

European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning

Preamble

EUA has drafted this charter following on from a seminar on Lifelong Learning held in the Sorbonne in December 2007. At this time French Prime Minister François Fillon asked the European University Association to prepare a Charter on this key topic for Europe's universities and for society in the future.

The Charter has been elaborated on the basis of extensive consultation, not only with EUA member universities and Rectors' Conferences, but also with a wide range of European higher education stakeholder organisations.¹

Since their foundation over 800 years ago, Europe's universities have championed research, fostered a civilised and tolerant society and prepared young people for their role in society and the economy. They have also shown themselves to be remarkably resilient and adaptable institutions, continually developing their role as society evolves.

In the twenty first century new expectations and demands on Europe's universities are mounting rapidly, as social and economic development becomes geared around the concept of a Europe of Knowledge. European citizens need strong, autonomous, responsive and inclusive universities providing research-based education and learning in order to meet the many challenges ahead. These social, and economic challenges are generated in particular by:

- the increasing speed of globalisation;
- the demographic transformation of Europe into ageing societies;
- the rapid pace of technological change.

These developments impact on and require adaptation in society and from labour markets everywhere. Universities are key actors in this process.

The European stage is set for lifelong learning, and the decade of reforms that has taken place to develop the European higher education and research areas now needs to be consolidated and taken forward to address lifelong learning challenges, taking account of existing achievements and good practice in Europe's universities to meet diversified learner needs. Currently the terminology of lifelong learning embraces many concepts - including initial education for disadvantaged groups, continuing education and training for well-qualified graduates, and post-retirement opportunities for cultural enrichment - and is subject to considerable local, regional and national interpretation.

For a European dialogue to be effective in guiding local and national developments, it is important to define better the overarching concepts and practices, and to clarify more precisely the particular contribution to the lifelong learning agenda that can be made by creating a culture of inclusive and responsive European universities.

Universities are among a spectrum of institutions that need to respond to these issues. They have a particular opportunity to provide research-based higher education for lifelong learners.

¹ List of organisations can be found in annex.

Currently European societies are missing out on a huge pool of readily available human talent, and comparing higher education participation rates in Europe with those in other world regions makes disturbing reading and calls for action. Widening access to higher education is not about introducing less qualified students, but rather about supporting all learners with the potential to benefit both themselves and society through participating in higher education. This means reaching out to an increasingly broad range of learners with different motivations and interests: not only offering programmes for professional development adapted to a fast-changing labour market, but also catering for the growing demand for personal development opportunities through the cultural enrichment that universities offer. There is also an urgent need for debate on how lifelong learning provision that will be of benefit to individuals, employers and society as a whole can best, and most fairly, be funded.

This impetus to develop more inclusive and responsive universities is not a call for revolution, but rather for evolution. It is often assumed that lifelong learning provision is different in nature to the provision of education to traditional students. In reality, the key challenge is to find ways to open up a wider range of educational services to new learners and to returning learners, and to ensuring continuing opportunities for learners throughout their lives. Expanding the range of learners becomes the key strategic issue, and the key activities for universities to develop are the establishment of systems for fair assessment and validation of all forms of prior learning, and providing relevant, creative and innovative educational programmes.

Universities are also aware of the need to engage in and reinforce dialogue with society more broadly - with employers and employee organisations, as well as with parents and students. This can best be achieved by strengthening partnerships at different levels, with particular attention to the local level where needs are most acutely perceived and expressed.

The purpose of this Charter, which is written in the form of commitments from universities in addressing the development and implementation of lifelong learning strategies, with a set of matching commitments for governments and regional partners to make, is to assist Europe's universities in developing their specific role as lifelong learning institutions forming a central pillar of the Europe of Knowledge.

Universities commit to:

1 Embedding concepts of widening access and lifelong learning in their institutional strategies

Universities will grasp the opportunity to address lifelong learning centrally in their mission and strategy as part of a wider definition of excellence. The complexity of lifelong learning concepts has to be acknowledged and explored as a key aspect of developing the contribution of universities to a culture of lifelong learning.

2 Providing education and learning to a diversified student population

European universities will respond positively to the increasingly diverse demand from a broad spectrum of students – including post secondary students, adult learners, professionals who seek to up-grade skills for the workplace, senior citizens taking advantage of their increasing longevity to pursue cultural interests, and others - for high quality and relevant higher education throughout their life-time.

European universities recognize the important contribution that a diversified student body will make to the development of a culture of success and innovation in the institution and wider society, and the need to think how far different types of learners can interact together in a supportive mutual learning environment.

3 Adapting study programmes to ensure that they are designed to widen participation and attract returning adult learners

Flexible and transparent learning paths need to be in place for all learners to access and succeed in higher education in all its different forms. It is an essential responsibility of universities to ensure that this educational offer is always of high quality.

European universities acknowledge the diversity of individual learner needs and therefore their responsibility to adapt programmes and ensure the development of appropriate learning outcomes in a learner-centred perspective. They also pledge to play their part in promoting widening participation and continuing education.

4 Providing appropriate guidance and counselling services

Relevant academic and professional guidance, as well as other psychological counseling, should be available for all qualified potential students when needed. This support should be relevant to learners of all ages, and from all social and cultural backgrounds.

5 Recognising prior learning

To ensure that all with the potential to benefit from higher education provision are enabled to do so, it is essential for universities to develop systems to assess and

recognise all forms of prior learning. This is particularly important in the context of lifelong learning in a global era where knowledge is acquired in many different forms and places.

6 Embracing lifelong learning in quality culture

Europe's universities have taken important steps in developing internal quality culture, assuming prime responsibility for the quality of their provision. This work will 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

Universities' research and innovation missions can be strengthened through lifelong learning strategies, and universities' specific contribution to lifelong learning should be underpinned by research. Researchers should also be recognised as a fine example of lifelong learners whose own educational needs are continually evolving, also taking account of the changing skills required by the labour market. Lifelong learning 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

In creating the European higher education and research areas, Europe's universities are engaged on a path of major reforms that places all learners at the centre. Universities now need to exploit the potential of these reform processes and their tools (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 a more diverse population of learners, and thus responds to societal needs for the modernisation of higher education. Fully integrating lifelong learning to the mission of universities is essential to enhance the creativity and innovation profiles of institutions.

9 Developing partnerships at local, regional, national and international level to provide attractive and relevant programmes

Providing relevant educational provision in a lifelong learning context cannot be done by institutions on their own. The need for structured partnerships – with a range of other educational institutions, employers, employees' organisations (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 are not only providers of higher education and research, but also major employers in their own right. They therefore have the potential to act as role models in society by offering lifelong learning opportunities for their own employees – whether academic, administrative or technical and auxiliary staff. They should also be key actors in lobbying for coherent policy development in national systems.



Europe's universities cannot realise these commitments without the concerted actions of governments and regional partners in providing appropriate legal environments and funding. The following commitments are therefore expected from governments to ensure that a suitable environment is created for universities to develop their contribution to lifelong learning.

Governments commit to:

1 Recognising the university contribution to lifelong learning as a major benefit to individuals and society

Governments have a responsibility to ensure that universities are valued for their contribution to lifelong learning, and that this is not perceived as a minor addition to the roles of universities. It is a major cultural shift to respond to the demands of a fast evolving lifelong learning society and of long-term labour market needs, and requires significant financial investment.

2 Promoting social equity and an inclusive learning society

Governments should make efforts to ensure that lifelong learning achievements are valued by individuals, public and private employers and other actors, and that a culture of learning throughout life is shared as a common societal goal. Citizens need to be provided with information on accessing lifelong learning educational opportunities, while Europe's universities need to be supported to ensure that such opportunities are open to all who have the potential to benefit from higher education at whatever time in their life is appropriate.

3 Including lifelong learning objectives in the missions and work of national QA agencies and systems

Most countries have now developed quality assurance systems for higher education that have a major impact on the nature of programmes developed. Attention to issues of lifelong learning in quality assurance processes is therefore a necessity to ensure that lifelong learning is recognised as a national priority.

4 Supporting the development of appropriate guidance and counselling services

Professional academic guidance, careers advice and welfare services are essential for all learners to find their way successfully through the more flexible provision that is being developed by universities, but particularly important to those individuals most at risk of failing to complete higher education programmes and who have little support from family, friends and colleagues. Irrespective of whether services are delivered within or outside higher education institutions, governments have a responsibility to ensure high professional standards. Governments also need to ensure that guidance, careers and counselling services are linked up in a lifelong learning perspective to provide continuous support to citizens at all levels of education. This support should be relevant to students of all ages, and from all social and cultural backgrounds.



5 Recognising prior learning

Governments have the responsibility to support and motivate institutions in the recognition of all forms of prior learning. This task can be facilitated through the provision of appropriate incentives to institutions, and by ensuring full integration of prior learning in qualification frameworks.

6 Removing specific legal obstacles that prevent many potential learners from returning to higher education

Governments should address the systemic obstacles that discourage many potential learners from taking advantage of lifelong learning opportunities. This means taking action on matters such as social security rights, precarity of employment rights, lack of financial support for lifelong learning, and loss of pension contributions during periods of study.

7 Ensuring autonomy and developing incentives for lifelong learning universities

Governments have a responsibility to ensure that universities have sufficient autonomy to develop their own responses to lifelong learning challenges and to decide their own admission requirements, but also sufficient incentives to be rewarded for pursuing this key mission. Major progress in developing lifelong learning provision can only take place if such a framework of autonomy with incentives is achieved.

8 Encouraging partnerships at regional level with local authorities, employers and agencies

The benefits of high quality lifelong learning provision will largely be realised in Europe's regions, and regional development agencies, local employers, as well as employees' organisations (unions) therefore have a high stake in this agenda. Regional partnerships with higher education institutions and social partners need to be strengthened as they are vital to the successful planning and delivery of lifelong learning educational services.

9 Informing and encouraging citizens to take advantage of lifelong learning opportunities offered by universities

As a key aspect of the implementation of national lifelong learning strategy, governments have a special responsibility to ensure that citizens are informed and aware of the varied and diverse opportunities of university based lifelong learning provision.

10 Acting as role models of lifelong learning institutions

Like universities, governments can set standards in society by acting as role models for the policies that they advocate. Governments should ensure that public sector employees therefore are encouraged to benefit from the range of lifelong learning opportunities offered by the universities and other providers.

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Annex: List of European higher education stakeholder organisations consulted during the drafting process

- Business Europe
- European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)
- European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)
- European Access Network (EAN)
- Education International (EI)
- European Students' Union (ESU)
- European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)
- European University Continuing Education Network (EUCEN)
- European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE)
- Forum Européen De l'Orientation Académique (FEDORA)