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Translating lifelong learning policies in Flanders: A case study

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Abstract

Over the last couple of years lifelong learning has been put forward strongly in policy documents drawn up at global and European level. Despite this attention to the importance of lifelong learning internationally, the participation rate in Flanders is low compared to the European average. This paper explores the actions the Flemish government takes to reinforce lifelong learning and to increase the number of people who engage in it. In a second step it analyzes how Ghent University is responding to the initiatives of the government and how lifelong learning policies are translated into concrete actions. To increase the number of participants, the university will undertake three key actions: (1) make it easier for professors to organize lifelong learning initiatives; (2) design the lifelong learning initiatives as flexibly as possible, starting from the educational needs of the target audience; and (3) discuss and co-create the content of the associated training with external stakeholders such as alumni and industry professionals.

1 Introduction

The fourth Sustainable Development Goal of the United Nations is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, 14). Lifelong learning is considered an important way to stay ahead in a technologically fast changing society, and to strive for social inclusion through access to employment (Valiente, Capsada-Munsech, de Otero, 2020). This is also taken up at the European level in various policy documents, general projects and initiatives (Rambla & Millana, 2020).

In Flanders² the proportion of 25 to 64 year olds participating in lifelong learning is currently 8.7%, which is far below the European average of 11%. In Europe the top performers are the Nordic countries and neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands, France and Luxembourg, with a participation rate of about 18% (*De lerende samenleving*, 2020, 1). It is noteworthy that in the participation rate in Flanders no evolution can be detected; the rate has been stable at 7-9% since 2000 (*De lerende samenleving*, 2020, 1).

In 2017 the Flemish government presented its long-term strategy for 2050, and this strategy included plans for the reinforcement of lifelong learning (*Visie 2050*, 2016). The strategy was repeated and emphasized in the coalition agreement of the Flemish government, approved in 2019. In the agreement it is stipulated that a switch towards a culture of learning is necessary.

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² In this paper I do not take into account the Belgian point of view, since education is a competence of the regions. In Belgium there are three regions: the Flemish community, the French-speaking community and the German-speaking community. Since Ghent University is a university in Flanders, the situation in the Flemish community is considered.

“The transition to an open, flexible and mobile talent market requires the shift to lifelong learning, to a real learning culture of education, re-education and further education throughout the career” (*Regeerakkoord*, 2019, 58). To achieve this goal the government will take steps to encourage lifelong learning in society, such as the development of a platform to improve synergies and cooperation between the policy domains work, education and economics (*Regeerakkoord*, 2019, 22). Next to that, an expertise centre for the innovative learning paths lifelong learning and dual learning will be founded (*Regeerakkoord*, 2019, 60).

2 Ghent University: a case study

If governments issue policy orientations it is up to the parties involved to translate these into concrete initiatives and actions (Valiente, Capsada-Munsech, de Otero, 2020). Ghent University, as one of the five universities in Flanders, has responded to the call of the government and has recently approved a strategic plan with concrete policy proposals and priorities for the next couple of years with regard to the reinforcement of lifelong learning. In this paper three key actions of this plan are discussed.

These actions are focused mainly on the reduction of so-called institutional barriers, as defined in research on participation to lifelong learning. “Institutional barriers are commonly understood as being created by workplace factors or by policy in general, such as lack of relevant programmes or that programmes are offered at an inconvenient time/place” (Hovdhaugen & Opheim, 2018, 563). To make an inventory of the institutional barriers, the eleven faculties of Ghent University were questioned. The key actions mentioned below are answers to the concerns raised in the surveys.

Of course, as mentioned by Hovdhaugen & Opheim (2020), other barriers such as lack of motivation and other forms of emotional barriers will also have to be dealt with in order to increase the interest in lifelong learning among individuals. This paper is only a starting point. More comparative research is needed about why there is not a culture of learning in Flanders compared to the countries mentioned earlier.

2.1 Towards a clear framework for lifelong learning promoters

Broadly speaking, professors at Ghent University and other Flemish universities have three main duties: research, education/teaching and service to society. With regard to educational activities, the primary focus is on teaching in the Bachelor’s and Master’s programmes. Professors are interested in being involved in post-initial education, but only when the framework for this type of education is clear and not time-consuming.

This is why the first action of Ghent University will be to lower the threshold for professors to offer parts of their research and/or education in basic courses as lifelong learning initiatives. For this, templates and straightforward models will be provided. In this way, updates of the latest insights are made available for graduates with only little effort. Participants will have the possibility to follow each module separately, but combinations of modules will also be promoted. By doing so, the university can offer perspective to participants and give them a reason to never stop learning.

2.2 Towards a flexible course offer of lifelong learning initiatives

For the lifelong learning initiatives Ghent University will construct a flexible course offer based on high-quality and blended teaching. On the basis of the goals of the target audience and the learning outcomes of the training courses a well-considered and well-balanced mix of on-campus and online teaching will be suggested. The purpose is so that participants will actively engage with the learning content, individually and in interaction with other participants and the lecturers.

This means that participants will come to campus for activities which have an added value, for instance active lectures, discussions, interaction and building a network. When the lifelong learning initiative is focused on professionals, these on-campus moments will be organized in such a way that they can be combined with work. For the online activities educational technologies such as livestreaming, video conferences and recordings will be used.

In the design of the programme particular attention will also be given to the location of the lifelong learning initiatives. Ghent University will ensure easily accessible locations, well-equipped rooms and welcoming waiting areas.

2.3 Towards a strong network of stakeholders

Ghent University cannot determine alone which courses are useful and respond to the needs of the different target audiences. Dialogue with representatives of industry, society and the public sector is necessary in order to co-create content together. Only under this precondition can lifelong learning be organized in a sustainable manner.

One specific group of stakeholders are alumni from Ghent University. The lifelong learning initiatives will be initially developed for this group. It is the intention of the university to engage alumni more and to keep them informed of the lifelong learning course offer. In the initial study programmes greater emphasis will also be placed on the importance of a culture of learning.

In this respect, the qualification system of lifelong learning initiatives will also be fine-tuned. For professionals, for instance, it is important to have a correct certification system. Ghent University will look into formal and non-formal education and the provision of microcredentials.

3 Conclusions

For lifelong learning the future is now, and for higher education institutions lifelong learning is the future. It is time to translate policy orientations into real and concrete actions. Three key actions which Ghent University will carry out have been discussed in this paper. They can serve as an inspiration for other higher education institutions planning to focus more on lifelong learning.

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