

# EUROPEAN QUALITY IN INDIVIDUALISED PATHWAYS IN EDUCATION

## Case Study

### Delivery of a Flexible Master's degree Programme at the Danish University of Education

#### Executive Summary

In May 2000 Denmark introduced legislation to reform the vocational education and training system (VET reform). This entailed a structural reform to integrate vocational education and training on the one hand, and the vocational adult education system and the general education system on the other. The reform thus affords learners the possibility of 'horizontal' as well as 'vertical' progression and constitutes an innovative response to the challenges of lifelong learning.

Central elements of the VET reform:

- Improved access
- Accreditation of prior learning
- Flexible provision
- Individual guidance
- Individual education plan
- Work-based learning
- Interdisciplinarity
- Recognition
- Progression

A master's degree is the highest level of qualification in the Danish tertiary education system for adults. Master's degrees are one-year degree programmes provided as part-time open education, and admission to a programme requires a minimum of two years' professional experience.

The VET reform provided the legislative framework for the flexible provision of a master's degree programme at the Danish University of Education.

While 'regular', i.e. institutionally regulated master's degree programmes consist of three prescribed coursework modules and a final master's project, the flexible master's degree programme is based on an individually chosen topic of study and thus on the needs of adult learners.

This new form of delivery is organised as follows:

1. All students attend an individual interview as part of the admissions process.  
The interview provides an assessment of applicants' prior learning and is designed to prepare adult learners for (re-)entry into higher education.
2. An individual education plan is formulated upon registration.

The individual education plan maps previous learning pathways and is designed to ensure continuity and progression. Learners are actively involved in determining the academic profile of their course of study and in setting goals.

3. Learners are assigned an individual mentor.

The task of the mentor is to ensure satisfactory progression towards defined learning outcomes.

4. Continuous evaluation of individual modules.

Learners are interviewed during the course of their studies and the entire programme is evaluated upon completion.

The present case study examines an innovative form of educational provision for adults in the context of the transformation of universities into institutions of lifelong learning.

## EUROPEAN QUALITY IN INDIVIDUALISED PATHWAYS IN EDUCATION

### **Delivery of a flexible Master's degree programme at the Danish University of Education**

The concept of lifelong learning has fundamental implications for educational provision. Education (learning) is no longer confined to a particular stage in life, namely youth, but a lifelong process and universities are thus facing the challenge of adapting to the needs of a new group of learners: adults. In this context, the role of universities – and of the educational system as a whole - is changing as they are transformed into *lifelong learning institutions*.

In response to these changes, the Danish University of Education launched an innovative educational initiative in the summer of 2002, in line with the concept of lifelong learning, with the aim of improving educational provision for adult professionals. This new initiative, the provision of a flexible Master of Education programme (MEd), has been developed with a view to the Danish government's decision to establish a professionally oriented qualifications system for adults.

#### **Quality in individualised provision**

Adults (re-)entering higher education are rarely full-time students, but will usually combine learning with other personal and professional commitments.<sup>1</sup> Thus, to be successful, adult learning should form a meaningful part of the lives of individual learners. While institutions of higher education have traditionally 'monopolised' provision – both in terms of form/delivery and content/supply – there is a clear shift towards individualisation of educational provision to better suit the needs of adult learners, as evidenced by, for instance, modularisation of programmes of study and increasingly flexible modes of delivery. The innovative provision of a flexible Master's degree programme at the Danish University of Education represents a response to this shift, which makes considerable demands on both learners and education providers: learners must be actively involved in determining the profile of their course of study and formulating learning needs from the very beginning, while institutions must ensure the quality of learning provision.

It seems reasonable to assume that the individualisation of provision requires an individualisation of quality assurance mechanisms - tailor-made courses call for tailor-made quality assurance. Therefore it seems neither possible nor desirable to adopt a quantitative 'one size fits all' approach to educational quality. A more 'holistic' approach is called for - a view that was also expressed in the recent OECD report *Beyond Rhetoric: Adult Learning Policies and Practices*, based on the thematic review of adult learning in nine European countries.<sup>2</sup> A holistic approach involves an awareness of the variety of purposes adult learning serves (personal, social, professional) as well as addressing the 'structurally holistic' aim of integrating adults into the general

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Diana K. Kelly, *A New "Learning Paradigm" for the Lifelong Learning University* in Proceedings of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Eucen European Conference, 15-18 May 2002.

<sup>2</sup> OECD, *Beyond Rhetoric: Adult Learning Policies and Practices*, February 2003.

education system and adult education into educational- and labour-market policies.

The latter was an explicit aim of the reform establishing a tertiary education system for adults, which Denmark introduced in May 2000.<sup>3</sup> This entailed a *structural* reform to integrate vocational education and training on the one hand, and the vocational adult education system and the general education system on the other. The reform thus had an educational- and a labour-market policy objective at the same time as it affords learners the possibility of 'horizontal' as well as 'vertical' progression.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the reform reflects a paradigm shift away from liberal education (*Bildung*) as represented by the Danish folk high school tradition (based on the ideas of N.F.S. Grundtvig) with its stress on non- and informal learning and the advancement of democratic values, and towards an increasing focus on labour-market needs and what has elsewhere been termed a "technocratically-inspired usefulness perspective".<sup>5</sup>

With this context in mind, the adult education reform provided the legislative framework for the provision of a flexible Master's degree programme at the Danish University of Education.<sup>6</sup>

A Master's degree is the highest level of qualification in the Danish adult education system. Master's degrees are one-year degree programmes (totalling 60 ECTS credits) provided as part-time open education, and admission to a programme requires a minimum of two years' relevant professional experience. Since programmes are aimed at adult professionals, they are designed to integrate theory and practice.

While institutionally regulated Master's degree programmes consist of three prescribed coursework modules and a final Master's project, the flexible Master's degree programme is based on an individually chosen topic of study and thus on the needs of individual adult learners.

The following provides an outline of the model adopted for the organisation of this new form of delivery – the first of its kind in Denmark. It should be stressed that the present case study examines a 'work in progress' in the sense of an ongoing process.

## **1. All students are interviewed as part of the admissions process**

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<sup>3</sup> The Danish Ministry of Labour and the Danish Ministry of Education, *Adult Education and Continuing Training in Denmark*, September 2000.

<sup>4</sup> The Danish Ministry of Education, *New Structure of the Danish Vocational Education and Training System*, November 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Erik Knain (2001), *The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies in a Norwegian Context*. The Norwegian Institute for Studies in Research and Higher Education. In: Finn Thorbjørn Hansen *Learning to be – when lifelong learning is in need of philosophical counselling*. Paper presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> congress of the International Network of Philosophers of Education, 10 August 2002, at the University of Oslo, Norway.

<sup>6</sup> The Danish University of Education was established on 1 July 2000 by the merger of four institutions: the Royal Danish School of Educational Studies, the Danish National Institute for Educational Research, the Danish School of Advanced Pedagogy and the Danish National Centre for Technology-Supported Learning. The university has approximately 4000 students and 150 permanent academic staff.

Students wishing to embark on a flexible programme of study complete a detailed application form. Applicants are required to provide comprehensive information regarding their professional experience. In contrast to MA programmes in the general higher education system, which total 120 ECTS credits, MEd programmes in the adult education system total 60 ECTS credits. This is based on the fact that the admission requirement of two years' relevant work experience represents an accreditation of prior learning in the form of 60 ECTS credits – cf. the integration of adult education into the general education system. It should be pointed out that while no exemptions are granted from the admission requirement of two years' professional experience, admission requirements relating to formal entrance qualifications are not as strict and applications are considered on their individual merits with a view to improving recognition of prior learning and thus widening access. Furthermore, applicants are required to formulate the focus of their intended field of study, including coursework modules to be followed and the proposed subject of the final Master's project. The application form thus represents the first stage of the self-directed learning process in the sense that it requires reflection on the part of learners as regards their motivation for and aims in embarking on a course of study.

From a quality assurance perspective, the application form thus constitutes a simple quality tool, which has been refined to serve both institutional and individual demands.

The completed application form forms the basis for the first interview, which provides a further assessment of applicants' prior learning and a preliminary discussion of their proposed course of study. The interview, which is conducted by the programme director, is designed to prepare adult learners for (re-)entry into higher education and thus constitutes the first stage in a continuous guidance process (see below). Applicants typically attend one more interview prior to registration to determine the components of their individual course of study – the individual education plan.

## **2. An individual education plan is signed upon registration**

The individual education plan (IEP) specifies the basis on which the learner has gained admission to the programme, the three chosen coursework modules in the order in which they are to be completed, as well as the overall focus of the course of study as represented by the final Master's project. Learners select coursework modules from regulated MEd programmes at the Danish University of Education or from other approved Master's degree programmes at other national or international universities. The flexible structure of this form of provision has also been designed with a view to incorporating a European dimension and potentially paves the way for the establishment of joint Master's degree programmes.

The IEP maps learners' previous learning pathways and is designed to ensure continuity – in terms of counteracting the risks inherent in a 'pick & mix' approach to educational provision - and progression – in terms of keeping a firm view on learning outcomes. The formulation of the IEP thus actively involves learners in determining the academic profile of their course of study and is instrumental in supporting a view of the learning endeavour as a project with a clear, learner-defined goal. However, although the IEP is a legal

document, a learning *contract*, this contract is subject to continuous negotiation. In other words, the above-mentioned goal of learning is not static in practice. Learners' needs – and goals – necessarily change in the course of the learning process and they typically wish to change the IEP as they progress through the course. It should be stressed that this is a key success indicator.

Therefore, while the IEP may be described as a quality assurance tool, it would be more accurate to call it a *process tool* to underline the fact that it marks yet another step on the individual learning path.

At the same time, the IEP ensures relevance of provision from the outset, thereby keeping dropout rates to a minimum. It thus serves as both an *individual* and an *institutional* quality assurance tool.

### **3. Learners are assigned an individual mentor**<sup>7</sup>

Due to the individual organisation of the programme of study, learners are assigned an academic tutor for each module. Thus learners will typically have four academic tutors in the course of their study. The tutor ensures satisfactory academic progress in the course of an individual module, that is to say, the tutor primarily fulfils the role of an expert in continuous support of formal learning needs.

In referring to learners' needs, however, the question of the nature of these needs must be addressed. While it is true that the majority of adults (re-)enter higher education for employment-related reasons, the boundary between professional and personal and/or social needs is not as clear in practice.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, questions of pedagogy and delivery in adult learning are intimately related, and delivery will always have implications for pedagogy.<sup>9</sup>

Individuals entering higher education become part of a community, both in the context of a chosen programme of study and in the larger context of the academic community as represented by the university. In individualised learning pathways, here represented by the flexible Master's degree, interaction between learners as well as between learners and the institution must be actively supported. Interaction between individual adult learners integrates the collaborative aspect of learning, but a highly diverse group of learners pursuing individual courses of study requires special provisions to support and encourage group and team work. At the same time, educational institutions derive obvious benefit from the development and improvement of learning processes occasioned by the influence of new types of *learners*, also with a view to maintaining academic standards.

At the Danish University of Education, all teaching for coursework modules on MEd programmes is organised under four 'pillars' over the course of each

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<sup>7</sup> The description of the role of the mentor is largely based on a private communication from Assistant Professor Finn Thorbjørn Hansen of the Department of Philosophy of Education at the Danish University of Education. Cf. Finn Thorbjørn Hansen (2002), *Det filosofiske liv. Et dannelsesideal for eksistenspædagogikken*. (Published PhD thesis).

<sup>8</sup> Learners also derive benefits from learning in terms of working relationships and professional status. Cf. *Beyond Rhetoric: Adult Learning Policies and Practices*, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 161.

semester (15 ECTS credits): an introduction day, a weekend seminar, a week of face-to-face instruction and a further weekend seminar; learners work individually or in groups. In the periods between formal instruction learners work together via an e-learning system, which also affords the possibility of continuous contact and dialogue with academic tutors. Learners who have progressed to the final Master's project participate in methodology seminars for all MEd students combined with up to six individual sessions with their project supervisor. In addition, all students embarking on a flexible Master's degree attend an introductory seminar prior to their first module.

But for the individual(ised) learning process to be successful, learners need more than strictly academic support, as indicated above with reference to the importance of the collective dimension of the learning process and the continuous adjustment of the IEP. Since flexible Master's degree programmes require a high degree of self-direction on the part of learners, they also require extended guidance provision. In a lifelong learning perspective, this involves a more 'holistic', or existential, approach to guidance.

Adult learners embarking on a flexible Master's degree are assigned an individual mentor, who follows the learner throughout the whole process, which lasts at least two years. Learners usually have two sessions with their individual mentor per module.

In contrast to the academic tutor, the role of the mentor is not confined to ensuring satisfactory progress towards academic learning outcomes. The primary task of the mentor is to support the self-directed learning process in dialogue with the learner, thereby encouraging the learner to take responsibility for his or her own learning. While the relation between mentor and learner clearly has a 'personal' aspect, it should be stressed that it is not a psychological or 'therapeutic' relation. It could be more accurately described as *existential*, since it aims at provoking reflection in the learner with a view to integrating the learning context into a larger existential context. If the aim of guidance is to "allow the individual to make informed choices", the form of guidance provided by the mentor is in itself an educational act aimed at teaching individuals to orient themselves in the world, thus strengthening their capacity for self-directed learning and living up to the *demands* of lifelong learning.<sup>10</sup> Mentoring provides a learning space for value clarification and thus empowerment through reflection.<sup>11</sup> While the mentor never loses sight of formal learning outcomes in the form of the final Master's project, (s)he is instrumental in promoting a *learning ethos*, thus nurturing the *transferable skills* required at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to make predictions about future skills needs.

#### **4. Continuous evaluation of individual modules**

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<sup>10</sup> CEDEFOP (2000). Foreword: *Agora X – Social and Vocational Guidance*.

<sup>11</sup> In line with the broad aim of lifelong learning, which is to promote *active citizenship, social inclusion* and *personal development*, as well as employability, as recently stated in the Declaration of European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training and the European Commission on Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training, the so-called Copenhagen Declaration (November 2002, p. 2).

As mentioned above, this case study outlines a work in progress. The provision of the flexible Master's degree is a long-term project and the process is still evolving. The above first and foremost explains the rationale behind and the aims of the project.

Since evaluation is retrospective, it represents only one aspect of quality assurance in this form of provision.

Learners are interviewed during the course of their studies and the entire programme is evaluated upon completion. The flexible MEd is a new initiative and, at the time of writing, the first graduates are about to complete the programme.

Evaluation will take the form of qualitative group interviews with students from different MEd programmes, including the flexible programme, and a questionnaire survey with students from all MEd programmes at the Danish University of Education based on telephone interviews to secure a high response rate. So far, evaluation has been confined to the first and second modules and further evaluation initiatives are in the planning stages.

However, the point here, from a quality assurance perspective, is precisely the implementation of continuous quality assurance mechanisms, which are built in from the outset.

While it is difficult to provide a definitive assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the project at this stage in the process, a tentative appraisal can be made.

A strength of the approach described here is clearly indicated by minimal dropout rates.

As will be apparent, the mentor plays a decisive role in the process. An unexpected –positive - result of the mentoring process is the fact that it gives rise to a continuous reassessment of the individual education plan. Consequently, the mentor should ideally fulfil the role of supervisor for the final master's project, which is not necessarily the case today. Furthermore, the mentoring process should be supported by extensive staff development activities.

It is also important to bear in mind that this form of provision requires a high degree of self-direction on the part of learners and is thus aimed at individuals with strong motivation.

Thus while the product here is a 'strategy' for a new means of provision, the ultimate 'product' that universities as transmitters of a learning culture can provide is lifelong learners: *authentic, autonomous, authoritative* individuals.

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