

From University Lifelong Learning to Lifelong Learning Universities – developing and implementing effective strategy

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Introduction

Jarl Bengtsson recently pointed out that “on the one hand lifelong learning is accepted, in policy terms, by all OECD countries and many other countries, but on the other hand there is an uneven and slow pace of implementation of lifelong learning” (Bengtsson 2013, p 1).

On the basis of EUCEN³'s network knowledge and projects results, we share a similar conclusion concerning University Lifelong Learning (ULLL). Higher education ministers in Europe definitively adopted a voluntary discourse inviting higher education institutions (HEIs), including universities, to develop lifelong learning in their core activities. Their successive communiqués - Prague in 2001, Berlin in 2003, Bergen in 2005, London in 2007 and finally Leuven-Louvain-la-Neuve in 2009 - established lifelong learning as one of the 10 priorities for 2010-2020 (Education and Training, 2013); they stressed the importance of going further than continuing education and adult education, raising the question of how to fully implement LLL in universities towards 2020. Meanwhile universities developed relevant provision for a greater variety of lifelong learners, in particular for young adults having no university degree, for individuals seeking professional development, for un-employed adults, for migrants, and so on; they created innovative collaborative projects; and accumulated good practice. However, despite the quality and quantity of these initiatives to foster lifelong learning, to external stakeholders the results appear insufficient so far and internally they appear fragile and highly dependent on the individual Rector.

For Bengtsson (2013), the main reasons for the slow pace of LLL implementation in general were the lack of workable implementation strategies, the lack of an effective funding system, and stakeholders' resistance to change. The purpose of this paper is to explore two of the reasons mentioned by Bengtsson: the first - lack of implementation strategies, and the third - stakeholders' resistance. However, we also remain totally convinced by the dramatic need of an adequate funding system (Davies 2009a; de Viron et al 2011a).

Firstly, we present the context of the European universities and synthesise the reasons (the rationale) why they are developing ULLL, many going beyond recommendations of the European higher education ministers. Secondly, we present the main trends of this development and implementation during this last 10 years and highlight the diversity based on overviews led by EUCEN. We then present the tools and quality methods developed by EUCEN and its members to promote the inclusion of LLL in universities' strategy and its implementation. Finally we conclude on some perspectives to strengthen this development in the future.

The context: demand, needs and opportunities

Beyond the general forces - demographic change, globalisation, and technological evolution –which affect all societal endeavours including adult learning, Merriam et al (2012) highlighted life

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transitions. Citing Aslanian and Brickell (1980), they pointed out that “83% of adult learners were engaged in learning activities because of some transition in their lives” (ibid, p92). Transitions could be marriage, retirement, job changes, the birth of children, leisure, art, health, religion or citizenship. Furthermore, Aslanian (2001) found that in 2001 participation in higher and continuing education was largely due to a career transition. New patterns of career and working life have emerged where the traditional sequence of education - work - retirement have been replaced by several entries to and exits from the labour market for men as well as women for a variety of reasons. As EUCEN (2009) pointed out, transition points are becoming the most important moments in individuals’ personal and professional pathways when the main concern is often to avoid long term unemployment. The moves between jobs and between jobs and training increasingly have to be managed by individuals. This creates need, demand and opportunity for universities to pay attention of to these transition points and to elaborate new forms of provision able to support their alumni over a longer term and offer flexible responses to a wide range of people involved in such transitions. The “institutions will have to take into account what people have learnt from previous activities, assessing and validating this non formal and informal learning and opening up new perspectives opportunities that are offered ... new employments accessible”. But this does not mean an exclusive focus on employability; personal development and citizenship are also important. “The challenge in our societies is not only to face rapid changes in economy but also in social, community or family life” (EUCEN, 2009).

Furthermore, in the context of the knowledge society, knowledge being everywhere, acquiring new knowledge is possible without reference to traditional boundaries of space and time: the key questions are now “where to learn” and “when to learn” throughout life (Carniero 2007). In this perspective, universities are not only the place where well-adapted formal learning programmes are delivered and where non-formal and informal learning are recognised and validated; they are also the place where fragmented knowledge (Pellert 2009; Carniero 2003) could be re-structured and re-organised into a holistic and coherent view and where work place learning settings are analysed and designed.

State of play – diversity of provision

Bengtsson (2013) identified wide diversity in LLL in general and this certainly applies to university LLL. Over the period 2005-12, EUCEN, with the support of the EC, undertook a number of projects (see www.eucen.eu for a full list) which included surveys of the state of play in the development of LLL in universities. It should be noted that the responses did not constitute a representative sample of all European HEIs, indeed given the diversity this would be a very difficult task. The major bias is due to fact that data were produced by the projects’ partners, often, but not exclusively, members of EUCEN and therefore experienced or at the very least interested in developing LLL. Thus we cannot generalise from the results to all European universities without caution. However all data, case studies, visit reports, questionnaires, have been designed, collected and analysed in scientific ways. The most interesting aspects of those results reside in their ability to illustrate developments in the field of ULLL, to identify innovative and new practices, to observe changes and trends.

Nevertheless a range of studies have given similar results in some respects (Sursock and Smidt 2010; Smidt and Sursock 2011) and it is clear although many initiatives and projects have been developed in European universities collaboratively, diversity is the overwhelming characteristic of the field (Davies 2007; Davies 2009a).

This diversity is apparent in a number of aspects. Significantly what is called ‘lifelong learning’ in one country might be called ‘adult education’, ‘postgraduate studies’ or ‘continuing education’ in others; and what is included under the label in one country may not be included in another. For example a Bachelor’s or Master’s with a professional orientation may be classified as LLL in one

country but part of the range of regular diploma courses in other countries. In some countries the label attaches to the provision, in others it attaches rather to the learners or target groups in others to the mode of delivery (full or part time, at a distance or on campus, academic or professional, customised/individualised or general). The range and number of courses offered varies enormously and in some countries LLL includes services such as advice and guidance, careers guidance, alumni contacts, validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) while in others such services may be located elsewhere in the institutional map. Indeed the term VNFIL covers a variety of approaches and practices and has a number of different names: validation is sometimes replaced by recognition, accreditation, assessment or certification; learning is sometimes replaced by competences, skills, or experience. The target groups are diverse: individual learners, organisations of all kinds – public, private, not-for-profit, professional, cultural, and/or specific groups of learners such as unemployed, women, or migrants. All universities are involved in a range of partnerships with different kinds of stakeholders for reasons related to LLL development: the analysis and forecasting of training needs, the identification of the target groups and promotion of courses, marketing or the distribution of information about courses, the delivery and execution of courses and programme, the evaluation of courses. Employers were reported to be the most frequent partners and regional authorities and social partners were also very important, consistent with the fact that much of ULLL is professionally oriented and so employers and social partners are key players alongside regional authorities since in many countries they have the responsibility for professional/vocational training.

In addition the way LLL is organised and managed varies between faculties of the same university, between universities in the same country, and between countries but a number of different models can be identified: a special LLL Unit within the university, a special Unit within the university but not only for LL, department or faculty responsible, a special organisation external but linked to and/or controlled by the university in some way (e.g. Foundation or University company), a hybrid model with a mix of approaches for different kinds of provision or service.

This diversity at all levels reflects the fact that universities usually have more than one purpose in offering LLL and the purposes vary between institutions: responding to the employment needs of the labour market, stimulating personal development by providing personal development programmes for post graduates, encouraging participation of non-traditional learners, attracting new groups into the university, meeting the needs of citizens in all aspects of life, supporting social, cultural and economic development of the region, and/or seeking new sources of revenue.

Such diversity is clearly its great strength and richness for the universities, stakeholders and learners since it demonstrates that institutions can be proactive and responsive, can reach and meet the needs of learners and stakeholders far beyond the traditional constituency for higher education. However, this diversity might also be a weakness from the point of view of official agencies or at the political level: how can such diversity be counted and measured on a national or European level? If it cannot be counted or measured easily, how can its impact be demonstrated? how can it be 'valued'? how can it be made accountable? how can its quality be assured? If it is for everyone, everywhere, anywhere, does it disappear in a mist? If it is 'all things to all men', how can it have a clear voice and how can that voice make itself heard? (Davies 2009a).

State of play – strategy development

What also emerges from these studies is that many HEIs have developed such provision in a way which has been largely ad hoc, responsive and opportunistic (in both its positive and negative sense). In some countries there is a fairly strong national policy framework, often (e.g. Austria, Belgium, France, Finland) largely influenced and shaped by those HEIs that were already active in the field. Similarly, the development of institutional strategy has tended to be developed one step behind the practice. In the BeFlex Plus project (www.eucen.eu/BeFlexPlus/index.html), the survey showed that

all respondents were offering LLL of some kind but as far as strategy was concerned only 13% considered LLL strategy as the highest priority, 55% considered it as important along with other priorities and 29% considered it not yet a priority (Davies 2009b). In 2010, the EUA Trends study (Sursock and Smidt 2010) found that only 39% of the responding universities were developing a strategy including LLL aspects (the most advanced being in SE, DK, FI, FR, IE, UK, CZ, LT). There is little more recent evidence that ULLL provision has further developed or expanded and there are of course a number of factors in this pattern but coming back to Bengtsson (2013), it seems reasonable to postulate that the absence of a strong institutional strategy is among them.

Nevertheless, it does seem that universities are becoming more engaged in developing a lifelong learning strategy and there are often powerful reasons for them to do so. A transversal in-depth analysis of 10 European universities (de Viron et al 2011a) undertaken in the ALLUME project (<http://allume.eucen.eu>) focussed in part on the reasons why these universities had started to develop and implement a LLL strategy and found that the dominant external driver was societal pressure: being socially aware and socially active, the ability to react to the needs of society, the national vision, or the need of society development. The second reason to develop a LLL strategy was the existence of legal framework to do so: national, regional or local policies, or a government decision. Six other reasons were identified: markets (internationalisation, globalisation), economic situation (crisis), and Europe (social fund, policies) were the most frequently cited. It is also worthy of note that in 7 of the 10 cases, the national or regional economic situation and structure were considered as impacting negatively not positively on the LLL strategy process. There were also internal drivers for starting a LLL strategy process: awareness of the need to widen access and to take demand into account was the most frequently cited: LLL and growing the volume of LLL or number of adult learners was seen as their mission. The universities also mention that some previous experiences in LLL, a culture of LLL and changes in internal organisation could also act as positive internal drivers, and organisational and structural change was sometimes a positive factor in the LLL strategy process.

The European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning (EUA 2008) identified a set of 10 commitments from universities in addressing the development and implementation of lifelong learning strategies, a set of matching commitments for governments and regional partners to support universities in their social engagement. The Charter has clearly had some impact on the development of LLL strategy at institutional level. The SIRUS project led by EUA (<http://www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/building-the-european-higher-education-area/projects/shaping-inclusive-and-responsive-university-strate.aspx>) focused on the 10 commitments from universities, while bearing in mind the role of governments and external partners in the strategic involvement of universities in lifelong learning. The project report (Smidt and Surcock 2011) discussed the different developmental steps towards an integrated lifelong learning strategy:

- the adaptation stage in which universities design a continuing education strategy, develop an ad hoc service and communicate it; they are willing to response to demand and take into account the opportunities. But this continuing education strategy remains separate from the strategy concerning traditional activities. Universities do not mention the concept of ULLL explicitly or try to define it.
- the organisational stage in which universities try to integrate the LLL strategy into other strategic decisions; they create specific programmes for lifelong learners or adapt degree programmes in order to enlarge their audience. Usually they also create services and specific units to attract and manage a broader pool of students.
- the cultural stage in which LLL is fixed within the universities' DNA and universities consider themselves as Lifelong Learning Universities which implies a major cultural change within universities: all learning initiatives are learner-centred, learning is shared, is lifelong and lifewide, learning is valued wherever and whenever it takes place, all the stakeholders are engaged in the

process as the LLL University is an open system, learning is enjoyable and a rewarding experience. In addition, universities undertake research in the lifelong learning field and practice organisational learning at all levels (Davies, 2009a).

However, it is clear that there are few universities at the 'cultural stage' and much remains to be done to have the strong institutional frameworks and strategies that are necessary to implement coherent and expanding LLL provision.

EUCEN (2009) has argued that it would be more efficient to take stock of the now well documented diversity and to invite universities to concentrate their efforts on specific objectives in line with their competences and resources. But the diversity has to be recognised and even celebrated. Universities should define their own strategy, adapted to their environment and legal framework; they need to prioritise their own development, their own academic and research strategies, their partnerships with their international and regional environment: multinationals, companies, small and medium enterprises. In addition, sustainable development needs more attention to the involvement of the maximum number of actors in the process and the establishment of networked universities contributing to the promotion, in synergy with other actors, of new activities closer to local stakeholders and populations.

Strategy and 'strategizing' – tools for strategy development

The difference between a university which has LLL (ULLL) and a LLL University (LLLU) is essentially that the latter has LLL firmly embedded in its mission, strategy and culture. To help the universities to develop their own strategy and become a LLLU fully adapted to their environment and legal framework, EUCEN, its partners, its member universities and the European professional community have built up a large set of methods or tools over the last 10 years. Diversity is also a characteristic of this set: even if the goals and aims are different, if they are using different approaches and have been developed in different context, all are attempting to contribute to the achievement of a LLLU.

In this section, we first present a schematic overview of the whole change process and then develop our approach to strategy and strategizing and describe some tools to support this approach.

1. The global process : how to become a LLL University

To have a global view of the whole process of change involved in 'becoming a LLL University' we have propose a conceptual map (figure 1).

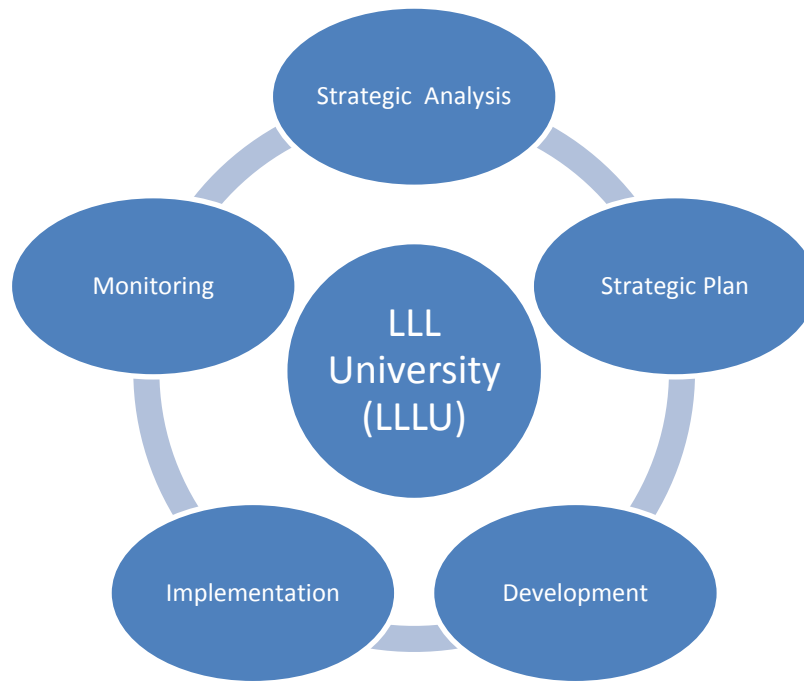


Figure 1 - Schematic view of the process 'becoming a LLL University'

The figure 1 highlights that a change process is not linear but more recursive and circular - an on-going process. The phases - analysis of the context and the internal situation, design of objectives and action plans, operational development, implementation and monitoring of the action plans - are the ones commonly agreed in any change process even if specific content or boundaries vary in the literature (Johnson et al 2011).

In this paper, we focus on the two first phases, strategic analysis and strategic plan, although the approach 'strategy as practice' is a comprehensive going beyond these phases and including the development, implementation and monitoring phases – strategy is said to be *done* in all phases.

2. Strategy-as-Practice Approach

“Strategy is about how to reach a desirable future. This means firstly thinking the potential futures ; secondly assessing which of these potential outcome may be more desirable than others, and thirdly identifying ways and making decisions to influence the outcome in the desired direction.” (Durand 2008, p.281).

In order to design the desirable future, the vision and the roadmap, organisations usually undertake some form of diagnosis, self-analysis, benchmarking. The most often used tools are SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis and/or environmental scanning, such as PESTEL analysis considering Political, Economic, Social, Environmental factors.

While strategic goals and objectives may vary from one university to another depending on their capacities and on their specific environment, the practices and the activities involved in elaborating the strategy – the strategizing process – may be similar so the methodology is transferable.

A main conclusion of the ALLUME project (de Viron et al 2011a) was that not only the content of the strategy is important, but that the way to elaborate this strategy is crucial: universities were not only invited to develop the content of their strategy – their vision, their objectives, their action plan - they

were also invited to set up an active, collaborative and permanent way of doing strategy: 'LLL strategizing' (de Viron et al 2011a). This is aligned with the strategy-as-practice approach proposed by Whittington (1996, 2002), viewing strategy as something that is *done* within an organisation – and not something an organisation *has*. The 'strategy-as-practice' school of thought (Whittington 1996, 2003, 2006; Jarzabkowski 2004) considers strategy as a process done by people in concrete and formal actions such as team meetings, presentations and workshops. It is in line with a broader "practice paradigm" in social science theory since the 1980s, focusing more on "people than on organisations, the routine as opposed to change, and situated activity rather than abstract processes" (Whittington 2003, p118). It is recommended to focus on strategists i.e. the people engaged in the real work of strategizing, 'strategizing' referring to 'doing of strategy' (Jarzabkowski et al 2007).

The ALLUME project adapted a formal framework based on Whittington's approach (2003 pp 119-121) for the LLLU strategizing context focusing on an institutional perspective (de Viron and Hesse 2012). Five key questions were identified:

1. Why does the process of LLLU strategizing begin? What are the external and internal drivers of change?
2. Who are the people involved in LLLU strategizing? Who are the internal actors? What are their roles: are they doers, influential persons, researchers, decision makers? Who are the external actors? What are their roles?
3. How is the process of LLLU strategizing done and organised? Is it a formal or informal process? What is its level of development?
4. What are the tools and techniques used for LLLU strategizing?
5. How are the products of LLLU strategizing communicated?

The rationale behind this choice of strategy-as-practice approach was to promote a wide acceptance of major change within the institutions, to organise the cultural and organisational changes, to address the internal and external stakeholders' resistance but also to integrate,–from the beginning, the evolution of the strategic content. As mentioned before, due to the limits of the ALLUME project (in particular the time frame), the strategizing approach was applied only to the design of the strategy: strategic analysis and strategic plan, the two first phases of the change process represented in figure 1. However, the approach could also be adopted for the development, implementation and monitoring phases.

Using this strategy-as-practice approach and based on the analysis of 10 European universities and on testing in 6 other universities from a total of 14 countries, a five-stage approach for developing and implementing a LLLU strategy, was established. These 5 stages are not to be seen as linear or successive stages within the strategizing process, but more as five permanent guiding principles, activated continuously during the process. These five principles are represented in figure 2.

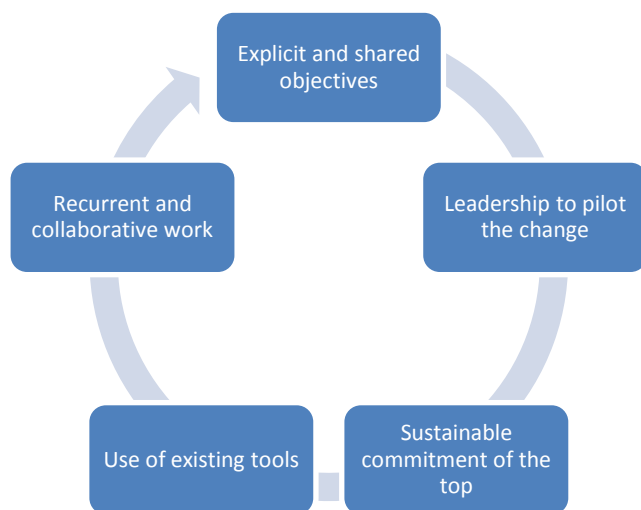


Figure 2 - Five principles in the LLLU strategy process

1. From a tacit, isolated and un-diffused strategy to an explicit, formulated, shared and communicated strategy
Independently of the position, role or function of the people involved in the ‘strategizing’ process, the strategy should be made explicit, well-formulated, and shared as much as possible with colleagues, with representatives of other institutional units, with leaders and rectors, with external actors. It should be communicated effectively internally and externally, in order to develop a shared vision of the future.
2. Leadership to pilot the change
As complex organisations, universities should identify the diverse leaders, each having different roles in order to involve them in this LLL strategizing process. A strong specific unit having a role to drive forward change and coordinate developments was identified as an advantage to feed the strategizing process.
3. Sustainable commitment of senior managers, vice rectors, heads of faculties, LLL council and so on
The commitment of these institutional leaders is crucial to achieve sustainable development and goes hand in hand with the creation of strategic documents, concrete and measureable objectives, and plans making the commitments binding with a shared vision of the future.
4. Use of existing tools
A large set of guidelines, tools have already been developed. There is no need to begin strategizing by designing new tools. The set of questions adapted from Whittington (2003), presented above, and the tools developed as a result of the ALLUME project provide a tried and tested starting point for this process and are flexible enough to support some local adaptation.
5. Recurrent and collaborative work within the institution
The strategy process or ‘strategizing’ should be a continuous process related to evolution in the internal or external environment: action plans may need to be revised or adapted, goals may need to be changed. The strategy process is also a collective task growing around a common vision of what a LLL University is and a common understanding of the challenges. This recurrent and collective work can start at different levels of the university’s organisation. There is no single ‘best way’ or ‘unique pathway’. Universities have to adapt

their LLL strategy process to their specific circumstances, using the available tools and techniques; they have to decide on the approach to be used and on concrete actions. Independently of the origin and direction of the LLL strategy process (top-down, bottom-up or middle-bottom-top), the LLL strategizing should be undertaken at an institutional level and it should be inscribed, formally registered, in the university structure.

A lot of dialogue is required for any strategy process; it could be face-to-face discussion, focus-group meetings, brainstorming or web-based dialogue as suggested by Kettunen (2010) in the context of a general HEI strategy.

3. Support tools for LLLU Strategy

During the strategy process and more specifically during activities such as self-analysis, benchmarking, objectives and action plan definition, the ALLUME project developed tools in order to share the experiences of and with European universities. The tools⁴ are intended to be reflexive in nature and to provide support to universities for the development of a lifelong learning culture and for the design of a lifelong learning strategy adapted to the specific needs of each institution. They also assist universities on the way to a practical implementation of LLL by inviting them and other LLL actors to formulate concrete action plans, largely connected to curriculum development, enhancing guidance and counselling, renewal of the student recruitment strategy, reaching for new audiences, designing the corporate governance of the social interaction of the university.

Two tools were proposed for self-analysis and self-diagnosis and a third for benchmarking:

The first self-analysis tool is dedicated to identifying the LLLU strategy *process* – the strategizing – and to monitoring it; it invites universities to analyse in detail their way of doing strategies. Mainly based on the relevant questions briefly set out above, it helps to identify key internal and external actors involved in the strategizing process and facilitates identifying the single steps to be undertaken in making a strategy. This tool has a strong internal organisation focus and helps universities to adapt the five-stage approach.

The second self-analysis tool is dedicated to the *content* of the strategy; it assists universities in getting a strategic overview about their current LLL-strategy, mission, vision and goals. Furthermore, it invites institutions to select 3 key priorities for the next years and to work in detail on them, leading to a revision of the current LLL-strategy and the formulation of an action plan.

The third tool is for benchmarking against the European Universities' Charter on LLL (EUA 2008); it invites universities to benchmark their performance against the 10 institutional commitments of the Charter. Some suggestions of further areas for improvement were offered inviting universities to use this in combination with the second tool (for self-analysis - content) with a view to selecting key priorities for the future.

⁴ These, and other related tools developed by EUCEN, EUA and other European partnerships, are available via EUCEN website (www.eucen.eu)

These tools were developed based on existing good practice in 10 universities and on the insights and suggestions for improvement obtained in 6 testing visits in other institutions with less advanced LLL strategies (a total of 16 HEIs and 14 countries involved). During the validation process in the testing phase, the supportive character of the process and of the guidelines was recognised and appreciated. Three testing institutions confirmed that it supported institutional efforts to speed up discussions and to move LLL closer to the forefront of the university's concerns.

4. Conclusions and Perspectives

It is clear that there is a widespread acceptance that LLL is an important element of higher education in Europe, that most universities have implemented it in some form, and that its key characteristic is diversity. While this diversity presents challenges in the context of national and European policy making, it is also its great strength since it reflects the specificity of universities' relationships with their learners and their various stakeholders. However, as the national and European policy context shifts – 'social dimension' is becoming the new terminology (see for example EC 2013, p20-21) rather than 'lifelong learning' – it is not obvious that the elements are in place for institutions to become what we have called *lifelong learning universities* or that this is happening on a large scale. As we have argued above, LLL activities have tended to come first in a responsive but rather ad hoc way and strategy seems to have come later (if at all) when a more coherent, institution-wide approach is necessary to develop further. This absence of an integrated strategy coupled with stakeholders' resistance are among the key factors in this apparent slow-down and the LLL strategy appears not to be the highest priority for a large majority of universities but has to be managed with many other priorities. In addition, even if there are national ministerial recommendations, the lack of a national and/or legal framework for implementation is sometimes an obstacle. Nevertheless, some internal and external stakeholders are aware of the need to change and indeed often constitute drivers for change. Furthermore, although it is sometimes said that there are no methods and tools to address these, we have also shown that there is in fact a wide range of tried and tested approaches available.

Looking at the LLLU issues and challenges, we can immediately conclude that time is a pre-requisite for LLLU strategy! It was apparent in universities which have a well-established long-standing LLLU strategy or which have intensive ULLL activity, that the design of a strategy and its implementation are effectively labour-intensive processes.

However, there is an obvious need for further work and we offer here our agenda for the future.

Firstly we propose that rather than developing yet more tools in yet more projects, we, as a professional community, should focus on strengthening the methodologies that have been developed, improving the tools that have been tried and tested, and developing a more holistic and coherent package of support to institutions. We need to consider how the tools relate to each other, to understand and exploit their complementarity (a packaging issue!), to reinforce their consistency and to consider making them available in more languages.

Secondly, we need to support the recurrence of the process, the constant improvement of the tools, and to enhance the dynamic nature of the tools (at present they are mostly static – based on one picture at one time).

Thirdly, we should support the collaborative aspect of the process (some functionalities such as multi-users should be improved), and develop tutoring, mentoring, the exchange of experience between universities with similar interests/strategies, and networking. The national and European networks have an important role here.

Fourthly, we need to develop monitoring and evaluation of existing ULLL-strategies (content and process) and of their integration in different academic settings. Similarly, although feedback on the testing and use of existing tools is almost unanimously positive we have no clear evidence for the effectiveness of the methodology or for the results of a collaborative strategizing. So there is a comparative research agenda to be addressed and a link to be established with national evaluation and accreditation agencies.

Finally, we need to consider the financial dimensions of LLL and the implications for institutions of the cultural shift we have explored.

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