

**43rd European University Continuing Education Network Conference
“Universities’ Engagement in and with Society. The University Lifelong Learning
contribution”**

Wed 09 to Fri 11 May 2012, University of Graz, Austria

Barbara Weitgruber

Opening address

Distinguished participants of the 43rd EUCEN Conference,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to address you today and to convey to you the best wishes of the Austrian Federal Minister for Science and Research, Prof. Karl Heinz Töchterle.

It is an honor for us that this conference is being held at the University of Graz. Let me start by conveying our sincere thanks to the University of Graz for hosting this event and especially to the President of EUCEN, Dr. Andrea Waxenegger, for her commitment and her dedication to the universities’ LLL contribution both at the national and at the European level.

As you are all well aware, the Bologna Declaration in 1999 set out (and I quote now the “Budapest Vienna Declaration” adopted at the launch of the EHEA in 2010) “a vision for an internationally competitive and attractive European Higher Education Area where higher education institutions, supported by strongly committed staff, can fulfill their diverse missions in the knowledge society; and where students benefiting from mobility with smooth and fair recognition of their qualifications, can find the best suited educational pathways.”

EUCEN can play a major role in shaping this EHEA in the field of LLL by offering participants of conferences the opportunity to explore the whole range of diversity in University Lifelong Learning and to share research results and best practice, and also by preparing and discussing recommendations on policy, research and practice.

The EHEA Ministerial Conference on April 26/27 in Bucharest once again underlined the key role of LLL and agreed in the Bucharest Communiqué on the following:

“Lifelong learning is one of the important factors in meeting the needs of a changing labor market, and higher education institutions play a central role in transferring knowledge and strengthening regional development, including by the continuous development of competences and reinforcement of knowledge alliances”.

In Austria, a LLL strategy, which sets out objectives and priority measures to be achieved by 2020, was adopted by the Ministerial Council last year.

The strategy takes a holistic approach and encompasses all areas of learning from upbringing in early childhood, to the entire school sector, vocational education and training, educational offers in the tertiary sector and general adult education, and also in-company further training. And it focuses on the learner's and not on institutional perspectives or legal requirements related to skills and competences.

The strategy aims at:

- ⇒ Creating basic conditions which enable every person, regardless of their age and prior education, to get involved in educational processes and to complement their qualifications in a meaningful way,
- ⇒ Creating incentives as well as an economic and social climate which allow lifelong learning to be experienced as a value, thus motivating persons and age groups with low qualifications and those who have previously placed a low emphasis on education.
- ⇒ Improving the recognition of non-formal and informal knowledge, skills and competences so that these can lead to formal qualifications and thus to a modern outcome in the orientation of learning processes.

The holistic approach also makes clear that lifelong learning cannot be reduced to educational policy. Social policy, labor market and employment policies, policy on families, and science and research policies play an important role in determining opportunities and preconditions for lifelong learning. Therefore a strategic working group composed of representatives of all the ministries in charge of these policy areas coordinates the implementation. And all strategic planning steps are taken in consultation with the social partners and are subject to feedback by experts. The implementation of strategy takes full account of the different competences at federal or provincial levels, as well as the responsibilities of the social partners. In this way, a concerted strategic orientation of individual measures towards a joint targeted effect shall be ensured.

Let me just mention a few of the measures related to higher education which were laid out in the strategy:

- To carry out activities for enhancing mutual recognition of equivalence of HE degrees and qualifications awarded by Austrian HE establishments
- To specify institutional lifelong learning strategies at all public HE establishments in connection with their development plans and profile development
- To increase the number of study places for employees or part-time study places at the universities of applied sciences to 50% and implement master's degree programmes for employees at every public university
- To include and strengthen aspects relevant for community education in the performance agreements of the Federal Ministry of Science and Research with public universities

- To intensify accompanying basic research and improve the data material

Of course, LLL is not new to the higher education sector in Austria. The Universities Act 2002 created the legal basis for a far-reaching autonomy of the Austrian public universities. In view of the diversification and autonomy of institutions of higher education, they themselves develop and implement LLL measures. They are however integrated in the performance agreements, which are negotiated every three years between the university and the ministry.

In the current performance agreements (2010-2012), the universities were called upon to describe their objectives and methods of procedure in the establishment of their institutional LLL strategy according to the LLL Charter for Universities. Furthermore, universities have to report regularly on their progress.

The development of the Universities of Applied Sciences sector is laid down in a specific development and financing plan. Currently, 46% of all courses are offered on a part-time basis geared towards full or part time employees. In near future the Universities of Applied Sciences will have to develop institutional LLL Strategies with a broader focus going beyond the offer of part time studies.

Let me conclude by thanking all input speakers and everyone involved in planning and organising this conference and wishing you an inspiring conference. I look forward to interesting results and hope that you will profit from this conference and from your stay in Graz professionally, but also personally.

Barbara Weitgruber

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