

Inclusive universities 'best placed to deliver'

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Universities that accept a broad range of students and offer lifelong-learning opportunities - specifically, those of Australia, the UK and Denmark - have the best higher education systems in terms of responding to economic and social challenges, **according to Brussels-based think tank the Lisbon Council.**

"In an era of knowledge, access to education is a key policy goal, which reaps tremendous social and economic dividends," said Lisbon Council President Paul Hofheinz, commenting on a study of tertiary education systems among 17 OECD countries, published on 18 November.

The study argues that overall, Australia, the United Kingdom and Denmark have the best tertiary education systems of the countries surveyed, ranking first, second and third respectively. This is because their universities accept the broadest range of students, both domestic and foreign, without lowering their educational standards. Inclusiveness attracts foreign students, which in turn gives countries an advantage in the global race for talent, the authors suggest.

In addition, all three countries are "frontrunners in the effort to offer continuing education to adults after they have left the formal education system," allowing large numbers of people to benefit from access to lifelong learning and, consequently, stay competitive on the labour market.

By contrast, Germany and Austria, which rank 15th and 16th respectively, suffer from the restrictiveness of their educational systems. "They turn away the most number of students from higher education, and as a result offer higher education to a relatively low number of people," argues the report.

As for Spain, ranked last, the report suggests that it should address "the apparent discrepancy between the subjects taught in university and the skills sought on the labour market".

"Our systems are too elitist and exclusive. They do not offer enough educational opportunity to enough people throughout their lifetimes," said Dr. Peer Ederer, the principal author of the study, adding that tertiary education systems are not delivering the social and economic demands of modern, knowledge-based economies.

In late October, the European University Association adopted a Charter on Lifelong Learning, committing universities to broadening access to higher education in response to growing demands to raise employability of students.