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# LIFELONG LEARNING: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES—EUROPEAN NETWORKING

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## INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning has been the subject of policy discussion and development for many years now. Yet today there is a greater need than ever for citizens to acquire the knowledge and competences necessary both to tap into the benefits, and to meet the challenges of a knowledge-based society. Higher levels of education and continuous learning, when accessible to all, make an important contribution to reducing inequalities and preventing marginalisation. This, however, raises fundamental questions about how well equipped traditional education and training systems are to keep pace with the developments outlined.

A cross-disciplinary European University Lifelong Learning Network (EULLearN) was established in 2003 in response to the Commission's Communication, "Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality". EULLearN serves as a core element to partner institutions to develop LLL in European co-operation by:

- Identifying coherent strategies and practical measures to foster university lifelong learning.
- Exchanging and sharing ideas, experiences, good practices and actions to contribute to building the European area of the lifelong learning.
- Enhancing the European dimensions of lifelong learning by supporting strategies on national as well as international levels.
- Providing a Forum of networking to share and test relevant and actual issues, experiences and challenges of Lifelong Learning in Europe.
- Developing new European lifelong learning innovative tools, learning materials and environments to support university Lifelong Learning.

EULLearN, with 112 partners from 31 countries including European universities and non-university partners, supports the exchange of good practices and experiences and the identification of common problems, ideas and priorities through the work of

three Targeted Thematic Groups (EULLearn TTGs): EULLearn is the continuation and the development of an earlier successful Thematic Network THENUCE which ran between 1996 and 2003.

### **THE MISSION OF EULLEARN**

EULLearn is aiming at becoming a Forum of Networking to share and test relevant and real issues, experiences and challenges of university lifelong learning in Europe, and a Centre of expertise to support the European dimension and European policies in university LLL initiatives by providing a platform for developing new innovative European tools, learning materials and environments to support university lifelong learning.

EULLearn serves as a core of European co-operation in developing LLL through identifying strategies and practical measures to foster university lifelong learning by exchanging and sharing ideas, experiences, good practices and actions to establish the European sphere of lifelong learning, thus developing the European dimensions of lifelong learning by supporting strategies on national as well as international levels.

### **THE BACKGROUND**

Most European Universities consider themselves to be international institutions but there are still many problems, such as how their continuing education staff can best express this European inspiration and incorporate this in their portfolio of activities. Furthermore, there is the question of how university lifelong learning with a European emphasis can be expanded in the most efficient way.

The traditional systems must be transformed to become much more open and flexible for the learners to have individual pathways of learning that match their needs and interests, and, thus, to take the genuine advantage of equal opportunities in the course of their lives.

This, however, raises fundamental questions on how well-equipped traditional education and training systems are to keep pace with these developments? Why is it that in many European countries' universities take very little part in the provision of lifelong learning? These and other questions are addressed by EULLearn, the European University Lifelong Learning Network, through its activities.

Between 1996 and 2003 a large Thematic Network, THENUCE (Thematic Network in University Continuing Education) mobilised experts from some 140

universities in thirty European countries to identify several important transitions which are required for current university Lifelong Learning management.

Since 2003 the activities of THENUCE have been continued and developed by EULLearN. THENUCE & EULLearN are Socrates “Thematic Networks”.

*Table 1. THENUCE / EULLearN Evolution*

	THENUCE	EULLearN
Theme	University Continuing Education	Lifelong Learning
Partnership	Open Network of more than 140 partners	112 selected and targeted partners
Partners	Universities only	Higher Education Institutions and social / economic / political partners
Working Groups	9 Thematic Groups	3 Targeted Thematic Groups
Management	Belgium	Lithuania

Educational Institutions can no longer function in an isolated gashion. They are in a competitive world which alone, one by one, they cannot face, and so they must work with each other, and they must work with all partners and stakeholders in society and the labour market. We must point out that 20% of EULLearN partners are already from the non-educational sector!

### **EULLEARN OBJECTIVES**

The EULLearN objectives are to enhance the quality of university lifelong learning (LLL) and to promote European-wide activities that would develop LLL in society. The target groups are the managers/providers of LLL and the expected added value is the positioning of LLL in Europe as a normal activity of universities, recognised as such at both the internal and the external level.

EULLearN aims to give a new wider European dimension and target to the network activities by developing Europe-wide actions and means of identifying and disseminating good practice.

## THE “THEMATIC NETWORK”

EULLearN, with 112 partners from 31 European countries, supports the exchange of good practices and experiences through the work of three Targeted Thematic Groups (TTGs):

- TTG ALL Methods & Environments, Common Core References, Learning Materials  
Leader: Helka Urponen, FI – Lapin Yliopisto
- TTG BNational University Lifelong Learning Networks and European Co-operation  
Leader: Anikó Kálmán, HU – Debrecen University
- TTG C Accreditation, TUNING, APEL & ECATS (European Credit Accumulation & Transfer System in LLL)  
Leader: Aune Valk, EE – Tartu Ülikool

## TTG A OUTPUTS

### University Lifelong Learning Managers’ e-Handbook

EULLearN—the European University Lifelong Learning Network—funded by the EU Socrates—Erasmus programme—aims to make a European area of lifelong learning (LLL) a reality by identifying coherent strategies and practical measures to develop LLL, especially in universities. EULLearN is working to make traditional systems much more open and flexible and to promote equal opportunities, so that individuals will be able to find educational opportunities to suit their needs and interests throughout their lives.

This e-publication—the European University Lifelong Learning: The Managers’ Handbook—is a practical guide on the management of LLL in European universities, frequently termed university continuing education. The Handbook is the result of collaboration between experts in 31 European countries and benefits from their experience and knowledge of LLL, which is reflected both in the text on important management topics and in more than 70 case studies reflecting good practice in LLL across Europe.

This new edition (the fourth) reflects the developments which are changing higher education and LLL in Europe, e.g. European policy promoting LLL; ECTS, the Bologna process, and AP(E)L; e-learning and ICT; regional development activities; and regional, national, European and international collaboration on LLL. The text has been thoroughly revised, there are new authors, almost half the case studies are new

and others have been updated. The Handbook's new format on the web makes it easier for readers to access the contents and to find what interests them.

The Handbook is designed not only for those who are involved in deciding policy on LLL or who manage LLL in higher education, but also for students and teachers involved in the many courses concerned with LLL and e-learning. Although it principally concerns universities, much of the Handbook is also relevant to other providers of LLL for adults, such as colleges, employers, LLL businesses, the professions and voluntary organisations.

The Handbook provides a range of challenges for those involved in shaping both policy and practice which will promote the further development of LLL within higher education. It seeks to examine the contribution which university LLL can make to meeting new challenges in a knowledge society. It examines the range of programmes and services which are provided for individuals, business and society and provides a resource for exchanging good practice and experience. Its also contributes to the European Commission's database on good practice, providing knowledge and expertise from all over Europe.

In *The Managers' Handbook*, the authors of chapters—Helka Urponen, Valerie Mitchell, Mick Brennan, Danguole Rutkauskiene, Frank Moe and Rob Mark—address the following key aspects of the management of LLL:

1. The Management of University Lifelong Learning: An Overview.
2. A Policy for Lifelong Learning.
3. Regional Development and University Lifelong Learning Management.
4. Organisational Structures.
5. The Management of E-Learning.
6. Marketing.
7. Staff and Staff Development.
8. Financial Management.
9. Quality Assurance.
10. Looking to the Future: Universities and Lifelong Learning in the New Europe.

In addition, over 120 contributors from across Europe have contributed over 70 case studies on these topics, illustrating both the wealth and diversity of LLL and its management across Europe. Through the case studies, the Handbook provides examples of how Europe's universities are responding to the new economic, social,

political, cultural and environmental challenges posed by the new Europe and the knowledge society. These include changes in policy, regional development projects, ICT strategies, organisational changes, regional and European collaboration, marketing, developments in curricula and in teaching and learning, quality and accreditation models, and much more. There are also some case studies from non-university providers of LLL. In short, the Handbook provides policy makers and practitioners in LLL with a wealth of new ideas on how to implement change.

### **MASTERS PROGRAMME—LLL FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

This is a multidisciplinary programme developed through EULLearnN. It is offered in collaboration with a number of other European universities. It is designed to support students working in public and private agencies with an interest in regional development through the enhancement of lifelong learning opportunities.

Entrance requirements are normally an undergraduate degree and current involvement in teaching and administrative positions in university continuing education. Applications are also considered from those working in public and private agencies with an interest in regional development and lifelong learning.

This programme is taught in collaboration with the University of Lapland in Finland, Lund University in Sweden, the University of Tartu in Estonia, Kaunas University of Technology in Lithuania, Queens University Belfast in Northern Ireland and the University of Malta in Malta.

The programme objectives are to critically explore the ways and extent to which different stakeholders contribute through lifelong learning to social and economic development at a regional level within Europe. The programme also aims to enhance the capacity of practitioners in a range of organisations to improve policy and practice through engaging in critical inquiry.

To be awarded the degree a student must complete six taught modules and a cognate dissertation of 15,000 words (over a period of two-and-a-half to five years). For the award of the Postgraduate Diploma a student must complete six taught modules. For the award of the Postgraduate Certificate a student must complete three modules.

Taught modules within the programme are as follows and will be available either in the Autumn or Spring Semester:

- I. Lifelong Learning, Concepts, Understandings & Implications (Malta):

This module will provide a framework for the analysis of the development of policy and provision in lifelong learning (LLL) at a regional level in Europe in the context of economic and social change, through developing an understanding of the forces that have shaped these changes.

II. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the Lifelong Learning Region (Queens, Belfast):

This module will examine issues of equality, diversity and inclusion in developing the learning region. In particular, it will examine the meaning of equality in a context of European policy and practice in lifelong learning and the need to reach out to diverse groups of adults.

III. ICT and Flexible Teaching and Learning in Innovative Regions (Tartu):

This module will examine the impact of ICT and flexible learning infrastructure on regional development. Four main themes will be covered: ICT in teaching and learning, the meaning and possibilities of ICT in regional development, ICT based models of operation in regions and e-governance.

IV. Knowledge and Technology Transfer in the Region (Kaunas):

This module will examine issues in creation, acquisition, application as well as dissemination of knowledge. The latter process could be interpreted as the main condition for technology transfer. The impact of the innovation to the changes in community, and the concept, evolution and development of research and technology will be examined globally.

V. The Learning Region – Clusters, Stakeholders and Modes of Knowledge Creation in the Regional Context (Lund):

This module provides an overall framework for life-long (continuous further education), life-wide (daily in the context of everyday life) and also life-deep learning (personal plans for life) in the regional context. The synergetic effects of collaboration among academia, industry and civic associations will be highlighted in different ways and related to the concept of Triple-Helix alliances in the learning region.

VI. Organisations and Networks in Trans-Regional Development (Lapland):

This module will examine issues, organisations and networks in trans-regional development at both national and international levels. The starting point is that successful regional development requires close co-operation and integrated action between regional authorities, education and research institutions, and business. These issues will be analysed from the perspectives of network management, learning, governance, and social capital.

VII. Dissertation (Stirling): A cognate dissertation will be focused around a small-scale research topic within the domain of the programme, and will be supervised at any one of the partner institutions.

All modules will be delivered through distance learning using the WebCT platform, and there will be a summer or winter school each year for face-to-face teaching.

The curriculum development on each of the six modules has been completed and the approval process was carried out at the end of January 2007 in Stirling (Scotland). A Memorandum of Agreement between the partner universities was signed in February 2007 and the modules of participating universities have been approved. Lund and Lapland University will be franchised from Stirling University, as they are legally unable to charge fees. The marketing plan and marketing will be implemented with TTGB (National LLL Networks) and other relevant bodies.

### **THE WELL—WEB-BASED EXCHANGE OF LIFELONG LEARNING**

WELL is a modern information exchange portal on lifelong learning (LLL) for learners, teachers and other LLL stakeholders. It is an innovative tool responding to the emerging need to improve and facilitate the exchange of information and experiences and to enhance the development of LLL among countries. This is a place where the users can easily access the information, products and various means related to LLL.

WELL is the outcome of two Erasmus/Socrates projects, EULLearn (European University Lifelong Learning Network) and EULLearnDis (European University Lifelong Learning Network Dissemination). It encompasses the useful exchange of experience and good practices as well as the products of both projects such as the Manager's Handbook, the book on APEL "Recognising Experiential Learning: Practices in European Universities", Multidisciplinary Master Programme "Lifelong Learning for Regional Development", which are available on-line.

WELL is an excellent instrument for observation, analysis and innovation in compiling, analysing and self-testing the database on LLL. It is a portal with the elements of both a traditional encyclopaedia (created and maintained by experts) and a public—driven website (developed and updated by any visitor). The website is a convenient aid for dissemination of products on LLL and a one-stop place for the information related to LLL.



**WELL can be characterised by three main features:**

- Its target market segments are wide ranging and cover all areas of LLL society;
- The diverse constituencies have different information needs that are met by the dynamic nature of the portal;
- It uses a wide range of formats for the information it conveys.

WELL could be of great help and use for all involved and interested in LLL activities and products as well as a perfect place to share expertise and news on LLL.

**TTG B OUTPUTS**

EULLearN, through its Targeted Thematic Network TTG B, is contributing to the initiation, setting up, development and operation of National LLL Networks:

One of the contributions has been the implementation of an International Lifelong Learning Network Survey about the Lifelong Learning Networks of 16 European Partner Institutions, started in 2004 and published in 2007.

EULLearN also considers important the co-operation between higher education institutions and non-university bodies, as identification of coherent strategies and practical measures to foster university lifelong learning cannot be implemented in isolation.

Efforts to make lifelong learning a reality must be supported at the European level by sharing ideas, experiences, good practices and actions to establish a European area of lifelong learning for all stakeholders. The EULLearN TTG B has undertaken, with the assistance of local partners, the organisation of seminars to identify means and ways of enhancing this co-operation, and to find means and practices that will improve co-operation between universities and social and economic partners in the field of LLL and human resources management and development.

**TTG C OUTPUTS**

Diversity and change are the keywords that describe what universities face nowadays. We find different provisions of education within and outside of universities, diverse student bodies and a variety of teaching methods which are the result of widening participation and internationalisation of higher education across the whole of Europe. The Bologna process, discussed in greater detail in several other studies in this book, has brought along tremendous changes, mainly via curricula reform but also through alterations in quality assurance procedures and through the need to ensure

transparency. Recognising what is different from before, and translating it into new and understandable frameworks is of utmost importance in this context.

One key aspect of these changes is lifelong learning. As described in the project of the European University Lifelong Learning Network (EULLearnN), lifelong learning is seen, on the one hand, as an opportunity to meet the needs of individuals, employers and institutions and on the other hand as a challenge to find ways of meeting those needs. “Most of the changes will require a move towards increased lifelong learning provided by universities. Making these changes while maintaining the best of the present university tradition (teaching based on high quality scholarship and research, and high levels of academic integrity, for example) will present a major challenge to Europe’s universities.” Under the slogan for 2004-2007 “From knowing to doing”, EULLearnN has undertaken several initiatives to support universities in increasing the diversity of what they have to offer in education, but also to deal with diversity and changes. Its thematic group on APEL (accreditation of prior experiential learning) has tried to put knowledge into practice by conducting a number of national seminars on APEL in eight European countries. To support that programme this book sets out to summarise some of the practices of APEL in European Universities, in the hope that by sharing good practices and a common understanding of APEL, more universities will be encouraged to develop provisions of their own.

APEL, the recognition and accreditation of prior experiential learning—what men and women have learned in non formal settings prior to university access—has been widely presented by European authorities, at least in the last 7-8 years, as an important educational principle and also as a tool that can help to deal with some of the problems which inevitably arise out of increasing diversity. The principle states that knowledge gained through experience can be considered equivalent to knowledge acquired in a classroom.

In some European universities, theoretical discussion on APEL has gone a long way and in parallel with practices. In others, some practices are burgeoning as a result of open-minded academics, frequently working in departments of lifelong learning or in touch with them, but there is a lack of discussion and a need for basic principles of action. In other universities, we can find some discussion, but no action. Recognising this, the book is an attempt to give a well-organised overview of what looks like a patchwork more than a single and consistent picture: a rich, varied, highly promising and often incomparable patchwork of experiences, provisions and regulations.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I puts APEL in a wider context: it gives an account of how the practices of recognising experiential knowledge came about in countries like the USA, the United Kingdom, France and Canada, where it is widely used; it presents the connections between APEL—and, more widely, lifelong learning—and current trends in higher education as a consequence of the Bologna process; it analyses pedagogical aspects of recognition and tackles one central problem of diversity—terminology, the present use of different words to mean the same thing, or the opposite, the use of the same word to mean different things, which make APEL provisions so difficult to compare one with the other.

Part II shows very clearly that not only can APEL be used in different ways, but institutional procedures and policies, differ so that formal methods of assessment contrast sharply with the delicate approaches required to assess what has been learned from a personal biography.

APEL is a rich phenomenon which opens up a wide range of opportunities for extending the services offered by education. Part II is the second and largest section of the book. It gives down to earth, practical examples of how APEL is used in 8 countries for different purposes. Starting with the unique example from France, where APEL can be used for the awarding of a whole degree, the section moves through different cases, and single case studies or national overviews in Estonia, Italy, The Netherlands, Finland, the UK, Norway and Ireland. The aim of Part II is to show how wide is the range of opportunities for deploying schemes of APEL that can be put into practice. For example, it is far too narrow to think that the aim should always be to strive for a full degree, or solely for academic studies. Local communities or communities of practice, foreign students, academic staff, students affected, or even blocked, by regulation or curricula reforms, are some of the target groups to whom APEL has been oriented. In case of a highly regulated job market with clearly defined qualification requirements and strong trade unions, ideally everyone needs a qualification and APEL can help some to obtain one. Where the labour market is flexible and less regulated, it is mainly the motivation of individuals which is the prime reason for undertaking an APEL programme and then APEL is useful but in much smaller scale.

Part III considers some of the components which go to make up APEL as a powerful educational tool; by and large these components can be divided between tools for creating systems, tools for assessment of prior and experiential learning, and tools for supporting the learner. In doing so it offers a rudimentary map on which

the wide variety of case studies in Part II can be plotted to underline the differences between countries. Chapter 15 gives an overview of regulations which set the playing ground for the recognition of experiential learning; Chapter 16 discusses at length the steps of guidance and counselling in the process of recognition; Chapter 17 analyses assessment, the heart, as it were, of APEL, which is a necessary action before any recognition can take place; and finally Chapter 18 summarises how APEL can contribute to lifelong learning.

Thus, the third part of the book seeks to integrate best up-to-date knowledge on three interrelated practical issues as well as referring to examples of applying these in different countries. It summarises all key issues regarding APEL for those who really want to move “from knowing to doing”.

The tools with which to do this (recognition) are largely in place. We only need to face up to the opportunities presented by this new educational world.

The cross-cultural psychologist John Berry wrote elegantly about facing diversity as opportunity diversity is a fact of life; whether it is the “spice” or the “irritant” to people is the fundamental psychological, social, cultural and political issue of our times (Berry, 1997, p. 138).

APEL can be either a spice or an irritant. It is a way of trying to understand and value both the problems and opportunities created by increasing practices of lifelong learning. Knowledge but also experience of practice is a prerequisite for valuing something. APEL is a one way of seeking a better understanding of one aspect of lifelong learning. It points to the value of the lifelong learning which takes place outside the traditional educational practice of universities. The hope is that this book may lead people across Europe to know more about APEL, to value it and encourage many more institutions to practice it in a way that fits best their own circumstances.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this brief review of the place of higher education in lifelong learning, the underlying theme has been one of more co-operation. There is a need for greater co-operation between university staff and the new learners, co-operation with their employers in some cases, and with their professional bodies. There is also a greater need for more co-operation between the national university bodies and national governments and between European organisations and the European Parliament and Commission. In order to ensure as far as possible a complete and seamless service,

collaboration between continuing education providers and providers of initial education are needed, not only with the full-time higher education providers (which are generally easy to maintain) but with the junior colleges and the schools as well.

The need for co-operation at all levels and among all the higher education stakeholders may seem obvious. The strength of the huge body of higher education providers in Europe working together must be greater than the combined strengths of the individual institutions. This collaborative model, however, is not one which is widely found at present. Working as an individual provider, the natural reaction of a university is to compete with those nearby. In this world, only the fittest will survive. The universities cannot abandon the ideas of the market: we must listen to our students, and potential students, and react to them; we must promote the courses we offer. The task for all of us, the representatives of European higher education institutions, European and national politicians, civil servants, the social partners and the professions is to find a collaborative way to make the necessary changes. The challenge to us is to find how this can be achieved over the coming years. A multilevel activity is needed that will connect most of the sectors, studies and actions in this huge and essentially horizontal area.

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