



**TRENDS V:
UNIVERSITIES SHAPING THE
EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA**

BY DAVID CROSIER, LEWIS PURSER & HANNE SMIDT

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**UNIVERSITIES SHAPING THE EUROPEAN
HIGHER EDUCATION AREA**

AN EUA REPORT

Written by

David Crosier, Lewis Purser & Hanne Smidt

5. LIFELONG LEARNING AND WIDENING ACCESS

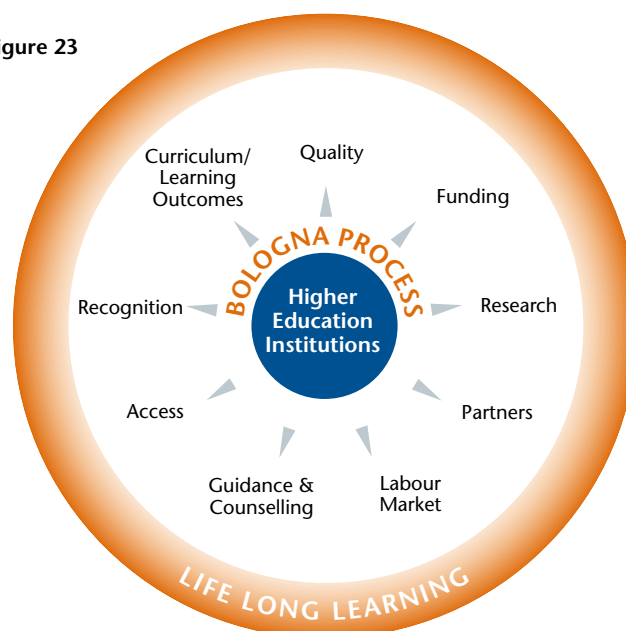
Introduction

Lifelong learning offers ways to rethink approaches to higher education, as well as for institutions to develop relationships with other formal and informal education providers and the rest of society. However, the term “lifelong learning” is itself the subject of conceptual misunderstanding, used confusingly both to cover continuing education and training for qualified graduates, and initial education for disadvantaged groups often through part-time education. Although it may have been expected at the beginning of the decade that lifelong learning would be central to institutional reform processes, this has so far failed to happen, with issues of structural reform taking precedence over these challenges. Lifelong learning has thus been developed more on the periphery of institutional strategy, rather than as a driving element of it.

Yet economic imperatives seem to be bringing the agenda once again to the forefront of attention, as national and European policy discussions focus on the development of a more effective workforce for the knowledge society. Europe’s changing demography, with ageing societies, declining younger generations, and the dramatic increase in representation of women in the student population, is inevitably set to have a major impact. In some countries, institutions may merge or close, but many can also be expected to diversify their educational offer and target different profiles of students.

The lifelong learning agenda challenges institutions to reorient provision to enable a broader range of individuals to fulfil their potential. Widening access is therefore a central element of the lifelong learning agenda. These issues have therefore been given considerable attention in the Trends V project, to find out to what extent the renewed political focus is mirrored in institutional reality. Questions posed in the Trends V questionnaire are not, however, directly comparable to the information gathered in 2003. At that time, the focus was on the strategic development of lifelong learning, whereas Trends V has concentrated on the activity that institutions are pursuing, and on the utility or otherwise of tools such as qualifications frameworks in this context.

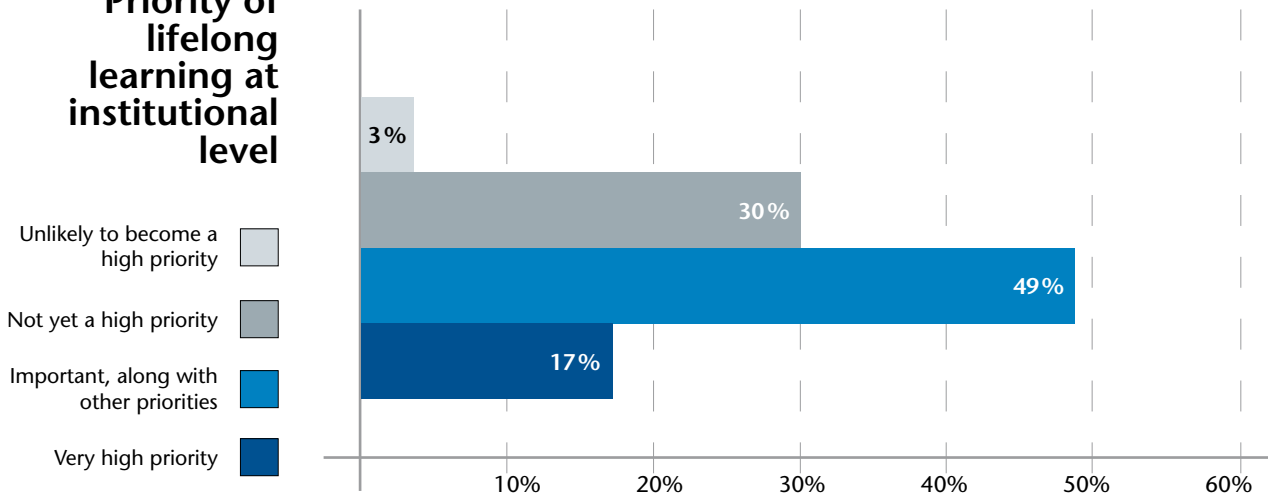
Figure 23



The Bologna process and lifelong learning

5.1 The priority of lifelong learning in European higher education institutions

Figure 24
Priority of lifelong learning at institutional level



The Trends V questionnaire responses indicate that lifelong learning is a part of the educational landscape for the large majority of higher education institutions. The questionnaire looked at what priority European higher education institutions give to lifelong learning. Two thirds of the institutions (66%) answered that it either had high priority or had priority along with other priorities. However, only 17% indicated that it had very high priority for their institution.

Only in five countries (Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Italy and Serbia and Montenegro) did over 50% of the responding universities indicate that it is not yet a priority, but it may become one. The countries where over 30% of the responding institutions considered it to be a high priority were Austria, Denmark, Ireland and Russia. Interestingly, there is no notable difference in the distribution between universities and other higher education institutions, nor if the sample is divided by the way they define their communities: regional, national, European or worldwide.

Although these findings are not directly comparable with Trends III, it is interesting to note that in 2003, 35% of institutions indicated that they had developed an overall strategy for lifelong learning and 31% that they were in the initial stages of doing so. Thus in 2003 66% of institutions were engaged in strategy discussions on lifelong learning, while exactly the same percentage of institutions today consider that lifelong learning has high or very high priority.

Although these statistics suggest uncanny coherence in the development of lifelong learning, little or no evidence was found from questionnaires or site visits of comprehensive national debates on lifelong learning strategies. Indeed no institution mentioned that it had taken part in a consultation process on the development of a national strategy despite the fact that the Trends III survey had pointed out that:

“a majority of countries have the intention or are in the process of developing a LLL strategy. Such policies already exist in one third of Bologna signatory countries, namely in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden and the UK.” (Trends III p.91)

National Rectors’ Conferences also reported as part of the Trends V exercise that institutions have yet to consider lifelong learning as providing an overall framework for education in a cradle-to-grave perspective. Thus, it seems that while rhetoric on lifelong learning has been a constant feature of policy discussion throughout the Bologna period, action has still to follow.

5.2 Lifelong learning practices at European higher education institutions

The reports from the diverse sample of European institutions reveal no coherent picture of the understanding and implementation of lifelong learning, although a number of institutions indicated that lifelong learning is an area of growth, an area where diversified funding sources can become more dominant, and an area of great possibilities for regional cooperation and development. The regional stakeholders ranged from other higher education institutions to local or regional SMEs and public employers who through lifelong learning can update their staff and act as sounding boards for other full-time programmes.

The site-visit teams encountered a number of different examples of how the provision of specialised courses had improved cooperation between higher education institutions and local or regional industry - often as a result of partnership with the innovation office of the university. One example was found in Romania where EC Structural Funds financed the provision of professional up-dating for civil servants by the university in co-operation with the public authorities.

Although no institution visited defined its mission in a comprehensive lifelong learning perspective, the site visits revealed that universities have a variety of offers under the heading of non-formal or informal education together with offers of professional education. Definition of educational offers and practices vary between countries and include education for:

- full-time mature students
- liberal adult education
- part-time degrees
- diplomas for those in work (post-experience)
- continuing professional development and training courses
- staff development
- open access courses
- regional development through open and distance learning, and networks of partnerships and collaboration with local stakeholders

A range of innovative practice was also identified in a variety of institutions. “Junior” university courses is a term used in some places for courses that prepare or motivate young people to take an interest in higher education. Some institutions were targeting specific secondary schools in order to attract the best students through this type of outreach activity. However, during the course of these site-visits no examples were found of access courses directed specifically towards socially disadvantaged students.

At the other end of the age spectrum, “senior” university courses also illustrated the diversification of the educational offer. Many of these courses are of a “self- improvement” character and are targeted specifically at the over 55 year old or retired population. Such senior university courses were found in several countries, but the course structure was different in each. In Portugal the “University studies for Seniors” (started in 2006) were intended for graduates over 55 years and, according to the course description, would give them:

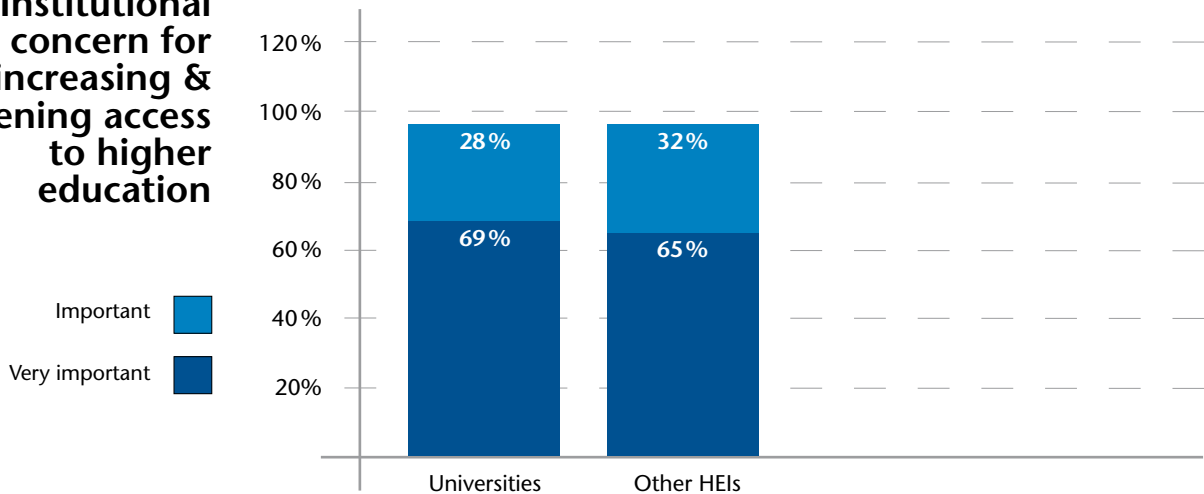
“an opportunity to re-evaluate the knowledge acquired both theoretically and through professional practice. Even though this kind of course falls neatly into one of the traditional university tasks, i.e. service to the community, it may also be seen as being part of teaching and research activities, since the programme aims at developing a self-questioning and research attitude”.

Part-time or open university students also play an increasingly important role in a large number of universities in Europe. Such students should not be confused with the large number of full-time students who are in fact only studying part time (see chapter 3). In some countries this profile of student is regarded as an important possibility for institutions to diversify both access and funding as typically such students will pay for their study programme or the costs are paid, at least in part, by employers. In the UK, for example 40% of all students are part-time and, according to a report by Brian Ramsden for Universities UK, the UK government is currently considering measures for funding this student category.

5.3 Lifelong learning, widening access and the social dimension

The Trends V data shows that 97% of all European higher education institutions find the widening of participation to be either very important or important, with very little distinction to be made between universities and other higher education institutions. Indeed, if the sample is divided into universities and other higher education institutions, 69% of universities find it very important to increase and widen access to higher education while the corresponding figure for other higher education institutions is 65%.

Figure 25
Institutional concern for increasing & widening access to higher education



Curiously, although 97% of European higher education institutions support widening participation, only 17% of all European higher education institutions expect socio-economically disadvantaged students to have better opportunity to access higher education in the future, while 69% think that opportunities will improve a little or stay about the same.

This lack of optimism for improving access for disadvantaged students is even more difficult to understand given the finding that institutions tend to consider that autonomy is improving. One explanation could be that access to higher education is only partially affected by institutions themselves, and to a large extent is a function of government policy and the prior educational system. This is perhaps also the reason why, when asked specifically on the need to take action in their institution more than 50% consider that their institution is already taking sufficient action to improve access for socio-economically disadvantaged students. Meanwhile 40% of all higher education institutions find that there is insufficient action taken at their institution.

Broken down by country, only in Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Macedonia, Poland, Romania and the UK did more than 25% of all institutions expect better opportunities for access of socially and economically disadvantaged students. In Finland, Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland and the Ukraine more than 50% of all institutions expect the possibilities to remain the same and in Germany and Russia more than 20% expect less opportunities. In Germany, where institutions are seemingly the most pessimistic, as many as 35% of the sample expect fewer opportunities for the disadvantaged in the future.

On the question of the need for further action to improve access by the higher education institutions themselves, more than 60% of respondents in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Switzerland, Russia, and the UK consider that sufficient action is being taken. On the other hand, in Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Macedonia and Spain 60% or more of the respondents considered that they could improve the access of disadvantaged students to their institution, while in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Germany, Iceland, Lithuania and Ukraine more than 20% of the institutions did not think that it was part of their responsibility.

The survey thus found no consistency between the overwhelming consensus (97%) on the importance of widening access and the low expectation that European institutions have on their own possibilities of further assisting in the widening of access.

The site visits tended to confirm the impression that improving the diversity of the student profile is often not a major concern for institutions. On the contrary, there are few or no incentives to take action in favour of widening participation, while future funding seems increasingly dependent on demonstrable "academic quality". In such a climate many institutions are therefore focusing on improving their competitiveness by trying to attract the best students possible rather than by aiming consciously to improve the diversity of the student base.

The social agenda of lifelong learning is a complex societal issue, and does not only involve the widening of access, but also the diversification of the educational offer and the funding of wider opportunities with the goal of improving employability. The site visits revealed an ongoing debate on the relationship between quality and diversification, with many considering the idea of diversifying the student body as being equated with lowering quality. The prevalence of this perception in the European academic community suggests that serious and broad debate on these issues is overdue.

While quality of education will increasingly be perceived in relation to institutions' capacity to respond to the diversity of citizen needs, perceptions of academic quality and associated institutional behaviour merit attention. If widening participation is to be a goal for higher education institutions, action will need to be taken on matters such as career structures, so that not only excellent research is rewarded in academic careers, but also excellent teaching, and student success. Such debates are yet to take place in many institutions and countries, but unless they do, it is difficult to see why individuals and institutions would alter their behaviour.

Trends V shows that there is still much work to be done to address this agenda, and that it is closely related to national policies, culture and attitudes to retention and employability of students. The site visits did not indicate widening of participation through non formal or informal programmes as an important issue, yet both increasing and widening participation in higher education are key elements for the creation of a European knowledge society. There remains much work to be done to open up access to learning opportunities for citizens throughout their lives.

5.4 Lifelong learning and the qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area

"New style" qualifications frameworks are tools that are designed with the goals of making qualifications more transparent and learning paths more flexible. They build on the Bologna tools for creating the European Higher Education Area, including ECTS and the DS. Yet the results of the Trends V survey and the reports from Rectors' Conferences show that, so far, national qualification frameworks have not been adopted or implemented except in a very few countries, and even when they exist, many institutions as well as citizens are unaware of them.

Implemented national qualification frameworks exist at the moment only in Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom, while a number of other countries have adopted legislation, but have yet to proceed with implementation. Yet the main finding in the survey is that institutions are currently either unaware of this issue or confused by it. European higher education institutions do not at the moment have any clear conception of national qualification frameworks, and indeed many institutions are unaware of whether or not there is a qualifications framework in their country.

Part of this confusion can perhaps be explained by the fact that the majority of European countries have some system of classification of qualifications, albeit one that has tended to act as a barrier between different levels or types of learning. Thus institutions may consider that a qualifications framework is in place if there is a system that specifies that an individual would have to complete one level in order to access the next level – from primary to secondary and from secondary to tertiary. Such existing systems may be confused with NQFs, even though the purpose of the new-type qualifications frameworks is to overcome barriers rather than to underline them.

Only Irish institutions appear to have a coherent understanding on this topic, since none responded that there is no NQF and 56% find the NQF useful when developing LLL. This is no doubt related to the fact that, since before the Irish framework was put in place in 2003, extensive consultation and communication activities were undertaken with all stakeholders, including the higher education institutions. The key to establishing a qualifications framework successfully therefore appears to be this element of broad societal dialogue, ensuring that all potential beneficiaries are involved in the process of development. The policy goals of increasing flexibility in learning paths between different educational sectors also need to be stated explicitly.

5.5 Lifelong learning and recognition of prior learning

While the vast majority of European institutions support the concept of lifelong learning, its implementation is hugely complex. Institutions in the process of reconsidering their traditional curriculum in the light of current needs should acknowledge that learning takes place in many contexts and this has implications for the design of study programmes in terms of structure, delivery and assessment. Flexible learning paths, and the accreditation of work placements, blended learning, company in-house training, distance education, e-learning and learning through work schemes all need to be increased and formally integrated within mainstream higher education provision.

These are issues that as yet seem to have been considered only on the margins of institutional strategic development. Yet the introduction of flexible learning paths is pivotal to the European Higher Education Area, and combining the different tools developed through the Bologna process gives the potential for major innovation and transformation. If implemented in a flexible way these tools have the potential to enhance the provision of education to a diverse population, but it is essential that they are developed and implemented simply, and that work is undertaken to ensure they are understood by all stakeholders. As Stephen Adam points out in his introduction to the Bologna Process seminar on recognition in Riga, 2007:

“When developments in qualifications frameworks, cycles, learning outcomes, quality assurance, credits, recognition and lifelong learning are put together something new and powerful will be created. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) will provide immense opportunities for countries and institutions providing they fully embrace the changes inherent within the new architecture for higher education that is emerging... However, it must be remembered that for most countries the difficult task of producing and implementing qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes is just commencing.”

Among the instruments to support flexibility, transparency, mobility and academic quality are a range of tools and processes to recognise prior learning, including Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL), Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), and Work-Based Learning (WBL). In the future, these will surely be combined with ECTS to express learning outcomes of prior learning through credits, and then also linked to the different levels of qualification frameworks. However, such processes are currently only in their early infancy, and institutions need to take responsibility to ensure positive developments. Particular care should be taken not to develop overcomplicated, time-consuming, bureaucratic and expensive systems which deter academics as well as citizens seeking recognition of their skills and abilities.

The Trends V survey, the site visits and the focus group meetings all show that European universities are working with a broader range of issues related to higher education and lifelong learning than is generally recognised. Each individual university is at the centre of a growing number of processes and demands, and effort must be made to connect processes that sometimes appear to have different drivers, but which all rely on well-functioning institutions for coherence and sense.

Key Findings:

- *Dialogue on lifelong learning provision with employers and other societal stakeholders is currently lacking.*
- *Excellence in all higher education missions needs to be rewarded, as institutions require greater incentives to respond to the challenges of broadening their educational offer to “non traditional” students.*
- *National qualification frameworks are currently an aspirational rather than an actual tool for most systems. To be effective, they should be designed coherently with broad societal consultation and strong involvement of higher education institutions.*

KEY ISSUE

Institutions in the process of reconsidering their traditional curriculum need to give a higher priority to lifelong learning, and to consider this agenda as a central element of institutional strategic development.

The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 46 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations EUA ensures that the independent voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact on their activities.

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