



Report from the Parallel Session on Lifelong Learning

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1.0 Introduction

Altogether, 28 participants attended the parallel session on Lifelong Learning (LLL); more than one half took an active part in the discussion and more than one half of them were students (either student representatives from national delegations or ESIB representatives). There were two introductory speeches. The Chair Ms. Vera Stastna (*Council of Europe, Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research*) gave an introduction to the main theme of the parallel session. She reminded that LLL was officially brought into the Bologna Process through the Prague Communiqué in 2001. It was the topic of the Bologna seminar “Recognition and Credit Systems in the Context of Lifelong Learning” (Prague, June 2003). Later, certain aspects were elaborated at some occasions (e.g. seminars on “Bologna and the challenges of e-learning and distance education, Ghent, July 2004; “The employability and its links to the objectives of the Bologna Process”, Bled, October 2004; “The social dimension of the EHEA and world-wide competition”, Paris, January 2005), but has not been highly profiled as an issue in the Process since then. However, some comprehensive conclusions and recommendations have been made at these seminars and at other occasions which haven’t lost their importance yet.

To give the topic of lifelong learning a higher priority and relevance, there is *an urgent need to identify obstacles for the furtherance of LLL within the EHEA* and to outline means to reach the targets set by the ministers already in Prague and Berlin. One of the dilemmas that need to be addressed is the pressure which the higher education institutions face concerning quality and increased efficiency - often leading to more closed, structured study programmes, versus the need for flexible and individually tailored programmes to enhance LLL. Another challenge is a strong demand for research and often the research career being “the only right” for an academic. Excellence is also quoted, very often in close connection to the outstanding research results. However, the Paris seminar of January 2005 led to thinking about excellence in much wider sense. It was very clearly underlined that “enlarging the emerging gap between those who benefit from

higher education and come back during their full life and those who have never used this possibility must be stopped and hopefully decreased in future” (*Concluding Remarks*, p.5).

The invited speaker Mr. Tom Schuller (OECD, *Centre for Educational Research and Innovation*) gave a comprehensive presentation on Lifelong Learning with a particular focus to higher education and the Bologna Process. His opening statement was rather provocative: whilst the mechanisms on which the Bologna discussion concentrates (qualification frameworks, quality assessment, etc) are potentially instruments for promoting LLL, they are not presented in that context. The wider theme of lifelong learning “has been very much neglected so far in the Bologna discussions” (*Trends IV Report*, p. 24). In the continuation he presented OECD activities relating to higher education and LLL (Promoting Adult Learning: thematic review; University Futures: scenario-building; E-learning: challenges from a set of case studies). He underlined issues and drivers which should be pushing LLL onto the higher education agenda, in particular to include demographic implications, to consider economic and technological change as well as equity and efficiency considerations. At the end, Mr. Schuller initiated the discussion with posing three important questions for LLL in higher education:

- how can the Lisbon and Bologna agendas be brought closer together?
- how seriously is higher education willing to take the implications of demography?
- will the monitoring process include LLL progress (or lack of it), and if so using what measures?

2.0 Discussion

Stimulated by both introductory speakers, participants entered a broad, very interesting but thematically heterogeneous discussion. Instead of keeping strict minutes, we will structure the discussion outcomes around three main clusters of issues:

- LLL and the structural dimension of the Bologna Process;
- LLL and the social dimension of the Bologna Process;
- LLL and the role of institutions;

finishing with some conclusions and recommendations from this parallel session.

2.1 LLL and the structural dimension of the Bologna Process

It was noted several times that an important progress has been made in the structural dimension of the Bologna Process, in particular between Berlin in Bergen. A framework for qualifications in the EHEA as well as standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA are now in place and approved by 45 European ministers. However, the devil is in details – in particular in details related to LLL. In this regard, the following statements and proposals were made:

- a) We all know that *recognition* is often a difficult issue in the mainstream education (e.g. with regard to mobility); we should be fully aware that in the case of LLL with its often less formalized structures it is – and will be – even more demanding issue.
- b) A framework for qualifications in the EHEA gives new opportunities also to *improving perspectives of LLL in our higher education systems*. Making these opportunities a reality depends very much on national frameworks for qualifications, which should be based on clear definitions of cycles and levels, learning outcomes and competences, credits and workload and *related to a particular context of LLL*.

- c) *Quality assurance systems* are very important also with regard to LLL; their promotion in higher education depends first of all on quality provision (evaluation; accreditation, etc.) – including quality provision of LLL.
- d) LLL paths should allow – and facilitate – *broad transitions* between study programmes and should not be treated only as a “second chance education”.
- e) The *EC proposal for a broader framework for qualifications for LLL* encompassing general education as well as vocational education and training is *good news* and should be considered very thoroughly in the Bologna Process.

2.2 LLL and the social dimension of the Bologna Process

Discussion in the parallel session made also clear that issues of LLL should be carefully considered in a light of the social dimension of the Bologna Process. Actually, the concept of LLL is about quality higher education *equally accessible to all within all their life*. In this regard, the following statements and proposals were made:

- a) For a growing number of students of different age groups LLL paths are the only *feasible entries to higher education and to higher education qualifications*.
- b) LLL provision at higher education institutions should not be primarily “a good business”; it is an integral and important part of *public responsibility for (higher) education*; public authorities and institutions should consider this issue together.
- c) The main principle of LLL should be the principle of *inclusiveness*; LLL should not be treated as a ghetto for certain social or age groups.
- d) Elaboration of concrete institutional LLL strategies – and supported at the national level – can importantly increase the share of *population in tertiary education*.
- e) Concrete LLL provision for different target groups is also a tool which supports *sustainable employability* (e.g. after the 1st cycle, etc.).
- f) In LLL, universities should search for contacts with “the real world”, with *real needs of learners*.

2.3 LLL and the role of institutions

The success of the next period within the Bologna Process (2005-2007) will depend very much on institutional implementation of the agreed principles. With regard to LLL, there are many open questions which should be solved at the institutional level but which also need a lot of support at the national and international levels. The discussion called attention to some dilemmas and questions and resulted in some further statements and proposals:

- a) LLL should be an integral part of the *institutional mission*; obviously, differentiation among institutions in this regard is needed – but how far?
- b) There is a lack of clear picture about *developments in LLL at the institutional level*; the 2007 stocktaking should fill this gap.
- c) *Recognition of prior learning* (including “short” higher education or “intermediate qualifications”) gives most firm basis for promotion of LLL at higher education institutions.
- d) *E-learning* brings a need for new learning methods; however, traditional teaching is not simply replaced.

- e) Today, there is a change of the perception *what student is*; traditional “student age” is (should be?) a relative notion. We are all lifelong learners. Institutions should find appropriate answers to this change.
- f) *Learners with special needs* are also lifelong learners; a special attention should be given to this group.
- g) We should not forget that *LLL perspectives start growing from the very beginning of education*; also children and students could give parents a motivation for LLL.

3.0 Conclusions and recommendations

Main conclusions and recommendations from the parallel session on LLL are summarized in the following four points:

- a) The Bologna Process has made a substantial progress; however, there is an obvious *lack of progress with regard to the LLL* as one of the ten Bologna action lines (since Prague, 2001).
- b) At the institutional level, there is *a huge need for more developed tools, methodologies and procedures for validation of prior learning*; progress at this level can help removing many existing barriers and mistrust.
- c) At the level of the Bologna Process, it is very important that opportunities for flexible learning paths and procedures for recognition of prior learning are made *a part of stocktaking for 2007*.
- d) Participants of the workshop strongly recommend to the BFUG to consider LLL in its various aspects *a priority of the working programme 2005-2007* (LLL and QF, LLL and social issues, a specialized follow-up seminar etc.)