

Workshop Innovation in regional business and industry, NGOs and the public sector – the role of University Lifelong Learning

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Alumni of vocational education as a new target group for higher further education – Chance and challenge for universities

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Abstract

In order to cope with the challenges in contemporary markets, flexibility has become a key asset to any modern organisation. According to the principles of lifelong learning today's job specifications cannot be considered as static but as a continuous process. Above all, individual competences have to be kept up-to-date to retain capacity to act in every situation leading to a constant demand for further qualification within enterprises. Especially in key technologies like micro technologies, demographic change, global competition and a lack of skilled labour result in rapid transformation of know-how as well as qualification requirements. Almost exclusively, micro technologies are in knowledge intensive branches with short innovation cycles, characterised by the shortest half-life of knowledge, products and technologies. Conclusively, the skill- and mindset of experts working in these areas has to be extremely dynamic and go with recent developments. In particular SMEs are challenged to rethink their personnel policy. Many of them miss a strategic, systematic, need based and innovation-oriented competence as well as personnel qualification scheme. Quite regularly they face the problem of having to react to 'suddenly' arising knowledge gaps on short notice, subsequently trying to bridge them with available human resources. Another problem is that, on the one hand, their employees have tremendous knowledge potential but, on the other hand, they often do not meet the formal entrance qualification of academic vocational education. At the same time there are only a few adequate academic programmes providing efficient extra-occupational further qualification. For further education of alumni of vocational education professional providers have successfully entered the market while universities either neglect their opportunities in this field or are simply overlooked by SMEs as potential providers of respective educational offers.

However, in terms of further education, intensified collaboration between science and economy with increased transfer of knowledge and technology is a win-win cooperation, but apparently there are still many hurdles to overcome. Organisations complain about traditional further education programmes being too general and inflexible in order to deliver credible,

relevant and approved content. In general, in addition to the challenge to deliver adequate content, academic further education programmes have to deal with a significant lack of trust in their services as well. To rebuild this trust has proven to require an exceptional effort but is at the same time without alternative for universities, who want to enter competition with the private sector.

Mainly for the above mentioned target group, universities need to conceptualise schemes exactly matching professional tasks and demands. New schemes should take full account of existing individual competences, tacit-knowledge, qualifications, certificates and everyday work processes. Higher further education has to orient their programmes as closely as possible on their customer's job environments in order to achieve a fluent transition of educational content into practise. Ideally, identified work processes can be seamlessly translated into learning objectives resulting in a comprehensive educational framework including practical projects.

The research group Microsystems creates customised further education services for SMEs. More specifically all efforts are concentrated on developing extra-occupational education concepts which appreciate contemporary professional demands for alumni of vocational education. Clearly the focus is on short-term programmes as well as BA and MA degrees.

To sum up, the proposed contribution consists of the most recent findings of the research activities carried out by the research group Microsystems. In a nutshell, the research suggests that further education programmes have to be consequently and explicitly designed around real work processes. Likewise, in order to take into account modern professional demands, they have to be of modular structure, customised and highly flexible.

Methodologically they are reliant on and benefit a lot from blended learning arrangements.