

1.1.2. High development of teaching programs: increase of people studying, interventions in learning difficulties, career management.

Introduction

As presented before, in recent decades, major societal changes have taken place which are challenging the role of Higher Education Institutions throughout Europe. The Higher Education sector has an essential role to play in Europe's post-pandemic recovery and in shaping sustainable and resilient societies, of which deeper and more effective transnational cooperation is a key element.

To tackle the needs of a fast-changing society and the most pressing societal challenges, universities are now focused on developing policies, courses, and research agendas to equip students with skills and knowledge to be able to thrive in a complex society (Clark 1998, 2004). Universities become more and more responsible for the sustainability of these changes and there is an emerging need of supporting a “transformative” approach to Higher Education.

A focus on technical skills is no more enough and there has been a push for universities to play a pivotal role in creating more responsible citizens and in empowering students to be able to contribute to societal challenges and build their careers in a protean context.

To do so, a series of initiatives have been implemented. These encompass different assets of Higher Education namely innovative students' services, improvements in didactics, investments toward Third Mission activities. All these aim at reshaping Higher Education activities in order to support students' academic success and successful and impactful careers in complex and fast changing societies.

1. The need of increasing people studying

The lines of actions which will be described later in the Chapter refer to a set of initiatives which can all be considered among the strategies that the EU has proposed to make further progress in the development and implementation of inclusion and educational success of vulnerable students and for reducing the rate of dropping out from Higher Education in all member States.

Another challenge is also to favour a broader entry to Higher Education, including for young workers and for those over 30 years old, with a system of micro-credentials that also functions as an integration mechanism.

With the aim of fostering more inclusive Higher Education, the EU strategies foster the promotion of initiatives that adapt organisational and learning processes to the needs of all learners and that promote information and accompaniment programmes, including individualised mentoring and guidance, both during Higher Education and at earlier educational stages to ensure academic success and impactful and sustainable careers.

The need for increasing participation in Higher Education in Europe is a crucial challenge for all member States and for all local communities. The EU 2030 target pinpointed that the share of 25–34-year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 45%, by 2030. The tertiary educational attainment rate of 25-34 year olds in the EU stood at 41.2% in 2021. This continues the steady growth seen in the past decade, up from 34.1% in 2012 and 37.6% in 2017. In all but three Member States, attainment rates have increased compared to 2017/22. At EU level, the current rate is 3.8 percentage points far from the 45% target for 2030, with 13 Member States surpassing it in 2021. Top performers are Luxembourg (62.6%), Ireland (61.7%), Cyprus (58.3%), Lithuania (57.5%) and the Netherlands (55.6%). Eight Member States have yet to reach 40% (OECD, 2023).

Young people whose parents have a low level of education are more than three times less likely to attain a tertiary-level qualification. Strengthening equity and inclusion in accessing Higher Education is still a challenge for most countries. In nearly every country with available data, the completion rate after three years is lowest for students whose parents did not complete upper secondary education and highest for students with at least one tertiary-educated parent.

Disparities in gender equity in access to tertiary education also persist. On average across OECD (2023) countries in 2020, women made up only 31% of new entrants to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) bachelor's programmes, although the gaps narrow at master's and doctoral levels. Moreover, women are a clear minority among senior academic staff. Across all fields, women typically make up between one-fifth and one-third of full professors in European tertiary institutions.

Career services and mentoring are activities that help students from disadvantaged backgrounds who find it more difficult to follow the dynamics of the courses. These mentorships can be provided by career practitioners, but also a great support can be made up of older students from the same university degree (with a specific training in mentoring).

2. The challenge of improving career management

Considering these data and the scenarios described in Chapter 1.1.1, one of the main areas of interventions for Higher Education to become “transformative” and responsive to recent societal challenges has to do with the implementation of services for supporting career management.

The European Policy on Lifelong Guidance introduced in 2008 the approach of Career Management as one of the main focus of the national and regional systems of career services and lifelong learning.

The concept of career management refers to the intentional management of work, learning and other aspects of life by each person, through reflective, evaluative and decision-making processes (Haines, Scott, & Lincoln, 2003; Watts, 2006). In this definition «Career is lifelong progression in learning and work. Learning is about education, but also about training, and informal learning. Work includes paid employment, but also about self-employment, and unpaid work within households and communities. Progression can be lateral as well as vertical» (Watts, 1996).

The right for all citizens of an intentional career management implies that everyone has the freedom but also the responsibility to make effective choices in study and working life, to promptly seize the opportunities that exist in an increasingly complex society characterised by rapid changes and unpredictability.

Career management means also that all services and new training paths should be designed for helping people to learn how to manage their career in changing and complex contexts all lifelong.

Following this approach, the main framework of the EU policy in lifelong guidance (LLG) is based on Career Management Skills (CMS), as a set of skills that people need to navigate their own way through life, learning and work. There are already some different national CMS frameworks in Europe, following different traditional approaches on career guidance and on skills description. Despite the differences in reference frameworks, the importance of these skills to handle complexity and navigate in the contemporary labour market is well proven. Universities are called to implement services to ensure the promotion of these skills from enrolment to graduation, but a main question still remains open: how do people learn career management skills? How can career services be redesigned to support students to develop these skills? Traditional didactical approaches, based on disciplines and on content teaching do not meet this need. All career learning activities must be designed to improve one or more specific skills, related to the career management of each single person. Career learning needs to be strongly centred on the experience and the aspects, values, life approaches of each learner. Learners must be actively involved in career learning activities to enhance their career management skills. For an effective design of all interventions, at any level, reflection, evaluation and exploration by learners will be the key point and will request adequate timing.

This challenge translates into major changes and commitment towards the structuring of strategic career services in universities. Career services in universities should be proactive, student-centred, and adaptable to the dynamic labour market. Fundamental assets of these services refer to:

- Personalisation of guidance services to tailor career planning and job search strategies.
- Skills development moving from a career information approach to an educational one where the learning component is central.
- Offering networking opportunities such as networking events, career fairs, alumni connections. It is well known that building a strong professional network is crucial for job placement and career advancement.
- Continuous update of labour market information which needs to stay current and provide information on emerging industries, job roles, and skills in demand. The job market is

constantly evolving, and students should be aware of the latest opportunities and of future literacy skills to allow them to foresee future trends.

- Mental health and well-being support as recognising the emotional and psychological aspects of job searching and career development is crucial.
- The use of data and analytics to monitor the success of career services programs. It is also important to consider the possibility of data-driven improvements and to establish mechanisms for students to provide feedback on career services, so they can continually feed data and improve and better meet the needs of the student body.
- Teaching students how to leverage technology and maintain a professional online presence through platforms and digital literacy.

3. Supporting students for academic success and active engagement

Another strategic area for “transformative” Higher Education refers to innovation in didactic methodologies. Universities are working to develop and improve teaching programs and implement new didactic approaches to empower students to address new societal challenges. The following sections present powerful methodologies to make the learning experience meaningful and “change maker”.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is an educational theory and methodology that emphasises the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and understanding through direct, practical experiences. It involves the active engagement of learners in real-world situations or simulations, allowing them to reflect on and draw meaning from their experiences. This methodology usually translates into internships, research projects, and community engagement activities. Practical experience can provide students with valuable insights into real-world challenges (Kolb,2014). The Kolb cycle, named after the American educator who developed it, is a model that defines experiential learning as a spiral process. Specifically, by following the four phases that compose it, everything starts from an experience one can acquire, and then the person develops and improves competencies and skills that must be tested and verified again, resulting in a new experience from which the cycle can begin again. The theory of experiential learning is based on the fact that ideas are not fixed or immutable but change according to experience. In fact, the learning process develops and changes from the very experiences we have. Therefore, even in academic contexts, it is necessary to integrate theory and practice. The steps identified by Kolb's exponential cycle that make experiential methodology effective and efficient are:

- Concrete Experience: Personally experiencing and discussing the lived experience within the training workshop, emphasising emotional aspects and intuition.
- Reflective Observation: Observing, reflecting and interpreting the feelings and behaviour that emerged during the experience, focusing on understanding and depth of analysis.
- Abstract Conceptualisation: Producing and schematising concepts and skills by extending them to external situations, both work-related and personal, emphasising logic and generalisation.

- Active Experimentation: Testing acquired knowledge and skills in new situations, focusing on change and evolution.

This last phase in turn becomes a Concrete Experience that starts a new learning cycle, hence David Kolb's definition of experiential learning as a spiral process (Kolb, 1984).

Service Learning

Service learning is an educational approach that combines community service with academic instruction, focusing on both community and student development. Burnett and colleagues define service learning as “structured learning experiences that facilitate the acquisition of awareness, knowledge, and skills while promoting a commitment to personal, social, civic and professional responsibility” (2005, p. 158). This method is designed to enhance students' learning experiences by actively engaging them in real-world problem-solving and community service. Students involved in service learning participate in structured, meaningful community service activities that address community needs. These activities may vary widely, from tutoring and environmental conservation to working with marginalised populations. Service learning is not just about volunteering. It integrates academic goals and curriculum into the service experience. Students are guided in reflecting on their service experiences and connecting them to course content, theories, and concepts. This helps students understand the real-world applications of what they learn in the classroom. Reflection is a critical component of service learning. Students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences, both in the service activity and their academic studies. They consider how the two relate and what they've learned from their service experiences. Collaboration with community organisations or agencies is a fundamental aspect of service learning. Universities often partner with local non-profits, schools, or other entities to identify service opportunities that align with academic goals. In the service learning approach, the objectives are established to guide students' service experiences. These objectives connect the service to academic content and skills development.

Interdisciplinary Approach

This transversal approach aims at encouraging interdisciplinary learning, as many societal challenges are complex and require multiple perspectives. An interdisciplinary approach in universities involves integrating knowledge and methods from multiple academic disciplines to address complex problems. Interdisciplinary approaches foster collaborations between different departments and faculties (Tobi & Kampen, 2018) and encourage collaboration between different departments or schools to provide a more holistic education and tackle real-world issues. This approach can lead to innovative solutions and a broader perspective for students and researchers.

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

Focus on developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability skills. Encourage students to think creatively and apply their knowledge to novel situations (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). Developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills is essential for making informed decisions, finding effective solutions, and navigating the complexities

of life. Remember that developing these skills takes time and practice. Regularly apply these strategies in your personal and professional life to become a more effective critical thinker and problem solver. Critical thinking, problem-solving, and challenge-based learning are crucial components of higher education, and universities play a pivotal role in nurturing these skills in students. Universities can design curricula that intentionally integrate critical thinking and problem-solving across various disciplines. Instead of compartmentalizing subjects, encourage interdisciplinary approaches that require students to apply their knowledge to complex, real-world challenges. Incorporating critical thinking, problem-solving, and challenge-based learning into the university experience prepares students to tackle the complexities of the modern world, equipping them with valuable skills for their academic and professional journeys.

Incorporate Technology

Leverage technology for online learning, virtual labs, and data analysis. Technology can help students develop digital literacy, a crucial skill in today's world (Pianfetti, 2001). Incorporating technology into the university environment is essential for enhancing teaching, research, administration, and student learning experiences.

Incorporating technology into the university environment requires a strategic approach, investment, and ongoing commitment to stay current with technological advancements. When done effectively, it can enhance the quality of education, improve administrative processes, and better prepare students for a digital-centric world.

Supporting teaching

The need to improve the quality of university teaching through the activation of qualified training pathways and specific monitoring and evaluation strategies of faculty development actions is a priority for the higher education system. These challenges are part of the main axes of the Bologna Process (Wihlborg & Teelke, 2014) and of the various European reforms (EUA Trends, 2018; EHEA, 2015; Eurydice, 2017) that support a pedagogical training in teachers and the development of competences not only disciplinary and research, but also didactics, design and evaluation. As the EUA Trends 2018 Higher Education Report (Gaebel & Zhang, 2018) points out, although the topic of teacher training is increasingly discussed and a key axis in innovation and development, it still remains an often critical and little explored issue. Moreover, teacher training in Italy is a recent topic compared to other European countries, and is developing differently in the various universities (Lotti & Lampugnani, 2020).

Available research on the topic shows how the training courses delivered to teachers have an impact on how they teach (Stes, 2011). The research results of Gibbs and Coffey (2004) show significant changes in the way students perceive the lessons delivered by teachers who have undergone training. Lecturers have a great responsibility in preparing young people for their entry into the world of work and this means equipping them with all the cognitive and metacognitive tools that will enable them to be adequate and capable professionals, and to be suited to a world characterised by complexity (Coggi, 2022). The challenge, therefore, for guaranteeing the quality of university teaching would seem to lie in the possibility of creating an environment that fosters the acquisition and strengthening of a shared internal culture. In this sense, investing in improving the skills of one's staff is considered a strategic operation (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010) as it is

intentionally aimed at developing the system's capacity to maintain and improve its performance and identity (Mushtaq & Khan, 2012). Indeed, training can become an enabler of the factors that determine the educational quality of work contexts, i.e. the educational potential expressed by the interactions that guarantee their functioning and are renewed due to the capacity of each organisation to evolve and transform (Vicari, 2008). Training, if strongly contextualised and connected to organisational processes, contributes to enhancing the educational potential that characterises the university organisation, enabling a possible synergic integration between intentional training activity and the informal dimension of learning generated by conscious and responsible participation in the overall system (Del Gobbo, 2021).

Faculty Development and Teaching and Learning Center

Provide training and resources for faculty to keep up with the latest research and teaching methods. Encourage research on topics related to societal challenges (Bergquist & Phillips, 1975). Faculty development and teaching and learning centers (TLCs) play critical roles in higher education by supporting faculty members in their teaching and professional growth. These centers are dedicated to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning at universities.

What is Faculty Development? Faculty development refers to the process of improving the skills, knowledge, and expertise of university faculty members. It encompasses various activities and initiatives that aim to enhance their teaching, research, and professional growth. In order to ensure constant training of skills and updating of teaching methods, there are centres linked to universities that take care of teacher training. The TLCs were created to ensure that teachers develop not only technical but also pedagogical skills. Teaching and Learning Centers are dedicated units within universities or colleges that focus on improving teaching and learning practices. TLCs provide a range of services and resources to both faculty and students. Indeed, university lecturers are responsible for training students and equipping them with the set of skills that will enable them to face the world of work, be aware and active citizens and manage their career path.

Continuous Improvement

Regularly review and update the curriculum based on feedback and changing societal challenges. Stay agile and responsive to emerging issues. Integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (2015) into a university's curriculum is a crucial step towards preparing students to be informed, responsible global citizens who can contribute to the achievement of these goals. The alignment of training courses with the needs of the world of work and the challenges of society remains central. For this, a clear reference to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is required. The SDGs established by the United Nations in 2015 are a set of 17 interconnected global goals designed to address a wide range of social, economic, and environmental challenges. The objectives outlined should be a clear guiding reference for structuring university pathways so as to ensure that students develop the competences, knowledge and skills they will need to meet the needs of society. The university is therefore concerned with training future professionals who can have a significant impact on the world and society, starting with the areas in which they live.

Assessment and Feedback

A significant moment for the harmonisation of assessment systems in higher education is the ministerial meeting in Bergen (2005). The Bergen meeting (May 2005) marks two important events. The Framework for the Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), i.e. the framework within which countries are required to place higher education qualifications, was approved. A fundamental element of the Framework is the Dublin Descriptors (the final act of their elaboration takes place in Dublin). The Descriptors, defined for the three levels of higher education, identify the nature of the qualification through five types of learning that students must demonstrate that they have acquired in order to be able to obtain the qualification. The focus is therefore on what the student has to learn and on the development of his/her competences. Having defined this framework, the five Descriptors concern:

- Knowledge and understanding
- Applying knowledge and understanding
- Autonomy of judgements (making judgements)
- Communication skills
- Learning skills

The other relevant event that characterises the Bergen (2005) meeting is the definition of the Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the Higher Education System, i.e. the document Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) drawn up by ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (<https://enqa.eu>).

ENQA is the international body established following the Recommendation of the Council on European co-operation in quality assurance in higher education. ENQA's tasks include the accreditation of Quality Assurance and Evaluation Agencies operating in the Bologna Process countries. Therefore, universities should use the indicated criteria and guidelines as a measure for the assessment, evaluation and structuring of university courses in order to be able to guarantee high levels of teaching quality for students, teachers and the territory. Furthermore, as the guidelines suggest, tools for the impact assessment of training pathways should be introduced to monitor the activities and services introduced. Qualitative-quantitative measurement of impact serves the organisation to be able to better structure its courses and adapt them to the challenges that society imposes. Adapting university pathways to these needs means, once again, equipping students and lecturers with the necessary tools to respond to the needs and requirements of this rapidly changing world.

Needs Assessment

Understand the current societal challenges and the skills and knowledge students need to address them. This may involve consulting experts, industry leaders, and conducting surveys. Building strong connections between universities, industries, and local territories is crucial for fostering economic growth, innovation, and community development. These connections can lead to mutually beneficial relationships and collaborations.

Collaboration among these stakeholders can lead to a stronger, more resilient local economy and a thriving community. The increasingly relevant need is given by the theory-practice connection and the overcoming of the university-world of work dichotomy. Creating a continuum between formal, informal and non-formal learning serves to contextualise student learning and provide them with a concrete vision of the world of work. This allows students to be aware of their possible impact on today's and tomorrow's society, as people and as professionals. Incorporating career-related learning into university curriculum is essential for preparing students for the workforce and ensuring their academic experience aligns with their career goals. Integrating career-related learning into the university curriculum not only benefits students in their job search but also enhances their overall educational experience. It helps bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical application, making graduates more competitive and better prepared for their chosen careers. The university must commit itself to responding to dual needs: preparing students to structure their careers in a complex world; preparing tomorrow's professionals to respond to society's needs.

In this chapter the importance of collaboration between university, business and the world of work was emphasised. This challenge is part of the many actions that universities will have to implement to meet the criteria of the Third Mission. This topic will be discussed in depth in subsequent chapters.

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