

# A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO ASSESS UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATION IN LIFELONG LEARNING

**Alina Irina POPESCU**

*The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania  
alina.popescu@rei.ase.ro*

## **Abstract**

Lifelong learning has grabbed the attention of both scholars and practitioners in the last decade and has developed into an orientation embraced by universities from all over the world as creators of knowledge and providers of learning for the knowledge economy. This article proposes a conceptual framework to assess universities' participation in lifelong learning activities based on previous researches conducted by the author on Romanian universities involvement in lifelong learning. The proposed framework is envisaged to act as a practical management tool that can be used to obtain a holistic overview of the implementation of lifelong learning activities in Romanian universities: the forms of learning, the contexts of learning, the types of learning activities, the mostly used financial instruments to finance lifelong learning activities by Romanian universities.

**Keywords:** Conceptual framework, Lifelong learning, Higher education

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Lifelong Learning has gained considerable attention at the European level since the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 that aimed to build a smart and sustainable economy with high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. The roots of the concept can be traced back to the 1960s when OECD advocated lifelong learning (referred to as 'éducation permanente') due to its potential to develop the human capital. The initiatives undertaken to build a lifelong learning policy at the level of the European Union have gradually materialised into a regional framework of reference which was adapted, in many cases, to national contexts.

Lifelong learning is a broad concept, and many were the attempts to define it. Two of them formulated by the European Commission are presented as follows:

- *'The process encompassing all purposeful learning activity, whether formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence'* (European Commission, 2000).

- *'All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective'* (European Commission, 2001).

Further clarification on the concept revealed **three forms of learning** covered by lifelong learning: formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning.

- *'Lifelong learning covers formal, non-formal and informal patterns of learning throughout the life cycle of an individual...'* (European Commission, 2001).

**Formal learning** refers to 'structured periods of learning with evaluative assessment that enables students to earn credits towards recognised awards and qualifications' (examples: a degree course followed at university, modular courses taught and assessed by universities which can be counted towards undergraduate or postgraduate degrees); **non-formal learning** refers to 'structured periods of learning that may include formative assessment but which do not lead to the award of academic credit' (examples: professional development courses which build professional competence, and vocational skills acquired at the workplace); **informal learning** refers to 'loosely structured periods of learning which rarely include assessment and which do not lead to the award of academic credit' (examples: open educational resources developed and made available online by universities to anyone who wishes to study them, inter-generational learning, for example where parents learn to use ICT through their children, or learning how to play an instrument together with friends' (Watkinson and Tinoca, 2010).

## 2. THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN PROVIDING LIFELONG LEARNING

A great diversity of actors is involved in lifelong learning, basically all organisations with activities in education and training. Among them, universities are expected to play an active role in the promotion and the provision of lifelong learning. Given the need to raise the skill levels of Europeans, lifelong learning was positioned at the centre of the European Unions' Europe 2020 Strategy which includes a European benchmark for raising the proportion of higher education graduates (in the age range 30–34 years) to 40% by 2020 (2010: 32).

The role of universities was also acknowledged by the Glasgow Declaration (EUA, 2005): *'Europe needs strong and creative universities as key actors in shaping the European knowledge society through their commitment to wide participation and lifelong learning, and by their promotion of quality and excellence in teaching, learning, research and innovation activities'*. Strong and self-confident universities are able to improve their governing structures and leadership competences in order to

increase their efficiency and creativity. When it comes to innovation and creativity, universities should be able to introduce innovative teaching methods, to adapt the educational offer and the curricula to the present and future needs of the labour market, to engage in a continuous dialogue with private and public actors, to embrace non-formal education and to recognize prior learning.

To cope with their ever increasing role in the knowledge society, universities in Europe have made considerable efforts to adapt to the lifelong learning requirements and to consider the developments and trends in the European higher education sector. Firstly, they had to adapt to the educational policies developed at the EU level: the Bologna Process resulting in the formation of the European Higher Education Area in 2010, the initiatives under the Lisbon Strategy including a variety of instruments for strengthening the European Research Area, and the Lifelong Learning Programme LLP 2007-2013. Secondly, they had to adapt to the national policies resulting in the amendment of many university functions like for instance: research policy, quality assurance, governance and financing. Thirdly, universities had to adapt to the rapid expansion and diversification of the higher education sector. With the development of new forms of learning, the competition among universities increased, trespassing regional and national borders (EUA, Sursock and Smidt, 2010).

It seems that although recognized and supported by universities, lifelong learning was still in the incipient phase in the case of the majority of European universities, according to a report prepared by EADTU (Watkinson and Tinoca, 2010) under the USBM project carried out by institutions from 14 European countries. They found that LLL was not yet organised sufficiently at most universities because, in general, universities are bound to their conventional business models focusing on education and research and innovation in the Bachelor – Master – Doctoral Structure (p.5). This structure is appropriate for traditional students, and targeting other categories of students / learners would mean developing new strategies and business models that would change the current organisational structure.

### **3. INITIATIVES TO ASSESS UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATION IN LIFELONG LEARNING**

Given the importance granted to university lifelong learning, it appears the need to assess universities' participation in providing lifelong learning in order to provide a basis for further improvement and increase of their role in providing learning activities for the development of the knowledge economy.

Several major projects that attempted to assess university commitment to lifelong learning were identified in the specialised literature. I refer to "university commitment" to lifelong learning in accordance with the formulation used in the European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning (EUA, 2008). The purpose of the Charter drafted by the European University Association (EUA) is written in

the form of “commitments” from universities in addressing the development and implementation of lifelong learning strategies “to assist European universities in developing their specific role as lifelong learning institutions forming a central pillar of the Europe of Knowledge” (EUA, 2008: 4).

The major European-level projects that aimed to assess and stimulate university participation in lifelong learning activities identified in the previous researches (Popescu, 2012) were:

1. The project called “Shaping Inclusive and Responsive University Strategies” (SIRUS) over the period 2010-2011, coordinated by a consortium formed by four European level organisations: the European University Association (EUA), the European Continuing Education Network (EUCEN), the European Association of Distance Education Universities (EADTU), and the European Access Network (EAN). The aims of the project are to support universities in developing lifelong learning strategies, to implement the commitments adopted in the European Universities’ Charter on Lifelong Learning, and to disseminate the best practices registered in this field (EUA, Smidt and Sursock, 2011).
2. The project called “University Strategies and Business Models for Lifelong Learning” (USBM) over the period 2008-2010, coordinated by the European Association of Distance Education Universities (EADTU). The project aimed at supporting the development of the lifelong learning strategy by presenting, analysing and sharing institutional strategies and business models for university lifelong learning (EADTU, Ubachs et al., 2011).
3. The project called “The Impact of Lifelong Learning Strategies on Professional Higher Education” (FLLLEX) over the period 2010-2012, initiated and supported by the European Association of Higher Education Institutions (EURASHE), coordinated by KHLeuven – Leuven University College and involves a consortium of 23 partners from 10 European countries. The project aimed at identifying challenges and implications of the incorporation of Lifelong Learning (LLL) into universities’ strategies and at supporting universities in developing an institutional strategy for lifelong learning (EURASHE, Frith et al., 2012).

At the same time, several national authorities investigated the contribution of universities to lifelong learning at country-level. It is the case of the project coordinated by Lindroos and Korkala (2008) in which the lifelong learning strategies of 16 Finnish universities based on the data provided by the universities to the Finnish Ministry of Education in February 2007. Their research findings showed different approaches to the implementation of lifelong learning activities at institutional level.

#### 4. A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK TO ASSESS UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATION IN LIFELONG LEARNING IN ROMANIA

The higher education sector in Romania underwent a continuous transformation since the Fall of Communism in 1989. Many governments have been in office during this period, often having different views on the functioning of the higher education sector. Nevertheless, the constant view of adapting to the requirements of the European Higher Education Area has shaped the evolution of this sector. At present, efforts are made to develop a National Strategy for Lifelong Learning in order to create a national framework to encourage university participation in lifelong learning. Several provisions in this respect were brought by the legislation since 2011, but the legislative framework regarding the issue of lifelong learning needs further improvement.

In this context, universities from Romania adopted different approaches in relation to lifelong learning, ranging from actively seeking to involve in lifelong learning to a low involvement in lifelong learning (Popescu, 2012). Consequently, this paper seeks to propose a framework to assess university participation in lifelong learning in order to stimulate them to do so. The international trends in the higher education sector coupled with the trends from the Romanian market (like for instance: the decreasing number of students in general, and of students with the financial possibility to attend a university, in particular; and the changing requirements regarding the skills and competences of the labour force) increased the competition among the universities and forced them to adapt to the business environment by providing lifelong learning services.

The proposed framework to assess university participation in lifelong learning in Romania is based on previous researches of lifelong learning activities in which Romanian universities are involved (Popescu, 2012).

The framework considers both initial and continuing education, as lifelong learning refers to all learning activities an individual performs during the entire lifetime, from cradle to grave (see Figure 1). In general, lifelong learning covers a great variety of educational programmes from the initial education (e.g. basic initial education, apprenticeships, technical or vocational education, special needs education) to continuing education (e.g. adult education, literacy programmes, training). In particular, the universities from Romania are involved only in providing some of these forms of education.

In considering the life-wide character of learning, three contexts in which learning occurs were identified: formal, non-formal and informal. Formal education consists mostly of initial education, and it typically takes place in institutions that are established having the purpose of providing full-time education. As such, the universities from Romania are most active in providing formal initial education: bachelor,

master and doctoral degrees. Formal education also includes forms of continuing education for all age groups with programme content and qualifications that are equivalent to those from initial education. According to UNESCO (2011) “programmes that take place partly in the workplace may also be considered formal education if they lead to a qualification that is recognized by national educational authorities or equivalent. These programmes are often provided in cooperation between educational institutions and employers (e.g. apprenticeships)”. It is noteworthy to underline that a clear line to distinguish between formal and informal education is difficult to be drawn. If the learner undertakes an educational activity after entering the labour market then the educational activity is classified as continuing education: this is why in the proposed framework the doctoral degree bypasses the “border” of initial education. A form of continuing education frequently offered by Romanian universities is represented by the post-university courses, targeted at graduates wishing to improve their knowledge in a specific field of study.

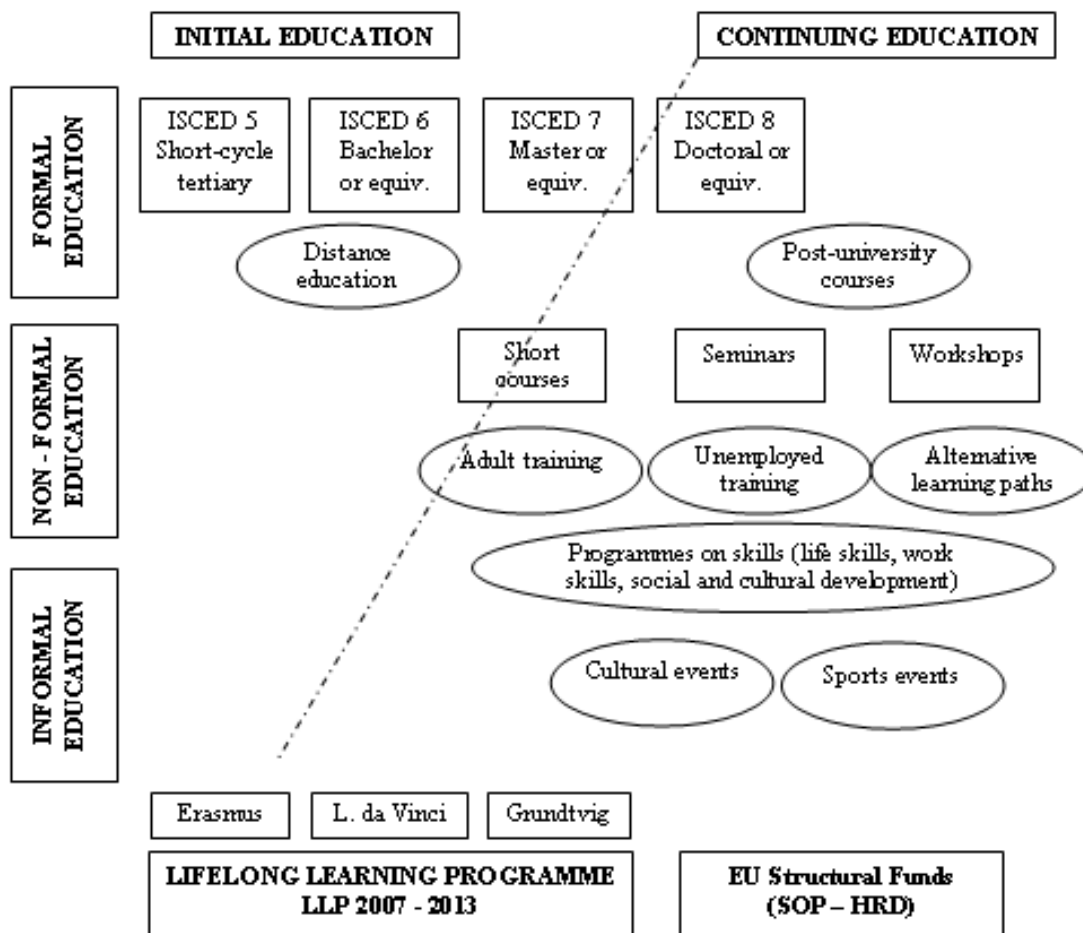


FIGURE 1 - PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO ASSESS UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATION IN LIFELONG LEARNING IN ROMANIA

Source: Author's conceptualisation

Moving to the non-formal context of learning we can identify several activities in which learning can occur organised by / within the Romanian universities: seminars, workshops, short courses, conferences. A non-formal learning activity is of a very short duration and it can address various needs of different categories of learners (e.g. adults, unemployed, elders, learners with special needs) or individuals, in general. The Romanian Universities demonstrate a lower involvement in these learning activities provided occasionally to interested individuals and / or at the request of interested parties.

Informal learning activities are not traditionally organised in universities. They are defined as “forms of learning that are intentional or deliberate, but not institutionalized” (UNESCO, 2011). Nevertheless, universities have important roles to play in the development of the region and community, and they can develop open educational resources and make them available online to anyone who wishes to study them, or organise cultural or sports events at which informal learning activities can occur.

The proposed framework considers also two major financial instruments available to Romanian universities to stimulate their participation in lifelong learning activities. Firstly, the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013 promoted by the European Commission offers a very good financial support through its components that can be accessed by universities: Erasmus (for higher education participants), Leonardo da Vinci (for vocational education participants), and Gruntvig (for adult education participants). Secondly, the Sectoral Operational Programme – Human Resources Development (SOP-HRD) offered under the European Social Fund provided universities financing for their involvement in lifelong learning activities, among others. This programme offered universities the possibility to finance learning activities that fell within seven field of activity called Priority Axes (PA): PA1: Education and training in support for growth and development of knowledge based society; PA2: Linking lifelong learning and the labour market; PA3: Increasing adaptability of workers and enterprises; PA4: Modernising of public employment service; PA5: Promoting active employment measures; PA6: Promoting social inclusion; PA7: Technical assistance. It was not the purpose of the study to assess the degree to which the universities from Romania have used these two financial instruments to develop lifelong learning activities; previous researches conducted by the author revealed a low implication and usage of the financial resources available through these instruments, with the exception of the Erasmus student mobility scheme (Popescu, 2012; Popescu and Popescu, 2011).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The educational landscape changes under the pressures for competitiveness raised by the emergence of the knowledge-based economy. The ability of universities to remain competitive plays an important

role in determining their success and even ensuring the continuation of their activity on the market. Lifelong learning, defined as a continuous process of learning throughout lifetime, provide universities with opportunities for developing flexible and alternative learning pathways for all individuals. This represents a challenge for the Romanian universities that need to adapt their strategies, structures and even the mentality of their management. This article proposes a conceptual model whose main purpose is to act as a practical management tool that can be used to obtain a holistic overview of the implementation of lifelong learning activities in Romanian universities: the forms of learning, the contexts of learning, the types of learning activities, the mostly used financial instruments to finance lifelong learning activities by Romanian universities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was co-financed from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/1.5/S/59184 „Performance and excellence in postdoctoral research in Romanian economics science domain”.

## REFERENCES

- EADTU (2011), Ubachs, G. coord., USBM - *University Strategies and Business Models for Lifelong Learning in Higher Education, Final Report*, retrieved December 2, 2012, from <[http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/project\\_reports/documents/erasmus/multilateral\\_actions\\_2008/emhe/eras\\_emhe\\_142914.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/project_reports/documents/erasmus/multilateral_actions_2008/emhe/eras_emhe_142914.pdf)>.
- European Commission (2010), *Europe 2020 Strategy: A European Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth*, Brussels.
- European Commission (2000), *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, Brussels.
- European Commission (2001), *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*, Brussels.
- European Universities Association – EUA (2005), *Glasgow Declaration: Strong Universities for a Strong Europe*, Brussels.
- European Universities Association – EUA (2008), *The European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning*, Brussels.
- European Universities Association – EUA, Sursock, A., and Smidt, H. (2010), *Trends 2010: A Decade of Change in European Higher Education*, Brussels.
- European Universities Association – EUA, Smidt H., Sursock A. (2011), *Engaging in Lifelong Learning: Shaping Inclusive and Responsive University Strategies (SIRUS)*, retrieved December 2, 2012, from <[http://www.eua.be/pubs/Engaging\\_in\\_Lifelong\\_Learning.pdf](http://www.eua.be/pubs/Engaging_in_Lifelong_Learning.pdf)>.
- EURASHE, Frith, A., de Jong, M., Vansteenhuyse, K. (2012), *Towards an Institutional Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Higher Professional Education*, FLLLEX project Results and



Recommendations, retrieved December 2, 2012, from <[http://www.eurashe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FLLLEX\\_project\\_results\\_recommendations.pdf](http://www.eurashe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FLLLEX_project_results_recommendations.pdf)>.

Lindroos, P. and Korkala, S. (2008), *The Lifelong Learning Strategies of Finnish Universities*, retrieved December 2, 2012, from <[http://www.ucef.fi/fi/liitetiedostot/The\\_Lifelong\\_Learning\\_Strategies\\_of\\_Finnish\\_Universities.pdf](http://www.ucef.fi/fi/liitetiedostot/The_Lifelong_Learning_Strategies_of_Finnish_Universities.pdf)>.

Popescu, A.I. and Popescu, L. (2011), *The Contribution of European Structural Funds to the Development of Human Resources in Romania from a Regional Perspective*, A 18-a Conferință Internațională IECS 2011 "Crises after the Crisis. Inquiries from a National, European and Global Perspective" (19-20 mai 2011, Sibiu), Proceedings of IECS ediția a 18-a, pp. 320-327.

Popescu, A.I. (2012), Essentials of University Strategy Development in the field of Lifelong Learning, *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 4 Issue 1.

Watkinson, M. and Tinoca, L. (2010), *Showcases of University Strategies and Business Models for Lifelong Learning*, European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, The Netherlands.