

# THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING: EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE AND CROATIAN PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

The lifelong learning has a crucial importance since a dynamic economic and social development in contemporary highly globalized world is based upon highly educated and trained entrepreneurs, managers and professionals. This is recognized in the Lisbon strategy (2000), the EU's overarching program focusing on growth and jobs. It has underlined that knowledge, and the innovation are the EU's most valuable assets, particularly as global competition becomes more intense in all sectors. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the discussion on lifelong learning activities and policies in EU and its implications on Croatia as an EU candidate country.

JEL classification: I20

**Keywords:** lifelong learning, universities, lifelong learning policy, EU, Croatia

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## 1. Introduction

The Lisbon meeting in March 2000 earmarked the turning point in the EU development policy. The EU adopted the so-called Lisbon Strategy, which set a new strategic goal for the EU in next ten years: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. Among many ways determined to become the knowledge-based economy, promoting the lifelong learning has become of extreme importance since the changes in economy and society call for people with better education, higher qualification and continuously up-dated competences in order for respond to challenges brought by increased globalization and competition world-wide. In that context, it has been recognized that education must ceased to be viewed as an event, but rather as a process that takes place throughout the people's lives. Thus, the concept of lifelong learning has become not only a fashionable term, but a necessity and development of the lifelong learning capacities a priority of all EU member states. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the theoretical and practical discussion about lifelong learning, which is not only one way of education and training but has to become a guiding principle in 'supplying' and

acquiring knowledge. Considering that Croatia is an EU candidate country, the EU policy and measures have great implications on promoting and developing system of lifelong learning in Croatia.

## **2. Lifelong Learning: definition and context**

Lifelong learning as an concept is not new since the idea and discussion of learning through life can be found in historical texts such as for example in Plato's Republic or later in Yeaxlee's book published in 1929 called ***Lifelong Education*** (Smith, 2001). The popular notion 'lifelong learning', as we use it today, was coined in 1970s by the European Council.

Lifelong learning (hereinafter: LLL) is often identified as the synonym to lifelong education. Still, there is a difference. The lifelong learning is defined as the activity of learning throughout life with the goal to improve knowledge, skills and competences within personal, civil, social and business perspective. On other hand, lifelong education is defined as a set of organizational, administrative, methodological and procedural measures which accept the importance of promoting lifelong learning (Knapper and Cropley, 2000: 9). Thus, the LLL implies the acquisition and modernization of all types of competences, qualifications, interests, knowledge, from the preschool period to the period after retirement. In another words, it considers promotion of knowledge and ability development which will enable citizens to adjust to the "knowledge society" and actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life, impacting in that way the own future. There are three types of LLL –(i) formal - organized around determined curriculum (e.g. courses at the University); (ii) non-formal – advancement of skills necessary for a job) and (iii) informal – based upon conversation and exchange of knowledge within family, friends, etc.<sup>1</sup>

Reviewing literature reveals that there are numerous pressures why lifelong learning should be adopted as an (educational) goal. For example, Avelini-Holjevac (2002: 216) recognizes that the globalization of knowledge is a big advantage, chance and positive challenge of general globalization trend which should be 'incorporated' in national policy agenda; Bahtijarević-Šiber (1999: 719) states that the modern business requires new competences that were not important in the traditional way of doing business; Barković (1999: 30) states that the use of computer is a necessary competence for information gathering necessary for everyday work. Thus, the goal of LLL is threefold<sup>2</sup>: (1) to

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed explanation see OECD: Higher Education and Adult Learning – Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning – Home, available at [http://www.oecd.org/document/25/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_39263238\\_37136921\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_37455,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/25/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_37136921_1_1_1_37455,00.html) (Accessed 4th March 2009)

<sup>2</sup> A Critical Importance of Lifelong Learning, B-Hert Position paper, no.4 – policy statement, Februray 2001

produce more highly skilled workforce that is able to respond to challenges of continuously changing business environment (e.g. emergence of new occupations and careers, economic restructuring and organizational reforms on micro and macro level, etc., new competences as the response to increased use of technology, etc.); (2) to ensure creation of more inclusive society (e.g. stronger democracy through transparency and knowledge available by digitalization of activities of government, e.g. e-government) and (3) to contribute to the more personally rewarding life (e.g. better employability due to modernization of competences, etc.). In a nutshell, LLL is essential for surviving on the market (as an individual or organization) and doing profitable business in highly globalized world (economic goal), but also it is necessary for democratic engagement, social inclusiveness and personal fulfillment.

### 3. Lifelong Learning Policy in EU

The EU has recognized that education and training are essential to the development and success of today's knowledge society and economy. The EU education and training policy has been given added impetus since the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, the EU's overarching program focusing on growth and jobs. It underlines that knowledge, and the innovation are the EU's most valuable assets, particularly as global competition becomes more intense in all sectors. The importance and necessity of lifelong learning in the EU was emphasized in a Memorandum of Lifelong Learning issued by the Commission of the European Communities in 2000, in which it was clearly stated that employability and active citizenship should be accomplished by the implementation of the LLL policy. Based upon the Memorandum, the Commission [Communication](#) in 2001 ***Making a European area of Lifelong Learning a reality*** revised the definition of lifelong learning to emphasize the importance of its four broad objectives of active citizenship, personal fulfillment, social inclusion, and employability, and to encompass the full range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activity. The main issues and areas of work identified in this Communication included following: (i) valuing learning: valuing formal diplomas and certificates and non-formal and informal learning in all sectors; (ii) investing time and money in learning: increased investment and targeted funding are called for, along with mechanisms for increasing private investment; (iii) encouraging and supporting learning at the work place, including in SMEs; (iv) guidance and counseling: ensure that everyone can easily access good quality information and advice about learning opportunities throughout Europe and throughout their lives; (v) work should focus on providing opportunities to acquire and/or update basic skills, including the new basic skills, such as IT skills, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills.

In 2002, the EU Council passed the Resolution on Lifelong Learning and since early 2004 the Council and the Commission adopt, yearly, joint interim reports on progress towards the Lisbon goals for education and training. The Commission proposal in July 2004 focused on establishing an [integrated action program in the field of lifelong learning \(2007-2013\)](#) which was adopted by the Parliament in October 2006. The new program replaced the existing four sectoral programs: [Comenius](#) - school education; Erasmus – higher education; [Leonardo da Vinci](#) - vocational training; and [Grundtvig](#) - adult education which expired at the end of 2006.<sup>3</sup> The budget earmarked for this new integrated program is 6.97 billion EUR for the seven year period. The strategy of the LLL has been incorporated as an important part of the Bologna process. i.e. the EU policy on higher education. This process is particularly interesting since it has been turned from the voluntary action to collective obligation with concrete future educational goals of educational systems across the EU member states. Uniting all phases of education, the LLL is finally being places in the center of European educational policies (Ziljak, 2005: 74).

The Commission adopted, in December 2005, a [proposal](#) for a Recommendation on key competences in lifelong learning. The eight key competences have been recognized: communication in the mother tongue; communication in the foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; digital competence; learning to learn; interpersonal, intercultural and social competences and civic competence; entrepreneurship; and cultural expression. The aim of defining these competences at EU level is to provide a reference tool for policymakers, education providers, employers and learners on the way towards active citizenship, social cohesion and employability. The Parliament adopted the recommendation in September 2006. Also, in September 2006, the Commission adopted a proposal for a Recommendation on [European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning](#) with an aim to facilitate the transfer and recognition of qualifications held by workers, as well as to function as a 'translation device' to make relationships between education and training qualifications of different national systems clearer. It is expected to make European general and adult education, vocational education and training systems more transparent and accessible.

Based upon EU statistics on Education and Training (EUROSTAT, 2009), there are currently 102915000 persons participating in some kind of lifelong learning activities. The majority of persons, i.e. 61% are involved in informal education such as computer-based learning, self-studying, studying in libraries or learning centers followed by 30.7% in non-formal education or job-related non-formal education and only 8.3% in formal education. In 2006, the Commission issued a

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<sup>3</sup> Detailed descriptions of these four sectoral programmes are available from European Commission on Education and Training, [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc78\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc78_en.htm) (13<sup>th</sup> March 2009)

report on Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training in which performance and progress of education and training systems in the EU was examined. Some of the key findings of this report are following: participation of adults in lifelong learning is heading toward the European benchmark for 2010, but breaks in data series in several countries overstate the progress made; many inequalities in access to lifelong learning still remain; adults with a high educational attainment level are more than six times as likely to participate in lifelong learning than low skilled; in non-formal education it is even ten times more; older age groups participate much less than the younger ones; participation of adults in LLL has a regional dimension whereby some regions are falling behind even though in their country the overall levels of participation are high. Reaching the Lisbon benchmarks in the field of education would imply that in 2010 four (4) million more adults would participate in lifelong learning. This means that the LLL policies should be revisited and shifts their focus to encompass and motivate low educated people, older age groups as well as to make LLL activities more regionally balanced. Business community should also increase their role in promoting LLL by developing capacity as well as to motivate employees to continue with learning activities in order to achieve competitive advantage both individuals and firms as whole.

#### **4. Croatia and Lifelong Learning**

The importance of knowledge and education has been recognized in Croatia as an important driver of growth and development, particularly in the context of increasing global competition and aspiration of Croatia to become a fully-fledged member of the EU. This is clearly stated by the Government in the Strategic framework for development 2006-2013. Particular emphasis in this document is given on the LLL - the 'old' efforts to maintain employment and to ensure permanent security of job should be replaced by the 'new' efforts to ensure permanent employability, which in turn requires participation in education and training activities through work life. According to the official statistic data, only 2.3% of labor active population in Croatia have been participating in some form of education and training, which is quite low compared to EU average of 10.8%.<sup>4</sup> There are several reasons for such an adverse statistics: majority of people who obtained the highest degree of formal education at universities or polytechnics do not continue with education and training; even though Croatian firms/organizations have improved their education and training practices during the last five years, these activities are still not perceived as strategically relevant (see for example study by Pološki-Vokić and Grizelj, 2007); there is a lack of people's self-confidence and in

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<sup>4</sup> Source of data: Strategic framework for Development 2006-2013, Government of the Republic of Croatia.

many cases (continues) education and training in older age is perceived as a 'shame'.

Even though the statistics is adverse and portray that Croatian workers are not life-long learners, there is a room for optimism in the future. Namely, the Croatia has been seriously building the LLL system. It started with formulating the Strategy for Adult Education in 2004 and the Action Plan for Implementation of the Strategy for Adult Education.<sup>5</sup> Croatia has also passed the Law on Adult Education (The Official Gazette, NN 17/07) by which the Croatian Parliament sent a valuable message that the education in older age represents both necessity and value. The Agency for Adult Education, as a public institution, was established by the Decree of the Government of the Republic of Croatia ([Official Gazette 59/06](#)) in May 2006. Its task is inter alia to develop programs which will enable unemployed and other socially excluded groups to gain qualifications and find jobs. Furthermore, there is also the Adult Education Council as an expert advisory body of the Government of the Republic of Croatia. It is in charge of monitoring the state of adult education and proposing measures for its development, proposing and providing opinions on legislative and implementing regulations and proposing financing mechanisms for state-funded adult education programs. In addition, introduction of the obligatory secondary schooling in Croatia since 2007 will also significantly contribute to an increase and qualified workforce in firms and other organizations. The number of institutions which have a permission to conduct the adult education programs increased from 345 to 447 in 2007.

## **5. The role of universities: concluding remarks**

Universities are among a spectrum of institutions that have an important role in promoting LLL. European Universities' Association (EUA) drafted a European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning in 2008 in order to assist universities across Europe in developing their specific role as LLL institutions. In this charter governments are also called to commit in ensuring proper levels of funding for LLL activities. According to the Charter, universities should commit to following<sup>6</sup>: (1) embedding concepts of widening access and lifelong learning in their institutional strategies: lifelong learning should be an integral

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<sup>5</sup> The Strategy for Adult Education and Action Plan for Implementation of the Strategy for Adult Education, Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2004 are published at the official web site of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports <http://www.mzos.hr/default.asp?gl=200407270000003&jezik=1&sid=>. (Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> March 2009)

<sup>6</sup> For more detailed explanation on these commitments refer to the full text of the Charter available at [http://www.eua.be/fileadmin/user\\_upload/files/Publications/European\\_Universities\\_Charter\\_on\\_Lifelong\\_learning.pdf](http://www.eua.be/fileadmin/user_upload/files/Publications/European_Universities_Charter_on_Lifelong_learning.pdf) (Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> March 2009)

part of the mission and strategy of any university; (2) providing education and learning to a diversified student population: university education should be provided to broad spectrum of students including post-secondary students, adult learners, professionals who want to up-grade their skills, senior citizens who want to pursue culture interests and all others who want to obtain higher education or additional qualifications and competences; (3) adapting study programs to ensure that they are designed to widen participation and attract returning adult learners: universities should ensure flexible and transparent learning paths for all learners to access and succeed in higher education in all its different forms; (4) providing appropriate guidance and counseling services: all type of counseling – from academic and professional guidance to psychological counseling – should be available for potential students, of all ages and of difference social and cultural backgrounds; (5) recognizing prior learning: it is essential to develop systems to assess and recognize all forms of prior learning particularly in the context of lifelong learning since in a global era knowledge is acquired in many different forms and places; (6) embracing lifelong learning in quality culture: important steps should be taken in developing internal quality culture, assuming prime responsibility for the quality of their provision, i.e. to adapt to an evolving framework for lifelong learning in order to ensure that an appropriate range of targeted learner support services are provided for increasing numbers of more diverse learners; (7) Strengthening the relationship between research, teaching and innovation in a perspective of lifelong learning: research and innovation missions of universities can be strengthened through lifelong learning strategies, and universities' specific contribution to lifelong learning should be underpinned by research since LLL can also be a source of new research methodologies and topics; (8) consolidating reforms to promote a flexible and creative learning environment for all students: universities should exploit the potential of on-going reform processes and their tools (e.g. ECTS, Diploma Supplement, European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, Qualifications Frameworks, etc) to enhance the development of a creative lifelong learning environment that is open to amore diverse population of learners, and thus respond to societal needs for the modernization of higher education; (9) Developing partnerships at local, regional, national and international level to provide attractive and relevant programs: establishing a network of partnerships - with a range of other educational institutions, employers, employees' organizations (trade unions) as well as with other stakeholders - is essential if provision is to be responsive, flexible and innovative; (10) Acting as role models of lifelong learning institutions: universities should act as role models in society by offering lifelong learning opportunities for their own employees - whether academic, administrative or technical and auxiliary staff. There are currently 7 public universities in Croatia, 12 public and 1 private polytechnic and 21 schools of professional higher education (of which 4 are

public and 17 private). The most important development in the last two years is the adoption of a policy of polycentric development of higher education, especially the development of professional studies in smaller urban areas. The aim is to increase the availability of higher education that is adapted to regional needs and particularities and to increase the number of persons with higher education in the general population since the current 7% of people with higher education degree<sup>7</sup> is not sustainable in the context of building the knowledge-based economy in Croatia. Thus, the university infrastructure is available and well-developed in Croatia and participation in the Bologna process is making it harmonized with European universities. The Charter of EUA provides guidelines for Croatian universities to assume more active role in enabling and promoting LLL. The recognition of LLL as an important part of the economic and social future of the country as well as the commitment of Croatia to align its educational system and goals to the EU is visible through examples of good practice in Croatia related to LLL. For example, University in Rijeka has established the Center for Lifelong Education; Faculty of Law in Split has an agreement signed with the city of Novalja to educate and train the members of city administration on legal issues and legal language; Polytechnic school Lavoslav Ružička in Vukovar organizes CISCO academy for network technology as well as it has the Microsoft Academy. It is evident that creating opportunities for LLL requires interplay of many institutions and partners in the public and private sector and civil society. The challenges that Croatia faces to increase the capacity and culture of LLL are numerous, but so are the rewards for individuals, economy and society as a whole.

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<sup>7</sup> A number is slightly higher when considering active labor force (from 25 to 64 years old) where they account for 15.9%)



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