

# REMOVING FINANCIAL BARRIERS TO CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

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## ABSTRACT

The University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI) offers continuing education courses that help already qualified and experienced professionals maintain their competitiveness in the changing labour market to avoid the risk of exclusion. However, the self-funding system for continuing education limits accessibility for disadvantaged groups because courses are offered at market price, and not everyone can afford the cost. An initiative was outlined to seek alternative funding sources to make SUPSI's CE courses more inclusive by covering the needs of specific disadvantaged groups.

Raising awareness and interacting with active employees in continuing education is crucial to ensuring the initiative's success. We therefore decided to launch an internal communication campaign to promote a more inclusive continuing education culture and proactivity towards finding potential alternative sources of funding. A dedicated newsletter combined with meetings and individual counselling were the main tools identified to implement the campaign. This initiative aims to create a culture that encourages the identification of specific needs and promotes a participatory and inclusive vision.

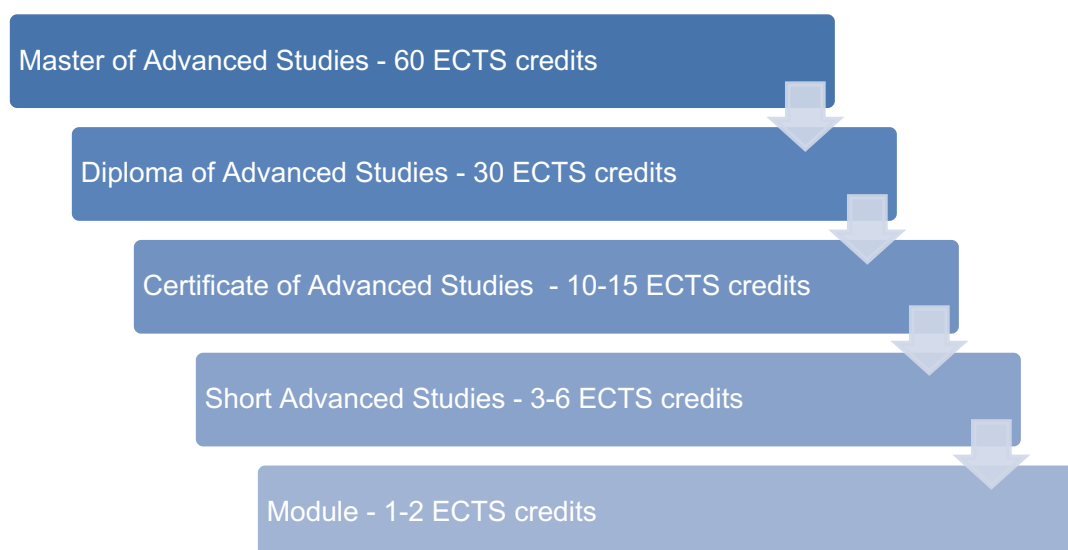
## CONTINUING EDUCATION IN SWITZERLAND AND ITS BENEFITS

Continuing education (CE) at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), based in Canton Ticino, Switzerland, is part of the Swiss education system defined by the federal legislative framework (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2019). It has a mission assigned by federal legislation (Fedlex, 2017; Swissuniversities, 2023b) to continuously update the skills of experienced professional adults to enable them to adapt to changes and evolutions in the labour market in anticipation of the risk of exclusion. SUPSI's CE is interdisciplinary, combining the diverse disciplinary fields of its four departments and three affiliated schools (SUPSI, 2023).

The CE courses at SUPSI have a modular architecture (Figure 1). In 2022, the structure consisted of 360 modules between 1 and 2 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), 482 Short Advanced Studies (SAS) courses, 732 Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) courses, 109 Diploma of Advanced Studies (DAS) courses, and 78 Master of Advanced Studies (MAS) courses. These types of courses award ECTS credits in varying degrees proportional to the length of the training and the amount of effort exerted by the participant. These

advanced studies certifications are not part of the formal European system of qualification and their value is recognised by the labour market. Such programmes have a big impact on the educational participation of work-experienced adults (Cendon et al., 2020).

Admission to these programmes requires a tertiary degree awarded by one of three types of universities (universities of applied arts and sciences, universities of teacher education and universities of federal institutes of technology) or issued by one of two types of professional education (colleges of higher education and federal examinations), together with sufficient professional experience in the relevant field of the study programme. Holders of lower-level degrees may be admitted only in exceptional cases.



*Figure 1. SUPSI Continuing Education Architecture.*

Numerous courses, seminars, webinars and events open to the public that do not award ECTS credits are also offered. They are designed both to spread good practices and to keep the various communities of practice and alumni active. The latter ensures that knowledge is disseminated to as many people as possible in their local areas.

Overall, 11,306 people participated in our CE courses in 2022, with an average age of 38 years for women and 40 years for men. This is a significant figure relative to the number of inhabitants of the Canton of Ticino (308,662 people) and especially its working population of 178,168 people, of whom 79,181 are cross border workers from neighbouring Italy.

## **AVOIDING LABOUR MARKET EXCLUSION**

Continuing education helps keep people active in the labour market longer and thus constitutes a preventive measure against unemployment. It also improves employment status and, consequently, earnings, both of which are factors that affect wellbeing (CSRE, 2023). Continuing education is, by nature, inclusive and accessible, as it welcomes people from diverse backgrounds.

The highly dynamic labour market also impacts the urgency for CE. Many workers frequently change jobs and, therefore, need to keep up to date, partly because the more dynamic a job is, the more workers need to remain competitive (CSRE, 2023).

## SELF-FUNDING

According to The Federal Law on CE (Art. 9 LFCo 2017; Fedlex, 2017) the university continuing education (UCE) of the Swiss Universities of Applied Arts and Sciences (UAS) (Swissuniversities, 2023a), which is characterised by a self-funding system, is offered at prices that allow full coverage of costs and cannot be in competition with unsubsidised private offers. In this system UCE differs from traditional academic education (bachelor's and master's degree) and research, but also differs from other European countries, especially non-German-speaking countries (Cendon et al., 2020). As a result, the courses offered are priced according to their market value, which is not always affordable for the most unrepresented groups of participants. According to the annual monitoring of SUPSI's CE graduates, it appears that most of the costs of attending CE courses are covered by the participants. In some cases, employees can receive dedicated time off for their CE course. Exceptions to this include teachers in compulsory schools, whose CE is fully funded by the canton, and employees of public hospitals, who receive partial cost coverage. Alternative funding initiatives could help identify needs with respect to reskilling and avoid labour market exclusion. Alternative funding initiatives could also assist in developing means to answer these needs, which cannot be covered under the current UCE self-funding system.

## CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR THE BENEFIT OF SPECIFIC GROUPS

Despite being actively employed, workers do not always have the financial capacity to undertake CE training experiences, and there is no guarantee that they will be able to find financial support from their employers or family networks. This was confirmed by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO), which conducted a survey in 2021 that found that 29% of the population aged 25–74 could not undertake CE. In 20% of these cases, the combination of the high cost of CE and family needs was the primary reason for this barrier (FSO, 2023a).

In addition to identifying the needs of active professionals who, for various reasons, cannot afford the training, we focused on disadvantaged people – professionals with specific needs – and thus drew on situations that could be relevant to the SUPSI context. One example is people over 55 who are at risk of leaving or who have already left the labour market. According to the FSO (2023b), although more young people (7.5%) are affected by unemployment than older people, older people can also be affected (3.9%). In addition, people over 55 comprise the age group that engages in the least CE because the higher returns generated by training are applied in a short time that does not compensate for the costs compared with a younger person who will work more years before retiring (CSRE, 2023). Women may also constitute a disadvantaged group, as unemployment affects more women (4.6%) than men (4.1%) (FSO, 2023b), and work leave to care for children may increase this risk. Immigrants are also affected by unemployment more frequently (7.2%) than Swiss nationals (3.2%) (FSO, 2023b).

The FSO (2023a) confirmed these figures, stating that in 2021, 30% of the people who were interested in pursuing CE but could not were unemployed, and 18% had a migration background.

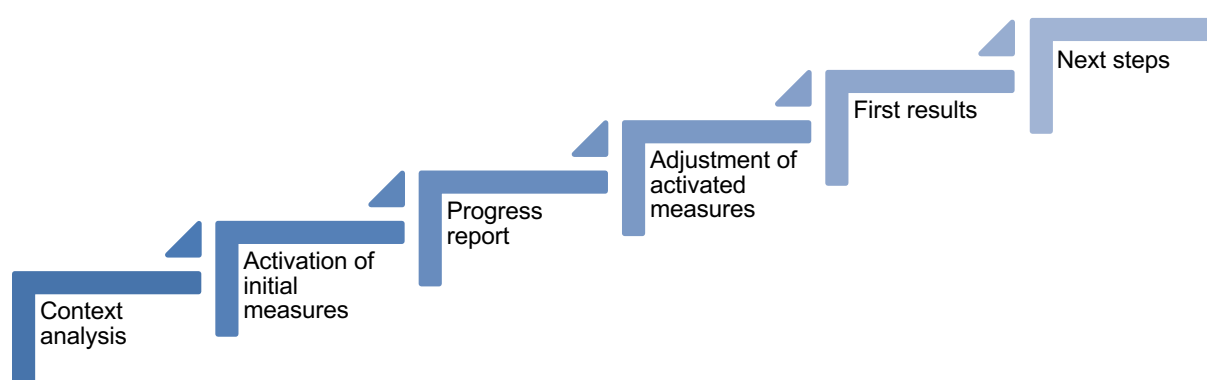
## CREATE A PROACTIVE MINDSET FOR SEARCHING FOR ALTERNATIVE FUNDING SOURCES

In Switzerland the Swiss Confederation and Cantons may support financially CE measures regarding the furtherance of basic competences for adults (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2023).

They do not give support to reskill or upskill in advanced or specialised courses, such as those offered in the UAS (State Secretariat for Migration, 2024).

Given this challenging background, we investigated how to make our courses and programmes more accessible and inclusive for the disadvantaged groups mentioned above. We prioritised the creation of a cultural environment conducive to acquiring alternative sources of funding in a self-funding system. Therefore, the initiative focused on raising awareness of the needs of these disadvantaged groups among SUPSI's CE course managers in order to support their participation (Figure 2), thus fulfilling a social commitment (Cendon et al., 2020).

## PARTICIPATORY ACTIONS TO DEVELOP AN ENABLING CULTURAL CONTEXT



*Figure 2. Initiative Action Plan.*

A survey questionnaire, which collected data about the sociodemographic and professional characteristics of participants, was sent to SUPSI's CE course managers. The results highlighted the case histories of potential participants who expressed a need for financial support due to their particular personal or professional situations.

After this situation analysis was conducted, the first measures to implement the initiative were activated. First, thematic categories were defined to direct the search for alternative funding sources. These included a broad and diverse spectrum of options, such as the following:

1. Targeting disadvantaged people such as women, people over 55, immigrants, and individuals with light neurodiversity (Asperger's syndrome, dyslexia, dyscalculia, attention disorder, etc.),
2. Designing transformative CE programmes that foster a change in personal perspective (Mezirow, 2000) and that promote reskilling and employability, acting indirectly on inclusion,
3. Co-designing inclusive programmes in collaboration with strategic prior partners, because the identified funding bodies can provide financial resources as well as expertise on their issues,
4. Researching innovative, learning-oriented CE for older adults with skills and experience, the results of which could benefit disadvantaged people (category 1) and transformative CE programmes (category 2) by applying to competitive programmes that support research programmes (e.g., Erasmus+),

5. Marketing solutions to encourage access for the most disadvantaged people, such as promoting donations to activate a dedicated fund to support the five categories mentioned above and purchasing gift vouchers on the SUPSI website, in order to make it possible for individuals wishing to give a gift opportunity to participate in a continuing education course to financially support the courses.

Potential initiatives that fall into one of these five categories will be monitored amid dedicated foundation channels, through newsletters that funding institutions send out regularly, and by online research selected for suitability and then disseminated to the internal network. Usually, cross-cutting to the areas of interest of the departments and affiliated schools' initiatives are selected to ensure that all can have the opportunity to take advantage of identified sources in the same way. After drawing up these five streams of potential fundraising research, we considered how to activate an outreach campaign to mobilise employees involved in CE to take a proactive attitude towards such research. We did this after analysing the context in which SUPSI CE exists and its potential participants with their respective needs, and we explored a new approach oriented towards the five identified categories (Gregory, 2020).

Therefore, an attempt was made to open and facilitate a communication channel with the employees involved in CE to proactively promote the identified funding initiatives. To this end, a biweekly newsletter was created to generate interest in the proposed themes. The recipients of the newsletter were individuals who had direct contact with the course participants. A mailing list was compiled to include course leaders, faculty, and administrative staff. More direct bilateral contacts in the form of specific informal meetings or internal events were also encouraged.

In parallel with these internal communication measures, efforts were made to expand the external relations with foundations, entities, or institutions that contributed information to the newsletter and with whom contact was established to find funding opportunities for the initiatives. We then assessed the effectiveness of these measures. Through timely and informal exchanges with the recipients of the newsletter, we realised that using email dissemination posed an obstacle, as the recipients received numerous emails every day, and for that reason, the newsletter was not being widely read.

Based on these findings, the previously introduced measures were adjusted. Email newsletters are now uploaded to a content management system software platform, and a team collaboration platform is used to notify recipients of the publication of a new edition. One advantage of this approach is that platforms are already used daily by all SUPSI employees, changing it from a one-sided to a collaborative communication approach.

In addition, an intervention was implemented regarding the presentation of issues. Now, the relevant issues are covered in depth over several editions, following a common thread. The topic is presented, data is provided, a survey is administered to the newsletter recipients and the results of this kind of interaction are presented, suggesting the development of projects that could potentially be funded by donors. Previously, topics were promoted as food for thought without any particular insight into where the interest lay. Also, more timely and specific additional content is posted between newsletters, which increases opportunities for interaction with the community.

At the same time, the expansion of external networking continues. Contacted organisations will not necessarily contribute financially to CE projects but may become partners in the co-construction of potentially fundable inclusive programmes (see research cluster 3). To ensure communication effectiveness, a record is kept of the organisations contacted and why they were contacted.

With this new communication approach, 10% of the network's recipients activated a contact to learn more about the proposed topic. The aim of this approach is to promote the creation of a cultural environment conducive to attracting funds in which employees who are active in CE are alerted to potential funding initiatives related to their professional contexts, based on a participatory model in which everyone brings their own added value and is actively involved in the initiative development process (Branch, 2002). Indeed, the exchange of information and the identification of funding sources can inspire the development of new ideas because project themes are provided, in which a need is recognised that can also be financed. By acting only at the central level, this process cannot take place. Thus, motivation and employee engagement are leveraged to support more inclusive CE.

## **FROM INTRODUCING A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL TO FOSTERING A SHARED CULTURE**

Involving and interacting with employees is important for expanding the initiative because it not only allows them to put into practice the skills and knowledge of colleagues (Campbell et al., 2012) but also to more easily reach their individual knowledge networks (Adler and Know, 2002), which are based on their field of interest because each one works in a different area due to SUPSI's organisational structure, which includes four departments with different areas of interest coordinated by a central CE direction. Skills and knowledge are intended to be enhanced for greater effectiveness of the initiative (Barney et al., 2011). In fact, the CE direction can extend to all areas of interest of the departments and affiliated schools through active employees who are experts in their target context (Branch, 2002).

With this type of internal communication channel, suggestions of fundable project ideas that can be co-designed with other stakeholders with common interests can be given and shared. Collaborators who launch projects are paired with internal facilitators who can assist them with the design. The role of the internal facilitator is twofold: 1) to present funding initiatives to the interested party and accompany them in the drafting of the project, and 2) to monitor projects to avoid overlap and ensure that the same financial support sources are not solicited by multiple employees.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The CE landscape in Switzerland is highly diversified with numerous options for different target groups (CSRE, 2018). This diversified and complex context has an impact on the quality and the relevance of the statistical data, which are assessed only in an aggregated way (Rageth et al., 2022). In other words, data regarding only UAS CE are not available from the FSO (2023a; 2023b), but are aggregated with those of other CE providers in Switzerland.

Moreover, the applicability of the practice, especially in other countries, is difficult precisely because the Swiss model of CE is not included in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (Europass, 2024). This prevents its clear comparability with other contexts. In implementing the initiative, it was decided that the action field would be restricted to the first category of the five presented, namely, that dedicated to disadvantaged groups. Future extension to other categories will enhance the impact of good practice.



## CONCLUSIONS

This network outreach process not only secures financial support for certain scientific activities and projects but also supports the mission to satisfy social needs. Indeed, identifying financial support sources coincides with identifying the needs of specific groups or organisations. For example, a foundation with its statutes aims to support a specific group of people who have certain characteristics or needs. Discovering these needs makes those working for CE aware of which realities are sometimes overlooked in today's society.

With this initiative, therefore, an effort was made to identify an aim that would create the appropriate commitment and engagement of the CE network collaborators. Efforts were then made to achieve this goal through newsletters and bilateral talks between facilitators and collaborators. The results of these interactions were tracked and will serve as the basis for defining an organisational culture and establishing common values and norms of behaviour conducive to seeking alternative funding sources (Kotter, 2008).

Promoting a new culture takes time and is not an automatic process. In this case, organisational communication, whose purpose is to convey an organisation's mission to its employees, plays an important role in making this strategic initiative effective (Gochhayat et al., 2017). It's an engagement approach that could be extended to other universities, inciting people to action by increasing their awareness and responsibility for the challenges of today's society. It is a best practice that could be transferred to other European universities as a method of participatory communication that can help create a transformative competence and future readiness that even teachers and study course managers at universities must have in order to continuously adapt their courses to the emerging needs of people and organisations (Foo Seong Ng and Chua, 2023).

A participatory communication model can be effective when accompanying changes or responding to complex challenges. It is a step-by-step approach that does not provide immediate results, which over time creates active involvement in the community in which it is applied and promotes future-oriented thinking and solutions to the challenges of our society. For us as SUPSI's CE, these challenges include finding innovative and participative solutions to make the provision of courses accessible and financially sustainable to today's underrepresented and disadvantaged publics.

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