

UK Workshop

“Higher Education and the challenge of lifelong learning”

Professor Tom Schuller, Director, Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, UK

The international participants of Professor Schuller’s interactive workshop had the opportunity to find out about the policies and practices of lifelong learning in the UK and were asked for observations when comparing their institutions with the UK predicament.

As Professor Schuller had set out in the introductory session, lifelong learning in the UK can be said to be a success story. This is illustrated by the increase in student numbers with students coming from a wide range of backgrounds and having diverse age profiles. Indeed, first-time students are increasingly older, not only in the UK but also in the other three English-speaking countries, which calls for a change in conceptions regarding universities’ target audience and degree models. Professor Schuller identified four factors specific to the UK which together allow lifelong learning to thrive in the UK higher education landscape:

- The UK has a greater degree of managerial capacity to take decisions and make changes at institutional level
- In the UK, there has been a drive to recruit a wider clientele into the Higher Education system including young people from low socio-economic groups.
- There has been a variety of initiatives in the UK to make the Higher Education system more flexible. In particular, the creation of Foundation Degrees has been an important step in this direction.
- There is a strong tradition of lifelong learning in many UK universities which, for a long time, have welcomed adults with formal and non-formal qualifications. Special programmes have been developed by UK institutions to recruit mature students. The strength of this tradition is illustrated, for instance, by the respective successes of the Open University and the University of Buckingham,

In response to the audience’s interests, Professor Schuller concentrated on four areas of discussion:

- 1) Full-time / part-time students
- 2) Universities’ missions and local partnerships
- 3) Changing demographics and the labour market

1) Full-time / part-time students

The mode of study matters with regard to the implementation of lifelong learning into universities’ missions as it is linked to finances. At present, the balance between governmental funding for full-time and part-time study places is unequal institutions get more governmental subsidies for full-time study places. Part-time students are not only institutionally but also individually at a disadvantage as, unlike full-time students, they do not have access to student loans.

This lack of financial incentives for part-time studies endangers the UK's extramural study tradition in general and the future of lifelong learning in universities' missions more specifically. In their recent publication, Professor Schuller and Sir David Watson recommend eliminating the divide in financial support for full-time and part-time studies. At institutional level, full- and part-time studies would be financially weighted and conducted on an equal footing. It would not be necessary to introduce separate degree programmes for full- and part-time students due to the increasing flexibility of people's working hours.

2) Universities' mission and local partnerships

Most universities worldwide are faced with the challenge of how to combine their global role of producing and globally disseminating new knowledge with engagement at a local level. This is particularly the case for research-led universities. Professor Schuller recommended that universities should reach out to their local communities. The University of Warwick in the UK illustrates how a university can successfully fulfil its mission to be a world-leader in research and teaching as well as having a wide community reach and being commercially successful.

The University of Warwick's business model was based on a decision by the University's leadership and originally faced fierce opposition in the UK Higher Education sector.

3) Changing demographics and the labour market

Lifelong learning is bound to play an increasingly important role in Higher Education due to people's increasingly late retirement. The investment in lifelong learning contributes to us staying independent longer and thus pays off in financial terms for the public and in terms of personal welfare for the individual. What is surprising, as Professor Schuller noted, is that our societies have been extraordinarily slow in responding to the demographic changes and economics in the labour market which have been long in coming.

In the course of the workshop, a number of cultural differences between Germany and the UK emerged, such as the difference in terminology and approach to students in Germany and the UK respectively. While in the UK there is stronger emphasis on the learner's perspective who is considered as a customer and empowered as such, there is a stronger provider-focus in Germany where mercantile concepts tend to be frowned upon. As a consequence, there is a different relationship between the public and the private sectors in lifelong learning in the UK and Germany respectively: in the UK, the private sector plays an important role as accredited providers of lifelong learning. The discussion on cultural differences continued in the subsequent plenary.