

The Role of Higher Education in the Context of Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to set out a rationale for a new agenda for change for higher education in the context of lifelong learning. The content is designed to complement current debates regarding making lifelong learning a reality and building a smart, sustainable and inclusive European economy delivering high levels of employment, and social cohesion. Europe is currently struggling to achieve its economic and social objectives and needs to refocus and reenergise. In this context, the paper sets out three key roles for higher education: a) to lead and spear head research that will enhance innovation and entrepreneurship thereby promoting the development of new skills for the future; b) to develop effective pedagogies for the 21st century that will capture the imagination of young people and provide for an ageing participatory working population; and c) to work more closely with other partners at national level to build more coherent education and training systems that support lifelong learning and promote greater economic sustainability and social cohesion.

Key words: Human capital, innovation, lifelong learning, social cohesion, sustainability.

Introduction

Europe's strategy for 2020 puts a major emphasis on high quality education and training as a means of ensuring greater innovation and productivity throughout the lifespan with the intent to increase individual citizen's income levels, health and wellbeing. However, to do so Europe needs to review and renew its commitment to lifelong learning and agree a new quality assured and integrated implementation strategy. To achieve this - policy makers need to instigate a paradigm shift that puts the individual at the centre of the action so that policy initiatives at national level will meet the diversity of needs. Also it requires a connected system covering the whole lifecycle, comprising all forms of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

The International Labour Office in *Conclusions on the skills for improved productivity, employment growth and development* (2008, p. iii) describes the current *vicious circle* of inadequate education, poor training, low-productivity jobs and low wages that traps the working poor and excludes young persons and workers from participating in economic growth. It advocates the need to promote instead a *virtuous circle* in which improving the quality and availability of education and training fuels the innovation, investment, technological change, enterprise development, growth and competitiveness that economies need to accelerate the creation of more but also better jobs and thereby improve social cohesion. It concludes that a low-skills, low-productivity, low-wage economy is unsustainable in the long term.



Therefore, policy makers need to open their minds and practices and spend more time joining up their education and training systems at national level in order to eliminate the current fault lines that exists between the different sub-sectors (general, vocational, higher and adult learning) that create inequalities and inefficiencies. There are plenty of examples outside the education and training sector where there are high profile cases of disconnections which frustrate customers and clients e.g. ICT and transport systems where the sub-parts (planes and trains) do not fully connect with each other. However, we tend to look at education and training differently. But, whether we are navigating virtual space, geographical distance or educational pathways *we need to maximise our connectivity*.

Methodology

The methodology includes a literature review of a) European policies, Recommendations, Council Conclusions, Resolutions and Communications on lifelong learning and employability and b) the current discourse on the evolving role of higher education, with the intention to establish and promote a new agenda for change for higher education in the context of lifelong learning.

Education and Training 2020

Developments over the last decade in education and training were driven initially by the evolving lifelong learning agenda (*see below*) and by the Bologna Process 1999, the Lisbon Strategy 2000 and the Copenhagen Process 2002. The Lisbon Strategy recognised the important role of education and training as: an integral part of economic and social policies, as an instrument for strengthening Europe's competitive power worldwide, and as a means of ensuring the cohesion of our societies and the full development of its citizens. It set the strategic objective for the European Union to become *“the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”*^[1] by 2010. To achieve this ambitious goal Member States agreed that substantial modernisation of Europe's education and training systems was necessary, to make Europe a world leader in the quality of the education and training it provides.

Some progress has been made across the education and training sector both at a European and national level. This progress is evident in a range of European initiatives, Recommendations, Council Conclusions, Resolutions and Communication papers agreed between 2000-2010 that established common principles, guidelines and tools designed to meet the specific needs of the various sub-sectors of education and training systems. It includes the development of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LL), Europass, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) for vocational education and training, the European Credit Transfer System for higher education (ECTS), the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), the Recommendation on Key Competences, Improving competences for the 21st Century: An agenda for European Cooperation on Schools, the Communication on Adult Learning 2006 and the Adult Education Action Plan 2007.

However, with the exception of the EQF-LL which is inclusive of all types of learning and the Recommendation on Key Competences which refers to both general and adult education the policy achievements to date are mainly framed to meet the needs of particular sub-sectors of the education and training system. This is further evident by the development at European level of two quality frameworks – one for higher education and one for vocational education and training.

By 2011, Europe is under greater pressure to improve its education and training systems in order to rebuild its economic and social infrastructure following the global economic downturn. Europe must redouble its efforts to be competitive in order to provide for its citizens and to safeguard its social economic model. In the rapidly changing world we live in, it is readily acknowledged that lifelong learning is the key to employment, economic growth and sustainability. But Member States need to be more creative, innovative and challenging in turning the lifelong learning concept into a reality.

[1] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm



The Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (Education and Training 2020) outlines that “*European cooperation in education and training for the period up to 2020 should be established in the context of a strategic framework spanning education and training systems as a whole in a lifelong learning perspective. Indeed, lifelong learning should be regarded as a fundamental principle underpinning the entire framework, which is designed to cover learning in all contexts - whether formal, non-formal or informal - and at all levels from early childhood education and schools through to higher education, vocational education and training and adult learning*”.^[2] This approach recognises that high quality pre-primary, primary, secondary, higher and vocational education and training and adult learning are fundamental to Europe’s success. The Education and Training 2020 strategic framework sets out clear long-term strategic objectives of EU education and training policies: making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

Promoting Lifelong Learning

The concept of lifelong learning emerged as an educational strategy in the 1970’s mainly through the efforts of OECD, UNESCO and the Council of Europe. In its early stages of development it tended to be associated with recurrent education and providing adults with second chance education. However, over time it evolved to encompassing all learning over a lifespan.

The International Commission on Education for the twenty-first century (a UNESCO Task Force), chaired by Jacques Delors produced the report - *Learning: the Treasure Within* in 1996. This report outlined that education takes place throughout life in many forms, none of which ought to be exclusive. It recommended that we need to think about education in a more all-encompassing fashion. The Commission felt that education throughout life is based on four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. The Commission outlined that it did “*not see education as a miracle cure or a magic formula opening the door to a world in which all ideals will be attained, but as one of the principal means available to foster a deeper and more harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression and war*”.^[3]

OECD Education Ministers adopted “Lifelong learning for all” as a policy framework in 1996. At this stage lifelong learning is described as all purposeful learning activity. That is, from the cradle to the grave - a comprehensive view, acknowledging that each stage of life has its own learning needs. *In Education Policy Analysis 2001* the OECD highlighted the consensus around the importance of lifelong learning for all but acknowledged that it is far from easy to achieve it in practice. The Report describes lifelong learning as having five systemic features:

- All learning should be recognised not just formal courses
- Lifelong learning requires good foundation skills among both the young and adults
- Equitable access to learning requires a lifecycle perspective - preschool to adults
- Countries must evaluate resources according to lifecycle needs and deploy them effectively
- The scope of lifelong learning goes beyond a single ministry. Policy coordination must involve many partners.

The European Union adopted and enshrined the principle of lifelong learning in a number of education policies including the Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 on lifelong learning. This described lifelong learning as all learning from the preschool age to that of post-retirement, including the entire spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

In practice, countries have found it difficult to fully embrace the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning – as to do so, requires new ways of thinking. If we are to convert concepts into reality policy makers must move beyond the development of attractive conceptual models to the creation of more practical means and methods that are affordable and can be readily implemented. For example, it requires qualification standards and learning outcomes to be clearly defined against which formal, non-formal and informal learning can then be assessed. It also requires champions and promoters to lead the change agenda.

[2] http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc28_en.htm

[3] <http://www.unesco.org/delors/utopia.htm>



Human Capital

Lifelong learning supports the individuals own personal development and self-fulfilment but it also directly contributes to their present and future employability. The European Commissions Communication (2008) *New Skills for New Jobs: anticipating and matching labour market and skill needs*, outlines how employer's investment in skills is a way of enhancing their employee's motivation and productivity. It is noted that low qualified adults are seven times less likely to participate in lifelong learning than those with high educational attainment. The Communication outlines that the education, training and employment policies of the Member States must focus on increasing and adapting skills and providing better learning opportunities at all levels, to develop a workforce that is highly skilled and responsive to the needs of the economy. Employers have a growing demand for transversal key competences such as problem solving and analytical skills, self-management and communications skills, linguistic skills and generally non-routine skills.

The 2009 Progress Report on the Lisbon objectives identified that the biggest areas for improvement appear to be at the two ends of the age spectrum - early childhood and adults, especially older adults. The European population and workforce is ageing. Over the next 30 years the number of younger people (up to 24) will fall by 15%. One in three Europeans will be over 60 years of age and about one in 10 will be over 80 years. This provides serious challenges for the European social model and the obvious need to employ the full potential of older workers. This means we need to address the issue of early school leavers and improve the skills and adaptability of older workers. From 2000-2006 the proportion of low achievers in reading literacy aged 15 increased from 21.3% to 24.1%. This was against a benchmark for 2010 which anticipates a reduction of 20%. The 2009 Progress Report outlined that the participation rates for early childhood education for the EU27 is 90.7% (2007). However there is significant variation between countries. We also need to improve the skills of immigrants e.g. in terms of language and in some instances their skills are underused and under recognised. Raising the overall level of skills of the adult population is not only important for personal wellbeing but it also improves efficiency and equity and mitigates against the social challenges such as related healthcare and retirement costs.

Schneider (2005) outlines that empirical investigation reveals that human capital is the most important factor of production in modern economies and countries who make the right investment in human capital are best place to deal with structural changes. This includes reforming education systems for growth and ensuring that education starts in the first years of life and does not end with a university degree. He argues that better education of the relatively poor is one of the most important ways to fight poverty both in rich and poor countries. Human capital and income is closely linked for individuals as well as whole economies. Higher human capital acquired through better and longer education improves effectiveness and productivity and generates more innovation and ideas. He estimates that the gain in income from an additional year of education range from 5% to 15% and that in the US a college graduate earns about two-thirds more than a high school graduate. He cites the example of South Korea, which undertook a long series of education reforms and subsequently witnessed impressive change in the level of its human capital between 1980-2000 moving South Korea to 6th place in the ranking of human capital levels. The average years of education in South Korea rose by more than 20% between 1985 and 2000 to 13 years. The quality of education also increased over the period - Korea ranked 3rd in PISA in 2003. 20% of central government spending goes on education. Private financing also plays a major role at university level. South Korea spends more than 8% of GDP on education. He argues that expenditures on research and development also tend to be higher in countries with a lot of human capital, as there can be no research without human capital and not much innovation without research. He argues that equal educational opportunity is a more sustainable vehicle towards social peace than transfer payments from rich to poor.

In February 2011 the European Council of Member States met and agreed that investment in education, research, technology and innovation is a key driver of growth and innovative ideas that can be turned into new marketable products and services that help create growth and quality jobs. It called for the implementation of a strategic and integrated approach to boosting innovation. The Council concluded that innovation contributes to tackling the most critical societal challenges we are facing and invites the European Commission to quickly develop a single integrated indicator to allow a better monitoring of progress in innovation. Europe needs a unified research area to attract talent and investment and the European Research Area needs to be complete by 2014 to create a genuine single market for knowledge, research and innovation. It has also set 2015 as the target for the



creation of a Digital Single Market. The Council also wishes to improve the mobility and career prospects of researchers, the mobility of graduate students and the attractiveness of Europe for foreign researchers. Member States are asked to give priority to sustainable growth-friendly expenditure in areas such as research and innovation, education and energy.

The Role of Higher Education

Lawrence (2006) outlined that “*higher education has been thrust into a new position of prominence as an indispensable engine of economic advancement*” (p. 3) across the global economy. It produces the basic and applied research that plays an essential role in creating new products and services and helps generate business opportunities, it creates spin off companies directly most notably within the medical and technological sectors. He advocates that higher education institutions are the gatekeepers for the knowledge, creativity and invention that can support economic security and advancement.

Higher education is currently going through rapid change and experiencing many challenges including: a changing demographic population (age, social class, minorities), the dismantling barriers, critique regarding its outputs, a modernisation agenda, new partnerships as well as increasing demand for its services.

Campuses are now more diverse and larger than previous. Lawrence observed that in the US institutions are striving to serve large proportions of ethnic groups historically underrepresented in higher education. According to the predictions of the US Census Bureau the white majority will become a minority sometime between 2050 and 2075. By 2050 more than half of the traditional college age cohort of 18-25 year olds will be comprised of groups now considered minorities.

In *As the Walls of Academia are Tumbling Down* (2002) Hirsch argues that the movement towards a global village of knowledge coincides with and is driven by the lowering of four venerable walls or barriers. These are barriers within universities (across disciplines), between universities, between universities and industry and a combination of barriers that can impede outreach programmes with the wider community. He outlines that “*universities that once used to educate the young must tool up and address themselves to the educational needs of a mature and older clientele*” (p. 8). In the same publication Wagner (2002) outlines that embracing the concept of lifelong learning creates fundamental challenges to the walls of academia. He argues (p. 169) that use of the terms “education” and “learning” demonstrate different value systems. Education is a supplier’s word – it is what is provided. Learning is a consumer’s word – it is what is experienced. These are two radically different approaches. The former suggests that higher education can be staggered between initial and continuing, while the latter takes a holistic approach not only within higher education but from pre-school. The emphasis on continuing rather than lifelong in some higher education institutions also excludes “training”. The institutions that espouse this, consider training as a lower-level activity that is not an appropriate function for a university. This he argues does not take into account medicine, law or architecture, which explicitly requires training to ensure competence for professional practice.

According to Duderstadt and Weber (2006) European universities are behind the US in terms of total investment on higher education and research (4% vs 6%). They argue that the European funding model is primarily dependent on tax support and that this is incapable of sustaining massification while achieving world class quality. They also contrast the difference between EU and US policies in terms of their university-business relationship mission. They argue that the EU’s mission is to build strong partnerships and collaborative networks to sustain existing industry, whereas the US strategy is to take advantage of market efficiencies by building environments and providing universities with the autonomy and agility to create new companies and new industries.

In 2006 the European Commission as part of the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs published a modernisation agenda for universities: *Delivering on the modernisation agenda for universities: education, research and innovation*. The Communication identifies nine areas where it feels changes should be made so that Europe’s universities and higher education institutions can contribute to the implementation of the Lisbon strategy. Specifically, the relationship between higher education institutions and the business community is of strategic importance. The Communication recommended that higher education programmes should be structured to enhance directly the employability of graduates. Higher education institutions should offer more innovative curricula, teaching methods and training/retaining programmes which include broader employment-related skills. Credit-bearing



internships with industry should be integrated into curricula. It should also offer non-degree courses for adults e.g. training and bridging courses for learners not coming through the traditional routes. It should encourage an entrepreneurial mind set amongst learners and researchers. The Communication advocates that universities and higher education institutions need to grasp more directly the challenge and opportunities presented by the lifelong learning agenda. The challenge for higher education is to provide courses for learners at later stages in the life cycle in a flexible manner and the opportunities include moving into new markets e.g. part-time provision as enrolments of learners coming straight from school will fall. Furthermore, the Commissions publication *New Skills for New Jobs* (2008) outlined that the composition of skills emerging from EU universities and training systems does not fully support a truly innovation-driven economy and suggests that mobility periods during education and training helps make people more open to mobility in their working lives.

At present, adult participation in lifelong learning varies greatly and is unsatisfactory in many EU countries. As outlined in the Joint Progress Report (2010, OJ 117/1), the European Union set a target for average participation in lifelong learning throughout the EU at 12.5% by 2010 for adults aged 25-64. In 2008, average participation was 9.5% – the benchmark for 2020 is 15%. Significant recognition has been given at a European level to the importance of adult learning in terms of social cohesion. This can be demonstrated by a range of Council Conclusions, Recommendations, Resolutions and Communications since 2002 including the 2008 Resolution: *It is never too late to learn* which urges Member States to promote the acquisition of knowledge and to develop a culture of lifelong learning, notably by implementing gender equality policies designed to make adult learning more attractive, more accessible and more effective. The European Commission adopted a Communication on Adult Learning in 2006, followed up by an Action Plan in 2007 that was endorsed by national Education Ministers in May 2008. The outcomes of the final conference on implementing the Action Plan on Adult Learning in March 2011 in Budapest highlighted the vital contribution of higher education institutions to both widening access to adult learners and providing the appropriate research to further develop the adult education sector.

Finally, in a period as outlined by Rhodes (2002, p.195) when knowledge is said to multiply every five years there is a heavy public obligation on higher education to facilitate progress and innovation in teaching and learning methodologies. He argues that “*unlike other natural resources, which are depleted by their use, knowledge multiplies at the hands of its users. It expands, even as it is challenged, tested and refined*”. Knowledge is the new economic capital and it needs to be nurtured and more effectively developed throughout the lifespan. Higher education has a pivotal role to play in updating the knowledge and skills of teachers in order to meet the needs of traditional and non-traditional students. To do so, it must develop more effective pedagogies for the 21st century that will capture the imagination of young people and provide for an ageing participatory population who wish to continue to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Responding to the Challenges

Over the last number of years the Bologna Process has helped to put in motion a series of reforms designed to make the European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for learners from other continents. However, further reform is required if Europe is to match the performance of the best performing systems in the world, notably the United States.

The University-Business Forum, a European level platform, is another modernisation initiative launched by the European Commission, providing for structured dialogue between higher education and industry/private sector. The Council Conclusions adopted in May 2009 promote the further development of the University-Business Forum and envisage its extension to include other levels of education and training.

In the *Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué* of 2009 Education Ministers identified priorities for the coming decade. These include three key priorities: lifelong learning, the social dimension including equitable access to higher education and employability. In the *Budapest-Vienna Declaration of March 2010* on the European Higher Education Area Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to implementing the agreed objectives and agenda for the next decade as set out in the *Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué*. They agreed to step up their efforts to accomplish the reform currently underway including to increase the mobility of students and staff, to improve teaching and learning in higher education institutions, to enhance graduate employability, to develop more flexible and sustainable learning pathways and to provide equal opportunities to quality education for underrepresented groups. In a time of unprecedented demand and need for new skills and new knowledge, there is still a lot of



work to be done by the higher education sector to achieve this, as there are still many barriers preventing learners, particularly adults and those from vocational backgrounds accessing higher education.

Rhodes (2002) highlights that constructive partnerships can renew both universities and society and there are “*unlimited opportunities for new partnerships within and between institutions, departments, centres, institutions, schools and colleges, new partnerships between teaching and research, between passive learning and active engagement, between book learning and practical experience, between academic studies and civic engagements, between universities and industry, between universities and non-profits, professional associations and academies, museums, libraries, research centres, government – local, state, federal – and other local, statewide, international and regional bodies, as well as local communities*” (p. 196). Partnerships with industry will provide new revenue and catalyse new economic activity. According to Rhodes, in 1999 in US, universities filed 7,602 patent applications, generating \$641 million in university income.

Gourley and Brenna (2006) in *Strategic Alliances between Universities and their Communities* provide two examples of universities successfully building local, regional and national partnerships, and in doing so, connecting with and meeting the needs of their respective communities. The first is the new South Africa and was part of the post-apartheid government’s policy for “reconstruction and development”. The second is the Open University, which caters for a diverse student population – young and old. Its mission is to reach out to people who have not had the benefits of conventional education and provide learning opportunities through a variety of media including distance learning.

A New Agenda for Change for Higher Education

The Bologna process and in particular the priorities outlined within the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué and the Budapest-Vienna Declaration can only be realised in the context of system reform on the basis of a lifelong learning approach. Higher education, from a number of perspectives – research and innovation, education, pedagogy - has a leading role to play, working closely with other key partners (as advocated by Rhodes above) at national level, to build more coherent education and training systems that support lifelong learning and promote greater economic sustainability and social cohesion. There are five key action lines required at national level to maximise *system connectivity* in favour of an effective lifelong learning approach. These are:

The development of *national innovation and skill strategies*, based on solid research, are a precondition for growth and sustainability. Greater efforts are required at national level to research and evaluate skill needs (transversal and specific) in order to ensure a constant and planned supply of human capital.

The development of *comprehensive national qualifications frameworks* based on learning outcomes are a key tool in supporting greater transparency within education and training systems thereby facilitating greater understanding and trust which is a precondition for lifelong learning. Comprehensive national qualifications frameworks, spanning general education, VET, higher education and adult education and training can be a catalyst for creating greater permeability between the various education and training sub-sectors, thereby ensuring more progressive access, transfer and progression pathways and deconstructing barriers. The description of qualifications in the form of learning outcomes greatly supports lifelong learning as it provides an objective and transparent basis for assessing knowledge, skills and competences irrespective of where or when the learning takes place. It facilitates the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and a life wide approach to acquiring and updating skills.

The establishment of *national quality frameworks and accreditation systems* for all education and training providers offering programmes across the lifespan including with regard to up-skilling, re-training, work-based learning and non-formal and informal learning is a pre-requisite to ensuring relevant, fit for purpose, high quality education and training provision that meets planned national economic and social requirements. Credible quality assurance systems across the education and training sector (including within general, vocational and adult education and training) will also facilitate enhanced access and progression pathways to higher education on the basis of agreed principles and criteria.

The development of a *national lifelong guidance services for individuals* throughout their working lives is required given the urgency to better match supply and demand for knowledge, skills and competences. Such an investment will have a positive impact on the national skill base and productivity levels. The cost of not doing so could be excessive - financially, economically and socially - given the potential waste and misuse of valuable and scarce resources, as Europe’s population ages.



Finally, all the above must be supported by a *coherent national lifelong learning funding* policy framework. Realistically, this needs to be a) based on a combination of public, private and personal contributions and b) agreed and promoted by national stakeholders.

Conclusions

Given the turbulent nature of the times we live in - high unemployment and the need for greater innovation, entrepreneurship and growth – Member States need to refocus, reenergise and actively renew their commitment to lifelong learning by developing concrete, coherent and comprehensive implementation plans and actions that will ensure greater connectivity across their own education and training systems. More cohesive, integrated national systems which eliminate fault lines and facilitate flexible pathways for learners across the sub-sectors (general, vocational, higher and adult learning) will be more cost effective and efficient.

Higher education has a long and established history in Europe in delivering high quality education and research but it has the potential to have an even more illustrious future. It is in a unique and prominent position a) to lead and spear head research that will enhance innovation and entrepreneurship thereby promoting the development of new skills for the future; b) to develop effective pedagogies for the 21st century that will capture the imagination of young people and provide for an ageing participatory population; and c) to work more closely with other partners at national level to build more coherent education and training systems that support lifelong learning, and promote greater economic sustainability and social cohesion.

It is time to earnestly, deconstruct the Berlin wall (between the education and training sub-sectors) and reconstruct (as in South Africa) a new more socially inclusive and sustainable future, by the development of constructive and effective partnerships and by the erection of a solid and coherent infrastructure underpinned by a quality assured and integrated policy framework. Higher education is a key player in the rebuild, particularly in terms of incubating innovation, advancing pedagogy for the diverse participating population, providing enhanced education opportunities across the life span and finally, leading and championing the development of a coherent policy framework and approach to implementing and realising lifelong learning.

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