

# THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION IN EUROPE. THREE QUESTIONS TO JOOST KORTE

**Wieger BAKKER**  
Utrecht University, NL

**Joost KORTE**  
European Commission, BE

Email: [w.e.bakker@uu.nl](mailto:w.e.bakker@uu.nl)

*Joost Korte graduated from the Faculty of Law at Utrecht University in 1983. Since then, he has held several directive positions at different European institutions, including Deputy Director-General of DG Enlargement (ELARG), Deputy Director-General of DG Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI) responsible for Directorates C, D and E, and Deputy Director-General of DG TRADE responsible for Directorates E, F, G and H. In 2018 he became Director-General of DG Employment, social affairs and inclusion (DG EMPL).*

**Wieger Bakker:** Why is university continuous education relevant for Europe and for the EU?

**Joost Korte:** Supporting a skilled and agile workforce is a priority for the Union. The issue of skills is high on the political agenda and is recognised as a key driver for the EU's competitiveness, strategic autonomy and prosperity. In this context, the [European Year of Skills](#), which started on 9 May 2023 and will run until 8 May 2024, has as its main objective to promote a mindset of upskilling and reskilling.

University continuous education is equally as important as continuing vocational training in the context of the European Year of Skills to promote this shift in mindset, helping adults refresh, broaden and raise their skills levels. Universities have as their core mission to prepare and shape the labour force of tomorrow, helping address societal and economic challenges based on their experience with teaching as well as their research. This is why universities must be essential players in lifelong learning and skills development, which needs to become the norm.

The latest [autumn economic forecast](#) shows that our labour markets remain resilient, with an average unemployment rate in the EU of 6%, which is close to an all-time low. However, labour shortages persist in many sectors. University continuous education therefore plays an important role in tackling these labour market bottlenecks and supporting the green and digital transition of our economies.

The European Year of Skills raises awareness about the importance of upskilling and reskilling throughout professional careers, in line with the first principle of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), whereby everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning. University continuous education is essential in making this right a

reality and to achieve the [EU headline target](#) of at least 60% of all adults participating in learning every year by 2030.

In order to reach this target, the [European Social Fund Plus](#), which is the EU's main instrument for investing in people, is allocating EUR 15 billion towards adult skills development in the 2021-2027 programming period.

**Wieger Bakker:** In your opinion, what role should universities take up concerning UCE? What is your assignment for them?

**Joost Korte:** I invite universities to explore how they can actively contribute to the [European Year of Skills](#) and further promote a mindset of upskilling and reskilling. Not only through their regular programmes, but also through the development of short training courses that focus on skills that are relevant for the labour market and that can lead to micro-credentials, in line with the definition provided in the [Council Recommendation on micro-credentials](#) for lifelong learning and employability, adopted over a year ago in June 2022. [eucen](#) can serve as a platform for sharing best practices among its members.

In addition, [eucen](#) can support the implementation of the [Upskilling Pathways](#) Council Recommendation, which aims to help adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills, or progress towards an upper secondary qualification. A [recent evaluation](#) of the recommendation showed only moderate progress in its implementation in EU Member States. In this context, [eucen](#) members have a deep-rooted expertise in seeking pedagogy, and in reaching out to those who are most in need of up- and reskilling. [eucen](#) can help forge partnerships with vocational education and training organisations, companies, civil society and with regional and local authorities to improve the effectiveness of programmes aimed at basic skills improvement.

The role of [eucen](#) in the [Adult Learning Working Group](#), where we support countries in implementing the [European Skills Agenda](#) to help people acquire the skills they need throughout their lives, is highly valued. Networks like [eucen](#) continuously share innovative ideas and best practices. I encourage [eucen](#) to keep contributing to the many ongoing initiatives, and even explore new possibilities for creating a culture of learning and helping people develop the right skills.

**Wieger Bakker:** How does the EU support universities to fulfil this role?

**Joost Korte:** Continuous education is part of the many roles and missions of higher education institutions across Europe, as highlighted in the [European strategy for universities](#) of January 2022. The [Council recommendation on micro-credentials](#) provides a clear definition and European standards and guidelines to support universities and other providers in the development of micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability purposes.

In addition, the EU supports the cooperation of universities with each other and with other stakeholders through funding and several initiatives aiming to equip people with skills throughout their lives. Fifty [European Universities alliances](#), involving 430 higher education institutions and 1700 associated partners such as enterprises, regions, cities and NGOs, are paving the way for the transformation of higher education, and equipping students and lifelong learners with future-proof skills, supported through Erasmus Plus. During the 2021-2027 programming period, [Erasmus+](#) will allocate around EUR 1.1 billion to the [European Universities initiative](#). This means up to EUR 14.4 million available for each European Universities alliance over four years.

Many universities already participate in the 18 large-scale skills partnerships under the [Pact for Skills](#), which is providing opportunities to approximately 10 million people to learn new skills. These partnerships can be funded each with EUR 4 billion from Erasmus+. I welcome the fact that [eucen](#) has signed up for the pact, and I invite your members to actively engage in large-scale and regional and local skills partnerships.

Another important role is linked to the Net-Zero Industry Academies: the development of these academies, to be established as part of the proposed [Net-Zero Industry Act](#), will enhance skills for net-zero technologies by setting up dedicated training programmes. The European Academies for batteries, solar technologies, hydrogen, raw materials cybersecurity and the [New Bauhaus Academy](#) aim to design training material for learners in these strategic areas. The actual delivery of programmes will remain the responsibility of education and training institutions; universities will therefore be crucial partners.

University continuous education is at the core of the [European Skills Agenda](#). [eucen](#) and the universities it represents are therefore crucial partners in our ambition to help people develop the skills they need in times of great societal changes. To conclude, I would like to thank [eucen](#) for its support as ambassadors in promoting the [European Year of Skills](#).

**Wieger Bakker:** Thank you very much.