

POLICY REMINDERS

The COMMIT project was aimed to increase commitment to the social dimension of higher education and support strategies for increasing attainment. The key underlying question of the project evolved into: “How can lifelong learning contribute to the social dimension of universities?” The COMMIT policy reminders are written to support the advancement of fruitful interaction between universities and their contexts. Our main motivation is that this important work should be based on the true qualities and main features of lifelong learning and social dimension.

The reminders rest upon the utilization of the results of previous projects and cooperation, the extensive work of the whole COMMIT partnership during the project, and finally upon an intensive workshop in Brussels in November 2015 where the final content was designed. We hope that they enrich the policy-making, strategizing and implementation processes at European, national and institutional levels.

The twelve reminders consist of three cognate sections. The first section emphasizes the fundamental relevance of lifelong learning as a central element of social dimension in universities. The second section focusses on the steering mechanisms that can make benevolent aspirations into concrete change. Finally, the third section indicates pathways that can lead to ever more effective arrangements of university lifelong learning in service of well-being and equality.

The partnership of the COMMIT project, 1 March 2016

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University lifelong learning as a part of society and university

- 1. The necessity and joy of learning throughout life is a constant driving force for society and universities. LLL can make a major contribution to the social dimension of higher education institutions, especially when it is embedded into the entirety of university strategic processes.** Although lifelong learning has lost some of its strength because of the wide, broad, sometimes even fuzzy use of the concept, its essential significance has not vanished. Lifelong learning is a powerful tool to build capacity for individuals, organisations as well as regions and nations. Embedding the perspective, principles and practices of lifelong learning into the structures and processes of universities will boost its effectiveness in terms of education and social responsibility.
- 2. While lifelong learning can serve as a mechanism of income generation for universities, its fundamental essence is to offer possibilities for adult learners and partner organisations.** Current financial context of higher education institutions with its various challenges should not obscure the fundamental values of lifelong learning. At the same time, a sustainable financial bedrock is a necessary precondition for success. Furthermore, the potential to widen the income generation can be a considerable justification factor for institutions, departments and faculty.
- 3. Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL) contributes to the social dimension of the university.** Many universities have launched applications relating to formal learning, and some have organized systematic recognition of prior learning (RPL) for adult learners. Still, the general picture gives an impression that it is more an encouraging opportunity than a universal success story. We need both determined embedding of VNIL in curriculum design processes and in the innovative pilot projects to improve the processes and practices.
- 4. Effective and high-quality implementation of the lifelong learning agenda also requires renewal of university organisation culture and practices.** The universities are facing great challenges in responding appropriately to the changes in their social and economic context. At the same time, they still have untapped potential for reforms that would make more effective use of new technology and other innovations. The shift towards a lifelong learning university will also benefit from making lifelong learning actions explicit, visible and recognised.

Steering higher education institutions towards lifelong learning and social engagement

5. **Lifelong learning needs political support at the European, national and regional level.** *European countries face severe economic and social problems, and the research-based interaction with higher education institutions would foster finding the solutions. European policies should emphasize the role of lifelong learning as one of the key threads in the cooperation. National legal frameworks and strategies for lifelong learning should create conditions for effective activities. Regional authorities and universities should cooperate to find solutions that are workable in relevant contexts.*
6. **External inputs into the university's decision-making can enrich the value-base of universities.** *A careful strategic analysis of the environment will bring forward arguments that will challenge the potential dominance of pure academic education assumptions (degree-based, course-centred, discipline-oriented, not sufficiently work-life-relevant). The configuration of decision-making changes from "lifelong learning in the margin of university" into "lifelong learning bridging university with its context". An explicit strategy has a chance to balance the two spheres of argumentation. Universities need to be both responsive and proactive.*
7. **Modification of internal structures as such will not necessarily mean a great potential for lifelong learning.** *Universities should avoid the risk of focussing too much on the structural arrangements of lifelong learning because often the greatest benefits can be gained from concrete developments of service, methods and processes of the activities. A variety of structural arrangements can function effectively in the implementation of lifelong learning as a key element of social dimension, as long as they are clear, established and in line with the strategic goals of the university.*
8. **Support from university leadership is the most significant facilitator of lifelong learning and social dimension.** *It is similarly important to win the support from the deans. Their importance stems from both the status and prestige, but also from their central role in the communication system. This is not to underestimate the collegial or organisational support for LLL commitment. The leadership support should also become visible in the statutes and regulations.*

Essence and quality of lifelong learning supporting social dimension

- 9. The expertise of various specialists and purposeful cooperation with stakeholders and networks are key success factors of lifelong learning and social dimension.** Capacity to build relevant consortia of expertise is necessary in the construction of an appropriate offer. Co-planning, co-design and co-implementation of the offer with client organizations are intrinsic in any postmodern service business and represent particular success factors of ULLL. Cooperation in European projects has shown its capacity to enhance the dissemination of best practice. The universities could make more use of staff mobility so as to develop the offer, practices and delivery of lifelong learning.
- 10. Higher education institutions have neither a monopoly on knowledge production nor on learning environments, but they would benefit from cooperation with other suppliers of learning possibilities.** The tradition to invite students into studies hosted by the university is still the natural strong mainstream. But learning at work and use of social media as places of learning will transform the roles of various actors. Universities need not always coordinate the courses and programs, but they may have justified expert partner roles in initiatives by other organizations. The transformation is connected to the fact that research institutes, work life organizations and NGOs have intentional roles in knowledge production and construction of learning opportunities.
- 11. Lifelong learning can only be legitimate inside confirmed quality assurance systems.** In addition to the strategic plan, the quality procedures are the most generally used tools to pursue the aims and objectives of lifelong learning. The credibility of maintaining high quality of learning with new audiences demands mechanisms that are legitimate for the leadership and the academic community. Respectively, inclusion of relevant elements of lifelong learning in the evaluation criteria and university rankings would advance the social dimension of universities.
- 12. A fertile research agenda and a functional framework of data production, collection and utilization should be key priorities of lifelong learning and social dimension at the national and European level.** Neither the expansion of the educational offer nor the challenges and possibilities of the delivery system have been very carefully examined. Especially the scientific research of academic lifelong learning has been limited. It is also evident that the production, collection and utilization of information is coincidental both at the institutional, national and European level. The aim should not be to increase the quantity of data but to improve the quality of information supporting policy and decision making.

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