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Universities as Regional Centres for
Lifelong Learning and Innovation

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Abstract: On the background of the results of a still running German project the role of universities to improve lifelong learning and innovation will be discussed not only from the perspective of a qualification supplier but as an enabler for a far-reaching and continuous social innovation process, including all the relevant stakeholders, institutions and policy makers. New education and training opportunities have to be constructed overcoming existing borders between the different education and training systems, based on already existing successful structures and institutions. Modulation and certification of education and training, non-formal and informal learning, transmission management etc. have to be coordinated where people are living and using these: at the regional level. Within a social innovation process universities can successfully take the role as a central actor in a regional field of qualification and innovation. They could act as a competent partner matching qualification and innovation demands. In order to competently fulfil their role in this matching process, universities will face both an internal development process and external challenges. In summary, they will face and have to master a multi-faceted social innovation process.

Keywords: lifelong learning; social innovation; higher education; regional coordination

1   Introduction

The role and the possibilities of universities within a new lifelong learning system, mainly coordinated and based at the regional level have still not been analysed and developed. Therefore this paper will make a first attempt of not only embedding universities in regional lifelong learning strategies but also checking their role as an enabler and provider of lifelong learning and innovation.

At first the European concept of lifelong learning will be summarised in relation to the main deductions and structural implications to improve education and training. At second the necessity and the factors for a successful implementation of lifelong learning at the regional level will be described on the background of the results of a still running German project started in 2006 (HESSENCAMPUS: www.hc-hessencampus.de) providing a basis for a social innovation process in a regional-local partnership for the improvement of lifelong learning of adults. Third – as a kind of conclusion and recommendation - the potentials and the role of universities within such a social innovation process of improvement of lifelong learning and regional development will be discussed.

2   Lifelong Learning: An Overall Approach for New Education and Training Structures

In the framework of the transition from an industrial to a knowledge-based society and its corresponding concept of lifelong learning as a European strategy to improve European competitiveness lifelong learning has to be seen and implemented as a middle and long-termed

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competitive factor (Lisbon Strategy, Europe 2020) being an answer to constant and profound technological, social, economic and demographic changes.

As priorities for future European cooperation on the implementation of lifelong learning policies experts of the "Seminar on Critical Factors for the Implementation of Lifelong Learning Strategies and Policies" identified beneath others that there is a high demand for improving adult education (also beyond working age), valuing of non-formal and informal learning as well as for improving stakeholder collaboration and partnerships, not only focussing on employability, which is perceived as the predominant dimension today, but increasingly on its potential to increase social cohesion as this is a growing challenge in most European countries (Chabera 2010: 13).

Taking the concept of lifelong learning fundamental a more comprehensive orientation of learning and support structures is needed. Lifelong learning in this sense:

– indicates a comprehensive alignment of learning opportunities and support structures responding to the increasing heterogeneity of work, education and living biographies of adult people.

– has to be an overarching structural principal of the education system in a whole, including the improvement, reconstruction and partly new construction of traditional structures of education.

– needs learning outcome orientation and the recognition of competences adopted on other ways than formal learning.

– is a growing demand and challenge for every single person to deal actively and self-confident with constant changes in the world of labour and society.

– is - at the same time - a challenge for public responsibility to support those individuals who are not able to maintain active learning.

– has to be realised on the regional level, improving quantitative and qualitative participation of lifelong learning of the inhabitants of a region, giving access and support where people work and live.

Based on these principles the learning process has to be seen as the starting and reference point for every learning offer, oriented by a comprehensive understanding of learning (taking into account all areas and forms of learning and competences) and the learners personality, environment and biography. This indicates a paradigm shift from an institutional to a strict learner's and learning process perspective and new overall and comprehensive structural principles of the education system: reconstruction and partly new construction of traditional structures of education building up a lifelong learning system instead of innovating only within the borders of educational institutions and areas, arranging lifelong learning possibilities in a more flexible way at the regional level - usable when and where needed, fulfilling specific learner needs, taking into account and accepting formal, non-formal and informal competences, supporting educational and professional transmissions.

3 Regional-Local Coordination of Lifelong Learning – A Process of Social Innovation

A successful implementation and a continuous development of lifelong learning in the described way needs not only a system-related approach but a far-reaching and continuous social innovation process based on a shared social and regional responsibility. Such a social innovation process (Howaldt/Schwarz 2010; Howaldt/Jacobsen 2010) is characterized by

– a coordination and mediation between various different groups of stakeholders who are involved in innovation activities,

– the interdisciplinarity, heterogeneity, recursivity and reflectivity of the processes of implementation and an emphasis on historical, cultural and organisational preconditions,

– an increased involvement of users/citizens in processes of "co-development",

– a systemic perspective on innovation in the sense of social innovation systems in which research, development, production and marketing are optimised simultaneously in an interactive process,

– a kind of "hybridization" at the boundary between society (practitioners/users) and science (experts/developers).

"As a process of collective creation, in the course of which the members of a particular total population learn, i.e. invent and establish, new ways of playing the social game of collaboration and conflict, in a word a new social practice, and in the course of which they acquire the necessary cognitive, relational and organizational abilities to do this" will take place (Crozier/Friedberg 1993). For the regional implementation of lifelong learning all the relevant stakeholders, institutions and policy makers as well as the regional inhabitants in general have to be involved in this social innovation process of regional lifelong learning. Such a „holistic interpretation of innovation" impacts (following Hochgerner 2011) all types of innovation (products, processes, marketing, organisation, roles, relations, norms, values), all functional systems (education and culture, economy, politics, law) and all intervention levels:

– on the micro level: behaviour of learners

– on the meso level: structural and institutional changes

– on the macro level: legislative framework, education system.

Such a social innovation process does not aim at developing brand new educational institutions, but at making better and efficient use of latent or unused *cooperational potentials*. Thereby, adult education has to be put forcefully on the *regional agenda*, not only for the citizens, but also and foremost for the municipalities and administrative districts. "Localisation" in this context would mean not only new possibilities to get hold of and mobilise potential qualification offers, but also an increased potential for education to become a "location factor" for integrated locational development (countering skills shortages, preventing "brain drain" from rural areas, enriching the employability and flexicurity of the inhabitants, human resources development etc.). Such an overarching regional-local social innovation process is also improving, changing, and creating new social practices concerning social roles, relations, norms and regulations, going beyond existing borders and pure networking and following the aim of a strict user focus instead of the traditional institutional focus.

The example of the German project HESSENCAMPUS[1] shows that the improvement of lifelong learning has to be embedded in a social innovation process (Schröder 2012) based on binding cooperation that goes beyond pure networking in form of a new and innovative regional-local partnership and structure, following the basic principle of a „*development in partnership*" cooperating "at eye level". Following the case of HESSENCAMPUS and Kruse/Schröder/Kaletka/Pelka 2010 this process has to be based on four **dimensions of lifelong learning from a learner's perspective**:

1. a *comprehensive understanding of learning* (competencies for life management, including but not only oriented on employability, including every type of learning - formal, non-formal and informal)

2. the *learners environment* (social environment/milieu, regional or geographical access to learning)

3. the *learners biography* (education and training pathways, employment and occupation biographies)

4. the *adult learner personality,* including that adult learning is different from child and youth education and learning ("andragogy")

and **three dimensions of integration**:

1. *Pedagogic integration:* The development of new or better learning opportunities, counselling and guidance services, new learning settings, a common learning culture

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[1] Kruse/Schröder/Kaletka/Pelka 2010, Kruse & Pelka 2009, www.hc-hessencampus.de.

2. *Organisational integration*: common administrational or directing structures, employees' participation, common use of resources (rooms, equipment, monitoring instruments), corporate identity, more permeability and mobility between the education areas (e.g. higher education and vocational education and training)

3. *Regional integration*: a selection of activities and projects which reflect local demands, central or de-central organisation of learning sites, local networking, continuous communication with politics and administration, with social partners and enterprises.
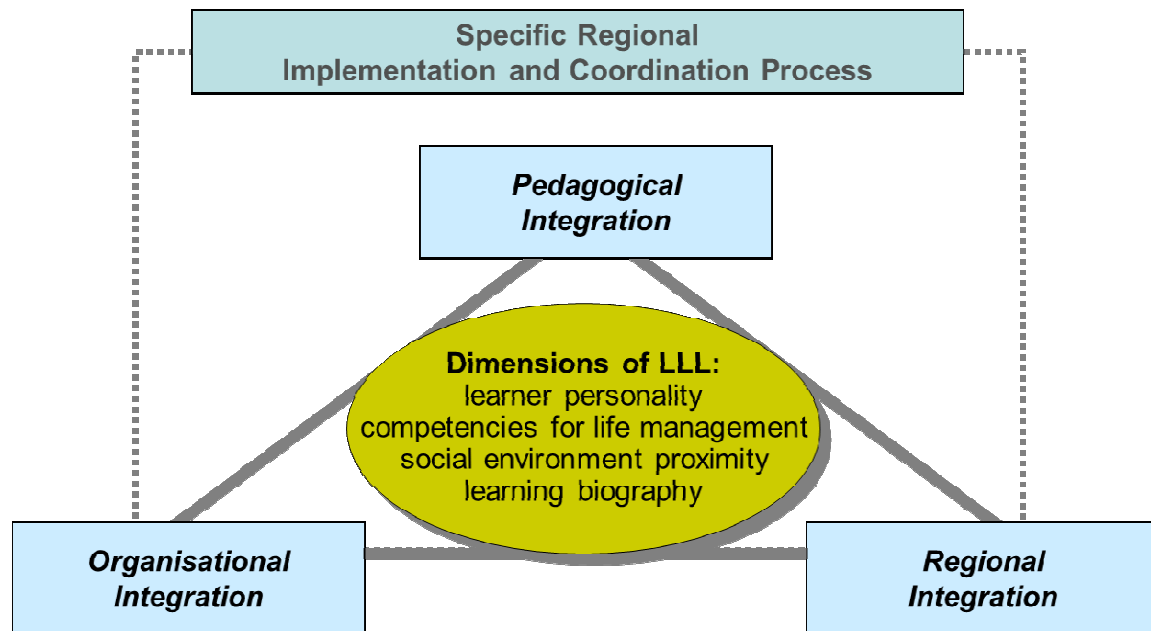

Fig. 1: Dimensions of Lifelong Learning and Integration Areas

Beneath the "corridor" of lifelong learning dimensions and integration areas the process of improving regional lifelong learning should be defined as an open innovation process referring to the four dimensions of social innovation named by Hochgerner (2011: 7):

- as an **idea** of quantitative and qualitative improvement of lifelong learning for adult people on the regional-local level in partnership (regional-local partnership of institutions and actors of education and training, partnership between national, local and regional administrations),

- by **intervention** through public funding, scientific support, core coordination structures, normative settings (matrix of four dimensions of lifelong learning and three integration levels), common framework and agreement,

- by **implementation** as an open innovation process based on development in partnership and public responsibility in interrelation with regional and economic demands and progression,

- by effectuating **impact** on

  ▪ learners: improvement of quantitative and qualitative participation, flexible learning opportunities along the learning pathways (including all types of learning)

  ▪ regions: improving education and training policies, establishing education as a locational competitive factor

  ▪ institutions involved: professionalization, efficiency and effectiveness.

4   Universities: Centres to Enable and Support Regional Lifelong Learning and Innovation Processes

The improvement and implementation of lifelong learning and innovation is crucial on the regional level: as the intermediary between European and national frameworks on the one hand and the demands and challenges of the localities on the other hand. More and more cities and regions take responsibility for the development of a highly qualified workforce and innovations meeting the demands of the regional economy. Within this regional development perspective the role of universities as enabler and the empowerment of universities as main stakeholders in a social innovation process of lifelong learning is of high importance: providing on the one hand excellent education and qualification throughout the learning biography of adults and at the same time acting as suppliers of innovation and highly qualified workers/engineers for the regional economy.

In the process of improving lifelong learning universities could take a leadership in supporting the region with higher education and scientific innovation as well as providing and supporting the process with scientific advice and monitoring. Scientific input and monitoring organised in an action or application oriented research concept could be seen as a driving force for this innovation process. For example, through action research on the regional level all the relevant actors of lifelong learning could be involved both as research subjects and experts for transfer, adaptation and evaluation of interim and final results, being the guarantee to reach the described objectives in the region as well as guaranteeing on on-going social innovation process, in interrelation with the regional-local possibilities, resources, and priorities. The action research approach provides impact in terms of developing tangible interventions in the regions in close collaboration with relevant stakeholders – based on inputs and transfer of excellent research to practical solutions relevant for the region and its specific conditions and framework.

Therefore existing borders and restrictions of universities - seen as mere suppliers of academic qualification – have to be overcome. At the same time, the potentials of universities as suppliers of lifelong learning *and* drivers of innovation on a regional level have to be explored and fostered. A special challenge is the development and support of social and technical innovations.

With a focus on the improvement of lifelong learning and the support of the inherent social innovation process, universities can proceed to important actors for the regional development towards the knowledge society. Within this social innovation process universities can successfully take the role as a central actor in a regional field of qualification and innovation. Universities could act as a competent partner matching qualification demands (e.g. pupils, students, employees, enterprises, elderly, unemployed, public authorities) and innovation demands (enterprises, labour market, region, customers). In order to competently fulfil their role in this matching process, universities will face both an internal development process (regarding pedagogic approaches, staff qualification, new management perspectives, understanding of how to support the development of innovations) and external challenges (sustainable regional networking, facilitating discourses and the spreading of innovation, development of new instruments, policy support). In summary, they will face and have to master a multi-faceted social innovation process. Within this process, universities will act as facilitators in a network with regional actors and will be able to supply education as well as innovation.

Being a part of the regional lifelong learning system universities could be more than higher education institutions. As regional centres of lifelong learning they could

- initiate and coordinate, monitor and evaluate regional innovation processes, projects, research and development activities

- be an innovation driver, enabling regional social innovation process and regional development

– enable and transfer innovations (as social and technology innovation and transfer centres), give scientific inputs and transfer scientific excellence into practice (transfer of innovation)

– develop new pathways, transitions between still separated educational areas (e.g. new pathways, access from occupational qualification to higher education) and between economy, industry, companies on one side and higher education and vocational education and training on the other side

– offer additional qualifications (e.g. business administration, management competences for engineers) and continuous education and training

– certificate non-formal and informal competences, on the basis of European standards like European and National Qualification Framework EQF/NQF, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System ECTS, and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training ECVET

– help to get funding for regional projects (fund raising).

In this respect universities could take an active role as development and construction agents, giving critical feedback and reflection on regional processes and the organisational development, securing continuous reflexivity, delivering process documentations and background investigation, etc. It serves also an opportunity for universities to initiate or accelerate a goal-oriented professionalization process in a region which takes a new approach in developing its adult education system by accepting responsibility and sharing it with local stakeholders. Universities and other institutions are provided with a theoretical background to reflect upon their up-to-date tasks and function in the local and regional learning community. This will have impact on the self-perception of the (not only educational) participating institutions and the significance of the learner in everything they do.

Last but not least, to achieve a high impact for the economic and social development the demands of the companies in a region have to be embedded in such a social innovation process of lifelong learning explicitly. Critical to the global competitiveness of European industries is a timely response to demands for new mandatory skills, education and training to ensure skills needs are met. A short-termed implementation of new skills for new job demands, being complementary with the Lisbon and Europe 2020 strategy, needs a closer collaboration between companies and universities creating short termed pathways for qualification: The timely and responsive implementation of new mandatory skills within the higher education system, anticipating actual and future industry needs, matching the demands of industry with the higher education and vocational education and training system, finding new ways of implementation (processes) of new skills for the industry sector and the appropriate education systems.[1] Therefore a regional lifelong learning system should give flexible ways and leeway to include and integrate modules systematically and short termed in different educational institutions (universities, secondary and vocational schools, company oriented vocational education and training) and for different reasons (general education, initial vocational education and training, further vocational training to adjust missing competences).

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[1] An example for such a concept of timely and responsive implementation of new mandatory skills based on the cooperation between universities / research institutions and companies is the European funded project Greening Technical VET (www.gt-vet.com).

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