

EDITORIAL UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING AS FLEXIBLE LEARNING

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Now, more than ever, there is a growing recognition that education is a lifelong process, and that it plays a crucial role in addressing the most significant challenges that Europe is facing today. Technology has proven to be an indispensable tool in tackling societal challenges and in overcoming unexpected situations, such as the pandemic. However, the digitalisation process, which has already significantly transformed our societies, must also ensure citizens' active participation in democratic decision-making, help to create better and fairer workplaces, and support sustainable development.

Universities are in a unique position to equip learners with the necessary skills and expertise they need to play an active part in these processes and to adapt to our rapidly changing societies. In order to ensure learner-centredness, flexibility is key to university lifelong learning. Flexibility for universities as institutions concerns as much changes internally as reaching out to learners (Sonne, 2023). Flexible learning for learners means learning according to one's own needs, includes learning at one's own pace, and having a choice on the place, and on the mode of delivery according to one's own needs (Advance HE, 2019; Gordon, 2014). This model of flexibility has been advanced by Andrade & Alden-Rivers (2019) as the fourth axis of access to learning.

On a broader scale, university lifelong learning as flexible learning includes four dimensions of learning: *digital learning* for using technology to access knowledge, *professional learning* for the enhancement of talents, *responsible learning* for connecting learning with the community and *inclusive learning* for a world where everyone is welcome. Taking flexible learning as a common frame of reference, the eucen autumn 2022 activities focused on approaches, projects, and practices of university lifelong learning that put the spotlight on one or more of these dimensions. Accordingly, this volume of the European Journal of University Lifelong Learning (EJULL) addresses flexible learning and its dimensions as *Contemporary Issues in University Lifelong Learning*, including the ULLL Open Fora 2022 (eucen, n.d.) and the 2022 eucen autumn seminar (eucen, 2022) as eucen autumn activities.

EUCEN AUTUMN ACTIVITIES

The eucen autumn activities in 2022 included the eucen ULLL Open Fora and the eucen autumn seminar in Barcelona. The ULLL Open Fora is a series of short online activities started by eucen during the Covid-19 pandemic in November 2020. In one month, we focus on four hot topics in each of the four weeks. The ULLL Open Fora provide a stage for short presentations and in-depth discussions, each week starting with a master class - an introduction to the topic by an expert from academia, policy, or business sharing his or her insights. After short presentations on the following days, a panel discussion concludes the week's topic with key stakeholders and presenters. The eucen autumn seminar, which took place from 17 to 18 November 2022 in Barcelona after two years of suspension due to the pandemic, was structured to stimulate dialogue, gather new ideas and work together towards new projects and collaborations. It allowed time for interaction and open discussion.

LIFELONG LEARNING AS FLEXIBLE LEARNING AND ITS FOUR DIMENSIONS

The eucen autumn activities 2022 focused on university lifelong learning as flexible learning and encouraged contributions relating to issues and questions concerning its four dimensions: *digital learning*, *professional learning*, *responsible learning* and *inclusive learning*.

Digital learning

Digitalisation and the use of technology in education pose some crucial questions: How is technology influencing education and what are the latest developments in the sector of *digital learning*? What role do virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, distributed ledger technology, gamification, and other technological innovations play? How can we use these tools in our classrooms and how can they replace or complement more traditional learning approaches?

Responsible learning

Besides research and teaching, universities have a so-called third mission and a responsibility to engage with their communities and address societal challenges from local to global, including rising unemployment, growing economic inequalities and climate change. Questions connected to that are: How do universities currently address these challenges? What can they do to provide their communities in well-connected urban environments or in rural areas with the necessary skills and knowledge to develop in a sustainable manner, and what is the role of community-based research? How do universities themselves benefit from this community engagement and research, including student placements or continuing professional development for university staff?

Professional learning

In light of the constant labour market demands for different and better skills, university lifelong learning plays a key role in delivering the required training while supporting professional learning. Universities provide technology-based teaching and learning approaches to support continuing education of individuals and to address skill requirements of the labour market. How are higher education institutions meeting this demand? Through which tools can university lifelong learning help learners develop their full economic potential? How can learners' new skills be made visible and be recognised? And, how can ULLL remain ahead of the labour market demands and offer programmes relevant to industry?

Inclusive learning

The European Commission states that ‘making higher education systems inclusive and connected to society requires providing the right conditions for students of different backgrounds to succeed’ (European Commission, n.d.). Opening up to diversity, and fostering humanistic and democratic values, entails embedding them as key principles in institutional policies and implementing them through concrete actions. What are our universities doing to become more inclusive and welcoming? Which steps need to be taken to become a genuinely inclusive organisation? How to sustain a democratic culture, humanistic values, and human rights?

CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONTENT

In this volume of the journal, we present a collection of five papers, all of them addressing one or even two dimensions of university lifelong learning. Four of them are shaped as innovative practice papers, offering a closer look at certain practices, approaches or projects that are either in progress or have been completed, and critically reflecting on their impact within the university or beyond. One paper is a *research paper*, drawing on theoretical debates, contextualised within current national and international policy debate, and reporting on project-based research done.

All papers share unique perspectives on flexible learning at universities and offer innovative approaches and practices to support it. All of them are based on insights and findings of European or national projects. Likewise, they all share the issue of project funding, and hence, sustainability of innovation.

The first innovative practice paper is dedicated to *inclusive learning*. *Angela Scanlon, Ursula McTaggart and Shauna McCloy* from Ulster University in Northern Ireland, UK explore how education, employers and specialist organisations and disabled graduates could collaborate in order to achieve inclusive recruitment, onboarding, and early career transition into employment within a Graduate Boost Project. This paper captures both the employer and graduate perspectives as the programme team build an enhanced understanding and guidance for inclusive recruitment practice which can ensure the onboarding of graduate talent and skills to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse workforce.

The second innovative practice paper combines *responsible learning* with inclusion and provides a good example of community learning in Ireland. *Derek Barter and Sinead Hyland* from Maynooth University in Ireland discuss here how “Communiversities” – a three-way partnership between Maynooth University, community-based organisations in the form Local Development Companies and the public library service – is targeting people experiencing ‘exclusion’ not only from a socio-economic standpoint but also in terms of age, mental health, addiction recovery, disability and other forms of marginalisation.

Digital learning is captured by the next two short papers which explore the role of instructional design in e-learning planning. In the third innovative practice paper, *Jenny Good and Vanessa Holtgrave* from University of Massachusetts Global, USA, discuss the iDEAL model of learning, which focuses on learning-centred approaches in online teaching with an emphasis on diversity, equity, experiential learning and use of technology. The authors describe innovative instructional design approaches in online learning that highlight the ongoing need for fair, accessible, and inclusive course content. Additionally, they put a spotlight on the use of media to engage learners and provide opportunities for students to demonstrate learning through their preferred means of knowledge acquisition.

The next paper deals with the development of micro-credentials programmes which is a new and important trend in the European educational landscape. *Neill Wylie, Laura Widger, Valerie Brett and Helen Murphy* from South East Technological University in Ireland evaluate the collaborative development of six micro-credentials in the area of basic skills within an Erasmus+ project. They critically explore design considerations for micro-credential development, emphasising the importance of choosing an appropriate instructional design framework.

The final paper is dedicated to *professional learning* and focuses on work-based learning (WBL). In this research paper *Kirstin Sonne* from eucen introduces the UniLab project experience. Today, higher education (HE) should not only provide students with subject-specific knowledge, but also equip them with transferrable, work-related skills. She explores the experiences of staff members within four universities in Azerbaijan and Belarus involved in UniLab, and the challenges they faced in promoting WBL, both within their institutions and among relevant external stakeholders. The paper identifies several enabling factors, such as universities' connections with key stakeholders, student involvement, and the exchange with EU partner universities.

In the concluding "Three questions to..." *Eva Cendon and Gary Husband* discuss openness, flexibility and the role of AI in university-industry partnerships.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of our journal and that it is stimulating and inspiring for you – as the work on this edition was for us. And we thank all our authors for sharing their insights and reflections and all our reviewers for their support in making the articles accessible for an international readership.

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