

EADTU Annual Conference 2013

"Transition to open and on-line education in European universities"

Strand:

1. *National and institutional aspects of **opening up education**: the open education market, **participation in lifelong learning**, international marketing, demands international students, the ability of governments and universities for opening up education, financial mechanisms for open and online education, business models, policy incentives*

Title of paper: "**LLL: Long Live Learning?**"

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Abstract

Although life long learning has been featuring on the educational agenda for years most European countries are a long way from realizing the 15% participation target of the European Commission. By setting up a Centre for working and studying in 2008 the University of Antwerp (Belgium) aimed at moving the idea of life long learning forward.

"Centrum WeST", the Centre for Working and STudying, operates directly under the Department of Education and provides information and guidance to students who combine a full or part time job with their study programme. In close co-operation with the Open University (The Netherlands) the Centre promotes and supports blended course and curriculum development in all faculties in order to meet the requirements of working students. Both faculty members and administrative staff should be aware of life long learners' need for flexibility and respect their specific learning profile (see dissertation by Ann Huybrechts, Institution of Educational and Information Sciences, University of Antwerp, 2012). In order to guarantee an open educational market to working students the institutional strategy needs to be based on innovation and change. Therefore the University of Antwerp focuses on a successful transition to technology based teaching and learning through its electronic platform (Blackboard), which is also used in the evaluation process.

By providing a flexible and open institutional model the university can play a crucial part in a society that gives priority to upgrading the skills and knowledge of its citizens within the European framework of life long learning.

Keywords:

opening up education, participation in life long learning, working students, institutional strategy

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Introduction

Although lifelong learning has been featuring on the educational agenda for years most European countries are a long way from realizing the 15% participation target of the European Commission. By setting up a Centre for Working and STudying (Centrum WeST) in 2008 the University of Antwerp (Belgium) aimed at moving the idea of lifelong learning forward.

FRAMEWORK

- The European Agenda for LLL

In its policy documents for 2020 the European Commission highlights seven flagship initiatives, as shown in the table below.

Smart Growth	Sustainable Growth	Inclusive Growth
Innovation <i>« Innovation Union »</i>	Climate, energy and mobility <i>« Resource efficient Europe »</i>	Employment and skills <i>« Agenda for new skills and jobs »</i>
Education and employment <i>« Youth on the move »</i>	Competitiveness <i>« An industrial policy for the globalisation era »</i>	Fighting poverty <i>« European platform against poverty »</i>
Digital society <i>« A digital agenda for Europe »</i>		

Table 1 : Martina Ní Cheallaigh, European Commission, Brussels, 6 May 2013

Under the heading of “*INCLUSIVE GROWTH: An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs*”, the Commission calls on Member States to ensure that European citizens acquire the skills needed for further learning and future jobs. Not only vocational training and higher education but also adult education plays an important role in reaching this goal. In fact the European Commission has been quite ambitious in setting the Agenda for ET 2020.

PRIORITY	BENCH MARK 2020
Early school leaving	10%
Adult participation in learning	15%

Table2 : Martina Ní Cheallaigh, European Commission, Brussels, 6 May 2013

The following elements are crucial factors in this European vision of adult learning for 2020:

- access to high quality learning any time in life for personal, social and economic ends
- adequate resourcing
- focus on learners and learning outcomes supported by guidance and validation
- learning locally with a significant role for social partners, civil society and local authorities
- mutual learning & solidarity between generations.

These goals make clear that the European Agenda for LLL requires a balanced distribution of education and training resources throughout the life cycle on the basis of objective needs and common responsibilities within a framework of strong public commitment, particularly to second-chance students. This can only be reached by intensifying cooperation with all stakeholders, both on local and national level, in order to improve quality and efficiency of lifelong learning programmes.

WAKE-UP CALL

- Making LLL a reality

Looking at the current state of affairs we are apparently not making any progress towards the benchmark for 2020, resulting in a huge skills mismatch on the labour market.

PRIORITY	BENCHMARK	EU AVERAGE 2006	EU AVERAGE 2011
Early school leaving	10%	15,5%	13,5%
Adult participation in learning	15%	9,5%	8,9%

Table 3 : Martina Ní Cheallaigh, European Commission, Brussels, 6 May 2013

Educational attainment	Skills supply in 2011	Forecasted skills demand 2020
High	26.8%	35%
Medium	46.6%	50%
Low	26.6%	15%

Table 4 : Martina Ní Cheallaigh, European Commission, Brussels, 6 May 2013

In order to reach the European ET targets for 2020 it is the urgent responsibility of each Member State to evaluate the current situation on a national level and to respond promptly and adequately to this wake-up call.

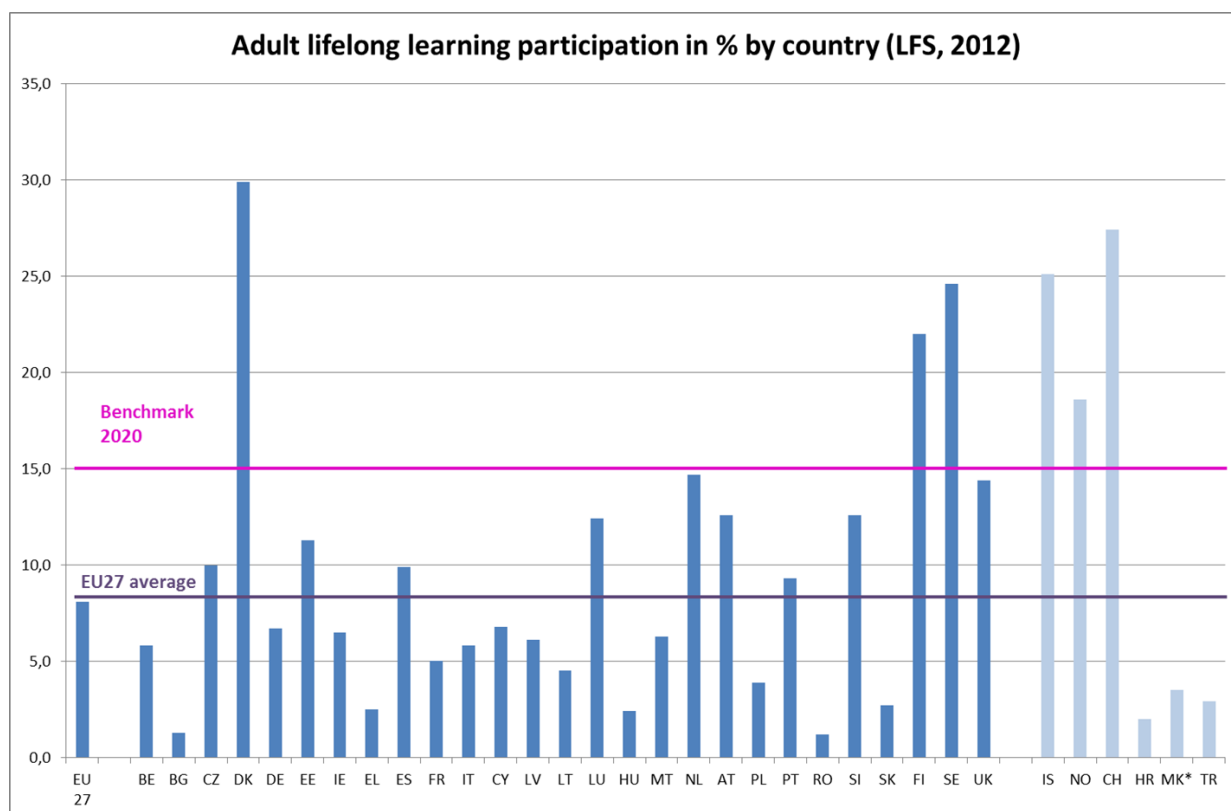


Table 5 : Martina Ní Cheallaigh, European Commission, Brussels, 6 May 2013

In order to make lifelong learning a reality in 2020 some national and European priority areas should get a more prominent position on the Agenda:

- improving the quality and efficiency of continuous education and training
- promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through adult learning
- enhancing the creativity and innovation of adults and their learning environments
- improving the knowledge base on adult learning and monitoring the adult learning sector.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE AGENDA

- Institutional level: University of Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium)
 - Policy declaration

In its policy declaration for the academic period 2009-2013 and renewed for 2013-2016 the University of Antwerp defined some explicit targets on lifelong learning:

- The number of working students should increase from 700 to 1000 (i.e. from 3 to 5% of the student population)
- Faculties should adapt more study programmes for the benefit of working students
- Faculties should develop more short post-academic programmes (20-60 ECTS)
- Faculties should integrate more courses of the Open University (The Netherlands) in their study programmes, by recognizing the credits (ECTS) or by setting up joint programmes
- The national authorities should (financially) reward the university's efforts for working students.

- Core values

The University of Antwerp distinguishes four interrelated core values in its vision on education, which apply to lifelong learning as well:

- *Nexus education - research.* Academic education is rooted in scientific research. University students need to acquire essential knowledge and skills to fulfil their part in society.
- *Competence-oriented education.* Students develop competences as an integrated whole of knowledge, skills and behaviours. Thanks to these competences the university graduates are able to act effectively and efficiently on an academic level in a professional environment.
- *Student-centred and activating education.* Students are seen as active and independent partners who manage their own learning. The educational programme should stimulate and support that attitude. It has an eye for specific talents and a genuine respect for different educational, professional, social, cultural or religious backgrounds and individual ambitions.
- *Internationally oriented education.* The university wants to foster an open and global vision in its students by international exchange and joint programmes. Students get the opportunity to prepare themselves for participation in scientific research at an international level.

- Action plan for degree-oriented lifelong learning: executed by Centrum WeST

In 2006 Antwerp University started two educational innovation projects concerning working students (in the faculties of Law and Social Sciences). The main purpose was to offer an alternative for the traditional "evening programmes". Both projects expired after one year but the University of Antwerp wanted to continue its efforts for the specific needs of the working students and launched Centrum WeST, a centre for working and studying, in September 2008.

“Centrum WeST”, the Centre for Working and STudying, operates directly under the Department of Education, as it provides information and guidance to students who combine a full or part time job with a degree-oriented study programme.

Centrum WeST, the Centre for Working and Studying, covers four main goals:

1) widening access to higher education

The target group of the centre are students who combine their study with a regular job. Since they also have a third aspect to consider, their family life, the combination is not obvious at all. So the aim of the centre is to increase and sustain the motivation for lifelong learning, particularly among economically disadvantaged or low-qualified groups, by offering information and guidance to working students.

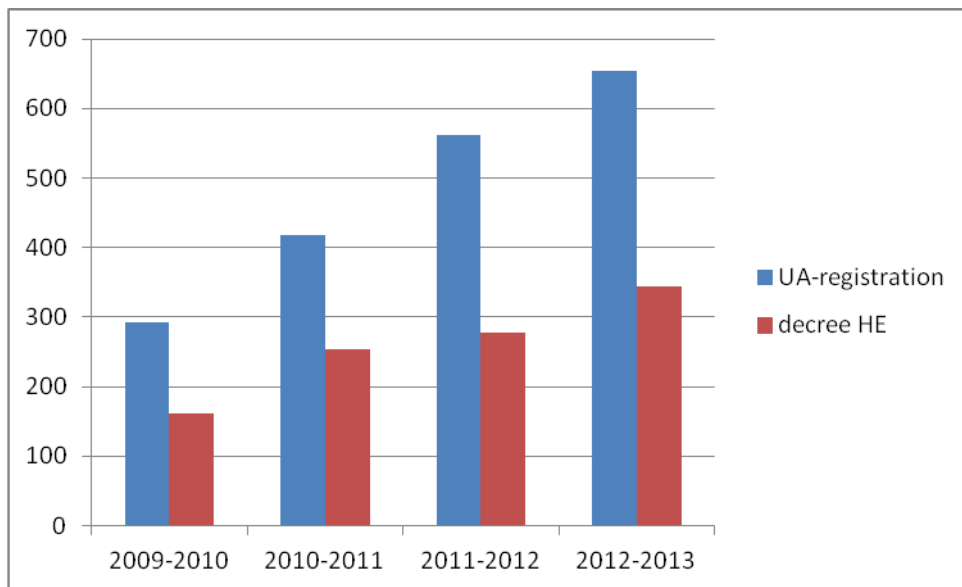


Table 6: registration of working students (UA-definition vs Finance Decree HE)

Over the years the Centre generated a continuous growth in its number of registered working students. However, the Finance Decree (HE, Flemish government, 2008) only offers extra financial support for working students who fit into a limited definition: i.e. working students who access higher education without a master's degree. Nevertheless the University of Antwerp decided to target all students who want to combine work and study in order to promote lifelong learning on a wider scale.

2) coaching and supporting working students

Besides informing working students through various channels (e.g. brochures, website, newsletter, email, personal appointments), Centrum WeST also supports them in their study. Working students often have not studied for a long period of time and going (back) to university might be a new environment they are not familiar with. Problems may arise with planning the study load, IT skills, reading and writing academic texts, etc. Therefore Centrum WeST organizes -in cooperation with other departments and services- evening sessions and workshops to learn or refresh skills that are required for an academic study. The centre also offers networking activities and lectures on lifelong learning related topics.

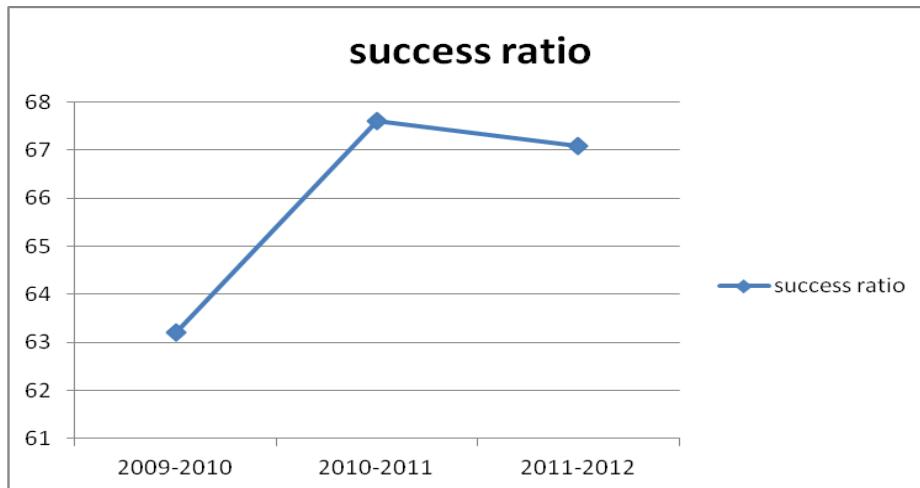


Table 7: success ratio (% acquired ECTS) of working students

3) development of courses in blended learning in collaboration with the teaching staff

In order to guarantee an open educational market to working students the institutional strategy needs to be based on innovation and change. Therefore the University of Antwerp focuses on a successful transition to technology based teaching and learning through its electronic platform (Blackboard), which is also used in the evaluation process.

This system of blended learning is an interesting approach for the working students since the amount of lectures and working sessions can be strongly reduced and the study material is developed for distant learning and adapted for self study. In close co-operation with the Open University (The Netherlands) the Centre promotes and supports blended course and curriculum development in all faculties in order to meet the requirements of working students.

4) Promoting the interests of lifelong learners

Centrum WeST tries to make sure that the interests of the working students are taken into account, both through internal collaboration with different university departments and services and external contacts with all stakeholders. Both faculty members and administrative staff should be aware of life long learners' need for flexibility and respect their specific learning profile (see dissertation by Ann Huybrechts, Institution of Educational and Information Sciences, University of Antwerp, 2012).

Reaching this goal of providing effective continuing education and training for working students requires rethinking and redirecting traditional educational systems towards stimulating open and flexible learning paths that accommodate different types of learners in a supportive mutual learning environment.

Embedding concepts of widening access and lifelong learning in their institutional strategies is definitely a fundamental task for the universities. However, it is also a common goal for society as a whole to stimulate a culture of lifelong learning which should develop incentives for working students and curriculum design fit for purpose. There is also an urgent need for debate on how lifelong learning programmes that will benefit individuals, employers and society as a whole can be funded fairly and adequately. In times of economic crisis and budget restrictions the key challenge is to find ways to open up the current educational services to a more diversified student group and to ensure further learning opportunities throughout a lifelong career.

- European level: *towards more flexibility in higher education*

In the twenty-first century European universities are faced with complex social and economic challenges that are generated mainly by the effects of globalisation, demographic changes and technological innovations. The resulting need for constant adaptation can only be met by universities who engage their students in lifelong learning to deal with local developments within a wider European perspective. The national strategies should be developed within a European dialogue among universities which are willing to contribute to a culture of lifelong learning that meets diversified learner needs.

In recent years working students have become a specific target group, both for the national governments (e.g the decree on the financing of Flemish higher education) and for the universities themselves. The changes in the landscape of higher education in recent years have created more possibilities for this target group. So European universities have adopted a very flexible system for full-time and part-time study that entails some essential LLL characteristics:

- recognition procedures for prior learning (both formal and informal)
 - o Students can make use of recognition procedures for formal and non-formal prior learning. By way of these procedures students can be exempted from one or more courses of their degree programme.
- bridging programmes for access to master degrees
 - o Universities can offer so-called “bridging programmes” for bachelors graduated at vocationally oriented institutions who want to supplement their study with a master’s degree.
- flexible study progress
 - o Flexible study progress. Students can compose quite freely study programmes ranging from 3 to 66 ECTS per academic year. Students can obtain academic degrees at their own pace.

Unfortunately this degree of flexibility offered by the educational institutions does still not correspond with the reality on the work floor, where the demand for lifelong learning (79%) apparently is not met equally by the opportunities offered (41%).

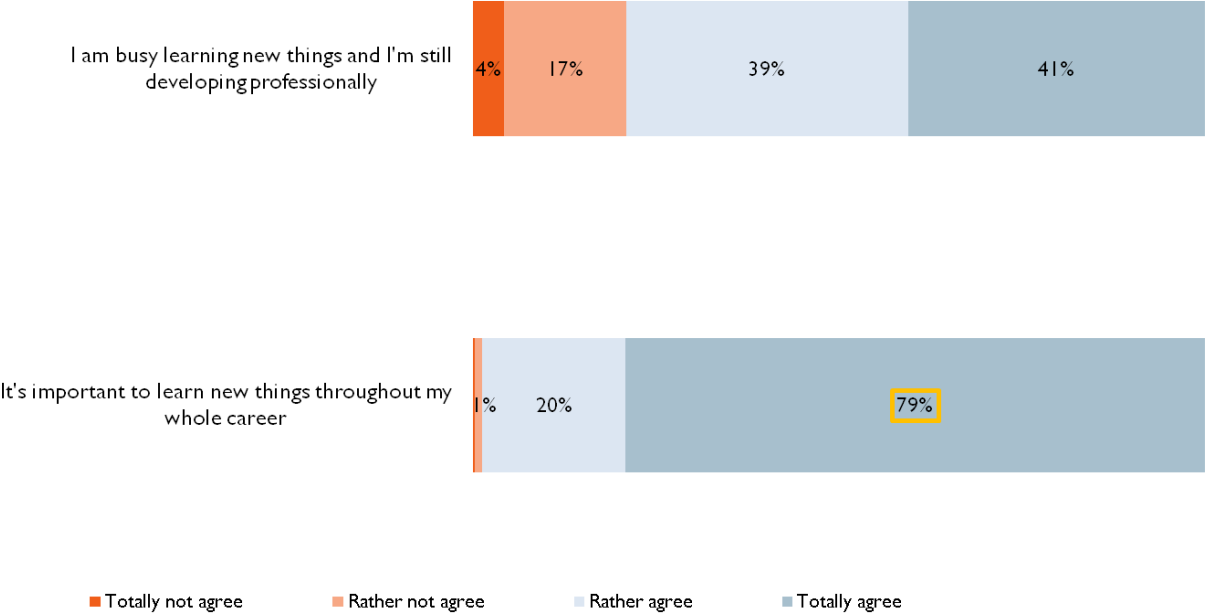


Table 9: Lifelong Learning in the Human Age, Experis Survey, 2012

Flexible learning paths which are clearly designed from a learner-centered perspective successfully enter the element of STUDY into equation of the WORK-LIFE balance. Governments should also remove specific legal obstacles that discourage many potential learners from taking advantage of lifelong learning opportunities. This means taking action on matters such as social security rights, precariousness of employment rights, lack of financial support for lifelong learning and loss of pension contributions during periods of study.

LONG TERM ENGAGEMENT

The SIRUS-project (Shaping Inclusive and Responsive University Strategies) highlighted the need for “The Engaged University” which respects the agreements of the EUA Charter on LLL, as drafted in 2008. The University of Antwerp fully agreed to signing this EUA Charter because it considers lifelong learning an intrinsic characteristic of degree-oriented learning at its university. In fact, all its lifelong learning actions can be traced back to one phrase in the long-term strategic goals the University of Antwerp, as defined in its mission statement in 2003:

The University of Antwerp wants to offer everybody with the appropriate competences the opportunity to acquire scientific knowledge, attitudes and skills to realise his or her role in society. In the light of the need for life-long learning, the Universiteit Antwerpen organises an educational offer in initial, advanced and continuing studies, accessible for specific target groups of all generations.

An institution with a culture of inclusiveness is driven by a strategy that balances academic values and individual development. By adopting an institutional strategy in which the concept of lifelong learning plays an important role universities can fulfill their commitment to serve society.

Conclusion

The lifelong learning agenda is a time-consuming process of encouraging institutions to move from an activity-based approach to an inclusive strategy for different types of learners. By providing an open and flexible institutional model universities can play a crucial part in a society that gives priority to upgrading the skills and knowledge of its citizens within the European framework of life long learning.

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