

Press release: 31 August 2011

New report analyses success factors for developing university lifelong learning

A new report published today (31 August 2011) analyses the different factors that enable universities across Europe to engage in and develop successful lifelong learning strategies.

“Engaging in Lifelong Learning: Shaping Inclusive and Responsive University Strategies (SIRUS)” is based on the outcomes of a two-year EC-supported project involving 29 universities from 18 different European countries, which has been led by the European University Association (EUA). The findings will be presented and discussed today (31 August) at a two-day conference taking place at the University of Southampton (UK).

Over the last decade, lifelong learning (LLL) has become increasingly important for universities, in particular as a result of the economic downturn and demographic changes which have increased pressure on them to develop coherent strategies to widen access and participation in higher education. Over the course of the SIRUS project, participating universities shared their experiences, with the aim of documenting and inspiring other universities to address these challenges. The project was also designed to follow up on the uptake of the 2008 “[European Universities’ Charter for Lifelong Learning](#)”, which contained a series of commitments for both universities and governments to develop lifelong learning activities.

Co-author of the report, Hanne Smidt, said: “The project results indicate that, while national legal and financial frameworks play an important role for universities, the single most important push factor for developing successful LLL, has been the active engagement of university leadership in creating inclusive and responsive university strategies”.

The report proposes that most universities go through a three-step sequence in developing an institutional LLL strategy involving: an adaptation stage; an organisation stage (where strategies are put in place); and finally a cultural stage (where universities adopt a new way of thinking, a LLL culture and a shared vision across the institution).

It also assesses the framework conditions that are crucial for supporting the successful development of lifelong learning. According to the participating universities, the two most important conditions were funding and legislation. Only 12 of the 18 countries represented by universities in the project believed such ‘supporting legislation’ was in place. Furthermore, only four countries outlined that specific funding for the development of lifelong learning activities was available. Many of the universities also pointed out that their respective governments had been slow to respond to the commitments in the EUA Lifelong Learning Charter.

Regardless of the framework conditions in place, the report argues that there are four common elements when universities develop and implement strategies, which involve diversifying student populations; and diversifying services to learners, educational provision and external partnerships. Universities agreed that for successful implementation, both support from the university leadership and the proactive engagement of staff was crucial. Partnerships and cooperation with other universities and also with non-university partners, including the private sector, were identified as another strategic priority for the success of LLL.

The report also looks to address the different challenges and obstacles which arise when universities seek to create this engagement both within their own institution and externally.

The SIRUS project was carried out by a consortium, led by the European University Association, including the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, the European Access Network and the European University Continuing Education Network.

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A copy of the report is available can be downloaded here:
http://www.eua.be/pubs/Engaging_in_Lifelong_Learning.pdf

The European University Association, as the representative organisation of both the European universities and the national rectors' conferences, is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. EUA's mission is to promote the development of a coherent system of European higher education and research.

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