Coherency in strategies of lifelong learning national approaches in Scotland, Germany and Denmark

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Abstract

Most of the European Member States have their national strategy on lifelong learning (LLL), being invited to design one by 2006. Building up a culture of lifelong learning is a central issue of the European and National Policy papers in this regard. As it is a complex and challenging aim, through the content analysis method and the comparative one as well, will be pointed out how in the national lifelong learning strategies are stipulating solutions to reach this aim. The countries chosen for analysis have different approach in designing and structuring their strategies.

Keywords: Lifelong learning strategy; coherency of lifelong learning; content analysis.

1. European focus on Lifelong Learning

The Council Resolution on Lifelong Learning invites Member States (MS) to "develop and implement comprehensive and coherent strategies reflecting the principles and building blocks identified in the Commission's Communication and involving all relevant players, in particular the social partners, civil society, local and regional authorities", pointing out their priority lines. The Council also asks MS, "in conjunction with the European Employment Strategy, to mobilize resources for those strategies and to promote lifelong learning for all by setting targets for an increase in investment in human resources, and to optimize the use of available resources, developing initiatives to stimulate private investment in learning ", providing flexible learning pathways and effective transition points between systems and levels of education, and a transparent system for recognition of prior learning (see http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/natreport08/council_en.pdf).

Member States committed themselves to design coherent and comprehensive national lifelong learning strategies by 2006. The last joint progress report of the Council and of the Commission on the implementation of the Education & Training 2010 work programme (Jan 2009) pointed out that, on the one hand, most countries have made progress in defining unified and overarching strategies that incorporates a comprehensive vision of lifelong learning, covering all types (non/in/-formal) and levels (pre/primary, primary, secondary, tertiary, and adult) of
education and training. Some, however, focus on formal education systems or on developing specific stages of the LLL continuum”. But sensitive points remain assuring basic skills, the quality of teaching, and the participation of adults in LLL.

In the recommendations given (p.17, 18) for the ways forward there are mentioned: joined-up education and training policy in a LLL perspective with strategic priorities set across the whole system; improving the interfaces with relevant policy areas, such as innovation policy, employment and social policy, enterprise, research and structural funding; integration of policy developments in the areas of higher education, VET and adult learning.

On the other hand, the joint report also stressed that implementation is still a great challenge for lifelong learning strategies in most countries, stronger institutional commitment, coordination and partnership with all relevant stakeholders, as well as linking the strategies with policy measures and securing funding being needed.

Also in the Communication 865/16.12.2008, with the proposals of European Commission for setting the ways of cooperating in Education and Training till 2020, it is pointed out as strategic challenge: Make lifelong learning and learner mobility a reality, and as main priority line: “Complete the process of implementation of national lifelong learning strategies, giving particular attention to the validation of nonformal and informal learning and guidance”. In line with the above mentioned aspects stressed in the European policy and monitoring documents, the content analysis was focus on two crucial aspects: the coherency of the strategic issues and the implementation of it. The limited space of the article constrains to point out only these two aspects; even the conclusions will be wider, trying to reflect other aspects as well. The countries selected are among the best performing ones in making LLL a reality.

The questions to answer therefore are the following two:
- Which aspects of coherency do they stress in their strategic papers?
- Which steps of implementation do they plan or realise already?

We follow these questions first for each country separately and compare the findings in the end, looking for common ideas and instruments, which might be an impulse for the further debate on life long learning.

2. Content analysis of the strategic papers on lifelong learning

2.1 Lifelong learning in Germany

Germany is a federal republic, in which the “Länder” (16) have the status of autonomy in the fields of education and culture. To coordinate their structures and activities and to find solutions for common problems in a better (economically, socially, politically) way, they used to work together in a commission (“Bund-Länder-Kommission für Bildungsplanung und Forschungsförderung”). One of the last activities of the commission regarding education was the paper “Strategy for Lifelong Learning in the Federal Republic of Germany” (Volume 115 of “Materials on educational planning and research promotion”), published in 2004. The paper has about 30 pages.

2.1.1. Coherency:

The paper declares at the very beginning the intention of a coherent approach to lifelong learning: “describe how all citizens can be encouraged to participate in learning during all phases of their lives and in all spheres of life, at different learning sites and through many different types of learning.”. Coherency is understood as well in regard to all phases of individual life’s, as to all types of learning and all fields of life. In the more concrete explanation of the realisation of the LLL concept it can be seen a kind of a matrix, which combines individual life courses (childhood, adolescence, young adults, adults and elderly) and structural elements of the system of education.

Regarding the educational system there are comments on networking, modularization, learning guidance, popularization of learning and access; there are also mentioned informal learning, self-directed learning and development of skills. According to the life phases there are different elements of the systems asked and stressed. For instance, young adults are related to all of the elements of the educational system like fair access, modularization, networking, self-directed learning etc. In Adult life, informal learning, the development of skills and modularization are important. The elderly undergo the need of a fair access to all kind of educational offers.

To comment the approach of coherency in Germany it is worth while to look at the first paragraph in the paper itself. The relation of the combined elements of education together with the different phases of life to other societal fields like workplace, daily life in family and social environment, voluntary work etc. seems to be disappearing; the approach in Germany is mainly focused on the educational system.

With this focus it has some innovative elements. Mainly the reflection of the variety of importance of different elements of the educational system in different phases in life is inspiring. Unfortunately there are missing more concrete hints on how institutions can change, cooperate, and integrate all aspects of learning and put this in reality.
2.1.2 Implementation

The aspect of implementation is a weak point in the paper and seems to be a missing follow up. The paper itself concludes (in the short version, p. 7) with certain openness: “It remains a task for all the responsible players in the Länder and in the Federal Government to apply the framework defined in this strategy paper in accordance with their respective educational priorities.” It makes clear that the implementation is only let to the public authorities in “Bund” (on federal level) and “Länder”; no commitment for employers, learners, organisations, schools and other educational themselves is mentioned. Like this the coherent idea behind the strategy falls back to political reality, the autonomous acting of public actors.

The concrete follow-ups being mentioned are more related to a system of supervising the process, than to change the educational structure: “The decision to draw up a report on education in cooperation between the Länder and the Federal Government; the agreement on uniform educational standards in all Länder; the establishment of a Länder institute for quality development in education; …, the educational campaign launched by the Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs entitled “Education – our ticket to the future” (p. 25)

2.2 Denmark

Denmark is one of the smaller European countries, governed centrally, and traditionally active in reflecting and developing the system of education and the learning opportunities for all people. It is famous for its subject oriented pedagogical approach (f.e. Grundtvig) and its combining of general and vocational learning in all phases of life.

The Danish paper “Strategy for lifelong learning” was presented by the Danish minister of Education in the year 2007, and it is supposed to be “the Goverment’s contribution to a realisation of the common objectives of the Lisbon strategy” of the European Union (Foreword, p. 1). The paper has about 35 pages.

2.2.1 Coherence

At the very beginning the paper points out: “The strategy covers the development of all forms of education, learning and lifelong skills upgrading for all – in the education system, in adult education and continuing training, at work and in the many other settings in which people learn and develop their knowledge, skills and competences.” (p.3). Intended is a lifelong and a life wide strategy on lifelong learning. The more concrete objectives are given on p. 8 – 10: nine objectives to be reached in the close future of Denmark: from a coherent education system, with equal opportunities and room for all; an education system, oriented to the needs of labour market and society; till a coherent education paths and transparency in the education system. Following these objectives the strategy paper gives more concrete aims for preschool, basic school, general and vocational upper secondary education and higher education. As a chapter on its own, adult education is underlined as sector of upgrading lifelong skills for all (p.19f.). It can be found a list of further aims in this sector and related to the target group of adults, being differentiated the shared responsibility, as well as the priority actions (p. 21, 22).

Furthermore, the strategy paper gives aims to supportive elements of the educational system like guidance and counselling, recognition of prior learning, credit transfer, transparency and cohesion in education system (p.25–28).

To comment the aspect of coherency in the Danish paper, it is obvious that it builds on a strong tradition of debates on the national education system with concrete figures, aims and arguments. The inclusion of all fields of the education system in the strategy is concretely given, whereas the link to other societal fields, mainly the world of work, is more generally mentioned. A strong aspect of the coherency in this paper is the definition of aims, which are put in a common frame of developing the educational system. Also, a strong point is the integration of aspects of implementation in the strategic reflections.

2.2.2 Implementation

Already at the beginning is mentioned as an initiative of the government and the social partners on lifelong education and skills upgrading for everyone on the labour market (p.8) and stressed: “....this is a shared responsibility for employers, employees and the public authorities”. Not only the actors and the groups of actors are defined, but also their sharing of roles and duties (p.21). In addition, it refers to the need of developing “stronger professional educational institutions” and “partnerships in education and training” (p.28).

There are also described concrete next steps and given figures in terms of money, time, duties and commitments, mainly the activities of the government being clearly mentioned (p. 14-18) and concrete key initiatives in adult education (p. 23-24). Further initiatives for a better interaction between educations, liberal adult education, learning in associations etc. are described as legal, supportive, project based and persuasive instruments (p. 31, 32).
Commenting the aspect of Implementation in the Danish paper it is impressive to become aware of a lot of different activities to foster LLL. A weaker point is the fact that all these activities cannot really be systematically related to the coherent idea of lifelong learning and sometimes it is unclear, why and up to which amount an activity is placed, another not. Important is the commitment for all organisations and people to find their role, place and their duty.

2.3 Scotland

Scotland is one of the countries within the United Kingdom, partly autonomous, mainly in the fields of education and culture. It has a highly developed education system and quite a tradition in adult education; even it is less structured than in England. The strategy paper is published by the Scottish minister for “enterprise, transport and lifelong learning” (interesting combination!) and published in 2003. It is supposed to be the “Executive’s five-year strategy for lifelong learning” (p. 5) and has a volume of about 80 pages (!).

2.3.1 Coherence

From the vision about LLL in Scotland, can be noticed already the coherency of linking individuals and society: “The best possible match between the learning opportunities open to people and the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours which will strengthen Scotland’s economy and society” (p.6). The vision is followed by 5 people-centred goals, the definition of LLL (“This strategy document is principally concerned with post-compulsory education, training and learning. Lifelong learning encompasses the whole range of learning: formal and informal learning, workplace learning, and the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that people acquire in day-to-day experience… LLL contributes to the development of society through the achievement of other social goals such as civic participation, sustainable development, improved health and wellbeing, reduced crime and greater social cohesion.” /p.7), the arguments for investing in LLL, and the ways the demand will be linked with the supply.

The whole document deals only with post-compulsory education, and in a balanced way there are mentioned roles and responsibilities for all actors and stakeholders into the labour market, private and public, employers etc. for assuring all key aspects of demand and supply, together with adequate information and guidance services about the people’s choices, being also pointed the resources to be secured, with concrete figures, for reaching concrete targets.

It is also set the context, being explained the connections with other strategies (f.e. for the Entreprise Networks, or for skills strategy for a competitive Scotland), the links with UK, but also the state of the art, with concrete figures. The way the coherency of actions to reach each objective is described is for sure a positive aspect, being clear and transparent what it is to be done, by whom, how, till when, with what.

2.3.2 Implementation

There are precisely described for each objective the measures to be implemented, with what resources, to reach what target, being also mentioned the activities to be undertaken under each goal/ priority line, numbering them very clearly (e.g. for encouraging community-based learning, there are mentioned the actors to be involved, what will be the 12 actions – 5 in focus, and 7 that will continue -, trying to reach how many adults etc. / p.42-44). There is also concrete mentioning about the system of quality assurance and the responsibilities of different actors in this respect.

It is, in addition, a special chapter about implementing the strategy, with distinct mentioning about better evidence based, measuring success, roles and responsibilities, partnerships, funding, responsiveness and relevance, as well as details about indicators to be reached by when, with what milestones, and quality criteria for evaluation.

3. Conclusions

It is evident that the character of the papers is different according to the authors respective the authority behind it. The two papers edited by ministers (Scotland, Denmark) are definitely more committing, definitely more basing on facts than the one of Germany, which is the compromise between 17 (Bund/Länder) actors. The papers have of course a different role in the respective political debate in the countries. In the case of Germany it is more an incentive, an impulse for the discussion and activities of the different bodies in Bund and Länder, whereas in Scotland and Denmark it is more a self-committing declaration with a direct look to the votes of the people. These two papers have also a more operationalised character as memorandum for the administration, including concrete figures on money and responsibilities. Another difference comes from the diverse understanding of the character of a “strategy”. If strategic view means a description of the future of LLL, is rather short limited in Scotland and
Denmark, in both cases about 5 years. In Germany the view is oriented to a future structure, which should be achieved, a vision, which has to be concretised by the actors in the governments. Like this it is more a frame for more concrete papers in Bund and Länder.

Regarding the aims, again the papers of Denmark and Scotland are clearer than that from Germany (the German one does hardly mention any objectives). But, on the other hand, the German paper, taken as such, might be understood as an objective as such: the change of the structure of the educational system according to the formulated vision is the overall objective. There is a different stress on the learner, the papers from Denmark and Scotland being more intensive, maybe because there is a different understanding of the role of structures for LLL.

Regarding coherency, there are some aspects to think about:

- Scotland and Germany have a more general approach, Scotland has a better concrete filling in it. Denmark is difficult to be seen in the general view, it is more pragmatically exposed the next future of activities.
- Germany tries to link all sectors of the education system in an integrative way, according to a common understanding of their role in the life cycle of people; Scotland puts clear relations within the educational sectors, whereas Denmark refers in almost all chapters on the relations between educational system an the world outside. Germany has the focus almost only on the education sector, whereas in Scotland and Denmark there is seen a broader approach and responsibility for LLL (employers, NGOs and learners included).
- Germany sees only the actors in the public administration and policy making, Scotland and Denmark pointing out the responsibility of all parts of society for LLL.

Regarding implementation there are also different approaches.

- Scotland and Denmark are mentioning so called “mile-stones”, aims to be achieved in a certain time limit and up to a certain extent. This is not the case in the German approach. The same for the time being planned for realisation and implementation and the procedure, according to which the actors and the activities are to be put in position: rather detailed in the Scotich and the Danish case, not at all in the German one.
- Scotland and Denmark are putting concrete figures (money, other resources) in their strategic approaches, this is missing in the German paper.
- Benchmarks are mainly given in the Danish and Scottish papers: compared with which achievement would we like to be at which time? Even more, the Scottish paper has clearly described the indicators in annexes.

Strategy papers in general have different functions in the discussion process. Just reading and comparing them might mislead the interpretation. Looking at the aspects of concretion, of operationalisation, of implementation, the German paper is the weakest amongst the three selected countries. But seeing the structure and the political context of the country, it might be exactly like this an acceptable frame for the 16 Länder (and the federal Republic too).

Looking at the strategical and visionary view of the papers the Scottish and Danish ones are not too strong, in spite of having some strong parts. They are more related to the actual situation and the necessary next steps to be done. It would be a research of great interest to see, what happened with the papers and what was the follow up in the respective follow up in the countries.

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