

TOWARDS A SHARED VISION ON LIFELONG LEARNING AND CONTINUING EDUCATION AT KU LEUVEN

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ABSTRACT

KU Leuven has a long tradition in offering continuing education. All faculties are responsible for developing and organising their own continuing education programmes, and each has its own policy and identity.

Although the autonomy of the faculties is important for the organisation of societally relevant university lifelong learning programmes, an overall institutional approach, recognising lifelong learning as a mission of the university, is crucial to give the necessary impetus to the implementation of lifelong learning and continuing education programmes on a faculty level.

At the central level of the university, there is a unit for lifelong learning. Although the unit has the words 'lifelong learning' in its name, the focus predominantly lies on supporting faculties in organising professional continuing education programmes. Consequently, there is a risk that lifelong learning will be narrowed down to 'the learning that takes place after having finished university'. To keep up with the challenges of the 21st century, a broader scope and strategy is needed.

To answer this need, KU Leuven invested in articulating a university-wide vision, rather than formulating regulations regarding the organisation of lifelong learning in faculties.

This paper describes the process of creating such a broad, common vision, combining bottom-up and top-down strategies, and the core elements that were its outcome.

KU LEUVEN: SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

KU Leuven is a comprehensive and research-intensive university in Belgium, founded in 1425. The university counts 57,631 students (2015-2016) and 13,133 staff members (i.e. administrative and technical staff, junior & senior academic staff, teaching staff, other academic staff) (February 2016).

KU Leuven has 15 faculties, organised in three groups of major science domains:

- Humanities and Social Sciences Group (7 faculties)
- Science, Engineering and Technology Group (5 faculties)
- Biomedical Sciences Group (3 faculties)

Within or besides the faculties operate numerous research departments and research groups.

In 2013, the whole higher education system in Flanders underwent a large-scale reform. The result was that the academic study programmes of the university colleges were integrated into the universities.

Since then, KU Leuven study programmes are available in 11 locations (campuses) spread over Flanders.

This reform also resulted in the integration of (part of) the continuing education programmes of the university colleges. These programmes predominantly focus on professional, career and skills development for specific professions.

LIFELONG LEARNING AND CONTINUING EDUCATION AT KU LEUVEN: STATE OF AFFAIRS IN 2014

At government level, there is only very limited legislation regarding continuing education and lifelong learning in Flanders. Continuing education is seen as an integral part of university education. However, this mission is not further elaborated and there is a lack of financial support, in contrast to specific funding mechanisms for (initial) education and research, two other university missions.

Nevertheless, KU Leuven looks back on a long tradition in offering continuing education. All faculties, research departments or units are responsible for developing and organising their own continuing education programmes, and each has its own policy and identity. In addition, there is, at the central level of the university, a unit for lifelong learning, which has been given the task of informing, advising and supporting the different continuing education organisers within the university. Although the unit has the words ‘lifelong learning’ in its name, the focus predominantly lies on supporting faculties in organising professional continuing education programmes. Consequently, there is a risk that lifelong learning will be narrowed down to ‘the learning that takes place after having finished university’. To keep up with the challenges of the 21st century, a broader scope and strategy is needed.

It was only in 2014 that a first comprehensive policy paper was written and approved by the management of the university, describing the current state of affairs in continuing education in the university, and the organisational structures which existed after the integration process with the various university colleges throughout Flanders had been completed. At the same time, a new vision and policy plan on education and students was introduced for the period 2014-2017. One of the objectives of the policy plan was the development of an up-to-date and university-wide vision on lifelong learning at KU Leuven.

TOWARDS A SHARED VISION: THE PROCESS

The process of developing and articulating a shared vision regarding lifelong learning and continuing education was undertaken in the period 2015-2017.

The ambition was:

- to develop a university-wide, broad vision, in the sense that it defines lifelong learning as a learning process from the cradle to the grave and as a lifewide and essential dimension of teaching and learning at the university;
- to direct the university’s mission and policy in the long term;
- to develop a framework that motivates, inspires and orients the different actors to optimise existing practices, to develop innovative initiatives and to enhance the quality and impact of lifelong learning initiatives;
- to provide a framework to faculties and departments to articulate their own policies.

In order to develop this vision, the central lifelong learning unit undertook a series of interviews with key stakeholders in faculties, departments and study programmes, to be able to visualise good practices, identify underlying principles which are worth sharing and to make an inventory of (potential) obstacles for successful implementation.

In a second step, the Education Council, the central university body which provides advice to the Academic Council on matters relating to teaching and learning, set up an advisory group which could take the necessary time and freedom to elaborate a common vision on lifelong learning and continuing education.

The advisory group was chaired by an emeritus professor and expert in (university) lifelong learning, and included representatives of all sections of the university: students, lecturers, educational developers, vice deans of faculties, organisers of continuing education programmes and the central educational support units. All members could speak in their own name.

Alongside the meetings of the advisory group, a series of interviews were conducted with important external partners from different sectors of the labour market and of society. These interviews focused on identifying the main challenges and questions within society and within the labour market nowadays, and on the role the university can play as one of many continuing education providers.

Throughout its activities, the advisory group and its chair opted for a bottom-up approach and built on already existing local and specific policy plans and documents of both the faculties and the lifelong learning unit. The advisory group's intention was to reveal the underlying principles and ideas of existing practices, and work towards the valorisation of good practices and policies, and to place these principles, ideas and practices in the broader international context of lifelong learning.

TOWARDS A SHARED VISION: THE OUTCOMES

The development process of a shared vision on lifelong learning and continuing education resulted not in one, but in two vision texts. This was a deliberate choice due to the terminological confusion between the two concepts in Flanders and internationally. Creating two separate vision texts offered the opportunity to distinguish lifelong learning from continuing education, and also to formulate their missions in a complementary way:

1. Lifelong Learning at KU Leuven

This vision text looks at lifelong learning from the learner's perspective and defines lifelong learning as a broader concept with a focus on the learner and his/her learning process

2. University Continuing Education at KU Leuven as a lifelong learning university

This vision text looks at lifelong learning from the provider's perspective: university continuing education as a post-initial part of the educational offering, aimed at specific target groups.

Lifelong Learning at KU Leuven

The first vision text looks at lifelong learning from the learner's perspective. This leads to the following definition:

Lifelong learning is a complex process in which people and organisations/teams, in all contexts of their functioning, form respectively a personal or organisational identity. During this process, they continue to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, competences and qualifications to handle their evolving professional, economic, social and cultural roles and tasks in a fast evolving society in order to take a critical, judicious, responsible and sustainable position. They do this alongside others to promote a viable and prosperous society with opportunities for everyone.

From this perspective, lifelong learning has to be part of the university's learning environment and becomes a leading principle in the educational design of all study programmes.

It is a process that is already initiated in the Bachelors and Masters programmes as *“the promotion of a ‘want-to-learn’ attitude and the competences to be able to learn”* (Van Petegem, 2011).

Integrating the concept of lifelong learning in university education serves several goals:

- **employability and citizenship:** university education does not only prepare students for jobs and the labour market, but also stimulates them to take a certain responsibility in society and to develop social and cultural roles and tasks;
- **the joy of learning:** lifelong learning is also about learning how to learn and enjoying learning;
- **community building:** lifelong learning offers the opportunity to create a valuable reciprocity between the university and the societal domains in which its students and alumni operate. Lifelong learning enables the university to create networks, to stimulate dialogue, to exchange ideas and information. It enables the university to participate in the public debate and to play a role in actual societal questions.

In order to reach these goals, it will be necessary to create a stimulating learning environment for a diverse group of learners, by building a lifelong learning attitude (21st century skills) throughout the curriculum through course sequencing and the development of flexible and transparent learning paths (online and blended).

University Continuing Education at KU Leuven as lifelong learning university

Complementary to the first vision text that focuses on the learner's perspective and the learning environment, the second vision text zooms in on university continuing education as a specific form of education provision, focusing on adult learners and realising a specific part of the lifelong learning goals.

University continuing education includes all initiatives aiming at updating, broadening or specialising knowledge, skills and/or competences. It is regarded as an essential and substantial component of the university's educational portfolio, situated at the crossroads of education, research and service to society. It consists of a variety of long term study programmes and short term activities. Continuing education design principles focus on connecting learning needs with research findings (academic orientation), investing in sectoral and professional networks and developing interdisciplinary courses and programmes.

KU Leuven has chosen a decentralised model for organising its continuing education programmes. Faculties, departments and units develop their own policy and strategy, and decide on the kind of organisational model they want to adopt. As mentioned above, a central unit supports the faculties in their activities.

UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING AND ITS RELATION TO SOCIETY AND THE LABOUR MARKET

In the two vision texts, there is a reciprocal relationship between lifelong learning on the one hand and society and the labour market on the other.

The first vision text focuses on the importance of lifelong learning in preparing students for a future evolving, flexible career, and on employability, community building and citizenship.

The second vision text focuses on the university's offer of continuing education programmes and the way it enables the university's faculties and research departments to build and maintain networks between researchers, labour market and alumni. To detect evolving learning needs, a number of faculties and research departments use specific consultation structures with representatives of different occupational fields. It is clear that in the future the networks of the research departments can be explored further with a view to developing continuing education. The same applies to the internal collaboration between faculties and departments.

Alongside the meetings of the advisory group, fourteen interviews were conducted with stakeholders from the labour market and society in general. In these interviews, the different stakeholders expressed their expectations and needs towards university lifelong learning and continuing education:

- They stressed the added value of academic continuing education and lifelong learning;
- They expressed the need for more interaction and communication: the way the university and the labour market currently communicate with each other does not fit the needs;
- They asked to further highlight and publicise the continuing education provision: the university is still heavily weighted to cater to traditional students who enter university directly after school to study full-time, and the institution's offer of continuing education courses/programmes is hardly known;
- They emphasized the role university continuing education plays in stimulating critical thinking amongst professionals;
- They saw a specific role for university continuing education in disseminating research findings and translating them to the labour market and societal needs. In this way, research findings can be linked to important societal questions.

THE FUTURE ...

After the development of this institutional response towards lifelong learning in the form of two vision texts – on lifelong learning and continuing education – the next step is the implementation of this vision into concrete university policy plans.

It is therefore promising that the recently elected Rector explicitly mentions lifelong learning and continuing education as a policy priority in his election programme. With both vision texts, the new Rector and his team will already have two elaborate documents at their disposal that can form a solid basis for a new university policy plan and strategy.

FINAL NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

If you would like to keep up to date on the further implementation of the lifelong learning vision at KU Leuven, please don't hesitate to contact Lut Moorthamer <lut.moorthamer@kuleuven.be> and/or Anneleen Cosemans <anneleen.cosemans@kuleuven.be>.

Let us further discuss, exchange experiences and learn from each other, and in this way put university lifelong learning and continuing education more prominently on the map.

REFERENCES

Van Petegem, W. (2011) 'Towards a strategy for lifelong learning: experiences from K.U. Leuven' in H. Smidt & A. Sursock (eds.), *Engaging in Lifelong Learning: Shaping Inclusive and Responsive University Strategies*, EUA Publications, Brussels, pp. 27-29.