

RETHINKING HIGHER EDUCATION - DEVELOPING A MODEL OF A EUROPEAN OPEN UNIVERSITY

Recommendations for action for successful diversity management

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Abstract

The demand for a highly skilled workforce and accordingly for education and qualifications is constantly rising in today's knowledge-based society. That is why higher education must be made accessible to those groups of students who have traditionally participated less, by paving the way for lifelong learning at European universities.

To reach the new learners, European higher education institutions need to rethink some of their conventional structures and traditional formats to build successful diversity management and thus become lifelong learning universities.

Within this context, the paper examines which characteristics are relevant for opening up universities to new target groups successfully and how to deal with an increasingly diverse student body effectively by deducing recommendations for action from four European institutions.

Keywords: Open Universities, Lifelong Learning, Diversity Management

1 INTRODUCTION

The Bologna process fundamentally influenced European higher education (HE), and recognised lifelong learning (LLL) as one of its essential elements. In Europe, there will be a growing demand in the future for university graduates who gain further qualifications within the framework of LLL but keep working at the same time. Also, people who have not previously found their way into academia will frequent universities increasingly, e.g. to obtain a bachelor's degree alongside work.

Universities, therefore, need to broaden access progressively to provide HE in the future not only for traditional target groups, but also for employed students and non-traditional learners. By doing so, higher education institutions will experience great change in the composition of their student bodies, resulting in diversity and an increasing number of students who would otherwise never have found the path into higher education. Thus, diversity management will be a central challenge for the HE system in coming years, with the universities seeing themselves obliged to address the needs of new, diverse groups of students very specifically.

1.1 Background of the project

Higher Education must be made accessible to those groups of students who have traditionally participated less, by paving the way for LLL at European higher education institutions. Within this context the ongoing European research project "Opening Universities for Lifelong Learning" (OPULL) is investigating critical success factors for how higher education institutions can successfully open up to those wishing to engage in lifelong learning.

In the first phase, the current state of lifelong learning in the partner countries Germany, Denmark, Finland and the United Kingdom was mapped, revealing essential parameters in all countries for easing access to HE for lifelong learners.

In the second phase a quantitative survey with lifelong learners and qualitative interviews with university staff were conducted to evaluate four European best practice examples, in particular the

Professional School at Leuphana University Lüneburg (Germany), the Open University (UK), the Open University at the University of Helsinki (Finland) and the University of Southern Denmark (Denmark).

Currently the project is in the third and last phase that aims to derive potential courses of action for widening participation in European higher education. During this final phase all the results from the project will be summed up, bringing the different perspectives and focuses together.

1.1.1 The subject of interest: the lifelong learner

The focus of the OPULL-project was upon the lifelong learner. When discussing open universities and widening participation, the non-traditional student (see for example [1], [2]) is often a topic. But the designation 'non-traditional' was not specific enough, since it also includes equity groups who were not of major interest to the OPULL-project. This is why we introduced the concept of the "lifelong learner" [3]. By this term we mainly refer to vocational learners, e.g. those who come to university after completing a vocational education or after at least two years of work experience. But these vocational learners are also late learners (students aged 30 and over), alternative learners (students in study formats different from contact study modes) and employed learners (students working full or part time while studying). Thus, the concept of the lifelong learner itself is multidimensional with respect to educational background, both from a circumstantial perspective as well as from a dispositional perspective.

Müller and Repo developed their own typology of lifelong learners based on the motivation for (re-) entering higher education [4]. Using this approach, the cluster analysis of the OPULL-dataset identified three types of lifelong learners: the careerist who enters HE for professional development, the educational aspirant who enters for personal development and the degree orientated who wants to obtain a HE degree for re-orientation and/or the academic title itself.

From this educational, circumstantial and dispositional diversity perspective, partly following Thomas and May, lifelong learners have a different and often more complex educational biography, different life circumstances as a result of employment and/or family responsibilities and enter university for various reasons that often differ from the motives of traditional students [5].

1.1.2 The countries of interest: Germany, the UK, Denmark and Finland

For the research, cases in Denmark, Finland, Germany and the UK were selected. This selection was based on the history of the welfare states of these countries that led to their different educational regimes [6] on the one hand, and the lifelong learning regimes these countries possess [7].

Germany, for example, was chosen as a representative of the conservative welfare system - the neo-corporatist European model - that is characterised by social stratification within the educational system, partly as a result of secondary schooling.

The UK represents the liberal and Anglo-Saxon tradition with a high share of private providers, between-school variation and, similar to Germany, high levels of educational inequality which reflects a perpetual class divide. In contrast to the social democratic welfare states, the Nordic model, lifelong learning and adult education are of minor importance in the UK.

In Denmark the principle of universalism exists in all sectors, even in the educational system, and LLL is a clear policy objective. Finland is even more developed in this area since, as a result of legislation, nearly all Finnish universities have affiliated open universities that offer lifelong learning programmes [3].

1.1.3 The institutions of interest: the University of Southern Denmark, the Professional School at Leuphana University Lüneburg, the Open University at the University of Helsinki and the Open University UK

The institutions that were selected for the OPULL project all have different ways of including the diversity that comes along with engaging with lifelong learning, to incorporate it into their educational structures. Jones and Thomas identified four ideal types of institutional responses to widen participation [8]. The responses varied from the altruistic response, which involves no institutional change but raising the aspirations of underrepresented groups, to the transformative response, which is characterised by a change in the institution's structure, its culture and in admission processes as well as in priorities.

The *University of Southern Denmark* (SDU) followed a utilitarian approach by implementing LLL into the existing structure through specific LLL and degree programmes targeted to the needs of non-traditional students.

Leuphana University Lüneburg followed a more transformative approach by establishing itself as a university with a previously unique profile within the German higher education area. Within the realignment of its organisational structure, a school providing continuing university education for vocationally qualified and employed students was established, namely the Professional School.

The University of Helsinki outsourced the whole focus on LLL to a special institution, the *Open University at the University of Helsinki*. The flexibility needed by lifelong learners is satisfied through alternative and flexible study concepts as well as free entry for everybody without admission requirements.

The *Open University* (UK) with its innovative study formats (distance learning, part-time studies) and its comprehensive support services is dedicated, in contrast to the other best practice examples, as a whole to lifelong learning [9], [10].

2 EVALUATING PERSPECTIVES ON OPEN UNIVERSITIES AND HOW TO DEAL WITH A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY

The following section evaluates the barriers, problems and critical success factors that were identified through the research in the OPULL project. The first phase of the OPULL project consisted of the mapping of success factors for opening access for lifelong learners in the countries researched. In section 2.1 the results are presented to give an insight into the current state of the art in these countries in this respect. In the second phase of the OPULL project a quantitative survey with lifelong learners and qualitative interviews with HE staff were conducted to learn about problems and ways to improve the process of opening up the respective institutions. The gathered data was analysed from different perspectives and the results are summarised in section 2.2. Lastly, within the third phase of the project, qualitative interviews were conducted with selected HE experts exploring the institutional and country developments with regard to widening participation for lifelong learners. Section 2.3 sums up the findings from this educational expert perspective.

2.1 Country perspectives on open universities

When mapping the educational systems of all the countries, four parameters following a top-down process were considered essential for easing access for lifelong learners: attitudes towards open access in the society, national educational policy decisions in general and those concerning LLL in particular, the permeability between different educational subsystems and between vocational and academic paths and, finally, existing best practice examples for open universities [3].

The four countries are at different developmental stages however. Regarding the attitudes towards open access in the society, the Nordic countries are most developed since these societies are more liberal towards equal educational opportunities in general, and also from a historical point of view. In Germany and England one can find a different picture with class divisions, high levels of educational inequality and a divide between the academic and vocational world.

The second parameter of relevance identified is national educational decisions, especially in respect to LLL. Although some good policy initiatives have been enacted in the UK in recent years, such as Aimhigher, the Nordic countries are in the lead again here because of their long-standing tradition of adult education which is also grounded in their legislation.

Thirdly, the permeability between different educational subsystems and between vocational and academic paths was considered relevant. Here still again the Nordic countries do best with their educational systems that promote equal opportunities for all and their long history of adult education. But there are some positive developments to be found in Germany, too. The ANKOM projects, for example, aim at increasing permeability between educational systems through the recognition of prior learning; and in the UK, the Lifelong Learning Networks serve as best practice examples for strengthening the relationships between employers, universities and other learning providers.

Countries in the lead for the best practice examples of open universities are the UK, with the Open University UK, and Finland with their Open Universities Legislation [3].

2.2 Institutional perspectives on open universities

From an organisational, descriptive perspective, three critical success factors could be identified for the successful implementation of lifelong learning programmes at all universities: First, an institution-wide, visible commitment to lifelong learning, which must be firmly anchored in the organisational structure of the institution. Secondly, effective support structures for non-traditional students, especially tailored teaching and learning methods and a certain flexibility must exist. Finally, universities should create a positive, open learning environment - open to the outside world, to industry and through cooperation within the institution [9].

Taking an empirical and explorative perspective from the students' level, the study identified key factors that have facilitated the process of opening up access at the respective institutions. Among them, refined support structures are of major importance. An analysis of the support offered at the universities in Germany, Finland and Denmark showed that lifelong learners need more and better support services in all participating countries. In particular, individual counseling for personal and career development is required [11].

Analysis showed, furthermore, that the main barriers for or problems of non-traditional students, and thus the central starting point for institutions that want to open up to LLL, are the learners' lack of time and an overall incompatibility of studies, family and work. Thus, the balance between study, work and leisure has a great impact on the rate at which lifelong learners drop out. Employed students in particular are often disadvantaged by conflicting demands on their time while studying, since it is very challenging for them to divide the available time optimally between study, work and family life. Consequently, they experience more stress, a lower life and study satisfaction as well as less study success. That is why in Germany, Denmark and Finland, the analysis revealed low to moderate expressions of students satisfaction with their work-learn-life-balance. External factors (such as support from the university or family) as well as internal factors (such as adaptation or self-regulatory strategies) can improve this balance, but external factors are significantly less important for student satisfaction than the internal ones. Significantly, the implementation of more flexible study modes/methods can help to improve the WLLB, and this in return increases student satisfaction while coping with the extra burden of studying [12], [10].

Another important observation was that the integration of new diverse target groups within higher education should have an impact on the curriculum offered. For successful diversity management it is important to know who the new target groups are and why they have an increasing need for higher education. Lifelong learners come to university because of various motivations and universities need to establish curriculums that allow for both personal and career development [10]. The motivation to pursue continuing education for these new learners is often associated with clear expectations and objectives, with a focus on contents that fits into the context of the targeted personal or professional development. For these students, the design of effective teaching/learning situations must be demand-oriented, and that means they must be built upon learners' existing knowledge and existing resources because of their maturity and prior experience.

Finally, the recognition of prior learning (RPL), i.e the process of crediting knowledge acquired outside the HE system towards competencies normally acquired within the context of university studies, is considered a useful tool for structural and social permeability. Qualitative interviews with German HE staff revealed a fairly critical view of RPL, according to a general, rather exclusive institutional habitus but the experts tended towards a more open approach for the future, as long as RPL would not compromise the quality of study programmes, which must be guaranteed. A certain mental barrier within the rather rigid higher education system and a fear of the dilution of HE standards and degrees (deprofessionalisation) was mentioned repeatedly [13].

2.3 Educational experts on open universities

Qualitative interviews with educational experts on the processes of widening participation for lifelong learners in the four participating countries revealed four main topics associated with the implementation of LLL programmes at European universities: namely financing, the institutional habitus and RPL, support structures and a diverse student body. From the institutions' perspective these topics have the potential to be seen as possible barriers or threats or even strengths and opportunities for the (further) development of open universities.

A topic that was extensively discussed during the interviews was the financial situations in the European countries and their consequences for the different HE systems. England in particular is

struggling with government funding cuts that have forced English universities to raise their fees substantially. The new financial structure makes it harder to advise students properly, since offering support brings additional costs. The financial issue also influences the student body: in the future less “third agers” are expected to attend the OU because of the high costs and the absence of a guarantee for potential benefits in the students’ professional future, while more younger learners who are willing to work and study at the same time might be determined to take on the high costs.

In Denmark, in complete contrast, there are no fees for fulltime study at all. The Danish system even offers living grants for Danish fulltime students (ca. 1,000 €/month).

Sometimes financial issues are solved by cooperation and/or agreements with other institutions: the OU in Helsinki, for example, is not financially supported by the government, but does provide teaching for students of other Finnish HE institutions, which compensate the OU financially according to mutual agreements. Another role played by economic pressures is seen in Finland, where they expect a significant increase in the demand for qualified workers, innovations and thus more HE in the future; this could serve as a massive driver for implementing LLL even further in the country.

The institutional habitus or the attitude towards lifelong learning and lifelong learners respectively is another relevant topic which was mentioned repeatedly during the interviews. The involved universities of the Nordic countries and the UK distinguish themselves by a very inclusive attitude towards new student groups, especially employed students and lifelong learners. This is partly because of their long tradition of openness (Denmark) that leads to an acceptance of LLL as a cultural norm, and also because of their positive experiences resulting in highly valuing the experiences and skills of these student groups (Finland) or because the institution itself was built and designed to primarily serve part time adult students in work and with family, making lifelong learners the original target group of the institution (the OU UK). The same applies to their perception of RPL. In Denmark it is widely implemented and accepted by students and HE staff through Quota 2¹, while it is seen as an important way to bridge the gap between academic and vocational routes in the UK. But aside from these perceptions, how often RPL procedures are actually implemented shows a slightly different reality: in Finland a great desire to establish a standardised RPL system that does not depend on individual professors and their decisions exists, and at the OU UK there are only few cases so far. RPL is not widely accepted yet and not often requested, because the portfolio procedure is rather labour intensive for the students and expensive for the institution. However, this is expected to change with the implementation of challenge exams in the future.

Compared to other German HE institutions, the Professional School and Leuphana in general have a quite open-minded view towards the integration of new student groups. The institution chose to reorganise itself with a new university model, which consists of four transdisciplinary entities and provides education for widely differing target groups: Besides the House of Research there are the College, responsible for undergraduate education, the Graduate School which combines interdisciplinary master’s degrees with doctoral studies, and an additional third school, providing continuing university education for vocationally qualified and employed students exclusively, namely the Professional School.

A third aspect on which the experts commented was the support structures offered in the respective countries. Support is seen as a measure to help students find a suitable educational pathway, for the retention of enrolled students and for career guidance. .

In the Danish case, bachelor’s programmes, for example, show a remarkably high drop-out rate due to a lack of support structures, especially before (wrong choice) and during studies. Dropouts could thus be avoided by strengthening support services, e.g. through government funding to offer extra student support to help students succeed in the appropriate bachelor’s programmes.

Here, the German case serves as a good practice example, as well as the OU UK. The extraordinarily high ratio of staff to students at the Professional School allows for individual support and a wide range of services such as online support, guidance on funding possibilities, close contact with professors and programme coordinators, as well as career counselling (partly free of charge). The OU in turn has very good support and guidance offers concerning the level of study, subject background, time management and WLLB. Counsellors even intervene proactively in cases when students do not ask for help, but are perceived to be in need of support. Also, to be able to offer quality assured support services, associate lecturers are given special professional development. Currently the OU does not offer any continuity of support, i. e. they do not ‘provide’ one tutor from beginning to end, but one for

¹ Potential bachelor’s students can apply in Quota 2 by handing in a description of their background, prior learning, ‘real’ competences to be accepted at Danish HEIs although they do not live up to the normal requirements of these institutions. These students very often do not have full upper secondary examination, but additional qualifications (e.g. lived abroad - language skills, working experience etc.).

each single module. However, a continuity of support services will be established in 2014: From next year there will be a shift in support structures from geography related to qualification related: there will no longer be local tutors, but qualification teams supporting students online and by telephone with more subject expertise ("Student Support Teams").

As a final but at least equally important topic, the experience of a diverse student body and the associated diversity management were addressed. As discussed above, the UK and the Nordic countries traditionally embrace the idea of diversity amongst students and lifelong learners, with all ages and backgrounds taking part in HE and appreciating their positive impact on the learning environment and their fellow students. The experts mentioned potential benefits through a good mixture of traditional and non-traditional (e.g. employed) students, because of their diverse views, educational and/or vocational backgrounds, motivational attitudes towards HE and professional experiences.

In the German case, the added diversity through the integration of lifelong learners is also seen as a way to improve the learning outcomes of all students by bringing together different perspectives, backgrounds and ages with resulting advantages for all enrolled students.

Nevertheless, with an institutional and societal ideal which aims to find young and academically qualified researchers to enter HE as directly as possible - as proposed by the Finnish government - lifelong learners might be seen as a threat to the desired development of the country on the prospective path to more innovation and new products.

3 DEDUCING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES TO OPEN UP TO NEW TARGET GROUPS

3.1 Multidimensional support mechanisms for the new target groups

To succeed as an institution on the way to an open or lifelong learning university, support mechanisms have to apply on three different levels. From a country perspective it is important to have an overall open attitude towards educational equality and LLL in the respective societies, to create an environment for favourable national decisions regarding LLL, including decisions and initiatives for financial support and to aim at fostering permeability between educational subsystems and the economy.

The organisational or institutional structure on the other hand should distinguish itself by having internalised an open habitus towards LLL institution-wide, by a defined comprehensive institutional strategy for LLL and effective support structures for lifelong learners to establish an open university successfully. Another major aspect within this perspective would be the implementation of RPL structures at the institution that value/appreciate knowledge, skills and competences obtained outside the HE system.

The LLL programmes in turn should allow for flexible study formats and a curriculum, especially tailored for the demands, different motivations and special skills of lifelong learners, and also allow for alternative admission criteria to recruit talents that otherwise would not find their way to HE and thus help to build a diverse student body at the respective institutions. In particular when dealing with employed students other major facts are the professional application of academic knowledge, i.e. the transfer of learning to their workplaces and the social integration of lifelong learners.

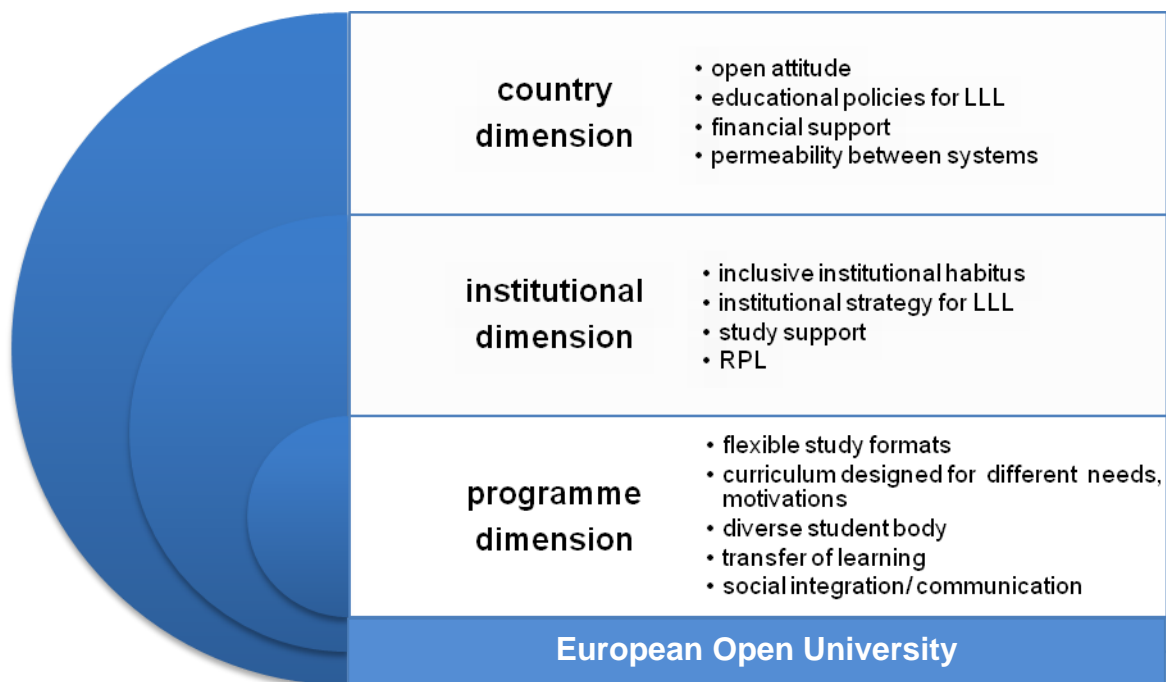


Figure 1: Support mechanisms for new target groups

3.2 Diversity management and specific derivations for study programmes

Specifically on the topic of how to deal with the new, diverse target groups and on the design of study programmes, the following recommendations can be offered:

- The study design should allow for flexible teaching and learning processes and needs to be tailored according to the particular situation of employed students.
- For non-traditional learners, the successful completion of their studies and continuing education programmes is of particular importance. It is therefore crucial that those students develop an active learning behaviour and experience success in their courses at an early stage.
- Another important aspect is that lifelong learners want to experience a noticeable benefit from their studies. This can be achieved through the application of knowledge within their professional work. Thus, transfer effects are of specific importance: The incorporation of elements into the study programmes which are conducive to the transfer of learning into the professional context can be helpful measures to increase the satisfaction level of non-traditional, and particularly employed, student groups.
- The communication with HE staff and social integration are other relevant factors: subject advice by lecturers and socio-emotional support as well as encouragement by the staff/faculty reduce the risk of dropouts.
- The compatibility of various obligations from private and working areas of life (family, work and study) is an important prerequisite for employed students to succeed in HE.
- The design of content and methods of the study programmes as well as the promotion of active learning are of relevance to the new target groups. Through problem-based learning and case study integration, they are able to contribute their professional experience and competence.

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