citizen be equipped with the right knowledge, skills and attitudes to achieve this.

In this context, Universities will play an important role, not only in the education and training of youth but also by providing opportunities for LLL, helping citizens, of all ages, to update and add to the knowledge acquired in their initial education. LLL implies that learning should take place at all stages of the lifecycle (from cradle to grave) and, even that it should be “lifewide” (European Commission, 2001)—that is embedded in all life contexts, be they school, workplace, the home or the community (Green, 2002, p. 613).

BACKGROUND

LLL ideas and practices are far from being a new phenomenon, as for many generations “learning throughout life” has been a necessity in order to survive in times of intensified change. Nevertheless, the term “lifelong learning” did not enter the international debate until the 1970’s when it gained currency at an accelerating rate, along with the concept of the “learning society” and the “learning organization”. These latter concepts both describe and advocate particular partners in the learning process (Ryan, 2003, p. 1).

Among the leading intergovernmental bodies advocating LLL are the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the G8, the World Bank, the Council of Europe and the European Union (as addressed later in this paper). The discourse of such organizations was influential for the development of the LLL concept,

which, in its “initial phase, inspired by humanistic ideals, had broad social and cultural objectives” (Dehmel, 2006:51) and which aimed to alter the view that we should learn only in institutionalised education systems; rather it recognises that we are learning from the moment we are born, to be in the world, to take our place in society and adapt to change as we pass through the different stages in our life (DfEE..., 1998).

Halfway through 1990, there was a shift in the world-wide policy discourse on LLL away from the main humanistic ideals—aiming at social emancipation—towards essentially more utilitarian, economic objectives (Dehmel, 2006:51; Hake, 2005:235). The policy documents produced by intergovernmental and international bodies since then have focused on justifying the need for lifelong learning, discussed new strategies and tried to develop a concept for LLL. Several policy landmarks, produced by some of these intergovernmental and international bodies are highlighted below.

In 1996, the OECD held an Education Ministers’ conference on LLL and called on its members to promote *Lifelong Learning for All*, as a common goal (OECD, 1996). Since then, this guideline has been the cornerstone of the OECD program on education and training. In the same year (1996), Jacques Delors chaired a committee of UNESCO which produced a report under the title of: *Learning the treasure within* (Delors 1996). Around the same time, the European Commission launched its policy document *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* (European ..., 1995) and declared 1996 to be the *European Year of Lifelong Learning (EYLLL)*, with the aim of raising public consciousness concerning the importance of LLL.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LLL

LLL must be defined before it can be analysed. A literal definition is simply “all learning”—everything that people learn in their lifetimes (Ryan, 2003, p. 1).

Since the 1970’s, LLL has been called by a variety of names including liberal education, adult education, continuing education and continuing professional development (in Britain), *éducation permanente* (in France), recurrent education (by OECD) (Osborne *et al.*, 2004, pp. 137-142).

The concept of LLL, in itself, emphasizes learning instead of institutional education. The traditional practice was based on the stereotype which concentrated all learning in formal education and training while young. The resulting knowledge and skills were expected to suffice throughout adult life. However, LLL has recently gained a new vitality as the key concept for mobilizing and adapting human resources, in relation to work, economic growth and competition. It is also recognised as an important generator of social autonomy, empowerment, equity, justice and social responsibility.

The public consultation on the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (Commission ..., 2000) (addressed in more detail in the following paragraph on EU LLL policies), produced by the European Union, led to the broader definition of LLL as:

all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences, within a personal, civic, social and / or employment-related perspective (European Commission, 2001, p. 9).

The breadth of this definition draws attention to the full range of *formal, non formal and informal learning* activity (life wide learning) and is a deeper definition than those used previously in European Commission documents¹ (European Commission, 2001, p. 9) and in the Council of Europe². It considers that the learning process must not be seen as a “sequence of different learning processes within the life cycle”—which is LLL in a narrow sense—but rather that learning can occur in “different social settings”, *i.e.*, in the workplace, home and many community contexts, as well as in education institutions (European Commission, 2002, pp. 78-80).

Although the driving forces which brought LLL back onto international agendas (since mid-90’s) were mainly economic objectives, there is a general shift towards more integrated strategies that encourage all stakeholders to take concerted action and that combine social and cultural objectives with the economic plea for lifelong learning (Kearns *et al.*, 1999). It is within this framework that the LLL policies in EU have been developed.

LLL IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN UNION POLICIES

In general, any policy at European level, in the field of education, is relatively recent; only since the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) has the EU had any competence in education, other than vocational training, which was featured in the Treaty of Rome 1957, where it was closely bound to the basic aims of creating a common market for goods, services and capital (Ertl and Phillips, 2006, p. 78). In higher education (HE), it is particularly weak since the principle of subsidiarity means that not only national and regional authorities claim precedence over European legislation but also, at institutional level, universities rigorously defend their autonomy (Davies, 2005).

At the political level, the European Union is making efforts to establish a European area of LLL; since the publication of its document on *Teaching and Learning Toward the Learning Society* (European Commission, 1995), and the promulgation of the *Year of Lifelong Learning* (1996), when the European Council first included LLL in its conclusions (European Council, 2002, pp. 18-19), the concept of LLL has grown considerably in importance, both at Community and at national level. In line with these developments, lifelong learning continued to figure prominently on the EU policy agenda. This can be illustrated by briefly pointing out some of the main milestones.

The Treaty of Amsterdam, established in 1997, explicitly supports the idea of LLL. Since then, LLL became a horizontal priority crossing all several European Union policies (e.g., *Employment, Social Agenda, Youth*, etc...) and the number of documents that address it continues to grow.

The Commission of the European Communities, in November 2000, based on the conclusions of the *1996 European Year of Lifelong Learning* and on the experience acquired at European and national level, issued a *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (Commission, 2000) which formed the basis for broad consultation in Europe, including the candidate countries. This *Memorandum*, which attracted considerable attention worldwide (e.g. Australia, 2003), provides a structured framework (consisting of six Key Messages) with the purpose of launching a European-wide debate on a comprehensive strategy for the implementation of LLL (Dehmel, 2006, p. 54).³

In November 2001, the Commission adopted a Communication—*Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*—based on a public consultation on the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, issued in previous year (European Commission, 2001).

This Communication—which is a ‘European Action plan’ and presents ‘priorities for action’ under the six Key Messages of the *Memorandum*—lays down a coherent strategy for implementing LLL⁴ and led to the adoption of the *Council Resolution on Lifelong Learning*, on 27 June 2002 (European Council, 2002a).

Member states such as the United Kingdom (DfEE, 1998), Sweden (Swedish National Board for Education, 2000) or Netherlands (Min, 1998; Hake, 2005, pp. 235-253) have also placed lifelong learning at the center of their educational debates.

Programme ‘Education & Training 2010’

Reflecting the recognition of the importance of education and training in the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, the Heads of State, in the conclusions of the Lisbon meeting (European Council, 2000), also invited the Ministers of Education to agree upon concrete objectives for education and training systems in Europe. In line with this, and on the basis of a proposal by the Commission, the Ministers of Education adopted the report *The Concrete Future Objectives of Education and Training Systems* (Council of the European Communities, 2001).

A year later, in 2002, a detailed ten-year work program for its implementation, was adopted at the Barcelona European Council meeting (2002), together with a detailed timetable for working towards the concrete future objectives of education and training systems (European Council, 2002). This work program—often simply referred as “*Education and Training 2010*”—is aimed at making *lifelong learning a reality*. The programme is built on three strategic objectives (quality/effectiveness; access; openness) and thirteen specific subdivided targets covering the various types and levels of education and training (formal, non-formal and informal).

At the moment, the “*Education and Training 2010*” programme integrates all actions in the fields of education and training at European level, including vocational education and training (VET) (the *Copenhagen process*) (Copenhagen). In addition, the *Bologna process* (Bologna) is crucial for the development of the *European*

Higher Education Area. Both Processes contribute actively to the achievement of the Lisbon objectives and are therefore closely linked to the “*Education and Training 2010*” work programme.

Summing up, the ‘*Education & Training 2010*’ programme aims to achieve transparency between the countries. Nóvoa and deJong-Lambert (2003:39) have stressed the importance of European benchmarks, common guidelines and best practice models for the future development of national education and training systems as currently advocated by the European Union. The same authors pointed out that growing convergence pressures mark the beginning of a new era in the EU’s provision for education and training which started in 2000, with the principle of the ‘open method of cooperation’⁵; this proposes new forms of working together in the European arena.

One of the aspects requiring further research is how far Member States are prepared to be influenced and/or coordinated by EU education and training policies (Dehmel, 2006:58).

‘Education and Training 2010’ in the Renewed Lisbon Strategy

Five years after the launch of the Lisbon Strategy the Commission acknowledged that the results achieved have been mixed. The Lisbon Agenda was therefore adapted, in February 2005, to act as an updated focus for European policy development. This new start for the Lisbon Strategy focuses the European Union’s efforts on two principal tasks—delivering stronger, lasting growth and providing more and better jobs.

Monitoring performance and progress is an essential part of the Lisbon process. Periodic monitoring allows the identification of strengths and weaknesses, thereby providing guidance and strategic direction in implementing the ‘*Education & Training 2010*’ strategy. In 2005 the Commission published the second annual report examining performance and progress of education and training systems in the EU using 29 indicators identified and endorsed by experts from the 31 participating countries (Commission, 2005d:12).

This annual report charts progress towards Europe’s targets in the area of education and training using a framework of indicators, benchmarks and statistics, and puts performance, where useful and possible, into a global perspective. The data gives an indication of the direction European education systems are moving

in and of Europe’s potential to fulfil the objectives set in Lisbon Strategy (Commission, 2005d:12). It gave rise to the 2006 joint interim report of the Council and of the Commission on progress under the ‘*Education & Training 2010*’ work programme, entitled *Moder- nising education and training: a vital contribution to prosperity and social cohesion in Europe* (European Council, 2006). One of the indicators aims to measure progress that has been made, since 2003, towards the goal, agreed by the European Council, that lifelong learning strategies should be put in place in all Member States by 2006 (Commission .. 2003a:24). This is a key dimension of the new Lisbon integrated guidelines.

The report also recognises that, although 11% of adults in EU aged 25-64 take part in LLL, representing some progress since 2000, a major challenge for Europe remains in increasing further learning to reach the benchmark of a 12,5 % participation rate in 2010, particularly in Southern European countries and the new Member states, where additional efforts are needed. The Nordic countries, the UK, Slovenia and the Netherlands currently show the highest lifelong learning participation rates (European Council, 2006: C79/18).

LIFELONG LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The higher education policy of the European Commission aims at reforming higher education systems, making them more flexible, more coherent and more responsive to the needs of society (Commission, 2006:1). Reforms should enable universities to play their role in the Europe of Knowledge and to make a strong contribution to the EU Lisbon Strategy (Commission, 2005a, 2005b)

In the EU Communication *The role of the universities in the Europe of Knowledge* (Commission..., 2003b), the main challenges facing universities, all around the world, are listed. They are: i) increasing demand for HE; ii) the internationalisation of education and research; iii) the need to develop effective and close co-operation between universities and industry; iv) the proliferation of places where knowledge is produced; and v) the emergence of new expectations (2003b, pp. 6-9).

In the 2005 Communication entitled “*Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy*” the Com-

mission recognises the crucial role of universities in achieving the Lisbon goals. The communication states that there are increasing challenges: the human capital and innovation gaps (tertiary education attainment, access to higher education, research performance), the bottlenecks (uniformity, insularity, under-funding and over-regulation; it is within the scope of the latter that LLL is examined. The document comments that the bottlenecks hinder modernization, e.g. “inflexible admission and recognition rules impede lifelong learning ...” (*op. cit.*, p. 4).

The Commission also describes the three important areas for reform:

- **Attractiveness** (differentiation in quality and excellence, more flexibility and openness to the world in teaching/learning (among which is the use of ICT to promote lifelong learning, broader access, better communication);
- **Governance** (reinforcing public responsibility for higher education as a system, enabling institutional modernisation strategies);
- **Funding** (investment priorities for the modernisation, contributions from students and industry).

In its recent communication *Delivering on the modernisation agenda for universities: education, research and innovation* (Commission, 2006), the Commission indicates the nine main changes that are required to modernise higher education systems in Europe and to help them to be innovative. The change that touches most directly upon lifelong learning is the one that calls for universities “to provide the right mix of skills and competencies for the labour market”. This highlights the call for universities to exercise their responsibilities for overcoming the persistent mismatches between graduate qualifications and the needs of the labour market. Universities need to grasp more directly the challenges and opportunities presented by the LLL agenda. For this effect,

university programmes should be structured to enhance directly the employability of graduates and to offer broad support to the workforce more generally. Universities should offer innovative curricula, teaching methods and training/retraining programmes which include broader employment-related skills along with the more discipline specific skills... (op.cit, p.7)

CONCLUSION

It is within this European framework, with the Bologna and the Copenhagen processes that LLL is taking shape in education and training systems in Europe and responding to the challenges of the Lisbon strategy.

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KEY TERMS

Formal Education: Refers to education in the traditional system of schools, colleges, universities and other formal educational institutions (European Commission, 2001:78-80).

Non-Formal Education: Includes the educational activities that do not correspond to the previous definition of formal education and so may take place within and outside educational institutions (European Commission, 2001:78-80).

Informal Learning: Encompasses all the situations that cannot be included in the previous categories. Usually, they are characterized by a relatively low level of organization and may take place at the individual level or in groups (European Commission, 2001:78-80).

The Bologna Process: was conceived in 1999, by Ministers of Education from 29 European countries, to support the need for a more coherent and cohesive European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010.

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The main objectives outlined in this statement were as follows:

- Adopt a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
- Adopt a system with two main cycles (undergraduate/graduate)
- Establish a system of credits (such as ECTS)
- Promote mobility by overcoming legal recognition and administrative obstacles
- Promote European co-operation in quality assurance
- Promote a European dimension in higher education

In the subsequent meeting held in Prague more action lines were added to the initial Bologna Declaration:

- Inclusion of lifelong learning strategies
- Involvement of higher education institutions and students as essential partners in the process
- Promotion of the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

In Berlin, Ministers agreed to speed up the process by setting an intermediate deadline of 2005 for progress on:

- Quality assurance
- The adoption of a system of degree structures essentially based on two main cycles
- Recognition of degrees
- and to add an additional Action Line entitled, "Doctoral studies and promotion of young researchers" including specific mention of doctoral programmes as the third cycle in the Bologna Process.

In Bergen, Ministers committed themselves for their next meeting in 2007 to reinforcing the social dimension and removing obstacles to mobility, as well as to making progress on:

- Implementing the agreed standards and guidelines for quality assurance
- Implementing national frameworks of qualifications
- Awarding and recognising joint degrees
- Creating opportunities for flexible learning paths in higher education

Copenhagen Declaration: On 30 November 2002 the education Ministers of 31 European countries and the European Commission adopted the Copenhagen Declaration on enhanced cooperation in European vocational education and training.

The Declaration follows a Resolution of the Education Council (12 November) on the same subject, taking up the same principles and priorities for enhanced cooperation, and ensuring that the candidate countries, EEA-EFTA countries, and Social Partners are involved as full partners in the follow-up to this important initiative.

The Member States, EEA countries the social partners and the Commission have begun cooperation at a practical level, focused on a number of concrete outputs:

- A single framework for transparency of competences and qualifications. The intention is to bring together into a single user friendly and more visible format the various existing transparency instruments, for example the European CV, the certificate supplements and diploma supplements, the *Europass-Training* and the national reference points, possibly using the EUROPASS brand. The Commission will come forward with a concrete proposal for the single framework by Autumn 2003.
- System of credit transfer for VET. Inspired by the successful European Credit Transfer System in higher education, the intention is to develop a similar system for the vocational sector.
- Common criteria and principles for quality in VET. Taking forward the work of the European Forum on Quality, a core of common criteria and principles for quality assurance will be developed, which could serve as a basis for European level initiatives such as quality guidelines and checklists for VET.
- Common principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The aim is to develop a set of common principles to ensure greater compatibility between approaches in different countries and at different levels.
- Lifelong guidance. The aim is to strengthen the European dimension of information guidance and counselling services, enabling citizens to have improved access to lifelong learning.

A key feature of the Bruges-Copenhagen process is that it has been developed within the perspective of lifelong learning, emphasizing the need for citizens to make use of the wide range of vocational learning opportunities available, for example at school, in higher education, at the workplace, or as part of a private course. The tools described above are being designed from the point of view of the user, making it possible to link together and build on learning acquired at different stages of life, in both formal and non-formal contexts. (Source: http://ec.europa.eu/education/copenhagen/index_en.html)

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “All purposeful learning activity undertaken on an on-going basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence” (Commission of European Communities, 2000, p. 3).
- ² Council of Europe considers Life Long Learning as “open path ways which allow continuity in studies at any age and time” (Council of Europe, 2006).
- ³ The six Key Messages (KMs) of the *Memorandum* are: KM 1: new basic skills for all; KM 2: more investment in human resources; KM 3: innovation in teaching and learning; KM 4: valuing learning; KM 5: rethinking guidance and counselling; KM 6: bringing learning closer to home (Dehmel, 2006, p. 54).
- ⁴ The strategy to implement Life Long Learning includes the following objectives (European Commission, 2002).

- developing a partnership approach: all relevant actors, in and outside the formal systems, must collaborate for strategies to work ‘on the ground’;
 - gaining insight into the needs of the learner, or the potential learner, along with learning needs of organizations, communities, wider society and the labor market;
 - ensuring adequate resourcing, in terms of financing and of effective and transparent allocation of resources;
 - matching learning opportunities to learners’ needs and interests;
 - facilitating access by developing the supply side to enable learning by anyone, anywhere, at any time;
 - valuing non-formal and informal learning;
 - creating a culture of learning by increasing learning opportunities;
 - raising participation levels and stimulating demand for learning;
 - setting up mechanisms for quality assurance, evaluation and monitoring;
 - ensure constant progression towards quality improvement with a view to striving for excellence on an ongoing basis.
- ⁵ In the *Open Method of Coordination*, one of the Commission’s roles is to draw attention to critical situations and possible solutions and to provide opportunities for policy makers—at system, as well as institutional level—to take inspiration from ideas, experiences and reforms undertaken or planned elsewhere (Figel, 2005, p. 5).