

Summary of the public seminar on “The Role of Universities in Promoting Lifelong Learning”, held in the context of the 60th Anniversary of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning



Introduction

On the occasion of its 60th Anniversary, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) organised a public seminar on “The Role of universities in Promoting Lifelong Learning” in collaboration with the University of Hamburg. The seminar, held on 25 May 2012, brought together renowned scholars and education practitioners to address possible ways of expanding and transforming higher education to facilitate lifelong learning in different socio-economic contexts. The specific objectives of the seminar were: (1) to exchange experiences and compare needs with regard to transforming teaching and learning; (2) to explore possibilities for cooperation in research intended to inform national and regional policy and practice; (3) to share information and ideas on ways to develop the capacity of policy-makers and practitioners for promoting lifelong learning.

The seminar was opened by Professor Rosemarie Mielke, Vice-President of the University of Hamburg. The two co-moderators were Ekkehard Nuisl von Rein, Professor of Adult Education at the University of Duisburg-Essen and Carolyn Medel-Añonuevo, Deputy Director of UIL. Seven speakers, from Denmark, Estonia, China, Latvia, Malaysia, the United Kingdom and

Spain, shared their research and working experiences in regard to engaging universities in making lifelong learning a reality. A wide range of topics was covered including adult education, validation of prior learning, third age learning, access to higher education, teacher training and ethical education. Active participation from the audience made the seminar a comprehensive forum for exchanging ideas on how universities can promote lifelong learning through teaching, research and extension services. The presentations and debates in the seminar are summarised below.

1. Looking beyond the traditional purpose of lifelong learning: strengthening the role of universities in promoting social cohesion

Coming from an academic background of ethnic studies, Amri Baharuddin Shamsul, Professor at the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan, Malaysia, drew the audience's attention to the relationship between lifelong learning and social cohesion, highlighting Malaysia as an example of a multi-ethnic society. He pointed out that lifelong learning in the conventional sense has to do with instilling the "three Rs" (reading, writing and arithmetic) and preparing learners for productive work. This involves primary, secondary and higher education. However, given the political, social and economic realities of the present day, we should look beyond the traditional boundaries of lifelong learning and perceive it as part of a larger social reality in which society-state-market relations are part of the equation. In countries such as Malaysia, where there is a continuing potential for ethnic conflict, peace and stability do not come without effort. Thus lifelong learning should serve to cultivate peaceful relations among different ethnic groups. This aim has to be embedded in the lifelong learning discourse. One of the most important principles in Malaysia, given the country's ethnic diversity, is that people have to learn to agree to disagree. A course called "introduction to ethnic relations" was announced as a compulsory subject for all university students, underlining that peaceful relationships cannot be taken for granted. The role of universities in this process goes beyond the traditional view of lifelong learning – it involves making people aware of who they are, where they are, and how they are performing.

2. Transforming teaching and learning in universities: a space for being different

Tatjana Koke, Professor in the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Arts at the University of Latvia and former Minister of Education of Latvia, addressed the critical issue of transforming teaching and learning in universities. Specifically, she reported on a project for developing teachers' professional competence within an interdisciplinary study environment. The ultimate aims are to link learning to real life and to promote students' entrepreneurial abilities, with the aid of innovative teaching strategies and enhanced teacher competence. The inter-disciplinary peer learning activities take place in a work-based environment where teachers from different disciplines exchange experiences on how to link learning to life and create innovative approaches to curricula. Thus in this project lifelong learning has shifted from the individual level to the organisational level. The project will initially be implemented from mid-2011 until the end of 2013 and will be extended in a further phase to 2015. Up to now, feedback from teachers and students has been positive: teachers value the multi-faceted collaboration with their colleagues, the motivation of the students, the professionalism of the project team, the varied forms of inter-disciplinary study, and above all the responsive and creative atmosphere. The students appreciate collaboration with classmates, the possibility to solve real life problems, and the contact with people outside the educational institution.

3. Rethinking pedagogy and didactics in universities: teaching and learning as a social process

Another participant from the Baltic States was Professor Larissa Jõgi, Head of the Department of Adult Education, Institute of Educational Science, Tallinn University, Estonia. She posed a number of challenging questions. Given that there is an increasing number of adult students in universities (i.e. those over the age of 22 at the time of enrolment), what kind of rapport exists between students and their universities or faculties (apart from the learning context)? What possibilities for interaction do we offer to students? What does learning at university mean for adult learners? Professor Jõgi emphasised the importance of linking learning and teaching with students' personal and individual life patterns, their social and cultural profiles, and disciplinary focus and their previous experience. Her presentation also facilitated a lively discussion among the audience. Some participants pointed out that universities are still largely very theoretical, which make it very difficult to address the individual contexts and experiences of the students. Other valuable inputs included the observation that students acquire much more than academic knowledge at university. Higher education is about developing a personal identity as well as an academic identity. Larissa Jõgi concluded the discussion by saying that university teaching should be recognised as a social process in which students' self-esteem, hopes and aspirations are supported.

4. Recognising prior learning: an alternative pathway to a postgraduate degree

Bjarne Wahlgren, Director of the Danish National Centre of Competence Development, presented an alternative Danish master's degree, designed especially for lifelong learners. Unlike the traditional master's degree, which requires academic qualifications upon enrolment, this programme is open to students on the basis of their social and vocational competences. There are five basic principles for this type of master's programme: (1) the participants should have at least two years of professional experience before starting the programme; (2) prior learning is recognised as equivalent to formal qualifications; (3) the programme takes only half as much time as a normal master's programme; (4) as a formal qualification, it has the same value for entry to further study and for vocational requirements; and (5) study is part-time. As regards the recognition of prior learning, this is based on two alternative models: (1) the identity model, in which the content of prior learning is identical with the subject category for which the credit is being awarded; and (2) the equivalence model, in which the prior learning has an equivalent value to the credit being awarded, even though the subject category is different – this means that practical and vocational competences can be considered equivalent in their own sphere to academic competences.

5. Enhancing the openness and flexibility of universities: helping adults into and through higher education

The seminar paid attention to the accessibility of adult learners to higher education. This subject was addressed by Professor Michael Osborne, Director of Centre for Research and Development in Adult and Lifelong Learning (CRADALL) and Co-director of PASCAL International Observatory, School of Education, University of Glasgow, who talked about access to higher education in the United Kingdom. He pointed out that any discussion of this topic must take into account particular constituencies, e.g. women, ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities, people living in remote areas, and lower socio-economic classes. Against this background, Professor Osborne introduced the notions of in-reach, out-reach and flexibility. In-reach is essentially improving the supply side, creating different ways for adults in particular, but also young people, to gain entry to the system as it exists; out-reach is about stimulating new

forms of demand; and flexibility is about structural changes in educational systems. Michael Osborne finished his speech by emphasising three points; (1) facilitating access is not enough – fundamental changes in the structures of the higher education system are required to ensure retention and progression; (2) universities could improve their provision for adults by avoiding artificial distinctions (such as “adult” and “non-adult”) when deciding what is allowable and fundable; and (3) many universities have forgotten that, in terms of adult education, their primary responsibility is to serve their local communities.

6. Making lifelong learning a reality for senior citizens: the role of universities in education for the “third age”

Minxuan Zhang, President of Shanghai Normal University (SHNU), China, discussed the role of higher education in meeting the learning needs of senior citizens. Shanghai has over 23 million people living and working in its metropolitan area, of whom 3.47 million are over 60 and 2.33 million are over 65. Thus lifelong learning in Shanghai should also include this part of the population. SHNU has been supporting this initiative since 1997 with allocation of personnel, financial resources, venue facilities etc. to help senior citizens better engage in education programmes. At the moment there are over 6,000 senior citizens studying at SHNU. The guiding principles for organising the senior citizens’ programmes derive from what Minxuan Zhang termed the six “anys”. “*Any people*”, old or young, local or migrant, should be able to participate. “*Any course*” can be pursued, be it for academic purposes or just for leisure and fun. Courses are available at “*any level*”. Thanks to information and communication technologies they are also available at “*any time*” and “*any place*”. Last but not the least is the principle of “*any way*” – through formal, informal, non-formal or distance modalities – whatever suits the learners’ needs. Besides the six “anys”, there are four “Ps” to keep in mind; *planning*, e.g. in curriculum design; focusing on *participants*, i.e. practising a learner-centred approach; fostering *partnership* with public and private sector bodies; and monitoring *performance*, e.g. through learning outcome assessment. Minxuan Zhang also pointed out that governmental support, together with the commitment from the university sector, is crucial in making lifelong learning for senior citizens a reality: Through financial support from Shanghai municipality, SHNU is able to offer free programmes to senior citizens. Professors and young university graduates are recruited as part-time volunteers in teaching and supporting the programmes. Adjustment at administrative level is also necessary to ensure the compatibility of the senior programmes with all the other programmes in the university.

7. Promoting tertiary lifelong learning: the inclusion of mid-life learners

A specialist in labour-market issues, Karsten Krueger is Programme Manager for Tertiary Higher Education for People in Mid-life (THEMP), which is funded by the European Commission within the lifelong learning programme and is focused on adults, especially those aged 40 years and upwards. As Karsten Krueger explained, this is a three-year project that started in 2011. It aims to examine how lifelong learning can improve the work situation of the learners or help them to maintain their position in the labour market. In addition it addresses how lifelong learning can improve their quality of life. The project comprises case studies on lifelong learning in seven EU countries involving eight research institutes. It has the following objectives: (1) to create a description of tertiary lifelong learning landscapes in the countries concerned; (2) to analyse the praxis of tertiary lifelong learning in at least three universities in each of these countries; (3) to deliver tools to measure the social efficiency of these lifelong learning programmes and to create an arena for the discussion of tertiary lifelong learning praxis. The focus of the case studies is on the transition to employment and on strengthening the capacity of learners to improve and maintain their position in the labour market.

Conclusion

Overall, the seminar constituted a searching and wide-ranging examination of the issue of how to expand and transform the role of universities in promoting lifelong learning. The salient conclusions that can be drawn from the presentations and debates are as follows:

- 1) Higher education should be seen as part of a larger social reality in which society-state-market relations are part of the equation; by the same token, universities are expected to contribute to social cohesion in the communities where they operate.
- 2) Teaching and learning in the universities can be transformed by linking learning to the wider issues of life, by recognising shared responsibilities, by creating innovative curricula and by capitalising on the diverse experiences of learners. Innovation and entrepreneurship in education can be crucial in terms of changing attitudes and values and helping to cultivate the necessary capacities for lifelong learning.
- 3) The reform of higher education goes beyond mere pedagogy and didactics; it is a social process which links teaching and learning to students' personal and individual life patterns, their social and cultural context and their chosen discipline.
- 4) The recognition of prior learning is also relevant for higher education. In particular, universities should build capacities to recognise, validate and accredit prior learning and vocational experience in order to accommodate the needs of adult learners;
- 5) Increased access to universities is not enough; the higher education system should ensure retention and progression of all learners, and adult learners in particular.
- 6) Especially in communities with a rapidly emerging aging population, universities should facilitate learning for senior citizens with support from the public and private sector. University professors and graduates can be recruited as volunteers in supporting programmes for senior citizens.
- 7) Given the rapid changes in the labour market, universities are expected to become more responsive to the work situation of the learners, especially the middle-aged, so as to help them to maintain and improve their position in the labour market and ultimately to improve their quality of life.