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EUROPEAN INTEGRATION
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

UNI4-4 Project Workshop

Blended Learning Spaces as a Social Innovation for Local Inclusion, Integration and Employability

Bastian Pelka[1], Christoph Kaletka[2]

Abstract: The paper highlights the potential of blended learning spaces (telecentres, public internet centres etc.) making use of social media based curricula as a means for fostering eInclusion as a challenge for European policy. It differentiates three dimensions in which blended learning spaces have to improve in order to scale up to a commonly accepted and professionalised social innovation. Data provided in the paper was collected and analysed in three European lifelong learning projects. As one specific example, a methodological approach for intergenerational learning is described in more detail, which corresponds with 2012 as the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. The paper has implications for (1) application-oriented research in the field of eInclusion and blended learning spaces, (2) blended learning spaces personnel and (3) policy-makers from the European to the regional level by helping them reflect upon eInclusion opportunities in their respective field of responsibility.

Keywords: eInclusion; telecentres; social innovation; intergenerational learning.

1 eInclusion as a European Challenge

The last few years have seen a growing interest in eInclusion policies considering information and communication technologies (ICT) as a vehicle for social inclusion, active citizenship, employability and personal development. The most prominent examples are i2010 as the EU policy framework for the information society and media until 2009, the Ministerial Riga Declaration on ICT for an inclusive society in 2006, the EU Ministerial eInclusion Conference in Vienna 2008, and the Digital Agenda for Europe started in 2010 with the enhancement of digital literacy, skills and inclusion as a main strand.

The term "eInclusion", frequently used in this political discourse, analytically addresses two distinct perspectives: Firstly, eInclusion is understood as the challenge to guide people to the digital world and the promotion of digital literacy as one key to "innovation and the sustainability of the socio-economic ecosystem of our society" (see Gdansk Roadmap for Digital Inclusion 2011). Secondly, eInclusion can be understood as the approach to integrate especially disadvantaged people and vulnerable target groups into society with the help of digital media, for example by promoting employability, key competences, social participation and quality of life. Third sector organizations play a key role in this field of work (see HACHÉ 2011).

In the following, we will refer to eInclusion in both meanings: We will describe an approach to link disadvantaged people and those at risk of exclusion to the digital and non-digital society by a combination of online and offline instruments, an approach which is being implemented in a variety of blended learning environments like telecentres and public libraries. Especially social media – which may be characterised by their easy usage and the way they allow users to create content and participate in online activities – are seen as good means for including people with low ICT skills into the digital

[1] PhD, Sozialforschungsstelle, Technische Universität Dortmund, Evinger Platz 17, 44339 Dortmund, Germany Tel: (+49) 231 / 85 96 – 268, Fax: (+49) 231 / 85 96 – 100, Corresponding author: pelka@sfs-dortmund.de.
[2] PhD, Sozialforschungsstelle, Technische Universität Dortmund, Evinger Platz 17, 44339 Dortmund, Germany.

world (KALETKA/KOPP/PELKA 2011) because they help to tap on the learners' real life experiences and demands. But of course, social media are neither the only viable solution for ICT-based adult learning, nor does their use guarantee learning and integration success: As Kluzer and Rissola (2009) described, the use of digital media in eInclusion approaches has to be aided by well-conceptualized offline support structures.

The need for eInclusion is evident on a regional as well as a national level. Regions and countries still face the challenge of a broadening gap between people that have access and – more important – the skills to use ICT and those who are excluded from the "digital world" – either by lack of ICT means, skills or motivation. This gap is crucial for social cohesion and economic development on a regional as well as European level, as a lack of digital participation will affect social cohesion, individual chances and the development of local labour markets and communities. This means that the two perspectives on eInclusion, as described above, are closely related and represent crucial conditions for one another. Communities (e.g. regional/local communities, migrant communities) or target groups (e.g. elderly people, unemployed youth, women in family phase) that lose touch with the development of the digital society are at risk of exclusion from the world of employment, education and participation. But also unemployed people or, more generally speaking, target groups who do not sufficiently participate in socio-cultural life which includes employment as a main pillar, are at risk of losing or not acquiring sufficient digital competences – and therefore loose connection to a society that becomes more and more "digital". A competent and responsible use of the internet, of social media opportunities and corresponding learning environments have already become an important basic qualification for European learners, both in social life and in the professional context.

In a broader political perspective, with this approach we adress the programme priorities of the EU Lifelong Learning programme (by which some of the findings were funded), and four EU2020 flagships: 1) Digital Agenda for Europe flagship, particularly its priority 6 aimed to enhancing digital literacy, skills and inclusion; 2) Youth on the Move; 3) An agenda for new skills and jobs (which recognises the increasing importance of competences like e-skills for the job market); and 4) European platform against poverty (as it brings qualifying opportunities to people at risk of socio-economic exclusion). On the policy side, the recent Gdansk Roadmap on Innovation for Digital Inclusion agreed by the EC and key stakeholders (third sector organisations, scientific experts, transnational networks like EUCIS-LLL) incorporated the recommendations for telecentres empowering disadvantaged groups – especially elderly and youth.

2 Social Innovation for eInclusion

Howaldt and Schwarz argue that with the transition from an industrial to the knowledge society, we witness a paradigm shift of the innovation system which profoundly changes the relationship between technological and social innovations. While the industrial society relied on their capability to innovate technological systems, the knowledge society challenges this old innovation paradigm, because knowledge, services and intangible goods face an increasing importance. Howaldt and Schwarz define social innovations with a reference to Schumpeter (2010, p. 21):

"A social innovation is a new combination and/or new configuration of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts prompted by certain actors or constellations of actors in an intentional targeted manner with the goal of better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices. An innovation is therefore social to the extent that it, conveyed by the market or 'non/without profit', is socially accepted and diffused widely throughout society or in certain societal sub-areas, transformed depending on circumstances and ultimately institutionalized as new social practice or made routine."

With this definition, Howaldt and Schwarz do not only distinguish a social innovation from technological innovations (that are "tangible", in comparison to "intangible" social innovations) but also from social inventions and social change. Social inventions are intended, new and social, but not necessarily used. And social change is not intended, it "happens". The key qualifier for a social

innovation is its adoption by society. With reference to the paradigm shift to a knowledge society, this requires new modes of knowledge creation and new communication mechanisms. As Howaldt and Schwarz (2010, p. 3) say, the "preparedness of society to adopt new solutions for needs and challenges comes into play. (...) Social values, ideologies, institutions, power imbalances, other disparities, and – last but not least – prevailing patterns of innovations have an effect on the success of different kinds of innovation ('path dependency')."

One important factor of preparedness is the extent of use of social media in a society. Social media, obviously, are dependent on an active involvement of a broad and interconnected public (PELKA/KALETKA 2010: 152). In recent years, while the use of the internet and social media has increased tremendously worldwide, the socio-demographic characteristics of the internet users have also changed; users more and more represent the overall population. Setting this as a background, we can say that social media have the potential to give birth to social innovations. Social media can be regarded as the social framework for a new form of cooperation. In the knowledge society, this form of cooperation refers to an increasing number of settings – such as labour, learning, leisure or political participation. The only problem of social media seems to be the issue of "speed and scale" (The Economist, 2010).

Still, the impulse of social media as a social innovation already affects multiple layers of the knowledge society (cf. Kaletka/Kappler/Pelka/Ruiz De Querol 2012), notably in the change of labour and education. The way social media support cooperation between individuals and foster the production of user generated content shows analogies to cooperation strategies in knowledge based labour processes. Education has also long since discovered the potential of user driven learning approaches. Modern learning environments deny a "teaching" in the sense of mediating knowledge but place the learner in the middle of the learning process. This shift from "teaching" to "learning" came along with pedagogical approaches and technological environments that enable learner to find their own way of acquiring needed knowledge, skills and competences (chapter 4 will provide the example of blended intergenerational learning as an innovative pedagogic concept).

Social media used for teaching and learning processes show analogies to this approach: They also put the learner in the middle of the process and give him or her the instruments to navigate through learning content on their own. The potential of blended learning spaces using social media for adult education (and consequently for eInclusion) is high if these learning spaces are embedded in supporting structures that these target groups will need to take full advantage of these innovative learning opportunities for eInclusion. Supporting structures for blended learning spaces can be differentiated in at least three dimensions.

- Pedagogics: The pedagogic dimension refers to the content development and methodological background of blended learning spaces (telecentres, but also public libraries and internet centres). Social media oriented curricula for the users of blended learning spaces, a close involvement of the users defining their learning needs and making learning experiences while solving their very own problems – these are the key challenges of these organisations.
- Organisational development: All organisational decisions have to enable blended learning spaces to better reach their goals of digitally and socially including their target groups on a sustainable basis. While national ways may be different, the decisions they have to make are basically the same. In addition to the organisational structure, its legal form and financing model – which is of particular importance since the target groups are often financially weak and the organization is at least partly providing public services often without being a regular public entity – the key question is the qualification and professionalization of the personnel, with special regard to the people working in those blended learning spaces ("e-facilitators"). Here, needs differ according to the intermediary roles played (social workers, learning moderators, local networkers etc), the target groups they serve, and on their particular role in the organization, from learning moderators to managers. Chapter 3 describes four different levels of facilitation

- Regional and local integration: This refers to the local and regional networking structures, the responsibility of local authorities for the organisation, the coordination of activities with other education providers and experts which help the blended learning spaces identify and answer to educational needs and find their own role. The organisations have to find a proper way of integration into the regional and local frameworks. This means that telecentres or libraries in metropolitan areas will have to provide other learning opportunities than in a rural area where people cannot personally attend courses regularly. It also means that some sort of monitoring system is needed to identify the current learning needs – be it a fancy reporting system, a good advisory board or just some well-networked employees.

3 Blended Learning Spaces as Providers of ICT Access and Promoters of Social Inclusion

Today, we see a broad variety of blended learning environments and spaces addressing social integration mediated by ICT. Examples for different blended learning spaces can be found in public libraries, educational, cultural or welfare centres, and other public spaces where digital services are embedded. All these quite different organisations are united in the approach to provide learning opportunities for special target groups by a blended learning architecture. They vary in the ratio to that they employ ICT and face to face learning, but use both in accordance to their own resources and strategies and their target group's needs. In particular, telecentres or public internet points (PICs) have become an important provider of free, public access to ICT, the internet and learning environments for disadvantages target groups. They are publicly funded, provide free access and training and play a key role in local societies, in towns, small villages and deprived metropolitan areas where they have become a reference point not only for new technologies and non-formal learning, but also for the development of social cohesion, a sense of community belonging and cultural life (RISSOLA 2007).

Telecentres can be hosted in public buildings, connected to a library or education centre. National research and comparative cross-country analysis illustrate how diverse the profiles of telecentres in different European countries are. Transnational research in the European Leonardo da Vinci project "VET4e-I - European VET Solution for e-Inclusion Facilitators" in 2010 and 2011 has lead to the identification of four typical telecentre profiles:

Level 1: On demand assistance	Passive role; the telecentre only reacts to user's demand of help.
Level 2: Level 1 + Training	Provider of digital literacy training, the telecentre can also look for/attract the users and give a social orientation to his/her intervention.
Level 3: Level 2+ User empowerment	Provider of social inclusion services, the telecentre promotes the digital autonomy of the users and their achievement of personal goals taking advantage of the many resources available at the Information Society
Level 4: Level 3 + Active participation in community	Provider of community service-learning, the telecentre promotes the critical use of ICT and the engagement of the users with their local communities/social belonging groups through their active participation of community/social projects.

Telecentres have become important throughout different European countries as an alternative to non formal education for disadvantaged groups. As learning to use ICT is becoming one of the main demands of vulnerable target groups, the need to introduce some kind of very practical teaching is increasingly felt in those centres. In this context, telecentres are a means of eInclusion with high potential – especially due to the increasing use of social media in telecentre curricula.

The innovative aspect of social media in telecentres matches with the descriptions given above: it is the "user generated content" approach which delegates the production and provision of content to the public, in this case to the telecentres' user groups. Compared to traditional media where editorial staff produces and distributes content (e.g. curricula for adult education), social media content can be produced in a decentralised way. Social media are considered one of the most important recent innovations in the field of ICT use, as an innovation itself and a place that again bears innovative media products like Wikipedia, youtube or flickr. Their concept of user generated content helps blended learning spaces to focus more on the users' real life experiences and problems, which can then become a part of the curricular learning experience. This has direct consequences both for the learners' motivation, and also for facing and solving problems of the local community the learners represent.

In a thematic strand of EU-funded projects, an international team of practitioners, researchers and consultants has been conducting research and working on strategies and concrete solutions to increase the capacity of telecentres in their engagement for eInclusion. This work comprises both concrete good practice implementation and policy recommendations development, in line with the core objective of Europe's Digital Agenda which is the "Digital Revolution for All". From different angles, the projects contribute to the development of telecentres as catalysts for eInclusion by addressing the professionalization of their personnel, key competences curricula for vulnerable groups, and intergenerational learning cycles promoting civic culture and social cohesion. All projects are testing and implementing constructivist learning arrangements, often on the basis of social media applications, which are set to empower the learner by introducing user generated content (KALETKA/KOPP/PELKA 2011). In the following, one specific approach of these research and development efforts will be described and discussed, namely an intergenerational learning circle with learning, teaching and mentoring exercises for the youth and elderly, hosted and facilitated by telecentres. This also serves as one example for the innovative pedagogics described in chapter 2.

4. Building a Methodology for ICT Supported Intergenerational Learning

In the project "eScouts - Intergenerational Learning Circle for Community Service", funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme in 2011 and 2012, the methodology for an intergenerational learning approach between young and elderly people was developed and is currently being tested and implemented. The project aim is to build a learning circle in which the youth supports elderly people in ICT usage and elderly mentor the young in their efforts to access the labour market and to face the challenges of adult life, completing in this way a circle of learning, exchange and conviviality. The teaching and mentoring was supported by ICT means (social web applications) and telecentres. Telecentres, in this case, served both as "rooms" that bring generations together, and as facilitators of intergenerational exchange. This second task was fulfilled by employees of the telecentres (the so called e-facilitators) who have skills in both ICT and learning facilitation processes. Within the project, telecentres in this meaning function as drivers for learning processes involving the elderly and the young generation. Doing so, the eScouts project is not only a transnational effort within the Lifelong Learning Programme, but also a contribution directly in line with the European Commission's decision to make 2012 the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations.

This ambitious eScouts project faces a number of challenges, one of which is the training design based on two methodologies which, despite sharing values and aims, differ in their conception and implementation. We refer to the Community Service Learning (CSL) methodology adopted by Fundación Esplai in Spain, and the Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR) developed by Reflective Learning in the UK. The two distinct methodologies differ, despite sharing values and aims, in their conception and implementation: Community Service Learning (CSL) is aimed to maximize the development of the individuals' potential and their active participation in society. CSL is an educational initiative combining learning with community service in a single well-articulated project. The participants are trained while working on real needs in their community.

Individual efforts must be added to carry out participatory projects, civic and effective. Finally, an activity for a social benefit, therefore intended to increase welfare community and in consequence open to solidarity.

PAAR and CSL are complementary in many aspects and have a potential to enrich each other. Both methodologies share values and goals such as an ethical approach of activities, the inclusion of the community in the processes of improvement of individuals, the personal and social development and empowerment of participants, the promotion of intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, and others. The eScouts project is a first attempt to build a common methodological framework off these approaches. Therefore, the community approach of CSL was combined with the strength oriented approach of PAAR, The result is a learning structure in which groups of individuals (youth and elderly) are guided in teaching in other on the base of appreciation of the other group's strengths. As an example, group reflection (done publically, rigorously and systematically) rather than solely self-reflection are employed in this new blended learning spaces didactical approach. A second result is the group orientation, which explicitly asks for group advantages and combines advantages and strengths of different groups to their advantages. A third dimension of the blended didactical approaches is the positive use of ICT for learning purposes. Especially social media were embedded in the learning design in order to empower especially groups to learn and teach. The basic principle of the use of social media is the idea to regard them as the social innovation of user generated content. The easy production of user generated content empowers even users with low ICT skills to participate in digital conversations. This social innovation, enabled by a didactical framework that is constructed by CSL and PAAR has the potential to address the problem of eInclusion in its two meanings: Inclusion to the digital society and inclusion by digital means.

5. Conclusions

The paper has started by elaborating on the imminent relevance of eInclusion for European citizens in general and vulnerable target groups in particular. It has drawn a connection between eInclusion as a European policy challenge and the potential that comes with blended learning spaces such as telecentres, public internet centres or libraries. One main point of this paper was that the general idea and conceptual developments of such blended learning spaces may be convincing. But the key question was and still is if these modern learning centres for adult education can live up to the expectations, prove to be viable and evolve as a social innovation, which is considered a new social routine and socially accepted solution to a problem.

We introduced a structural setting (blended learning spaces), a didactical approach (CLS + PAAR) and the perspective of social innovation to shape an approach to "bridge the gap" of digital exclusion that threatens the digital societies. Blended learning spaces as public organisations that provide ICT access, training and support for special needs can be seen as a key instrument for eInclusion. Intergenerational learning is only one example of how to provide learning – others can be found. The paper argues that the support of learning, and in particular non-formal and informal learning, needs social innovations as new and adopted social routines. The European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations can be used as a starting point for developing new approaches to provide learning possibilities to a big variety of different target groups. Especially adult education will face an increasing use of ICT. The challenge is to make sure that this happens in a well-reflected and innovative way, for example in a combination of distance learning and face to face situations which match the learners' needs, the infrastructure of the regions, and the capability of the organisations.

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Universities as Regional Centres for Lifelong Learning and Innovation

Antonius Schröder[1]

Abstract: On the background of the results of a still running German project the role of universities to improve lifelong learning and innovation will be discussed not only from the perspective of a qualification supplier but as an enabler for a far-reaching and continuous social innovation process, including all the relevant stakeholders, institutions and policy makers. New education and training opportunities have to be constructed overcoming existing borders between the different education and training systems, based on already existing successful structures and institutions. Modulation and certification of education and training, non-formal and informal learning, transmission management etc. have to be coordinated where people are living and using these: at the regional level. Within a social innovation process universities can successfully take the role as a central actor in a regional field of qualification and innovation. They could act as a competent partner matching qualification and innovation demands. In order to competently fulfil their role in this matching process, universities will face both an internal development process and external challenges. In summary, they will face and have to master a multi-faceted social innovation process.

Keywords: lifelong learning; social innovation; higher education; regional coordination

1 Introduction

The role and the possibilities of universities within a new lifelong learning system, mainly coordinated and based at the regional level have still not been analysed and developed. Therefore this paper will make a first attempt of not only embedding universities in regional lifelong learning strategies but also checking their role as an enabler and provider of lifelong learning and innovation.

At first the European concept of lifelong learning will be summarised in relation to the main deductions and structural implications to improve education and training. At second the necessity and the factors for a successful implementation of lifelong learning at the regional level will be described on the background of the results of a still running German project started in 2006 (HESSENCAMPUS: www.hc-hessencampus.de) providing a basis for a social innovation process in a regional-local partnership for the improvement of lifelong learning of adults. Third – as a kind of conclusion and recommendation - the potentials and the role of universities within such a social innovation process of improvement of lifelong learning and regional development will be discussed.

2 Lifelong Learning: An Overall Approach for New Education and Training Structures

In the framework of the transition from an industrial to a knowledge-based society and its corresponding concept of lifelong learning as a European strategy to improve European competitiveness lifelong learning has to be seen and implemented as a middle and long-termed

[1] Senior researcher, member of management board of the Sozialforschungsstelle sfs – Technische Universität Dortmund (Social Research Centre at the University of Technologies Dortmund), responsible for European research. Dortmund, Germany, tel.: +49.231.8596.283, fax +49.231.8596.101, Corresponding author: schroeder@sfs-dortmund.de.

competitive factor (Lisbon Strategy, Europe 2020) being an answer to constant and profound technological, social, economic and demographic changes.

As priorities for future European cooperation on the implementation of lifelong learning policies experts of the "Seminar on Critical Factors for the Implementation of Lifelong Learning Strategies and Policies" identified beneath others that there is a high demand for improving adult education (also beyond working age), valuing of non-formal and informal learning as well as for improving stakeholder collaboration and partnerships, not only focussing on employability, which is perceived as the predominant dimension today, but increasingly on its potential to increase social cohesion as this is a growing challenge in most European countries (Chabera 2010: 13).

Taking the concept of lifelong learning fundamental a more comprehensive orientation of learning and support structures is needed. Lifelong learning in this sense:

- indicates a comprehensive alignment of learning opportunities and support structures responding to the increasing heterogeneity of work, education and living biographies of adult people.
- has to be an overarching structural principal of the education system in a whole, including the improvement, reconstruction and partly new construction of traditional structures of education.
- needs learning outcome orientation and the recognition of competences adopted on other ways than formal learning.
- is a growing demand and challenge for every single person to deal actively and self-confident with constant changes in the world of labour and society.
- is - at the same time - a challenge for public responsibility to support those individuals who are not able to maintain active learning.
- has to be realised on the regional level, improving quantitative and qualitative participation of lifelong learning of the inhabitants of a region, giving access and support where people work and live.

Based on these principles the learning process has to be seen as the starting and reference point for every learning offer, oriented by a comprehensive understanding of learning (taking into account all areas and forms of learning and competences) and the learners personality, environment and biography. This indicates a paradigm shift from an institutional to a strict learner's and learning process perspective and new overall and comprehensive structural principles of the education system: reconstruction and partly new construction of traditional structures of education building up a lifelong learning system instead of innovating only within the borders of educational institutions and areas, arranging lifelong learning possibilities in a more flexible way at the regional level - usable when and where needed, fulfilling specific learner needs, taking into account and accepting formal, non-formal and informal competences, supporting educational and professional transmissions.

3 Regional-Local Coordination of Lifelong Learning – A Process of Social Innovation

A successful implementation and a continuous development of lifelong learning in the described way needs not only a system-related approach but a far-reaching and continuous social innovation process based on a shared social and regional responsibility. Such a social innovation process (Howaldt/Schwarz 2010; Howaldt/Jacobsen 2010) is characterized by

- a coordination and mediation between various different groups of stakeholders who are involved in innovation activities,
- the interdisciplinarity, heterogeneity, recursivity and reflectivity of the processes of implementation and an emphasis on historical, cultural and organisational preconditions,
- an increased involvement of users/citizens in processes of "co-development",

- a systemic perspective on innovation in the sense of social innovation systems in which research, development, production and marketing are optimised simultaneously in an interactive process,
- a kind of "hybridization" at the boundary between society (practitioners/users) and science (experts/developers).

"As a process of collective creation, in the course of which the members of a particular total population learn, i.e. invent and establish, new ways of playing the social game of collaboration and conflict, in a word a new social practice, and in the course of which they acquire the necessary cognitive, relational and organizational abilities to do this" will take place (Crozier/Friedberg 1993). For the regional implementation of lifelong learning all the relevant stakeholders, institutions and policy makers as well as the regional inhabitants in general have to be involved in this social innovation process of regional lifelong learning. Such a „holistic interpretation of innovation" impacts (following Hochgerner 2011) all types of innovation (products, processes, marketing, organisation, roles, relations, norms, values), all functional systems (education and culture, economy, politics, law) and all intervention levels:

- on the micro level: behaviour of learners
- on the meso level: structural and institutional changes
- on the macro level: legislative framework, education system.

Such a social innovation process does not aim at developing brand new educational institutions, but at making better and efficient use of latent or unused *cooperational potentials*. Thereby, adult education has to be put forcefully on the *regional agenda*, not only for the citizens, but also and foremost for the municipalities and administrative districts. "Localisation" in this context would mean not only new possibilities to get hold of and mobilise potential qualification offers, but also an increased potential for education to become a "location factor" for integrated locational development (countering skills shortages, preventing "brain drain" from rural areas, enriching the employability and flexicurity of the inhabitants, human resources development etc.). Such an overarching regional-local social innovation process is also improving, changing, and creating new social practices concerning social roles, relations, norms and regulations, going beyond existing borders and pure networking and following the aim of a strict user focus instead of the traditional institutional focus.

The example of the German project HESSENCAMPUS[1] shows that the improvement of lifelong learning has to be embedded in a social innovation process (Schröder 2012) based on binding cooperation that goes beyond pure networking in form of a new and innovative regional-local partnership and structure, following the basic principle of a *„development in partnership"* cooperating "at eye level". Following the case of HESSENCAMPUS and Kruse/Schröder/Kaletka/Pelka 2010 this process has to be based on four **dimensions of lifelong learning from a learner's perspective**:

1. a *comprehensive understanding of learning* (competencies for life management, including but not only oriented on employability, including every type of learning - formal, non-formal and informal)
2. the *learners environment* (social environment/milieu, regional or geographical access to learning)
3. the *learners biography* (education and training pathways, employment and occupation biographies)
4. the *adult learner personality,* including that adult learning is different from child and youth education and learning ("andragogy")

and **three dimensions of integration**:

1. *Pedagogic integration:* The development of new or better learning opportunities, counselling and guidance services, new learning settings, a common learning culture

[1] Kruse/Schröder/Kaletka/Pelka 2010, Kruse & Pelka 2009, www.hc-hessencampus.de.

2. *Organisational integration*: common administrational or directing structures, employees' participation, common use of resources (rooms, equipment, monitoring instruments), corporate identity, more permeability and mobility between the education areas (e.g. higher education and vocational education and training)
3. *Regional integration*: a selection of activities and projects which reflect local demands, central or de-central organisation of learning sites, local networking, continuous communication with politics and administration, with social partners and enterprises.

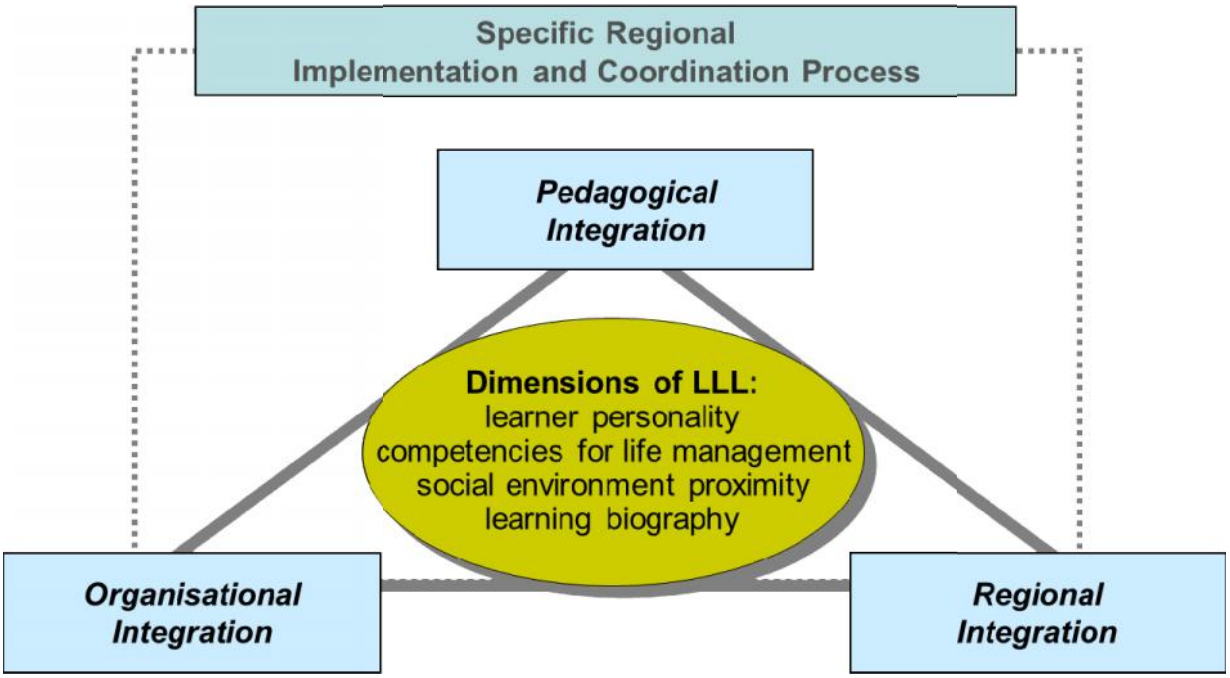

Fig. 1: Dimensions of Lifelong Learning and Integration Areas

Beneath the "corridor" of lifelong learning dimensions and integration areas the process of improving regional lifelong learning should be defined as an open innovation process referring to the four dimensions of social innovation named by Hochgerner (2011: 7):

- as an **idea** of quantitative and qualitative improvement of lifelong learning for adult people on the regional-local level in partnership (regional-local partnership of institutions and actors of education and training, partnership between national, local and regional administrations),
- by **intervention** through public funding, scientific support, core coordination structures, normative settings (matrix of four dimensions of lifelong learning and three integration levels), common framework and agreement,
- by **implementation** as an open innovation process based on development in partnership and public responsibility in interrelation with regional and economic demands and progression,
- by effectuating **impact** on
    - learners: improvement of quantitative and qualitative participation, flexible learning opportunities along the learning pathways (including all types of learning)
    - regions: improving education and training policies, establishing education as a locational competitive factor
    - institutions involved: professionalization, efficiency and effectiveness.

4 Universities: Centres to Enable and Support Regional Lifelong Learning and Innovation Processes

The improvement and implementation of lifelong learning and innovation is crucial on the regional level: as the intermediary between European and national frameworks on the one hand and the demands and challenges of the localities on the other hand. More and more cities and regions take responsibility for the development of a highly qualified workforce and innovations meeting the demands of the regional economy. Within this regional development perspective the role of universities as enabler and the empowerment of universities as main stakeholders in a social innovation process of lifelong learning is of high importance: providing on the one hand excellent education and qualification throughout the learning biography of adults and at the same time acting as suppliers of innovation and highly qualified workers/engineers for the regional economy.

In the process of improving lifelong learning universities could take a leadership in supporting the region with higher education and scientific innovation as well as providing and supporting the process with scientific advice and monitoring. Scientific input and monitoring organised in an action or application oriented research concept could be seen as a driving force for this innovation process. For example, through action research on the regional level all the relevant actors of lifelong learning could be involved both as research subjects and experts for transfer, adaptation and evaluation of interim and final results, being the guarantee to reach the described objectives in the region as well as guaranteeing on on-going social innovation process, in interrelation with the regional-local possibilities, resources, and priorities. The action research approach provides impact in terms of developing tangible interventions in the regions in close collaboration with relevant stakeholders – based on inputs and transfer of excellent research to practical solutions relevant for the region and its specific conditions and framework.

Therefore existing borders and restrictions of universities - seen as mere suppliers of academic qualification – have to be overcome. At the same time, the potentials of universities as suppliers of lifelong learning *and* drivers of innovation on a regional level have to be explored and fostered. A special challenge is the development and support of social and technical innovations.

With a focus on the improvement of lifelong learning and the support of the inherent social innovation process, universities can proceed to important actors for the regional development towards the knowledge society. Within this social innovation process universities can successfully take the role as a central actor in a regional field of qualification and innovation. Universities could act as a competent partner matching qualification demands (e.g. pupils, students, employees, enterprises, elderly, unemployed, public authorities) and innovation demands (enterprises, labour market, region, customers). In order to competently fulfil their role in this matching process, universities will face both an internal development process (regarding pedagogic approaches, staff qualification, new management perspectives, understanding of how to support the development of innovations) and external challenges (sustainable regional networking, facilitating discourses and the spreading of innovation, development of new instruments, policy support). In summary, they will face and have to master a multi-faceted social innovation process. Within this process, universities will act as facilitators in a network with regional actors and will be able to supply education as well as innovation.

Being a part of the regional lifelong learning system universities could be more than higher education institutions. As regional centres of lifelong learning they could

- initiate and coordinate, monitor and evaluate regional innovation processes, projects, research and development activities
- be an innovation driver, enabling regional social innovation process and regional development

- enable and transfer innovations (as social and technology innovation and transfer centres), give scientific inputs and transfer scientific excellence into practice (transfer of innovation)
- develop new pathways, transitions between still separated educational areas (e.g. new pathways, access from occupational qualification to higher education) and between economy, industry, companies on one side and higher education and vocational education and training on the other side
- offer additional qualifications (e.g. business administration, management competences for engineers) and continuous education and training
- certificate non-formal and informal competences, on the basis of European standards like European and National Qualification Framework EQF/NQF, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System ECTS, and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training ECVET
- help to get funding for regional projects (fund raising).

In this respect universities could take an active role as development and construction agents, giving critical feedback and reflection on regional processes and the organisational development, securing continuous reflexivity, delivering process documentations and background investigation, etc. It serves also an opportunity for universities to initiate or accelerate a goal-oriented professionalization process in a region which takes a new approach in developing its adult education system by accepting responsibility and sharing it with local stakeholders. Universities and other institutions are provided with a theoretical background to reflect upon their up-to-date tasks and function in the local and regional learning community. This will have impact on the self-perception of the (not only educational) participating institutions and the significance of the learner in everything they do.

Last but not least, to achieve a high impact for the economic and social development the demands of the companies in a region have to be embedded in such a social innovation process of lifelong learning explicitly. Critical to the global competitiveness of European industries is a timely response to demands for new mandatory skills, education and training to ensure skills needs are met. A short-termed implementation of new skills for new job demands, being complementary with the Lisbon and Europe 2020 strategy, needs a closer collaboration between companies and universities creating short termed pathways for qualification: The timely and responsive implementation of new mandatory skills within the higher education system, anticipating actual and future industry needs, matching the demands of industry with the higher education and vocational education and training system, finding new ways of implementation (processes) of new skills for the industry sector and the appropriate education systems.[1] Therefore a regional lifelong learning system should give flexible ways and leeway to include and integrate modules systematically and short termed in different educational institutions (universities, secondary and vocational schools, company oriented vocational education and training) and for different reasons (general education, initial vocational education and training, further vocational training to adjust missing competences).

[1] An example for such a concept of timely and responsive implementation of new mandatory skills based on the cooperation between universities / research institutions and companies is the European funded project Greening Technical VET (www.gt-vet.com).

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