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EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Education System

An EU-funded research project Lifelong Learning 2010 (LLL2010) investigating the role of formal education in lifelong learning in Europe involved researchers from Scotland, England, Ireland, Austria, Belgium, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Norway and Russia

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INTRODUCTION

Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Education System

In March 2000, the then 15 European leaders committed the European Union to become by 2010 “the most dynamic and competitive knowledge based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment”. The Lisbon strategy, as it has come to be known, was a comprehensive but interdependent series of reforms, which has significant implications for a whole range of social policies, including policies for learning. As part of the Lisbon strategy, the European Union has set the goal of raising the number of adults participating in lifelong learning to 12.5% by 2010.

However, the proportion of learning adults in Europe differs widely across countries. This project was dedicated to identifying the **reasons behind these differences** and to studying the policies and practices related to adults’ participation in and access to lifelong learning in a number of European countries. The research focused on the contribution of the education systems to the process of making lifelong learning a reality and its role as a potential agency of social integration.

The project's innovative approach of multilevel institutional analysis had three principal points of departure. First, we assumed that lifelong learning is functioning within the broader economic, social and cultural systems in which it is embedded. Second, all subsystems strongly interact. It means that the differences between lifelong learning systems are systematic, and the systems could be classified and grouped into types of systems with common characteristics. Third, these institutional ‘packages’ and subsystems yield strikingly different outcomes of analogous political reforms and become thereby the main mechanisms for promotion of the so-called Europeanization of the societies and their country-specific policies.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

European Union and national level policies **too instrumentalist**

Although there is broad consensus across Europe that lifelong learning can both enhance economic competitiveness and help generate social cohesion and stability, **understandings of the concept** are subject to **wide variation** and have to be viewed in relation to specific national contexts. The diversity of national contexts is likely to **counteract the development of a single European model of lifelong learning**.

As in EU policies, there is a general trend across the countries of lifelong learning policies **focusing on labour market issues**. However, the reasons for this differ. Post-communist countries tend to see lifelong learning as a way to enhance their economic development, whilst countries with established market economies place greater emphasis on maintaining economic performance and meeting necessary skills shortages.

There is widespread acceptance, at least rhetorically, of the need to address **problems of social exclusion** through creating (and ensuring wider access to better learning opportunities for disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

However, there are significant **differences in approach**. Some governments and policies seek to address social exclusion through community-related lifelong learning.

The more common approach is to assume that the key to overcoming exclusion is to ensure the excluded have the capacity to return to employment. The evidence is that insofar as the latter strategy is intended to address inequalities, it has limited success.

Adult formal education **very diversified** across countries

Differences in country specific understandings of formal adult education provide deep insight in underlying institutional processes and variations in formal education's societal significance. While up to day, all attempts to operationalise formal adult education in a way useful for comparative statistics have remained limited in their results, the barriers for standardisation become a starting point for fruitful comparative research.

There is a clear line is drawn between the 'liberal', 'non-formal' adult education organised by a broad range of societal actors and the 'formal' education. **Diversification** could come **from two different sources**.

Firstly, a **broader range of institutions** – including for-profit training providers – could become entitled to provide formal adult education. *Secondly*, a **much broader range of educational activities** could become entitled to be formal adult education.

Patterns of participation of adults in formal learning illustrate **different motives**

Participants in formal adult education are actually made up of very **different populations**, another indication that considerable differences exist between the countries, regarding patterns and the dominance of particular types and systems of formal adult education. Country patterns and variation in participation in formal adult education as well as in the causal effects on these activities can be linked to **the different structural and institutional settings in the various European societies**.

The increasing reach of the global market-place is placing intense pressures on many economies and societies. Among its effects are intensified disparities of income, wealth and power. Lifelong learning is often seen as providing a mechanism for addressing some of these problems. However, in general, **patterns of lifelong learning appear to reflect, rather than challenge, these inequalities**.

The analysis identified **five types of participation patterns among working adults**:

- Completing – completion of a step within (initial) formal education and its variation 'finishing' and 'entering'.
- Returning – re-entry in the initial (vocational) education pathway.
- Transforming – taking up formal adult education to prepare a change of the occupational field.
- Reinforcing – taking up formal adult education to prepare a change of the occupational field.
- Compensation – formal adult education as an arena for meeting individual aims not covered by the occupation.

Individual motives to re-engage in formal learning as an adult

The motives for participation in formal adult education are much broader than those for adult education in general. **Personal fulfilment and social upgrading** (obtaining a diploma) score higher in the participants' reported motives. This indicates the specific value of formal adult education.

Extrinsic motives to participate in formal adult education differ more between countries than the other motivational dimensions. Adult learners in Eastern European countries score higher on extrinsic motivation than their counterparts in Western European countries.

Barriers in participation may prevent differences in quality of education for adults

Considerable differences exist between the countries regarding the barriers in participation in formal adult education. Country differences are connected with the different level of diversification of adult education system and welfare state regime types. **Fewest barriers** were perceived by adult learners in countries which are characterised by the **high level of diversification** of their formal adult education system. Such systems often separate adults from students in initial studies, which questions the way quality in education is understood.

Access of disadvantaged groups could be fostered by introducing alternative settings

There are very many different groups considered when concepts on **disadvantaged, marginalised** or **underrepresented learners** are used. The extent to which these groups have been considered as needing support in overcoming barriers in access to and during their studies, as well as the practical help offered, is highly different across institutional settings and contexts.

Decentralised community based locations for learning, such as community lifelong learning centres provide examples of progressive outreach strategies for reaching marginalized communities and individuals. Still, outreach strategies will only work when other barriers such as finance and lack of proximity to the educational institution are overcome.

Bridging between formal and non-formal learning necessary

For those traditionally alienated from the formal school system, **the non-formal educational sector can serve as a key bridge towards social inclusion**. Its climate tends to be more inviting, informal and flexible for learners who are often extremely intimidated by the thought of 'going back' for more education after usually negative experiences of schooling from the past.

The arrangements for recognising non-formal and informal learning are weak in the majority of countries. Some countries have well developed systems of accreditation; however, it was noted that assessment required for accreditation may discourage certain people from engaging with learning, thus potentially increasing social exclusion.

Supportive learning environment crucial for adult learners

The satisfaction of adult learners is strongly determined by the **quality of their classroom environment**. The most influential aspects of classroom environment are the students' active involvement, teacher support and flexible organisation of the courses.

In order to obtain high-quality learning environments, the adult education sector needs **well-trained professionals** who can work in secured and continuous employment positions. On the one hand, they must be specialists in the subjects they are teaching; on the other hand, they need to master teaching skills such as the use of appropriate didactical methods and psychological insight.

Patterns of support for learners in SME's independent of general training policy

SME's support for formal adult education is embedded in company's different **training cultures**, however support patterns enjoy also a significant autonomy from general training policies.

The behaviour of companies towards formal adult education can be classified into a five-step typology, ranging from a completely passive attitude where no significant support forms the bottom line, to **pro-active support**, with formal adult education as a **fully integrated** part of HR development

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

European Union policy level

EU policy instruments should be *reviewed* by taking into account **the country typologies**, and then *fine-tuned* for specific contexts according to those differences.

There is obvious need for systematic **integration of the four core lifelong learning goals** – social inclusion/cohesion, active citizenship, employment, personal fulfilment – pervading European Commission and Council documents also into nation states policies, structures and practices for lifelong learning.

It is recommended that the EU Commission consider leading a process for the **development of agreed structural, process and outcome indicators** for access to lifelong learning – for formal and non-formal education, including prison education. These proposed European level indicators would also require a review process to examine their implementation and development across European countries.

There is a clear need to continue **the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**, encouraging links to national qualifications frameworks, especially those that provide an effective system for recognising non-formal/informal learning and to develop mechanisms that allow qualifications to ‘transfer’ between EU countries based on EQF.

There is a need for EU to lead **the process of clarification of the criteria to ascertain socio-economic disadvantage** given the observed tendency, especially in some Central and Eastern European countries, for targeting to occur for more easily identifiable target groups like those with a disability or from an ethnic minority – in contrast with groups experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

National level decision-making

National lifelong learning strategies themselves are not able to improve lifelong learning: it is not the means to overcome fragmentation; instead, strategies should be **more directed at institutions** – national-level coordination is problematic due to the different policies involved.

Adult formal education should be considered as **constituting separate but equal system** taking into account particular situation and needs of adult learner or ‘nontraditional’ learner, enabling learning for those who are actively engaged in other life spheres as well. Higher diversification of adult education system – increasing variety of institutions providing adult education as well as increasing variety in the length and content of programmes – would enable better/wider access to participation.

The LLL policies should reflect **both human capital and social capital needs of social actors**. On the one hand, they should emphasise the economically adaptive potential of LLL; on the other hand, however, parallel emphasis should be put on its individually liberating, empowering and socially recovering effects.

Lifelong learning (in broader sense: education) policies and labour market policies should be harmonized **to the reasonable extent**, reflecting the human capital needs of **individuals, communities, and firms**.

Institutional level: schools

It is essential for the quality of individual-level outcomes as well as for education and lifelong learning in general that **the informal and non-formal contexts and approaches within formal education would be fostered**, in order to bring the aims and content of education closer to each individual.

Schools and formal adult education institutions in general should develop and follow a way **more integrated and strategic policies of outreach to adult learners**.

As **the pedagogical skills of teachers** in adult education play a major role in supporting learners and fostering their active involvement, it is important to examine the competence profiles of teachers and exchange experiences in the field of teacher training for adult education.

Improve learning environments by **better counselling services** that reflect learners' educational paths. Another set of recommendations relates to **the removal of barriers**: a more flexible organisation of courses (with flexible time schedules, a modular organisation, educational leave schemes, preparatory courses (to remedy gaps in prior knowledge) etc. may also contribute to stronger motivation and better performance.

Acknowledge and inspire different motives that people can have to participate, e.g. personal fulfilment in addition to the instrumental aims related to labour market incentives; acknowledge different backgrounds and dispositional settings.

Institutional level: workplaces

Employers' tending to their employees' needs for balancing work and studies **should not be considered investment into their productive individual human capital**, or into their work motivation. Instead, it should be considered employer's socially responsible contribution to the community. To support the best use and **development of the human capital in local community should be acknowledged commitment of each employer**.

Adult learner should be able to choose between the different educational programs, and **still get support from the workplace to participate in studies**, since their increased level of education benefits the community in many ways.

Without penalising those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those for whom working with their current employer is a temporary phase in their career, **work environment should be developed which supports and encourages learning and returning to formal education**.

Employee's enrolment in formal education should be encouraged so that different groups of **employees would be represented in balanced ways**. Efforts should be taken by the employer to learn, acknowledge and **accept the diverse motives employees have to engage in educational programs**, which may but do not need to be connected to their career with their current employer.

While **flexible work organisation** is helpful to reconcile work and studies, alternatives such as **enabling time off from work without pay cut** should be preferred to support employee's studies – research shows that enough time for balanced working life creates more creative environment with mutual trust and cooperation.

Employees who are engaged in formal studies should be recognised for the increased alternative costs of their time at work. Social partners – employer and employee organisations together with local communities – should find ways to reasonably compensate the employer for the temporary replacement of the employee during the demanding period of studies, so as to **protect the co-workers of the adult learner from being overworked**.

To recognise and make use of the advanced potential of the employee, employers might consider **increasing the functional flexibility** of the job, offering job rotations or internships, including international ones.

It is advisable for the employers and employer organisations to participate in designing formal education programs in their area that would **suit the needs for working students**. Different forms of cooperation between employers and schools should be discussed and established that would fit their local community.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The Objectives of this project LLL2010 were to:

1. Show to what extent the countries differ in terms of patterns of lifelong learning.
2. Reveal how these differences depend upon specific institutions and policies of each country.
3. Assess the contribution of each country's education system to the development of lifelong learning.
4. Trace the ways institutional and policy prerequisites for lifelong learning have been developed in European countries.
5. Identify the barriers to participation in lifelong learning in terms of policies, educational institutions, enterprises' practices and potential learners' motivation.
6. Identify the best solutions and most successful practices in terms of participation in lifelong learning and to decide to what extent these would be applicable in other countries.
7. Propose changes, which would enhance adult participation in lifelong learning and decrease social exclusion.

Selection of Countries

Countries selected for the study were chosen by the differences in their labour markets and education systems. Additionally, it was decided to look at the smaller European countries for better comparability of their contextual features. Extra attention was paid in securing good representation of postsocialist countries. Altogether, countries of EU-15 (Scotland, England, Ireland, Austria, Belgium) as well as those of NMS (Slovenia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Bulgaria) were represented, compared to Norway and Russia. Where applicable, analysis of other MSs was carried out.

Target population

Individuals who have completed, or are above the age of, compulsory education and who are (considering) re-engaging in formal education to complete or advance their level of education

Methodology

The approach **combines quantitative and qualitative analysis**: the project has combined large-scale statistical and sociological studies, documentary and policy studies, and qualitative studies (individual and expert interviews, case studies). Altogether **five** different studies were carried out and **four** original fieldwork projects were designed to collect new data.

Overview of qualitative and quantitative fieldwork

Research tools and data will be made available for research community – contact prof Ellu Saar at Tallinn University for further information

Qualitative studies designed and implemented in LLL2010:

- 1) Lifelong Learning: Patterns of Policy in Thirteen European Countries – in 2006, policies that directly or indirectly affect adults' participation in formal education were analysed, and data for **thirteen** countries in the study plus **EU adult education policy and its developments** were collected
- 2) *The Significance of Formal Adult Education in Small and Medium Organisations* – in 2008, **case studies of 120 SMEs** were completed across twelve countries in the study, consisting of interviews with an employee currently engaged in formal education and with his or her supervisor to study their role in LLL
- 3) *Access to Education for Traditionally Marginalised Groups in Europe* – in 2009, **197 interviews with stakeholders in adult education** were completed across twelve countries to identify the practices, accomplishments and problems in making adult education more accessible for marginalised groups

Quantitative studies designed and implemented in LLL2010:

- 4) *Adult Learners In Formal Adult Education: Experiences and Perceptions* – in 2007, within the 13 countries, **13,293 adult learners** were interviewed, as well as representatives of these **734 educational institutions** where they studied.
- 5) Based on large datasets of European Labour Force Survey (2003) and Adult Education Survey (2007) by Eurostat, inequality of participation within and across European countries was studied extensively

PROJECT IDENTITY

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Consortium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher Institute for Labour Studies, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium - University of Surrey, England, United Kingdom - University of Nottingham, England, United Kingdom - Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom - Educational Disadvantage Centre, Centre for Human Development at St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Ireland - Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Oslo, Norway - Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, Ljubljana, Slovenia - TÁRKI Social Research Centre, Budapest, Hungary - Centre for International Relations and Studies, Mykolo Romerio University, Vilnius, Lithuania - Institute of Sociology, Sofia, Bulgaria - St. Petersburg State University: Department of Sociology, Department of Retraining and Improvement of Professional Skills for Sociology and Social Work, Russia - 3s research laboratory, Vienna, Austria - Danube University, Krems, Austria - The National Training Fund, Prague, Czech Republic - Institute for Social Research, Vilnius, Lithuania
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Website	http://LLL2010.tlu.ee
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Further reading	<p>Final Report</p> <p>Saar, Ellu et al (2011) Towards lifelong learning society in Europe: the role of education system. Integrated report on results from multilevel mixed methods analysis of different aspects in learning as an adult in old and new EU member states, Norway and Russia by LLL2010 project. LLL2010 Project Reports Series No 6, LLL2010 Working Paper No 77</p>
<i>Publications from this project can be downloaded free of charge from the Publications section of the LLL2010 website http://LLL2010.tlu.ee</i>	

Full project reports are available free of charge from the LLL2010 website <http://LLL2010.tlu.ee> → Publications → Reports

Comparative Reports

Holford, John with Sheila Riddell, Elisabet Weedon, Judith Litjens; Guy Hannan; Vida A. Mohorčič Špolar, Peter Beltram, Angela Ivančič, Jasmina Mirčeva (2008) Lifelong Learning: Patterns of Policy in Thirteen European Countries. LLL2010 **Subproject 1** Comparative Report. LLL2010 Project Reports Series No 1, LLL2010 Working Paper No 16

Hefler Günter (2010) The qualifications-supporting company – The Significance of Formal Adult Education in Small and Medium Organisations. Comparative report - **Subproject 4** – LLL2010. Danube University Krems, Krems. LLL2010 Project Reports Series No 2. LLL2010 Working Paper No 32

Roosmaa, Eve-Liis, Ellen Boeren, Ellu Saar, Ides Nicaise (2010) Adult Learners In Formal Adult Education – Experiences and Perceptions. LLL2010 **Subproject 3** Comparative Report. LLL2010 Project Reports Series 3. LLL2010 Working Paper No 46

Downes, Paul (2011). A Systems Level Focus on Access to Education for Traditionally Marginalised Groups in Europe: Comparing Strategies, Policy and Practice in Twelve European Countries. Comparative report for **Subproject 5** of LLL2010. Dublin: Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College. LLL2010 Project Reports Series No 4. LLL2010 Working Paper No 59

Hefler, Günter, Péter Róbert, Paul Ringler, Matild Sági, Stephanie Rammel, Anikó Balogh, Jörg Markowitsch (2011) Formal adult Education in Context: the View of European Statistics. Lifelong Learning in 2010: **Subproject 2** synthesis report based on LFS and AES. LLL2010 Project Reports Series No 5. LLL2010 Working Paper No 62

Policy briefs

There is a number of thematic policy briefs available on the findings of LLL2010 – see <http://LLL2010.tlu.ee/briefing-papers>

LLL2010 working papers are available free of charge <http://LLL2010.tlu.ee> → Publications → Working Papers

Online Working Paper Series

Project reports as well as the country-reports of the five research projects are published in the LLL2010 online working paper series – see <http://LLL2010.tlu.ee/publications/working-papers/>

Books published in the framework of this project can be ordered from the publishers

Books

Saar, Ellu; Ure, Odd Bjørn; Holford, John (eds) (2012) **Lifelong Learning in Europe: National Patterns and Challenges**. Edward Elgar Publishing [in press]

Riddell, Sheila; Markowitsch, Jörg; Weedon, Elisabet (eds) (2012) **Lifelong Learning in Europe: Equity and Efficiency In the Balance**. Policy Press [in press]