

**COMMIT** ■

**COMMITTING TO THE SOCIAL  
DIMENSION IN UNIVERSITIES**

**EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY**

### 1. Why COMMIT?

The ministers responsible for Higher Education (HE) reaffirmed the importance of the **social dimension** of the Bologna Process several times (Bologna Ministers Declarations, Berlin 2003, Bergen 2005, Budapest-Vienna 2010) and agreed on a common definition of university social dimension in the framework of the Bologna process: “*The student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of the population*” (London Communiqué, 2007). After several years and many projects carried out in this field, statistics still show that reality is far from the desired results, and much has to be done to reach the target levels of access, retention and attainment of adults in HE.

Consequently, the objective of COMMIT is to support universities in the **self-assessment** of their level of commitment to the social dimension, their strategies to increase attainment, and to embed the policy and practice of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) in a strategy of wider social interaction.

For the COMMIT project, the social dimension of University Lifelong Learning was defined as located on two dimensions: the individual and the collective. The goals on the individual level are to provide a **socially just access, retention and success** for students, lifelong learners and university staff. On the collective dimension the goal is to transfer relevant academic knowledge to society and enable groups of people inside and outside university **to build and develop** an ecologically, socially and economically sustainable society.

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### 2. Project approach

COMMIT builds on the work of a previous project, ALLUME<sup>1</sup>, which developed a set of self-evaluation tools for universities to review their strategy of implementing a comprehensive and coherent LLL university.

In a first project phase, **the 3 self-evaluation tools developed in ALLUME were reviewed and adapted** to take on board a wider concept of the social dimension, with clearer definitions of participants in HE and attainment levels:

- *Strategy process tool*
- *Strategy content tool*
- *Benchmarking tool (also referred to as the EU Charter tool)*

The tools incorporated features suited to generate clearer descriptions of under-represented and non-traditional groups, as well as relevant qualitative indicators of their participation.

In addition to revising and adapting the pre-existing tools, a **new Tool for Monitoring Attainment** was developed and its feasibility was assessed through piloting with all the partner institutions.

The set of visit templates developed in ALLUME was also adapted to the new project.

A capacity building activity was organised in order to unify criteria amongst the partners about the scope of the visits they would be organising and attending and how to use the tools. This helped partners brief colleagues in their own institution, prepare the self-evaluation activity effectively and organise the participation and documentation for the visits they would receive and carry out.

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<sup>1</sup> Project 504635-LLP-1-2009-1-BE-ERASMUS-EMHE. <http://allume.euцен.eu/>

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The training event included inputs from several experts and other related EU-funded projects such as EU-USR<sup>2</sup>, HEAD<sup>3</sup> and PL4SD<sup>4</sup>.

The four COMMIT self-evaluation tools became the starting point of a collective learning process culminating with the **peer-learning visits** that each partner university hosted and carried out. Different members of staff from different managerial levels (all connected to ULLL/Continuing Education/ Outreach/Social Services) in each partner institution were involved in the peer-learning visits, with the aim of generating a process of **organisational learning** and reinforcing commitment towards university's social dimension. At the end of each visit, a report was prepared in partnership between the visitor and the visited. The COMMIT project processes were based on a combination of individual and peer learning, collective and team learning, as well as organisational learning processes.

The transversal analyses of the visit reports and the tools filled out by partners were then carried out, producing the draft final products validated in the course of a full partners' meeting held in November 2015:

- Executive summary
- Policy reminders
- Technical report covering the methodology and findings of the data collection and analysis

### Target groups

The **primary target group** of the project comprised: universities' Management teams (President/ Rector teams), Directors of ULLL, Continuing Education (CE), Outreach, or/and Social Services Units and Faculty/Department Deans, who were directly involved in the use of the self-assessment tools and participated in the visits. Student representatives were also included in the primary target group. Over 14 individuals have been involved in each of the 12 different teams (each in a different institution and country), thus engaging a total of 172 primary target individuals in the process.

### The partnership

The partnership was composed of 13 partners from 5 countries with a documented track record of attainment – BE, FI, FR, ES, IE – and 7 countries with more work to do in this regard – RO, DE, GR, HU, IT, PT and TR. Six of the 13 partners had taken part in the ALLUME project (5 as full partners and 1 as a testing university), to provide continuity with the previous project experience. Since partners were at different stages of developing the social dimension of HE, a valuable and stimulating exchange was expected to take place, with each partner having something to teach and to learn, making it an engaging combination to promote commitment by all.

<sup>2</sup> Comparative Research on University Social Responsibility in Europe, <http://www.eu-usr.eu/>

<sup>3</sup> Opening Higher Education to Adults, [http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/study/2012/adult-learning-g\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/study/2012/adult-learning-g_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Peer-Learning Initiative for the Social Dimension, <http://www.pl4sd.eu/>

COMMIT project flow chart



### 3. COMMIT main outputs

- A refined set of 3 self-evaluation tools based on ALLUME's products (available in EN and FR):
  - The **Strategy Process Tool** uses the strategy-as-practice approach developed by Wittington and invites universities to analyse in detail their way of 'doing strategy' including the social dimension; it has a strong internal organisational focus and helps to identify key internal and external actors, steps in making a strategy, methods, communication
  - The **Strategy Content Tool** assists universities in getting a strategic overview of their current strategy related to LLL and the social dimension, mission, vision and goals; it invites institutions to select key priorities for the future and work in detail on them, leading to a revision of the current strategy and the formulation of an action plan
  - The **Benchmarking Tool** or EU Charter Tool includes not only the 10 institutional commitments of the European Universities' Charter on LLL but also the social dimension indicators, and invites universities to benchmark their performance and engagement against these dimensions, and to define their objectives
- The **Tool for Monitoring Attainment** is a new tool that describes and defines what is involved in the social dimension of HE more clearly, and helps universities monitor not just participation but also attainment levels (available in EN and FR)
- A "Visit Kit", consisting of a set of documents to assist users when organising their self-evaluation processes. It is a refined set based on ALLUME's products (available in EN and FR) which includes:
  - Short Info Sheet
  - Fact Sheet
  - Template Agenda
  - Step by Step Procedure
  - Host Report Form
  - Visitor Report Form
- An Executive Summary, summarising the project outcomes and achievements (available in EN and FR)
- Policy Reminders (available in EN and FR)
- A Technical Report (available in EN), covering the methodology and results of the data collection and analysis

The last three documents reflect on the methods, process and lessons learned, the experience gained by the partners at an individual and institutional level, the policy lessons, as well as the analysis and findings of the project work.

All COMMIT documents listed above are available in electronic format and can be downloaded from the project website: <http://commit.eucen.eu/>

### 4. COMMIT main findings

The data collected within the COMMIT project present very positive features: they ensure a wide geographical and institution-type coverage, and they constitute an authentic evidence of the present state of ULLL and SD in HEIs as well as a clear indication of the great variance between institutions.

It is important to consider that the source material used in the COMMIT transversal analysis consists of the information given by the 12 COMMIT project university partners in the 4 self-assessment tools and in the visit reports. This prompts a series of warnings concerning the data collection process.

First of all, the data translate the self-representation of each university situation.

Secondly (and consequently), the 'data collectors' are different from one university to another. Some collections have been made as a group while others are the result of a one-by-one approach.

Thirdly, the data show results of a specific moment in time, giving a "snapshot" of the LLL/SD strategizing process in the 12 partner universities at a particular period, without considering the later evolution of this process.

Lastly, the nature of the collected material is not identical from one tool to another. Some tools are essentially quantitative while others mix qualitative and quantitative data. The analysis had therefore to be adapted to each tool in order to take these differences of nature into account.

The major findings are summed up as follows:

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#### ■ Drivers for LLLU/SD strategizing:

- The most important external drivers with positive influence for the 12 partner universities are:
    - the duty to support social development
    - European legislation
  - The most important external drivers with negative influence are:
    - national public financing
    - the economy and the problem of funding
  - As for internal drivers, the most important internal drivers for the 12 universities are:
    - the previous experience in LLL
    - the necessity/demand for LLL programs (people within the universities consider that it is necessary for the university to evolve and to develop LLL programs)
    - the desire to improve access to university
    - the desire to make people aware of the fact that the university offers these programs
  - The most negative impact comes from:
    - budget availability
    - the staff devoted to these tasks (only pointed out as negative by 2 universities, referring to the little staff devoted to LLL/SD)
    - the university structure
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Overall, most of the universities mention that they get more internal incentives to the LLL/SD strategizing process than external ones and that there are more external resistances to the LLL/SD strategizing process than internal ones, even if some external barriers like the **national public financing**, the **problem of funding** or the **economy** are the most contrasted items: some universities feel they are global negative external influences while others feel they are positive ones.

#### ■ **Actors for LLLU/SD strategizing:**

- The most active internal doers in LLL/SD strategizing are the people responsible for specific LLL structures, teachers and researchers in LLL. Concerning the decision makers, the vice rector in charge of LLL, the rector and the head of specific LLL/SD department are the three most influential actors in LLL strategizing. The most influential external actors are specific ministries and the Government (national or regional).
- The collected data do not really allow a comparison of the influence of internal and external actors but a common result to be highlighted is the low influence and presence of researchers in LLL and SD. Internally, higher level staff have more influence than the researchers or the teachers. The influence of some external specific research units is quite rare.
- The involvement of a wide diversity of internal university members who act in the process or who influence it and the influence of external persons as specific ministers, government, national or regional authorities reflect a **collective approach** of the LLL/SD strategizing process. This result is consistent with previous observation or research (ALLUME, 2011; Holdaway and Meekison, 1990).

#### ■ **Characterisation of LLLU/SD strategizing:**

- Partner universities use informal processes more than formal processes. Even if the difference of intensity is not so high, it is insightful to realize the intensity of the LLL/SD strategizing process in universities: a lot of work is done informally but it is not always done by university leaders and certainly not known by university members. On the other hand, informal processes of strategizing remain important even when strategizing is formalized. Furthermore, high level university staff members are well informed about the LLL/SD strategizing process, but almost all universities face a problem of funding and resource allocation which echoes and is reflected by the number of researchers in LLL/SD, for instance.
- The most well informed people about the LLL/SD strategizing process within universities are deans and department heads, all university members and students. Externally, the most intensively informed people are policy makers. The external people who are less informed belong to social associations, enterprises and other universities.
- A middle-bottom-up approach is more likely than a top-down one. This result is aligned with the ALLUME (2011) results and conclusions. It means that there is a decision of faculty's deans or LLL directors to implement LLL/SD strategy principles in collaboration with teachers or researchers, and then those actors support and promote the principles to the rector or to the university's President's Cabinet.
- The LLL/SD strategy process is unique within each university, due to the distinctiveness of its environment and its culture. The formal 'research based' approach in the LLL/SD strategizing process has a very low influence on the strategies although it is essential in the core processes of LLL and SD.
- We observe the dominance of a **strategic plan** in the methods used by universities, as highlighted in previous researches by Kadir (2012)

### ■ Content, strategy and organization of social engagement

- The meaning of the concepts of 'social dimension' and 'social engagement' are far from explicit and established. For some institutions, the concepts 'social dimension' and 'social engagement' refer only to missions and functions where the university is aiming to support the disadvantaged groups of society. For others they cover all forms of action where the faculty, departments and units are involved with the society, e.g. continuous professional education, technology transfer, the role in the innovation system etc.
- The great majority of COMMIT partners describe the status of social engagement as secondary to research and education. Also, the universities highlight the entanglement of the "three missions". In the majority of institutions the regulations, definitions and argumentation are not as distinct and established, but the universities may still be sensitive to their social responsibilities and actively engaged with their context. Also, universities are able to identify successful units and the most important stakeholders, but the intensity typically fluctuates between the faculties and also in time. It is not uncommon that the permanence of involvement is endangered because of the reliance on individual faculty members.
- It is usually not just an individual being who is responsible for social engagement. The organization is a small centralised unit within or outside the university administration and a diverse network of experts, both in regards to content, methods or branches of society. The social engagement specialists are relatively few, whereas a large proportion of the faculty may participate in the activities with varying workload. The same universities that have documented the SD strategy most explicitly also have the most structured arrangements for organisation and staff.
- Appropriate data collection lays the foundation for the construction of indicators that may later be used in the processes of resource allocation. The creation of potential indicators is fairly easy although the complexity of social engagement makes it more demanding than, for example, in research or degree education. The crucial stage is the selection of the most functional indicators at that certain mission in a specific institution. At the same time, the national and potentially wider contexts may demand a different selection.
- The trends in society, work-life and economy have an essential and concrete effect on the development of ULLL. The European agenda and discussion of lifelong learning have promoted the progress in various countries. Participating in European networks and projects have provided concrete forms of practical international cooperation to support LLL at home.

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### ■ LLL for various audiences

- ULLL/SD serves both the individual needs in one's professional and personal life as well as the needs of society, especially the economy.
  - University missions on lifelong learning take shape in various formulations and documentations. If the mission is defined in the university-level statutes which tend to be general, the lifelong learning element is embedded in the mission statements concerning research and education. Often the more specialised or concrete LLL mission formulations are written in lower-level documents, e.g. in a charter for social engagement, the statutes of the University Continuing Education department or mid-term contracts for independent institutions. In these cases they may include descriptions of the way the mission is implemented at the university.
  - External pressures have enhanced the strategic formulations in many universities. They may have come from the regional stakeholders and the growing interaction with companies and lifelong learners. National authorities have produced reports to enhance the interaction between higher education institutions and their region. In some cases legislation has been a key driver to encourage universities to take ownership of their lifelong learning and social engagement.
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- In some universities, taking part in European cooperation and the European lifelong learning agenda as such has had an effect. Even though the lifelong learning community in universities had in general expected a stronger impact from the Charter of European universities lifelong learning on the European level, it was an important support for development in some countries and universities.

### ■ Benchmarking against the 10 Commitments of the EU LLL Chart

- The degree of adoption of the European Universities' Charter on LLL still has some way to go before it is really implemented. 8 out of 12 partners are above 50% of implementation, while 4 are below 50%, thus showing the different degree of appropriation of each HEI of the Charter. This diversity reflects each HEI's identity and particular reality, and this ranking cannot be read as absolute information, as some of the HEIs well known for their LLL commitment and practice (possibly more self-critical and self-demanding) score lower than others and recognise there is a long way to go.
- The highest score is found in Commitments 4 (Providing appropriate guidance and counselling services), 1 (Embedding in the strategy), 9 (Developing partnerships at the local, regional, national and international level), and 2 (Providing education in a diversified population).
- The commitments that are less implemented are related to 10 (acting as a role model) and 5 (implementing mechanisms of RPL). This seems contradictory as one might consider that RPL<sup>5</sup>, as part of the HEIs strategy, would be a key way to diversify the students' population. Instead, in average, HEIs seem to prefer to invest in counselling and guidance. Also, the fact that acting as a role model is the least implemented commitment may indicate that universities are more concerned about advancing their strategy than about the image they transmit to other LLL institutions.
- HEIs are effectively engaged in embracing a quality culture and strengthening the relationship between research, teaching and innovation to adapt study programmes to widen participation and attract returning adult learners, to ensure that they are designed to consolidate reforms to promote creative learning environment for all students.
- Very good examples of good practices are identified and presented, usually originating in the HEIs that score higher while, at the same time, they exhibit a higher notion of what more can be done. A common denominator in the findings is that HEIs that produce very good practices and evidence wider and longer experience and LLL/SD appropriation are also the same that identify the most pertinent obstacles. Efforts are being made in the development of a quality culture and the provision of education to a diversified student population is already working well.
- One of the obstacles to move up on the benchmarking against the EU Chart is that university priorities are not clear and the strategy needs further engagement either through clarification of the vision or internal cooperation.
- HEIs' main priority is now to strengthen the relationship between research, teaching and innovation from a SD Lifelong Learning perspective. At the same time, they will continue the LLL institutional strategy of widening access. These priorities result from each HEI's own orientations and beliefs. Being a role model is not a main concern from a SD perspective. Data from each HEI have significant impact on the overall picture, again emphasizing the crucial relevance of diversity.

<sup>5</sup> RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) is mentioned in the EU Charter, but eucen prefer to use and refer to the broader concept of VNIL (Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning).

### 5. COMMIT policy reminders

A number of policy reminders emerge from the work of this project. They can be grouped in three main categories:

#### ■ University lifelong learning as a part of society and university

1. The necessity and joy of learning throughout life is a constant driving force for society and universities. LLL can make a major contribution to the social dimension of higher education institutions, especially when it is embedded into the entirety of university strategic processes.
2. While lifelong learning can serve as a mechanism of income generation for universities, its fundamental aim is to offer possibilities for adult learners and partner organisations.
3. Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL) contributes to the social dimension of the university.
4. Effective and high-quality implementation of the lifelong learning agenda also requires regeneration of university organisation culture and practices.

#### ■ Steering higher education institutions for lifelong learning

5. Lifelong learning needs political support at European, national and regional level.
6. External inputs to the university decision-making can enrich the value-base of universities.
7. Modification of internal structures as such will not necessarily mean a great potential for lifelong learning.
8. Support from university leadership is the most significant facilitator of lifelong learning and social dimension.

#### ■ Essence and quality of lifelong learning

9. The expertise of various specialists and purposeful cooperation with stakeholders and networks are key success factors of lifelong learning and the social dimension.
10. Higher education institutions have neither a monopoly on knowledge production nor on learning environments but they would benefit from cooperation with other suppliers of learning possibilities.
11. Lifelong learning can only be legitimate inside confirmed quality assurance systems.
12. A fertile research agenda and a functional framework of data production, collection and utilization should be key priorities of lifelong learning and social dimension at the national and European level.

## 6. COMMIT strength

Although there have been various projects concerning the social dimension in Higher Education in the past few years, less has been done concerning the issues of access, retention and attainment of adults in Higher Education. COMMIT addressed these specific aspects of the social dimension by adapting and enhancing the tools and approaches developed by the previous European project ALLUME and transferring them to new countries.

The COMMIT Project defined the social dimension of University Lifelong Learning as located on two dimensions: the individual and the collective. The goals on the individual level are to provide a socially just access, retention and success for students, lifelong learners and university staff. On the collective dimension the goal is to transfer relevant academic knowledge to society and enable groups of people inside and outside university to build and develop an ecologically, socially and economically sustainable society. At the beginning of the project, a top-down approach was chosen to define SD for universities. This helped partners work with the tools. After the transversal analysis of the tools, plenty of examples from the 12 partner universities were available and contributed to revise and simplify the SD concept.

The innovative aspect of COMMIT also lies in its approach based on social learning, on learning from one's own experience and the experience of others, including from mistakes and failures. This approach required trust and confidence and was, at the same time, about individual learning, mutual, collective and team learning, and organisational learning.

## 7. Project Partners

- eucen (BE) - Coordinator
- Université catholique de Louvain (BE)
- University of Turku (FI)
- University of Brest (FR)
- University of Aveiro (PT)
- University of Stuttgart (DE)
- Dublin City University (IE)
- Bogaziçi University (TR)
- University of Genoa (IT)
- University of Ioannina (GR)
- University of Iasi (RO)
- Rovira i Virgili University (ES)
- University of Pecs (HU)

## 8. External Evaluator

Seamus O'Tuama (IE)

## 9. Acknowledgments

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## Committing to the social dimension in universities

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COMMIT supports universities in the self-assessment of their level of commitment to the social dimension of higher education and promotes their strategies for increasing attainment, embedding the policy and practice of University Lifelong Learning in a strategy of wider social interaction.

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