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Lifelong Learning in the Context of the European Area of Lifelong Learning

Núria Arís Redó

nuria@cir.uic.es

Vice-Dean, Faculty of Education, International University of Catalonia

Miquel Àngel Comas

macomas@cir.uic.es

Lecturer, Faculty of Education, International University of Catalonia

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Abstract

The importance of lifelong learning is beyond question in any working context and especially so under the circumstances of today's global recession. Consequently, in the current European Higher Education Area (EHEA), continuing education tendencies and plans acquire a global dimension that overcomes – or should overcome – reductionist approaches. The construction and development of the European Area of Lifelong Learning (EALL) (Commission of the European Communities, 2001a), should be understood as a process that is embedded in a much broader framework. It is a networked action in which the involvement of many active professional stakeholders is required, and in which convergence, recognition and cohesion are the principal qualitative components.

Following an exhaustive review of original and official documents linked to the origin, foundations and construction of the EHEA, the EALL stands out as a challenge within the context of the EHEA as a whole. In the aforementioned review, lifelong learning is conceived on the basis of the free

movement of European citizens and the potential to offer better training and work opportunities, both of which relate to the principles of movement and recognition. It is found that full adaptation to the knowledge society demands a number of transparent mechanisms and effective instruments to foster improvements in quality and competitiveness, as well as the convergence and recognition of academic qualifications and university degrees, as a response to the increasingly globalised labour market, to technological advances and to full European social integration.

It is for these reasons that lifelong learning is a priority action for Europe, in line with the principle of continuing improvement and investment in human capital for its own benefit, as defined by the European Commission itself.

Keywords

training, lifelong learning, EHEA, EALL, ERA, research, higher education

La formación permanente en el contexto del Espacio Europeo de la Formación Permanente

Resumen

La importancia de la formación permanente es indiscutible en cualquier contexto laboral y muy especialmente en las actuales circunstancias de «crisis económica mundial». Pero en el actual espacio europeo de educación superior (EEES), las tendencias y los planes de formación continua adquieren una dimensión global, que supera o, mejor dicho, debería superar los planteamientos reduccionistas. Por ello, la construcción y el desarrollo del espacio europeo de formación permanente, EEFP (Comisión de las Comunidades Europeas, 2001a), debe entenderse como un proceso que está inmerso en un tejido más amplio. Se trata de una acción en red donde es necesaria la implicación de muchos agentes activos profesionales y donde la convergencia, el reconocimiento y la cohesión han de ser sus máximos elementos cualitativos.

En la revisión exhaustiva de documentos originales y oficiales vinculados con el origen, los fundamentos y la construcción del EEES destaca el reto que supone el EEFP en el contexto del EEES. En dicha revisión, la formación permanente se concibe sobre la base de la libre circulación de ciudadanos europeos y de la posibilidad de ofrecer mejores oportunidades formativas y laborales, ambos en relación con los principios de movilidad y reconocimiento. Se constata que la plena adecuación a la sociedad del conocimiento exige unos mecanismos transparentes y unos instrumentos eficaces que puedan permitir la mejora de la calidad y la competitividad, la convergencia y el reconocimiento de los conocimientos de los niveles académicos y los títulos universitarios, como respuesta a un nuevo mercado laboral cada vez más globalizado, al adelanto tecnológico y a la plena integración social europea.

Por ello, la formación a lo largo de la vida acontece como una acción prioritaria europea bajo el principio de mejora continua y de inversión en el capital humano en beneficio propio, tal como lo define la propia Comisión Europea.

Palabras clave

formación, formación permanente, EEES, EEFP, EEI, investigación, educación superior

Background

The path towards the construction and development of the European Area of Lifelong Learning (EALL) (Commission of the European Communities, 2001a), should be understood first as an extension of the constitutive nature of the European Union and of its meaning of unity, and second as a process that is embedded in a much broader framework that contemplates the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (*Sorbonne Joint Declaration*, 1998) and the European Research Area (ERA) (Commission of the European Communities, 2002). The initiative becomes a networked action in which the involvement of many active professional stakeholders from the education sector is required. At the same time, it is a distinctive element of the new Europe, in which convergence, recognition, mobility and cohesion are the principal qualitative components. According to Comas (2010), the creation of the EALL is not an unconnected action distinct from the reality of the European Union; rather, along with the EHEA and the ERA, it should be interpreted as a common community action to create a common European Union mark of quality. This article aims to serve as a tool that underscores and supports the open, integrative spirit of the EALL and its cohesion and complementarity within the strategic lines of the European Union.

In the context of its basic functions, the European Union should promote its citizens' progress and welfare. The adaptation of the knowledge society demands a number of transparent mechanisms and effective instruments to foster improvements in quality and competitiveness. Account should be taken of elements such as the convergence and recognition of academic qualifications and university degrees as a response to the new, increasingly globalised labour market, to technological advances and to full European social integration, as stated by the European Council:

"The European Union is confronted with a quantum shift resulting from globalisation and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy. These changes are affecting every aspect of people's lives and require a radical transformation of the European economy. The Union must shape these changes in a manner consistent with its values and concepts of society and also with a view to the forthcoming enlargement. The rapid and accelerating pace of change means it is urgent for the Union to act now to harness the full benefits of the opportunities presented. Hence the need for the Union to set a clear strategic goal and agree a challenging programme for building knowledge infrastructures, enhancing innovation and economic reform, and modernising social welfare and education systems." (European Council, 2000)

We find that there is a shift towards fostering and promoting training, human capital and the knowledge society as an essential element of the driving force behind the European economy; this is also stated in the cited European Council document:

"People are Europe's main asset and should be the focal point of the Union's policies. Investing in people and developing an active and dynamic welfare state will be crucial both to Europe's place in the knowledge economy and for ensuring that the emergence of this new economy

does not compound the existing social problems of unemployment, social exclusion and poverty. Europe's education and training systems need to adapt both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. They will have to offer learning and training opportunities tailored to target groups at different stages of their lives [...]" (European Council, 2000)

Lifelong Learning in the EHEA

In the early 21st century, community concerns and action proposals based on lifelong learning and education to strengthen a knowledge-based and much more competitive Europe are beginning to take shape and to have a higher priority, as detailed by the Commission of the European Communities:

"The knowledge-based society, along with wider economic and societal trends such as globalisation, changes in family structures, demographic change, and the impact of information society technologies, presents the European Union and its citizens with many potential benefits as well as challenges. Citizens have vast new opportunities in terms of communication, travel and employment. Taking advantage of these opportunities, and actively participating in society, is reliant on the ongoing acquisition of knowledge and competences. At the same time, competitive advantage is increasingly dependent on investment in human capital. Knowledge and competences are, therefore, also a powerful engine for economic growth. Given the current uncertain economic climate, investing in people becomes all the more important." (Commission of the European Communities, 2001a)

This new impetus came out of the meeting in Lisbon (European Council, 2000). The political leaders of the European Union were already aware of the need for a deep-rooted modernisation of the European economy to compete with the United States and other major actors in the global economy. It was in Lisbon where community action and strategic plans were established and designed to meet that objective. These plans would be firmed up over time, as contemplated in the aforementioned communication of the Commission of the European Communities:

"The Lisbon European Council in March 2000 set the European Union the strategic goal, reaffirmed at the Stockholm European Council in March 2001, of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world. Key elements of the strategy to achieve this were the adaptation of education and training to offer tailored learning opportunities to individual citizens at all stages of their lives; the promotion of employability and social inclusion through investment in citizens' knowledge and competences; the creation of an information society for all; and the fostering of mobility." (Commission of the European Communities, 2001a)

Thus, the European concept was designed around two basic principles: one was the free movement of European citizens, with greater and better training and work opportunities, which would be constructed through the EALL, as expressed by the Commission of the European Communities:

"A comprehensive new European approach to valuing learning is seen as a prerequisite for the area of lifelong learning, building on the existing right of free movement within the EU. Proposals focus on the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning as well as on the transfer and mutual recognition of formal certificates and diplomas. Information, guidance and counselling is addressed mainly at European level, with proposals that aim at facilitating access to learning through the availability of quality guidance services. This communication contributes to the establishment of a European area of lifelong learning, the aims of which are both to empower citizens to move freely between learning settings, jobs, regions and countries, making the most of their knowledge and competences, and to meet the goals and ambitions of the European Union and the candidate countries to be more prosperous, inclusive, tolerant and democratic." (Commission of the European Communities, 2001a)

The other principal fostering a 'Europe of Knowledge' is *The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2000), as stated by the Council of the European Union:

"Education and training are an indispensable means for promoting social cohesion, active citizenship, personal and professional fulfilment, adaptability and employability. Lifelong learning facilitates free mobility for European citizens and allows the achievement of the goals and aspirations of European Union countries (i.e. to become more prosperous, competitive, tolerant and democratic). The action set out in this resolution respects the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and in particular its Article 14, which declares that everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training." (European Council, 2002)

Following the Lisbon meeting, the Commission of the European Communities created a working group to design and firm up the lines of action for the definition of priority objectives of education and training systems. These were reflected in the communication of the Commission of the European Communities (2001b). The foreword of the *White Paper on Education and Training* (1995) makes explicit reference to the need for improvement in the area of education, and states that "Training and apprenticeship policies, which are fundamental for improving employment and competitiveness, must be strengthened, especially continuing training". It also tackles an analysis of education's implication in community issues. As indicated by Sarrate (2008), education is a top priority in the complex situation of meeting the needs of the knowledge society, of scientific and technical civilisation, and of economic globalisation; according to the White Paper, the "three factors of upheaval" have an impact on moving towards a knowledge society in which knowledge is presented as an essential component, not only in the area of production, but also in social relationships and global coexistence.

Alongside this new stance favouring the treatment of educational topics as a priority community principle, CEDEFOP-European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training was created to assist the Commission and to contribute to the promotion and development of vocational training and continuing education on a community-wide scale. It marked the beginning of action in

an educational area that, until that time, had gone unnoticed and was not important, a fact that coincides with the views of Sarrate (2008), who considers that in this period, it could be said that there is a degree of concern, albeit incipient, for lifelong education because aspects such as equality of opportunity, continuing vocational training, the battle against illiteracy and adult education have been approached.

This new impetus in the area of education was firmed up in a number of strategic lines, as specified in the report from Commission of the European Communities:

"[...] with the aim of contributing to the 'new strategic goal' for Europe, the Ministers of Education have adopted the following concrete strategic objectives for the coming ten years: 1) Increasing the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the European Union: 2) Facilitating the access of all to the education and training systems; 3) Opening up education and training systems to the wider world." (European Council, 2001)

However, the EALL should not be interpreted as the only training process involved in the promotion of the Europe of Knowledge. Rather, it complements the EHEA and the ERA with the aim of consolidating the creation of a European mark of quality. The creation of the EHEA, from the very beginning in the *Sorbonne Joint Declaration*, justifies and promotes the design of the higher education system:

"[...] they should not make one forget that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well. We must strengthen and build upon the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent. We are heading for a period of major change in education and working conditions, to a diversification of courses of professional careers with education and training throughout life becoming a clear obligation. We owe our students, and our society at large, a higher education system in which they are given the best opportunities to seek and find their own area of excellence." (*Sorbonne Joint Declaration*, 1998)

Final Reflections

To conclude, we would like to highlight an important point, also described in the *Presidency Conclusions* of the Lisbon European Council (European Council, 2000): "Given the significant role played by research and development in generating economic growth, employment and social cohesion, the Union must work towards the objectives [set out in the Commission's communication]" and in the communication of the Commission of the European Communities (2001a): "Member States, the Council and the Commission [were invited] to identify coherent strategies and practical measures with a view to fostering lifelong learning for all."

Lifelong learning is a priority action for Europe, as a mark of quality, in line with the principle of continuing improvement and investment in human capital for its own benefit, as defined by the European Commission itself (Commission of the European Communities, 2001a): "all learning activity

undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective. [...] These proposals principally contribute to or involve 'creating a learning culture,' 'facilitating access to learning opportunities' and 'striving for excellence.'"

The new educational milestone marked by the EALL rests on a number of principles, intentions, directives and interests with a clear pro-European definition of unification, convergence and mobility, the aim of which is to work towards a European Union mark of quality. In addition, all of this is networked with the EHEA and the ERA, which gives much greater value to the European commitment to lifelong learning, research and higher education as a mark of quality and competitiveness.

Under today's adverse circumstances, the challenge is to achieve the necessary impetus to make a real investment in the knowledge society's lifelong learning and to create a culture of lifelong training as a significant element of identity and progress "to ensure that Europe offers attractive prospects to its best brains" (European Council, 2000).

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About the Authors

Núria Arís Redó

nuria@cir.uic.es

Vice-Dean, Faculty of Education, International University of Catalonia

She holds a doctorate in Education Sciences awarded by the International University of Catalonia (UIC), for which she undertook research into burnout syndrome in pre-school and primary education teachers. She is vice-dean of the Faculty of Education at UIC and coordinator of the official master's degree programme in Social Sciences Research.

She is accredited by the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation. Her current lines of research focus on pedagogical innovation. She has been a Psychopedagogy consultant at UOC and a collaborator in several education-related publications.

Miquel Àngel Comas
macomas@cir.uic.es
Lecturer, Faculty of Education, International University of Catalonia

He is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the International University of Catalonia (UIC). He is currently completing his European doctorate and working on his European doctoral thesis on the origin, foundations and construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). As a strategic educational project manager, he advises several education centres in Catalonia. He has been a manager and advisor on several European educational innovation projects at the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute IN3-UOC.

Universitat Internacional de Catalunya
Campus Barcelona - Edificis Gamma i Delta
C/Terré, 11-19
08017 Barcelona
Spain
www.uic.es



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