

Lifelong Learning Strategy at Danube University Krems – University for Continuing Education: Societal Impact. Innovation. Quality

Krems, Austria





General Information

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| Title | Lifelong Learning Strategy at Danube University Krems – University for Continuing Education |
| Pitch | Societal Impact. Innovation. Quality |
| Organisation | Danube University Krems |
| Country | Austria |
| Author | Balzhan Orazbayeva (Science-to-Business Marketing Research Centre) |
| Nature of interaction | <input type="checkbox"/> Collaboration in R&D <input type="checkbox"/> Commercialisation of R&D results <input type="checkbox"/> Mobility of staff <input type="checkbox"/> Academic entrepreneurship <input type="checkbox"/> Governance <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lifelong learning <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Joint curriculum design and delivery <input type="checkbox"/> Mobility of students <input type="checkbox"/> Student entrepreneurship <input type="checkbox"/> Shared resources |
| Supporting mechanism | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Strategic <input type="checkbox"/> Structural <input type="checkbox"/> Operational <input type="checkbox"/> Policy |
| Summary | <p>With increasing global competition, companies and their employees are under increasing pressure to update and improve their skills throughout the life of their career. Despite this, there are very few higher education institutions committed to the development of postgraduate skills to the same degree as Danube University Krems (DUK).</p> <p>Founded in 1994 as a centre for continuing education, DUK is one of the most pioneering higher education institutions in Europe. It is a specialised institution in the sector of lifelong learning (LLL) offering university-based advanced education. Continuing education is not just a field of training, rather it is a core competence.</p> <p>The university's mission and vision, together with existing expertise in continuing education, mean that the entire educational structure is geared towards the particular standards and requirements of middle-aged professionals and executives.</p> <p>DUK's student profile is unlike any other, with more than 50 per cent of students having worked in their fields for more than 10 years, now benefiting from further career development or professional re-orientation. With over 9,000 students from 90 countries studying on over 200 different courses, DUK is leading the way in facilitating LLL across the Austrian and European educational arenas.</p> |



Introduction & Overview

1. BACKGROUND

The university has its roots in the early '80s when the Lower Austrian State Government decided to build a unique and innovative HEI exclusively devoted to the concept of postgraduate continuing education and LLL. This initiative was in reaction to the demographic change in the region and to create a new actor in the European educational system fully capable of dealing with challenges of the modern business world.

In 1987, a provincial scientific academy in Krems began working on developing postgraduate programmes. Through this action, the government was not only aiming at building another traditional university, but also at offering a unique and innovative HEI infrastructure for the continuing education and LLL for middle-aged adults with and without previous academic background.ⁱ According to DUK's LLL mission, it is of vital importance to provide this target group with the opportunity to learn on equal terms with the young and in age-appropriate ways.ⁱⁱ

When the working agreement with the Federal Government had been reached, the National Assembly started the process of building a new HEI centre for continuing education in the Wachau region along the Danube in 1994. The cornerstone of the new institution has been firmly placed, which led to the official inauguration of the Danube University Krems (DUK) in 1995. Since then, the university has distinguished itself as one of the leading continuing education institutions in Austria and across Europe exclusively dedicated to LLL. In 2004, the university was upgraded to a University of Continuing Education with the Federal Law for the Danube University.

Now, more than 19,000 graduates and 8,500 students from 91 countries make Danube University Krems one of the leading universities of continuing education in Europe today. With more than 20 years' experience, it is among the European pioneers in the field of continuing education and a specialist for LLL.ⁱⁱⁱ What began with the two courses for European Advanced Studies and European Journalism Academy has developed into 300 LLL programmes embedded in the foundation of the university's three faculties: (i) Health and Medicine, (ii) Business and Globalisation, and (iii) Education, Art and Architecture.



2. OBJECTIVES AND MOTIVATIONS

Currently, the importance of LLL is widely acknowledged and accepted. In times of rapid technological change and increasing globalisation, LLL has become of vital importance in the context of demographic change towards an aging society. As the basic education completed at the beginning of one's professional career is considered insufficient in today's rapidly changing environment, the issue of adults seeking access to higher education is becoming more and more prevalent throughout the world.

At Danube University Krems, continuing education is not just a field of training but rather a core competence. The entire educational structure is geared towards the particular standards and requirements of middle-aged professionals and executives guided by the experienced LLL specialists on their way to further career development or professional re-orientation.

The university courses are specifically tailored toward the needs of working professionals. A holistic approach specifically developed for continuing education enables DUK students to deepen their expertise and strengthen their personal competences. DUK operates on eleven parameters of research-based teaching that stemmed from its comprehensive experience in educating heterogeneous groups, promotion of social inclusion and mobility.^{iv}

These eleven parameters are an essential part of the university's development plan (Entwicklungsplan) and serve as the main guidelines in providing higher education at DUK:^v

1. Taking into consideration students' needs and certain life stage characteristics;
2. Using blended learning didactics;
3. Expanding the number of courses offered in English, and the international focus in general;
4. Didactic implementation and use of small groups;
5. Careful selection and mentoring of lecturers with both academic and professional backgrounds;
6. Offering courses of study that are not yet in demand, but might be in the future;
7. Admission of students with non-academic qualifications comparable to academic degrees;
8. Equal representation of the age and gender groups;
9. Providing a culture of positive welcome and social inclusion with the aim to provide services for students with disabilities or chronic illnesses;
10. Offering preparatory courses tailored to the main study programme as well as exam preparation during the course to support students;
11. Granting a variety of scholarships.

Each curriculum must adhere to the standards with these eleven principles, which also have to be mirrored in the quality management and feature in the relevant documents (Entwicklungsplan/Leistungsvereinbarung with Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy). Furthermore, these principles have to be considered in the process of arranging the teaching personnel, because all stakeholder groups need to be accountable along with the principles. Lecturers with high academic profiles are obviously essential for all universities, but for DUK

it is of great importance to employ lecturers and professors with a certain professional background.

3. STAKEHOLDERS

Students

The majority of the student body at Danube University Krems are individuals who have either already completed an academic degree and/or gained a wealth of working experience. They are professionals who want to expand and update their expertise and competences building upon their existing knowledge and experience. Furthermore, DUK is committed to supporting individuals with no prior academic background, which means that the DUK implements a concept of permeability and validation of non-formal and informal qualifications for admittance within the framework of subject-specific acceptance. The professional experience of students is included in the needs assessment and teaching.

Businesses

Since companies are already experiencing demographic challenges, which are intended to be dealt with, through the continuing education at DUK cooperation with local as well as regional and international businesses also play a key role in the provision of DUK's LLL strategy:

- ▶ business partners are actively participating in the process of curriculum design by informing and consulting DUK about their needs and challenges related to the skills and competences provided by the graduates;
- ▶ business' needs are considered in the curricula, through an analysis of the private sector's needs and problems, and are addressed through an 'evidence-based' curriculum design e.g. keeping their employees up-to-date, with the ability to cope with rapid technological development;
- ▶ company representatives are also part of the university's board to advise the university top management on employability and competence building related issues.

Staff

The course leaders and department leaders are responsible for the acquisition of strategic business partners. Before entering any strategic partnership, course leaders are expected to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the needs and problems the companies are facing as well as the analysis of the innovative potential and expected value a certain collaboration can provide. Normally the collaboration evolves in a very formal way when the university's representatives initiate first linkages with potential business partners. However, due to the professional background that the majority of both lecturers and students already have, the cooperation is most often initiated through the existing contact points and alumni networks.

Regional Government

After initiating the creation of the university in the early 90s, the province of Lower Austria has continued to be an important DUK stakeholder. The Lower Austrian State Government finances the campus facilities and supports the university in providing the blended learning infrastructure, which is one of the most common learning and teaching formats applied at DUK. Moreover, the Province of Lower Austria has initiated collaborative endeavours related to both teaching and research. Several years ago, the Lower Austria Health and Social Fund (NÖGUS) started cooperation with the university aiming at providing its employees with a continuous professional development training at DUK. In the framework of the MBA course, Aviation Management, there is an ongoing collaboration with the Airport Vienna, devoted not only to the course development and provision but also to the research activities in the aviation management field.

Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy

In 2004, the former University Center for Further Studies – renamed University of Continuing Education – was deservedly awarded official status as Austria's 22nd public university, thus obtaining the right to appoint professors and firmly establish its scientific reputation. DUK bears the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ Austria) seal of quality in compliance with the Austrian Federal Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education.





Implementation

4. INPUTS

Funding

DUK operates on a total budget of €52m: 70% of which is self-financed, and 30% of which is contributed by the government (2016). The government funding is invested mainly in administrative staff and in the development of teaching fields that are not sufficiently demanded yet, but are significant for society and the Danube University's profile. By 2015 DUK had obtained a total of €5.2m in granted research funding. The university offers both supported and fee-based degree programmes. The students can apply for scholarships provided by the university itself or by several public sponsors.

Human Resources

The university has specific policies for the teaching staff, which encourage employing academics with work experience as an important element of the LLL strategy. In addition, the university employs more than 1,000 external academics and professionals from industry-related fields as the university considers it is of great importance to have highly qualified trainers who have relevant work experience. The university applies a service-oriented approach in providing these professionals with all necessary conditions including logistic solutions for those coming from other cities to teach at DUK, and child care facilities. Overall, DUK has more than 600 employees of whom 50% are academic and the other 50% are administrative staff members. There are more than 400 full-time employees who have an international academic and practical background.^{vi}

Facilities

Concerning students, the university is also committed to providing student-oriented facilities and study services, including the comprehensive blended learning support services. This includes the university's own e-learning centre, with the aim of enabling the provision of sustainable blended learning scenarios. Furthermore, the university offers an academic service centre unit, which provides guidance in career planning and support in dealing with academic issues and personal matters.

DUK shares a campus of 34,000m² with other institutions and provides modern equipment, housing, food service, research and teaching facilities. More than €55m have been invested in order to build these comprehensive and service-oriented facilities. Furthermore, the campus includes a variety of other service functions like cafés, a library with longer working hours, restaurants, documentation centre, cultural and sport programmes, child care facilities and car parking.

5. ACTIVITIES

LLL

As an institution for continuing education, DUK is fully committed to meeting the societal challenges of LLL and offers, in this context, part time academic studies and continuing professional development. This approach is mainly based on the specific requirements for LLL and part time academic studies and combines scientific grounding with practical applicability. The teaching and learning methods and structures are specifically designed to permit a maximum degree of flexibility through the use of modularisation, block courses and blended learning. The study programmes at DUK can be offered in the blended or distance learning format.

Each module of the blended learning programme consists of three different phases:

1. the preparation phase before the module meaning pre-reading and/or self-assessment;
2. the face-to-face courses at the campus; and
3. a post-module phase, when the students work on the coursework or case-studies.

Distance learning programmes remain flexible, so students can adapt them to their individual time resources and current location. The learning process for them is supported by an electronic learning platform, where students may apply and start the programme independent of the traditional academic calendar year.

The pedagogical approach and course materials are tailored directly to the needs of adult professionals. With this aim, academic teaching in DUK is based on six principles of didactics in accordance with its statutory mandate within the framework of continuing education practice:^{vii}

- ▶ Scientific learning – alignment of all learning processes with recent international academic research findings;
- ▶ Practice-based learning – alignment of teaching with the professional experience of the students and acquisition of new professional skills;
- ▶ Activity-based learning – implementation of the genuine activities into the teaching context to facilitate hands-on knowledge;
- ▶ Competence-based learning – development of skills and competences that will help graduates to deal with the complex situations in diverse professional contexts;
- ▶ Outcome-based learning – focus on the learning outcomes as a measurable indicator for the quality assurance;
- ▶ Individualised learning – alignment of teaching with the individual academic backgrounds of the students to promote comprehensive organisation of appropriate teaching programmes.^{viii}

Research

In addition to the basic research in selected specialist fields, DUK is primarily committed to conducting transdisciplinary applied research in collaboration with diverse scientific and business partners, as well as public institutions in Austria and abroad. In recent years, the university has become more acclaimed in this type of research and is active mainly in four particular areas of expertise based on the criteria of international visibility and interdisciplinary: (i) health and medicine; (ii) educational research and LLL; (iii) European integration, migration and economics; and (iv) art, culture and architecture.

The research activities are guided by the current challenges and the needs of professional organisations. This 'challenge-driven' and 'needs-based' research conducted at the university yields important outputs that can be applied in practice not only in the professional world but also in LLL higher education and continuing education. Along with the basic objective of the research activities, DUK aims to produce research results that can be practically applied for the benefit of society and economy as well as teaching process, highlighting the university's commitment to knowledge and technology transfer.

6. OUTPUTS

LLL has the potential to increase learners' engagement in learning and the application of knowledge within a variety of contexts. Every university alumnus is a stakeholder of DUK's LLL strategy. With their existing expertise in diverse areas, obtained leadership skills, new interdisciplinary understanding and knowledge, the alumni have the opportunity to enjoy significant advantages after graduating from DUK in their everyday work life, especially when competing for new positions.

The alumni perspectives survey, which is conducted regularly on an annual basis, reports several significant results confirming the benefits of the continuing education to DUK graduates' occupational status:

- ▶ around 85% of alumni rate the strong value of the personal development through LLL;
- ▶ more than 60% report high level of skills and competence development in the fields of their actual employment;
- ▶ 60% see the benefits of a new academic qualification obtained at DUK;
- ▶ positive expectations towards self-employment are fully met for 50% of the students who were already anticipating to start an entrepreneurial career during their studies at DUK;
- ▶ another 35% of students indicated that DUK has, to some extent, contributed to the development of their entrepreneurial career;
- ▶ 15% of the students have successfully launched their own companies after their studies.

The case of e-government^{ix} is an example of the university's third mission related activities. This research project, in cooperation with the Federal Chancellery, aims at researching the e-governance field and generating policy and managerial implications related to the concept of electronic government and governmental cyber security.

7. IMPACTS

DUK acts as a main regional stakeholder in promoting continuing education, providing the potential for wider benefits for middle-aged professionals and for society at large within its role as a unique and innovative HEI. With its research-based continuing education in a blended learning format, DUK assumes that in the regions where graduates continue working, there are **significant spill-over effects**.

Studying at DUK enables students to develop **new high quality competences, obtain new knowledge and get fresh perspectives and inspiration**. This inevitably contributes to their current and future professional career, particularly for students with no prior academic qualifications.





Support & Influencing factors

8. BARRIERS AND DRIVERS

The biggest issue lies in the **lack of awareness and understanding of the critical need for LLL development and research** especially in the context of higher education both at a national and international level. In this context, the role of the Federal Government in providing continuous education remains essential especially in the light of the recognition problem related to several Master's courses offered at DUK. One significant step towards the desired recognition was however made in **March 2016**, when the National Qualification Framework (NQF) as a response to the European Qualifications Framework (EFQ) was officially presented for the Republic of Austria. NQF aims to include qualifications from all education and training subsystems and forms of learning.^x

Nevertheless, DUK is facing the need of additional **support from the government**, exclusively devoted to raising awareness and mobilising practical actions towards the development of LLL programmes in the non-business and non-economics disciplines since there is a huge labour force in the humanities that needs to be fostered through offering LLL programmes at the universities. While management and business related disciplines can be easily developed towards the continuing education within the university framework, the fields in humanities are still lacking opportunities in this respect.

9. FUTURE CHALLENGES

After more than 20 years of experience, DUK has become a well-established and steadily growing HEI, having a well-developed service-oriented learning and teaching infrastructure. DUK top management is rethinking further development options, putting more effort into **strategic research in the field of LLL**, which is still not yet fully accepted at national as well as at international level.

For the university, one of the main challenges facing DUK is to gain **accreditation for all Master's programmes** since, unfortunately, several Austrian as well as European HEIs still do not share the same vision of the continuing education and general understanding of LLL. In this context DUK is nevertheless pursuing its vision and strategy especially at the national level through active participation and consulting related to the development of the *National Quality Framework*.^{xi} This is aimed at raising *quality* and driving continuous improvement and consistency in Austrian education.

10. CONTEXT

DUK is also committed to the **European LLL Charter**^{xii} which aims to respond to rapid globalisation, demographic transformation and technological change with research-based education. This charter requires HEIs to offer education to a diversified student population, meet

employers' demands and develop strategic university-business cooperation partnerships. The charter states the necessity of governments' high commitment to LLL as one of their missions through its promotion and quality assurance.

Furthermore, the theoretical understanding of an individual as a lifelong learner also has some implications for political practice at the national level. In Austria, this resulted in the strategy for LLL called '**LLL: 2020**',^{xiii} adopted by the Austrian government in July 2011, which enforces the integration of LLL into society and is reflected in DUK's LLL strategy.

11. KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

The following activities are the main factors guaranteeing the success of the LLL concept at DUK:

- ▶ DUK's LLL approach combines focusing on societal impact, innovativeness and high quality orientation in providing study programmes;
- ▶ DUK develops job-related competences through its training and study approaches;
- ▶ DUK provides its students with high flexibility during the studies;
- ▶ DUK leverages collaboration with diverse stakeholders.

The university's mission and vision, in line with existing expertise in continuing education and motivation to contribute to societal development, drive DUK to hold its strong competitive position in the European educational arena in facilitating LLL. **The combination of focusing on societal impact, innovation and quality-oriented approach** provides a strong foundation for the success of the LLL programmes.^{xiv}

Students benefit from high quality competence development in long-lasting training approaches, which encompasses **job-related competence development** and a praxis-oriented interdisciplinary education. DUK ultimately enables students to directly apply the acquired knowledge in their professional lives. In order to facilitate students' attendance, a **maximum degree of flexibility** is provided through block courses or e-learning and is supported by all necessary facilities and study services.

Transdisciplinary applied research in **collaboration with scientific partners and businesses** is another success factor which enables DUK to consistently monitor and comprehensively analyse employer needs and societal challenges of the modern world.



Further Information

12. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

In 2015, the university passed the overall audit of the **Quality Management System** (Austrian Quality Law for universities) to assure quality and performance. Its success is based on continuous development, expansion and integration of the quality instruments and tools for facilitating a comprehensive quality management system and a deeply-rooted quality culture.

The quality strategies, the implementation of principles and standards, the evaluation, monitoring and continuous development of the Quality Management System are applied in the four areas:

- ▶ teaching/scientific professional development;
- ▶ research and development;
- ▶ cross functions – supporting structures and processes;
- ▶ information systems and stakeholder involvement.^{xv}

A '**collaboration audit**' is another element of the quality management framework at DUK devoted to the regular monitoring and evaluation of the existing partnerships with companies and research institutions.

To support the quality assurance of LLL, as well as teaching and research in general, a special administrative unit has been established, **the Office for Quality Management and Teaching Enhancement**, which ensures high quality throughout all processes at the university and offers thorough internal and external quality assurance.

In order to ensure a consistently high standard of education, the quality management system is aligned to the **Act of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (HS-QSG)** and is certified by AQ Austria. In addition to this, DUK engages with specialist quality assurance agencies to accredit their programmes externally.

13. TRANSFERABILITY

There is a similar case in France – the conservatoire national des arts et métiers (le CNAM) – founded in 1794 as an open university – a leading higher education and research institution dedicated to adult continuing education. Even though both universities have been established independently from each other, they use similar approaches in facilitating LLL and providing adults with continuous education.

14. PUBLICATIONS AND ARTICLES

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Kil, M./Motschilnig, R./Thöne-Geyer, B. (2012): What Can Adult Education Accomplish? The Benefits of Adult Learning – The Approach, Measurement and Prospects. English version of German original in: Der Pädagogische Blick - Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft und Praxis in pädagogischen Berufen. 20. Jg., H3, S. 164-175. URL: www.die-bonn.de/doks/2013-benefits-en-01.pdf

15. LINKS

Danube University Krems. Lifelong Learning Strategy <http://www.donau-uni.ac.at/de/universitaet/ueberuns/lifelonglearning/index.php>

Danube University Krems. Pedagogical Approach of Danube University Krems <http://www.donau-uni.ac.at/de/universitaet/ueberuns/didaktisches-leitbild/index.php>

16. CONTACT PERSON



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- ^{ix} <http://www.donau-uni.ac.at/en/departement/gpa/telematik/>
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