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Resilience and Agility in Times of Change

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EDITORIAL
LEADING POSITIVE CHANGE IN CHALLENGING TIMES

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Contingency increasingly shapes our world. We are living in a time of constant change and increasing complexity in which it is becoming ever more challenging to predict the future. The cocktail of emerging, interlinking and existential challenges include climate change, migration, security, health, advances in technology including artificial intelligence, misinformation and a rapidly transforming world of work (Global Challenges Foundation, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2024). These challenges interact in complex ways that multiply their overall impact (Swilling, 2013). Navigating these issues and a (poly)crisis of this scale demands new future-oriented approaches and novel ways of managing the present and conceptualising the future.

On a global level, UNESCO is trying to get a grip on the future via the *Futures of Education Initiative,* emphasising the role of education for a common world and a shared future by 2050 and beyond (UNESCO, 2021). The associated *Futures of Higher Education project* focuses on the future of higher education by 2050 and the contribution of universities to a better future in 2050 (UNESCO & IESALC, 2021). At the European level, the European Commission is focusing on the topic of the future of universities through a *European Strategy for Universities*, which recognises the need for future-proof education and 'future-proof skills' (European Commission, 2022, p.4) to be promoted through innovative pedagogical approaches at universities. One central feature in this strategy is the *European Universities Initiative* (European Commission, 2024), first launched in 2018, and already in its fifth iteration, with around 500 engaged higher education institutions from across Europe. The commission calls for increased responsibility of universities in addressing the challenges ahead of us: "Beyond their core tasks of teaching, research and innovation, universities are key actors in Europe to address big societal challenges, being true engines of development for cities and regions and promoting civic engagement. In addition, students from all across the continent seek high-quality and meaningful study opportunities to evolve professionally and personally" (European Commission, 2024, p.1). In his recent report on the future of European competitiveness, Mario Draghi states the necessity to reignite productivity and sustain growth in Europe. To be able to make that happen, he, among others, emphasises

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the need for and the urgency of increasing the percentage of the population that participates in adult education significantly (Draghi, 2024, p.37). Last but not least, the role of university lifelong learning (ULLL) in equipping higher education institutions for the future has been stated by eucen (Royo et al., 2021, p. 3), with special focus (among others) on:

- marginalised groups and strategies for widening participation; inclusion and equal opportunities;
- transversal and hence future skills;
- permeable pathways that are open to people entering and leaving higher education at various points in life; and
- research, development and innovation in learning cities-regions and learning communities from the scope of intergenerational and intercultural learning.

In this environment of uncertainty and disruption, ULLL plays a twofold key role: One main task is helping individuals and society stay abreast of today's challenges. At the same time, ULLL is increasingly called upon to support individuals and organisations in meeting the challenges of tomorrow and dealing with uncertainties in a constructive way (Yang, Schneller & Roche, 2015; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022).

The focus of the eucen 2024 conference in Cork was to reflect on the significant role ULLL has to play in equipping people with resilience and agility so that they can cope with and thrive in times of change. With a tripartite focus on learners, the university, and society, the 2024 conference aimed to showcase the significant impact of ULLL in leading positive change across Europe and beyond.

- The first stream of the conference explored *how ULLL can act as a vehicle for empowering learners to succeed in a complex and uncertain world*, especially for those from marginalised or disadvantaged groups. This is a call for change: In reaching out to those groups via forms of widening participation through ULLL; in supporting these learners to develop knowledge and skills to flourish in both their personal and professional lives; and in engaging in new ways of designing programmes.
- The second stream of the conference focused on *how universities might need to change to succeed in this new reality*. This poses questions of a culture of lifelong learning in universities that go beyond structures and impact underlying principles, beliefs, values and assumptions. But this also includes questions around existing approaches, structures, and modes of delivery. As such, the future role of the university itself can be challenged – and with it the role and the future of ULLL.
- The third stream of the conference explored *the reach of ULLL beyond the university and focused on partnership-building*. In order to meet the needs of learners, universities need to reach out beyond their walls and engage with learners wherever they are - in the community, in business, in industry, in public institutions or in the non-governmental sector. Through building partnerships and working collaboratively with key stakeholders, the impact of ULLL (and hence the whole university) can be substantially enhanced.

This volume of the European Journal for University Lifelong Learning includes a selection of papers that address the topic of the EUCEN 2024 conference from different angles. They all focus on change in one way or another, thereby elucidating and exploring different fields where ULLL is leading or driving change: with regard to the learners, the university, and society.

The opening research paper of this volume provides insights on change with regard to the curriculum designing processes of adult educators at University College Cork. *Finola*

McCarthy and Leslie Cordie provide us with some background on the long-established tradition of adult education courses at university in the Irish context. In their study, they focus on the development of curricula in different ULLL programmes that emerge in the college design process of adult educators, and look at common themes and principles. The research builds on an innovative, participatory methodology - concept mapping – being used for both data gathering and data analysis.

The following two innovative practice papers explore change with regard to ULLL programmes - both crossing boundaries in different ways.

The article by *Annemieke Maas, Marie Lesterhuis, Annette van Royen-Kerkhof, Hannah Verbeek and Stefan van Geelen* takes an interprofessional and interdisciplinary perspective on facilitating change in the context of healthcare and continuous professional development (CPD) in the Netherlands. In their paper, the group of authors, as educationalists, physicians and philosophers being interdisciplinary themselves, share their insights on the development and piloting of a training for healthcare professionals that crosses professional boundaries and helps the participants to train adaptive expertise by enhancing their situational awareness through working in the Arts.

The innovative practice paper by *Jorie Soltic and Benedicte Seynhaeve* from Flanders, Belgium, takes us into the world of industry cooperation. The article presents and discusses strategic content and structural decisions when developing two advanced master programmes, thereby exploring the possibilities of using stackability as a structured learning path towards a master degree.

The next two innovative practice papers take European projects as a point of reference for change.

In a joint venture, *Rosette S'Jegers and Lieve van den Brande, Mélina Delmas and Jo Angouri* from universities in Belgium and the United Kingdom provide us with insights from a project from the aforementioned European University Initiative. The focus of the cross-European project FLECSLAB is on defining conditions for universities to set up flexible mechanisms for lifelong learning. The authors present insights on the results of a survey and discuss three ways in which universities could open up to lifelong learning: regulated, structured, or fragmented, and provide some first implications for policies and future research.

Diana Treviño-Eberhard and Carme Royo present a Horizon project that focuses on strengthening liberal democracy via developing a European curriculum for education for democracy. After describing the steps taken in the project, the authors discuss implications for inspiring ULLL and universities as such.

The two last two innovative practice papers focus on change in specific national contexts – both going beyond the single institution.

Benoit Berthou addresses change with regard to quality assurance at French universities. He describes an evolving new understanding of quality assurance particularly for ULLL that has been developed as a collective approach, conceptualising quality as continuous improvement by a network of lifelong learning services.

The final paper reflects on more than 20 years of engagement of Learning City Region in Pécs, Hungary. *Klára Bajusz and Balázs Németh* describe the development of lifelong learning initiatives and practices in the development of a learning city, and highlight as one specific example within this framework the Senior academy of Pecs, focusing on active ageing.

"The three questions," this time posed by *Lyndsey El Amoud*, and answered by *Anne Burke*, from the *Southern Traveller Health Network, Ireland,* close the circle and deal with the Irish (higher) education context. After a contextualisation of the situation of the Traveller Community in Ireland, the three questions address key barriers to higher education for Irish Travellers. A Traveller women leadership programme at the university calls upon universities to create adequate pathways for excluded or marginalised groups.

We would like to thank all authors for sharing their valuable insights and their distinct ways of addressing (positive) change in turbulent times, as well as all reviewers for taking the time and effort to make all articles shine. And finally, and most importantly: we wish all readers change-making insights while reading this issue – and a peaceful turn of the Year, with hope for positive change in 2025. Stay with us!

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CONCEPT-MAPPING THE CURRICULUM DESIGN PROCESSES OF ADULT EDUCATORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM PRACTICE

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Keywords: *concept-mapping, curriculum design, adult educators, higher education, life-wide learning*

ABSTRACT

Through a collaborative research project at the Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE) within the University College Cork (UCC), we sought to elucidate the dynamic and complex process of curriculum design for lifelong learning (LLL) in the higher education context. This case study employed a constructivist grounded theory framework to explore curriculum design practices of three adult educators in an Irish university. Concept-mapping, as a research method, facilitated the visual representation of shared meaning between the research participants (adult educators) and the researchers. By delving into the adult educators' processes, we aimed to identify broader lessons applicable to higher education institutions seeking to diversify curricula and offer lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Ireland has a long history of adult education that began in the 19th century with the establishment of mechanics' institutes, agricultural societies, and reading rooms. These groups provided basic literacy and vocational training to adults. In 1919, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) was established in Ireland to focus on providing liberal education to working adults. The Diploma in Social and Economic Science was ACE's first adult education course at UCC. ACE has provided adult education courses since 1946 and has grown from the initial diploma offering to provide over 90 distinct programmes. These programmes range in topic and length and include diverse personal and professional development programmes that are delivered locally, nationally, and online. ACE's purpose is to provide university lifelong learning (ULLL) opportunities for all adults, irrespective of age and previous educational background and has played "...an essential role in democratising education and bringing non-traditional learners in the south of Ireland into a university environment" (McCarthy, 2023, p. 3). Thus, ACE occupies a unique pedagogical LLL space that can be critically explored, as it is a well-established (75+ years) adult continuing education centre providing curricula in a traditional, campus-based higher education institution.

Overview of Study

This research project conducted an in-depth exploration of the participants' (adult educators) curricula development processes to illustrate broader lessons on lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities that could be used by higher education institutions wanting to diversify their curricula and provide broader programmes across the lifespan. This research is of particular interest to two groups in the higher education sector: 1) universities wishing to provide ULLL who may find the curriculum development processes in ACE useful when planning to implement ULLL in their respective institutions, and 2) educational researchers who wish to examine the innovative use of concept-mapping as a participatory research method that explores and represents the complexity of the curriculum design space across the learning spectrum.

Theoretical Background

The notion of curriculum design is based on the premise that curricula are constructed across multiple contexts and activities within educational systems, and as such, curriculum can be studied as a social practice (Priestly et al., 2021). This understanding of curriculum design was evident in the design processes of the participants and led us to explore theories after the data-gathering process, as the study took a grounded theory approach. Theories related to life-wide learning, experiential learning, critical reflection, and transformative learning provide a robust foundation for understanding curriculum design in adult and continuing education and emphasise the centrality of the adult learner (Merriam, 2017), who has diverse needs and interests (Knowles & Associates, 1984; Knud, 2017).

Life-wide learning recognises that people inhabit several different learning spaces and that a LLL journey provides a variety of experiences important to the development of the adult learner (Jackson, 2012). Life-wide learning expands the context of LLL in that the continuous pursuit of knowledge and skills occurs throughout the lifespan and in a variety of contexts (i.e., formal education, personal relationships, community activities and other experiences). This holistic approach to learning empowers individuals to adapt to change, enhances their personal and professional lives, and contributes meaningfully to society.

Experiential learning emphasises the importance of hands-on experiences (Kolb, 1984). By actively engaging in real-world activities, learners gain practical skills, develop critical thinking abilities, and deepen their understanding of concepts (Dewey, 1938). This process fosters personal growth, enhances problem-solving and thinking skills, and creates a deeper connection to the subject matter. Related to this theory is critical reflection, which involves analysing and evaluating one's thoughts, actions, and experiences (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970). It encourages individuals to question assumptions, explore alternative perspectives, and identify areas for improvement. By engaging in critical reflection, learners can gain deeper insights, enhance their decision-making skills, and develop a more nuanced understanding of the world around them.

Lastly, transformative learning involves a profound shift in one's understanding of the world and includes deep reflection on existing beliefs and assumptions, leading to a fundamental change in perspective (Freire, 1970; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). This process often occurs through challenging experiences or critical reflection, resulting in a new way of perceiving and engaging with the world. Transformative learning empowers individuals to question the status quo, embrace new ideas, and develop a more informed and compassionate worldview.

This broad theoretical lens was critical in examining how curricula are designed for and cater to the diverse needs of adult learners engaging in LLL across the lifespan in the university HE context.

METHODOLOGY

The guiding research question for this case study was:

How do adult educators conceptualise, design, and implement lifelong and life-wide learning courses in the university context?

A constructivist grounded theory framework was utilised to explore the non-standardised process of curriculum design (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Constructivist grounded theory is a qualitative research method that focuses on generating new theories through inductive analysis of data gathered from participants. Unlike traditional grounded theory, it acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity and recognises that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants. The constructivist grounded theory approach to this case study aligned the researchers and participants through a common language, meanings, and actions (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). Therefore, this approach emphasised the importance of understanding our participants' (adult educators') perspectives and experiences, allowing for the development of rich and nuanced data about curriculum design during the research process.

Concept-mapping was utilised as a collaborative research method to enhance the scope of data collection and sharing during the interview processes between the researcher and the participants. Concept-mapping added depth and supported the participatory approach to the qualitative data-gathering process as it offered the participant and researcher the ability to creatively view, refine, clarify, discuss and critically explore the relationships between the various elements of their curriculum design processes (Novak, 2015).

The Case and Participants

The case was bounded by one centre for adult and continuing education (ACE) located in a university setting (Yin, 2018). The participants were volunteers who were solicited via official email and selected using purposeful sampling that identified them as adult educators who had engaged in curriculum design in ACE. The participants were identified as adult educators using the following criteria: subject matter experts (SMEs) through education, research, and/or work experience; teaching and curriculum design practices that were grounded in adult education theory; and a learner-centred praxis (rather than the university tradition of content-centred course design and lecturing). The term ‘adult educator’ is one that the participants used during the study as their actual university title is ‘Coordinator’.

Three participants were sufficient for the case study according to Yin (2018), as it looked intensely at a small group (adult educators) in a specific context (ACE), with emphasis placed on the exploration of their curriculum design methods. The three selected participants designed different types of courses and had diverse cohorts of adult learners. Two of the curricula were designed to provide continued professional development (CPD), one at the postgraduate level (Trauma-Informed Care), and the other at the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Level 6 (Neurodiversity in the Screen Industry). The third curricula explored were the non-accredited LLL short courses provided as part of the Cork Learning Neighbourhoods ‘Neighbourhood University’ initiative. These short, non-formal courses take an approach to LLL design and provision “...that is about community capacity building, resilience, and a broader understanding of the complexity of the world in which we live,” (Ó Tuama, 2020).

Curriculum design in ACE is a creative endeavour that is infused with interdisciplinary theories and practices from the field of adult education, the course content (often interdisciplinary itself), and the field of practice beyond the university. ACE does not have a standardised method for course or curriculum design, nor had the educators explored or documented their design processes before this research study. ACE's accredited programmes, though, are developed in collaboration with anchor schools in the university and are subject to the university's and QQI's (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) quality assurance standards and processes.

Data Collection

After obtaining institutional research approval, data was gathered through three semi-structured interviews, three reflective and validating interviews, and the generation of multiple collaborative concept-maps. Data also came from the wider social and political environment that has shaped each of the three cases (programme, institution, country and time); critical reflexivity from the collaboration between the researchers and participants; field notes recorded by the researcher, including observations and significant moments that checked for understanding with the interviewees; and praxis (i.e., the practical application of adult education teaching and learning in a higher education context).

The research used an adaptive approach that emerged from documenting the curriculum processes and the use of concept-mapping. Initially, one concept-mapping format was used to design a generic structure for the data collection. Following an inductive approach during the interview process, it became clear that using one generic structure to create the curricula processes was not sufficient. Thus, different layouts for the concept-maps were chosen iteratively for their suitability to the data and were developed with the participants. The various formats for concept-mapping construction (hand-drawn, digital template, graphic representation) allowed for simultaneous data collection and analyses. The participants mapped as they spoke, and in collaboration with the researcher, analysed and explored the relationships between the concepts during the interviews (Novak, 2015). The researchers chose this collaborative method to represent the diversity and uniqueness of the dynamic design processes while trying to present the data in a format that suited the research question and the data itself (Ligita et al., 2022).

Data Analysis

Using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) enabled the researchers to utilise concept-mapping as a data-led strategy that allowed for co-constructing meaning-making. The insider/outsider positions of the researchers deepened their understanding and supported the co-construction of meaning-making (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The researcher and participants immersed themselves in the data and interpreted the data not only through the text or the graphics created during the process but also through the 'voice' (tone, pace, flow, emphasis, pause, gesture) of the interviewees.

Concept-mapping was also utilised as a collaborative research method to critically explore the curriculum design processes while visually representing the qualitative data and supporting analyses (Conceição et al., 2017). The distinctive styles and content of the concept-maps offered a visual representation of each participant's cognitive framework, highlighting the adaptability of concept mapping for capturing complex design processes (Ligita et al., 2022).

Lastly, thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) was conducted by exploring and analysing the data (transcripts, concept-maps, field notes) to collaboratively identify patterns in meaning across the data to derive themes. Reflective thematic analysis involved an active process of reflexivity with both researchers in this study working together to identify their judgments,

practices, and beliefs throughout the process and while engaging with the data (Braun & Clark, 2021). This process required each of the researchers to understand their positionality in terms of the social and political context and how it influenced the study, while analysing the data and discussing the implications.

THE THREE CURRICULA DESIGN PROCESSES

Three versions of concept-maps were generated for each of the participants' data through an iterative and collaborative process that allowed a final visual version of the curriculum design to emerge: (a) Version 1 was an original hand-drawn map created by the participants during the first interview; (b) Version 2 was a digital map (PNG) based on the original concept-map and the researchers' analysis of the interview; and (c) Version 3 was the final refined and validated digital version (PNG) generated by the researcher after the second participant interviews. The final versions are presented below and highlight the complexity and uniqueness of designing LLL in the university space.

Curriculum 1: Neurodiversity for the Screen Industry

Neurodiversity for the Screen Industry was part of a continued professional development (CPD) course and certificate, NFQ Level 6 (no third level qualification needed) Special Purpose Award. The 12-week, part-time course cost €600, and was delivered in an online blended format. This programme provides an interdisciplinary introduction to neurodiversity in the context of the screen industry, with the learning outcomes focused on providing students with a holistic and people-centred understanding of the multi-faceted beliefs and models. The course evolved from other courses in ACE (i.e., programmes on disability studies and autism studies) and was designed in response to and in collaboration with industry partners. The adult educator's work background and research interests were aligned with the content of the course. This alignment may have provided the capability and resources to develop the course more authentically for the learner and may have been crucial to the course outcomes (Biggs, 1996).

Figure 1 (see page 12) shows the critical components of course design using concept-mapping as the collaborative tool. The inputs from all partners in the process are highlighted.

Curriculum 2: Trauma-Informed Care - Theory and Practice

The second course, Trauma-Informed Care, was also part of a CPD certificate programme. This NFQ Level 9 (postgraduate) Special Purpose Award was a part-time, 16-week course that cost €850 and was delivered in an online blended format. The certificate in Trauma-informed Care is designed to meet the educational and professional skills needs of front-line practitioners to support the integration of trauma-informed practices into their roles and in response to their experiences working with anyone who has experienced trauma. This course was developed by the coordinator who had research experience in trauma and was familiar with the needs of the social care practitioners in the field. The coordinator was both a designer and instructor in the field who had developed a practice framework for integrating intervention methods and critical thinking skills into trauma-based care. Thus, the same alignment of curriculum design in terms of practice and experiences was also found in this trauma course as with the neurodiversity course discussed earlier (Biggs, 1996).

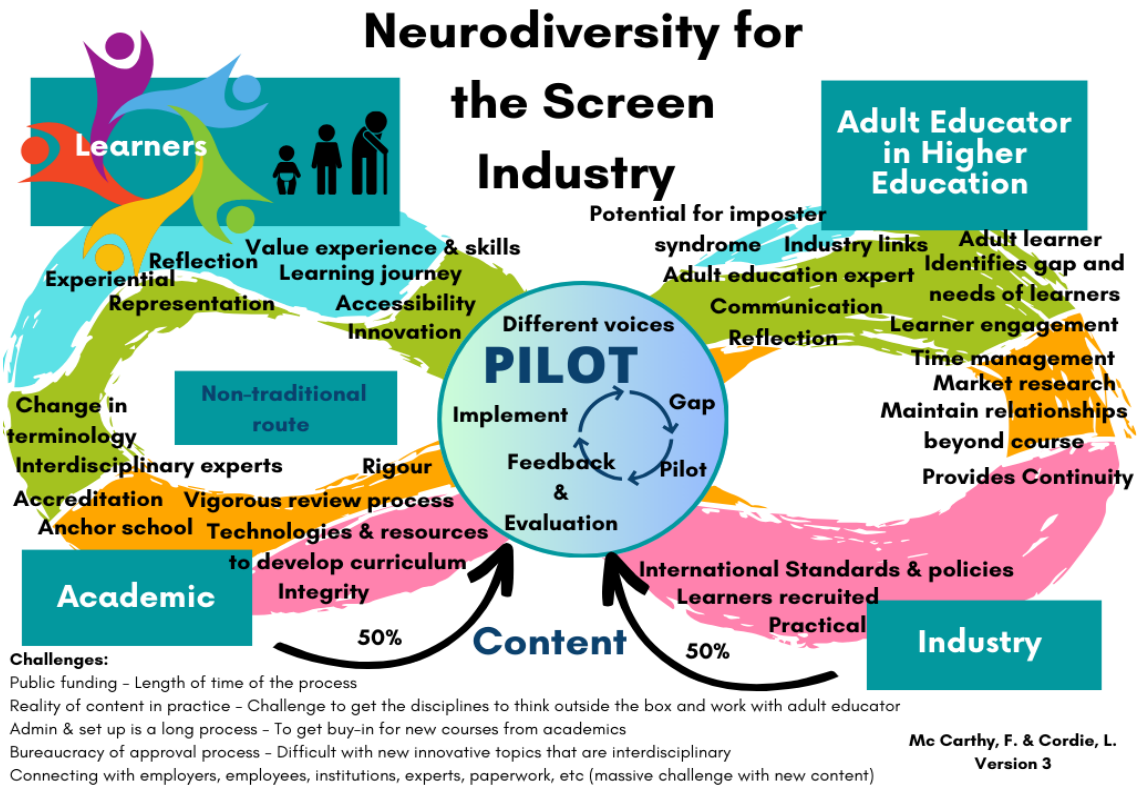

Figure 1: Collaborative Concept-Map for Neurodiversity Course

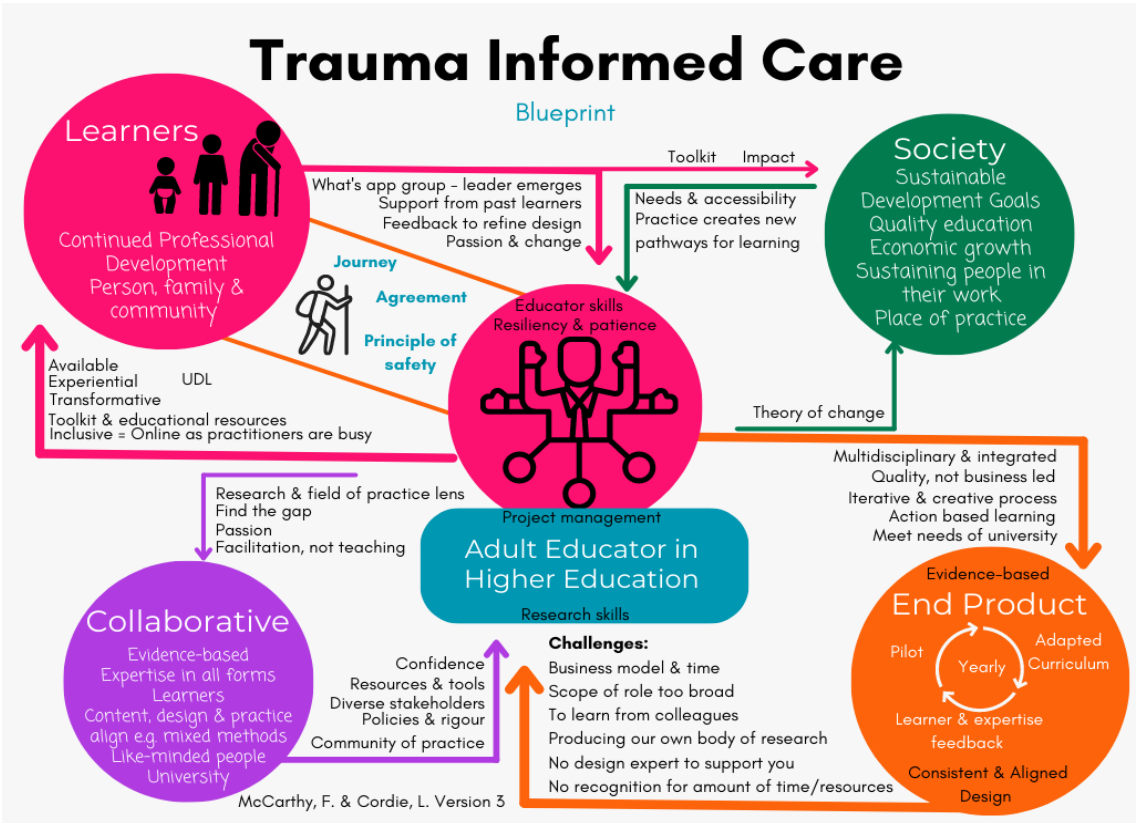

Figure 2: Concept-Map for Trauma Informed Care Course

Figure 2 (see page 12) shows the inputs into the course design of trauma-informed care with additional emphasis on inputs from society and a more prominent role of the adult educator as a liaison between the various stakeholders in the learning process.

Curriculum 3: Neighbourhood University College Programme

The last course explored in this study was a non-accredited university 'taster' programme open to all members of the public and was delivered one morning per week over eight weeks at a community venue, with face-to-face delivery. Cork Learning Neighbourhoods is part of Cork's role as a UNESCO Learning City, which offered the course at no charge to the participants. A learning neighbourhood is an area that has an ongoing commitment to learning, providing inclusive and diverse learning opportunities to whole communities (Cork Learning City, n.d.). Two Cork City Learning Neighbourhoods were first piloted in 2016, with a total of six active neighbourhoods in the city as of June 2024. Thus, with the support of key community partners, a series of university/college programmes are held at various Learning Neighbourhoods in Cork City throughout the calendar year. This programme was developed to encourage local people to 'sample' further and higher education subjects in an easily accessible and welcoming local environment.

Figure 3 below details the importance of the learner and the adult educator in a community learning venue, with a smaller role by the university partner.

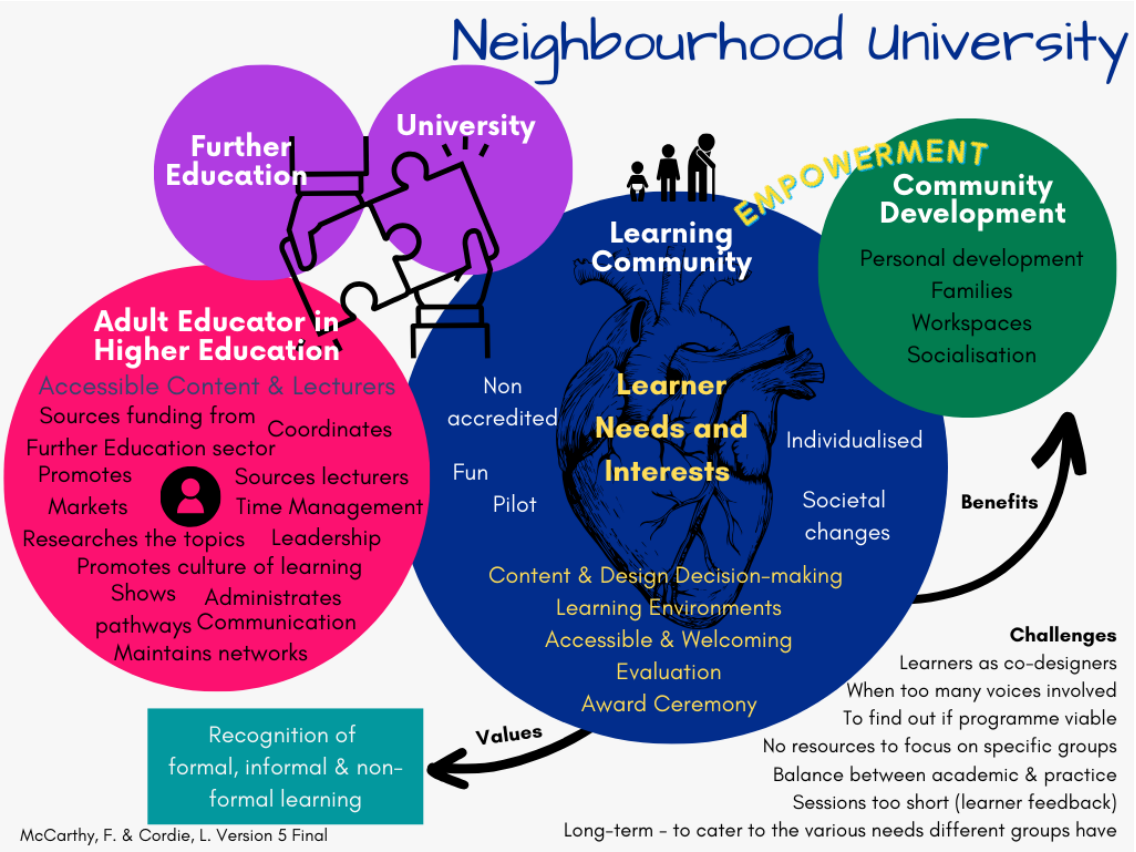

Figure 3: Concept-Map for Neighbourhood University Course

THEME DISCUSSION

Four key themes emerged when analysing the concept-maps and the interview data: the role of the adult educator in ULLL provision; a lifelong and life-wide learning design; curriculum making versus curriculum design; and design thinking, including pilot testing, as a key part of the development process. In this section, we discuss the themes found and connect them to the theoretical literature in adult and continuing education.

Theme 1 - Role of the Adult Educator in University Lifelong Learning

The participants in this study work in a university, have conducted research in universities, and are experts in their subject-matter areas, but they design courses as 'adult educators,' not university lecturers. Other terms could have been used to name the participants in this study but the one that they called themselves is 'adult educator.' As noted above, this is not their official university job title as that is 'Coordinator,' and it is not what their peers across the centre or the university might call them. However, they self-identified as adult educators when discussing the design of their curricula and teaching practices. This demonstrates the implicit understanding they have of the central role that the adult educator plays in the provision of LLL within the university context. As highlighted by participant 1: "I think that we have to wake up to the reality that lifelong learning and adult education go hand in hand".

During the course design process, the participant (adult educator) was given the space to reflect and design in response to the sector that they both knew and understood (community, screen industry, social care). These adult educators are practitioners who have worked in or currently work in the course subject-matter sector for a variety of years; thus, they had multiple learning experiences to bring into the curricula (Jackson, 2012). This work experience is particularly relevant to the context of adult education because it recognises the importance of practical experience in learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). Adult educators who have had multiple experiences with curricula can draw on their knowledge and skills to provide effective learning opportunities. Each of the participants had relationships within the sector and understood the responsibilities of the various stakeholders and, most importantly, the needs of the learner (Knowles, 1984). The participants utilised adult education principles as the foundation for their practice and designed content with the key concepts, noting the importance of the learner in the final curriculum development. In adult education design the learner is central:

> "*...because that is key to every element every step of the way has to be infused with that student-centred thinking... I think that's {the} massively important part of the process before you even start, that has to be every single part...nothing will work without that as key*" (participant 1).

This foundational understanding of adult education is critical to the curriculum development process and signifies the importance of the learner (Merriam, 2017). In the current rhetoric of LLL, there is a risk of tunnel vision on its economic function (i.e., upskilling/reskilling employees). Thus, it is important to consider that any provision of LLL in universities needs to be designed and implemented from the principles of adult education (Fleming et al., 2019) or it risks being 'life short and life narrow.' These adult educators had a critical perspective that resisted the narrow view and advocated for a holistic approach to learning while still designing specific course content (Jackson, 2012; Merriam, 2017). The grounding of each of the participants in the principles and practice of adult education can be seen as a safeguard against the co-opting of LLL into the narrow and short-term 'skills for work' design perspective.

Collaboration with industry partners forms part of the design of the curricula, yet there are strategies in place to ensure that the learning experience is much broader than knowledge and skill development for employment in the industry through a piloting process. Transformative learning theory posits that learning is a process of critical reflection that can lead to fundamental changes (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). By working with industry partners, learners gain exposure to different perspectives and experiences that can challenge assumptions and beliefs to develop new perspectives. It is also important to note that these curricula are also attempting to improve practice in the industries that they are collaborating with so that outcomes are more inclusive, fair, equitable or trauma-informed. This use of critical pedagogy as a framework for teaching and learning emphasises the importance of empowering learners to understand how systematic factors contribute to inequality and equip them with tools to advocate for change (Freire, 1970).

The adult educators who participated in this study identified themselves as agents of social change within their teaching practice. The participants saw their learners as “advocates in their community” (participant 1) for positive social change. By taking a participatory and co-design approach to the Neighbourhood University courses, the learners were centralised, and the adult educator played a networking and relational role with the university as a facilitator of learning and liaison with the community. This centralising of adult education and community development principles, such as empowerment and participation (Ledwith, 2015) in the design of curricula, can be viewed as ACE putting adult education ideals and theories into practice in the university context.

Theme 2 - Lifelong and Life-wide Learning Design

The course content was designed by all three participants with a holistic, learner-centred approach. Adult educators engage with the learner using the perspective of the whole person's development and focus on learning that is lifelong and life-wide - not just an individual moment in time or with a distinct end to learning (Jackson, 2012). This reflects a more psychological or humanistic perspective that focuses on the lifelong growth and development of the learner (Merriam, 2017). This broad view of the person/learner and society was used in the design approach and encompasses learning beyond what is needed for specific or workplace skills with a concern for wider societal ‘impact.’ One participant defined it as “...an approach to education that is underpinned by principles of inclusion and transformative learning” (participant 2).

The curricula were designed with the theoretical idea that the adult educator and the adult learner co-create a holistic learning experience through their approach to the content. This approach has a range of benefits to not only the individual but also to the workplace and society. This concept is known as Bildung, a LLL process that goes beyond the idea of acquiring knowledge as learning (Horlacher, 2004). Adult educators who embrace Bildung look at developing the whole person and a wide range of skills that are not only important to the individual but also to society. As one participant explained: “It's more than a course. I know that’s what it’s marketed as. But anyone who does it, they are changed...because I have a whole theory of change around it...and this is the context” (participant 2).

The curricula in this study were developed in the Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE) at UCC (University College Cork), which is deeply involved in the UNESCO Learning Cities initiative. The five essential elements to the UNESCO definition of LLL state that it must include the following: (1) all age groups; (2) all levels of education; (3) all learning modalities; (4) all learning spheres and spaces; and (5) a variety of purposes (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, n.d.). Designing from this broad definition of LLL facilitates the design space for life-wide as well as LLL opportunities (Jackson, 2012), creating learners who are capable of adapting to change throughout their lives (Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

Theme 3 - Curriculum Making instead of Curriculum Design

The significance and impact of the curriculum as important to society was evident in all three designs. This was especially highlighted by the Neighbourhood University and was an underlying theme of the other two course designs. All the participants were driven by a desire to improve the lives of the learners and 'excluded' members of society (Freire, 1970). The participants view the learning that they design as "...important for personal growth, personal development, for socialisation, for workspaces, for communities and for families" (participant 3). The participants noted that the courses designed were not only for CPD and to improve the working lives of the learners who take the course but were also important to the wider society because of the positive impact that these learners could contribute once they transfer their learning to practice - a more humanistic approach to learning (Merriam, 2017). This ethos of societal provision is crucial so that ULLL courses are not simply focused on a narrower interpretation of designing 'skills for work.' These courses might not be as innovative and responsive as they appeared to be if the centre looked only at a specific time or need in the workplace. As such, these courses understood that the world is becoming increasingly complex and unpredictable and that their learners needed to face this idea with resilience and transversal skills (Chang & Kidman, 2022).

All the participants took a collaborative approach to the design and provision of the content. The notion of curriculum-making is based upon the premise that curricula are constructed – made – across multiple sites of activity within education systems, and that curriculum can be studied as social practice (Priestley et al., 2021). The concept-maps highlighted the interconnectivity and relative importance of the boundary-spanning partnerships. The main research in the field of curriculum studies has been that the different social actors envision curriculum in their disciplines, yet curriculum work involves dynamic processes of interpretation, mediation, and translation (Priestley et al., 2021). For instance, participant 1 noted:

> "*I think industry is delighted. They really, really want these kinds of courses and I think they don't see disciplinary parameters. So, they want interdisciplinary because that's the way the world is. The world is interdisciplinary. We don't confine, but there is a challenge to get the disciplines to consider these programs {because they are innovative} and to want to come on board*."

Thus, universities developing curricula within their specific contexts need to consider ideas beyond their discipline and involve other social actors, including their learners, in the process of developing lifelong and life-wide learning that meets the changing complexities of today's world.

Theme 4 - Design Thinking and Pilot Testing

All three participants took a piloting approach (develop-test-revise) to curriculum design and considered it to be central to the process of effective curriculum design. This design thinking is a more human-centred approach (Merriam, 2017) to curriculum design that emphasises understanding the learner and what they need by gaining their input early in the course development. The process is not linear and allows for a more creative and continuous process for design (Meinel & Krohn, 2022) and aligns with the participant's roles. For example:

> "*I think getting that input from the students and from the team like the team {lecturers and industry} is involved in that pilot...I think that's a vital element and I think it should be across all curriculum change*" (participant 1).

As practitioners in the subject-matter area of these curricula, the participants were at the front-line and understood the need to innovate and change practices within the sector. The piloting process was central to each of these designs as each allows for movement within each of its iterations. Indeed, yearly evaluation and refining of the design are built into the process for the course design. This may ensure that the adult educators keep evolving and responding to the needs of the learners, industry, society and the community.

IMPLICATIONS

This case study examined the design of three diverse curricula using semi-structured interviews and the collaborative approach of concept-mapping. The concept-maps represented the complexity of the design approach by the participants using adult education principles, which view adult education as playing a positive human, community, and societal role (Jackson, 2012; Merriam, 2017). The curricula were designed in alignment with the contemporary cultural and social context of 21st-century Ireland, with the overall aim of improving society. Thus, when curricula are designed and implemented by adult educators working in an adult continuing education context, ULLL curricula can also be life-wide opportunities for learning.

Several key insights that would be useful for universities that want to develop LLL opportunities emerged from this study:

- Broadening Curriculum Development: Beyond LLL, curriculum development should encompass "life-wide" learning, recognising that education occurs in various contexts and throughout one's life (Jackson, 2012; Merriam, 2017).
- No Singular Design Process: Unlike a one-size-fits-all approach, there is no singular design process or model universally applied in curriculum development. Flexibility is essential to accommodate diverse learners and contexts (Kolb, 1984; Merriam, 2017).
- Adult Educators and Approach: The role of adult educators is significant. An adult education approach, tailored to the unique needs and experiences of adult learners, is crucial for effective curriculum development (Knowles & Associates, 1984).
- Interdisciplinary Approach: Contemporary innovative LLL curricula integrate theories, principles, and practices from multiple disciplines (Merriam, 2017).
- Iterative Design and Piloting: An iterative design process, including piloting, allows for refinement and adaptation. Piloting ensures inclusivity and responsiveness to learner feedback (Kolb, 1984).
- Curriculum Making instead of Design: Adult educators in the university context often engage in a process of "curriculum making" rather than rigid design (Priestley et al., 2021). Context matters and curricula emerge within specific settings, involving collaboration with learners, agencies, community organisations, and industry partners that allow for transformative learning (Freire, 1970; Mezirow & Associates, 2000).
- Concept-mapping as a Research Method: Concept-mapping serves as a valuable curriculum design research method, enabling critical exploration of how various elements interconnect (Novak, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Through this research project, we came to understand that the processes of ‘curriculum design’ these participants engaged in stemmed from a shared practice, where their concept of curriculum “...is a complex system involving teachers, students, curricular content, social settings, and all manner of impinging matters from the local to the international” (Connelly,

2013, ix). The findings, as illustrated in the concept-maps, underscore the theoretical underpinnings of adult education and LLL, emphasising the learner's centrality, critical reflection, experiential learning and transformation (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Kolb, 1984; Knowles & Associates, 1984; Merriam, 2017; Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

The concept-mapping process used during the research provided depth and credibility to the data on curriculum design (Ligita et al., 2022). As such, the concept-maps were a useful research method to explore complex design thinking and processes that do not follow one instructional design approach or model. This research method created a more holistic visual as each concept-map was uniquely individual to each of the participants and the curricula they designed.

This study underscores the importance of context-aware, collaborative curriculum development that considers diverse learners and embraces lifelong and life-wide learning experiences. The social and collaborative complex space of curriculum making (Priestly et al., 2021), rather than a top-down curriculum design model, creates curricula that can adapt to the lifelong and life-wide learning needs of adults in higher education. As such, adult educators play a pivotal role in facilitating the university learning experiences for adults through the development of curricula that meet their lifelong and life-wide needs.

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STIMULATING SITUATIONAL AWARENESS IN HEALTHCARE THROUGH THE ARTS: AN INTERPROFESSIONAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Continuous professional development (CPD) of healthcare professionals is essential to consistently meet patient and healthcare needs. Current CPD focuses on profession-specific knowledge and skills. However, changing health requirements of patients and society require CPD to evolve, with a focus on professional adaptive expertise. We developed a training for healthcare professionals to enhance the essential non-profession specific skill of situational awareness. This training crosses professional boundaries by learning in interprofessional teams and through interdisciplinary education with the arts, aiming to stimulate participants' situational awareness. During the pilot, participants observed paintings applying Visual Thinking Strategies, with subsequently transferring their observations to colleagues. To evaluate this new teaching method, participants completed a post-training questionnaire. They reported increased awareness of different perspectives, enhanced attentiveness and improved observational skills. This innovative practice describes the development, implementation and evaluation of the training and closes with a critical reflection

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, healthcare provision has changed from a classic, somewhat paternalistic approach to a more patient- and person-centred one. Patients' needs hold a more significant place in the treatment process, and patients are seen as more proactive participants in their own health (Jo Delaney, 2018). Other important changes include the rapid growth of patients with chronic diseases, but also increased availability of new knowledge and technology, making healthcare more complex and expensive (Frenk et al., 2010). Due to the rapidly changing health needs of patients, healthcare, and society, the lifelong-learning environment in health is also changing, necessitating new forms of continuous professional development (CPD) of healthcare professionals (Mitchell et al., 2023). CPD is part of lifelong learning for healthcare practitioners and implies that they, after their initial training(s), continue to deepen

and develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes (Merry et al., 2023). CPD is progressively required for practitioners to maintain their registration and right to practice healthcare.

In the Netherlands, CPD for healthcare professionals is regulated under the Healthcare Professionals Act (wet BIG) ('BIG-register Legislation'). This act requires periodic re-registration of healthcare professionals and adequate continuing education. Different accreditation organisations, such as the Royal Dutch Medical Association (KNMG) for physicians, the Dutch Professional Nurses Organization (V&VN) for nurses and the Royal Dutch Dental Association (KNMT) for dentists, are responsible for approving and registering CPD activities. Additionally, most professions make use of quality registers, where registration demonstrates that the healthcare professional meets the requirements for CPD. Theselearning activities are funded in various ways – through employers, the healthcare professionals themselves, professional organizations, government and training funds – making CPD widely accessible through direct investment in training, membership fees, tax deductions and specific grants.

In healthcare, CPD's current emphasis is on developing profession-specific knowledge and skills. However, developing professional competencies that match the current complex needs of patients and society also requires the the creation of learning opportunities that bridge professional boundaries, are interactive, focus on competence-based outcomes and go beyond developing medical knowledge and skills (Mitchell et al., 2023; Frenk et al., 2010). For example, consider the impact of the increase in patients with chronic diseases, such as Diabetes Mellitus type 2: a metabolic disease characterized by high blood sugar (glucose), which can cause damage to various organs (Sen & Chakraborty Biplab De, 2016). When treating this disease, attention must be given to lifestyle, medical, social, economic and psychological factors. This complex interaction of factors means that patients' situations can change rapidly. This requires flexibility of healthcare professionals and a holistic approach towards practising healthcare (Nikpour et al., 2022).

To address some of these needs, the authors, consisting of two physicians , two educationalists and one philosopher , developed a new training for healthcare professionals, emphasising crossing professional boundaries and developing essential non-profession specific knowledge and skills. As regards the latter, one of the most important non-technical skills for healthcare professionals is situational awareness (Ghaderi et al., 2023): the process of receiving, interpreting and anticipating information in dynamic complex environments such as healthcare (Graafland & Schijven, 2015). Situational awareness is of major significance in healthcare, as it enables healthcare professionals to have a comprehensive understanding of the patient's clinical situation, including medical, social and environmental factors. As such, situational awareness was chosen as the foundation for our training. To engage in learning across boundaries, the training was given an interprofessional and interdisciplinary character, as detailed in the next paragraph. Subsequently, we will describe the developmental process of the training, following the ADDIE framework (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation) (Kurt, 2017). In the analysis, we explain the key concepts for the training: situational awareness and adaptive expertise. Using both literature (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Haidet et al., 2016) and prior experience, we incorporated an interdisciplinary design by collaborating with the arts. The learning goals and activities are elaborated in the development phase. The last phase explores how the training was implemented and evaluated.

INTERPROFESSIONAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION

Medical education is already changing to meet the current needs of patients and society by embedding interdisciplinary and interprofessional education into the formal medical curriculum (Albert et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2018; WHO, 2010). Interdisciplinary education

integrates disciplinary knowledge of disciplines not directly related to healthcare (e.g., engineering, law, arts), finding a common 'ground or language.' It teaches students to solve complex discipline-transcending problems by considering these from more than one perspective and integrating knowledge across disciplines. Interdisciplinary education develops interdisciplinary competencies: critical thinking, creativity, reflection and a broader perspective (Angerer et al., 2021). Interprofessional education focuses on integrating knowledge and skills from different healthcare professions (e.g., nursing, physiotherapy). Through interprofessional education, students from two or more separate healthcare programmes learn with, from and about each other to improve collaboration, communication and healthcare provision (WHO, 2010).

This development in medical education, although promising, focuses more on the new generation of healthcare professionals rather than those already working as professionals. Furthermore, our experience shows that medical students encounter challenges in integrating their new interdisciplinary and interprofessional knowledgeand skills in the workplace, as the workplace is often still shaped by traditional educational ideas. It is therefore important that CPD also becomes interdisciplinary and interprofessional. Over and above the importance for the healthcare professionals themselves, this type of education is important for the socialisation of medical students: the process of learning the values and beliefs of a professional domain (Biesta & van Braak, 2020).

ANALYSIS

During the analysing phase of the training, we posed the following question to several people who train healthcare professionals: what is of note in the workplace right now? The overarching theme we found was the ability to adapt to unexpected situations. Healthcare professionals must constantly adapt to the evolving health requirements of patients, healthcare and society (Jo Delaney, 2018; Constand et al., 2014). Two examples that emerged during the analysis were: patients are upset with you because a colleague set the wrong expectation and now you have to manage their frustration. Or, you are already taking care of too many patients due to staff shortages and then an additional, very sick patient is admitted to your ward because someone else made that decision.

In order to adapt to unexpected situations, healthcare professionals need adaptive expertise – the ability to find new solutions in response to change and to create and develop the associated new knowledge and skills (Pelgrim et al., 2022; Kua et al., 2021). This type of expertise requires a different way of making decisions. In the domain of healthcare, professionals must continuously make decisions that have important consequences for patients. Routine expertise focuses on the rapid and efficient completion of routine tasks, where decision-making is non-analytical and unconscious, relying on previous experience. In contrast, adaptive expertise requires professionals to switch to more conscious, slower and analytical thinking to respond to unexpected situations (Graafland & Schijven, 2015).

Training adaptive expertise by enhancing situational awareness

After finding this overarching theme, we decided to translate training adaptive expertise into a more practical skill that closely reflects the healthcare professional's real-world experience. Thus, the goal of the training became to enhance the non-technical skill of situational awareness; the ability to observe, interpret and, with that, adequately anticipate situations (Graafland, 2015; Flin et al., 2009). Situational awareness allows healthcare professionals to adequately adapt to changing situations, thereby improving decision-making, patient safety, performance of healthcare professionals and health outcomes (Feller et al., 2023; Ghaderi et al., 2023; Green et al., 2017).

Constantly evolving health requirements are a challenge for decision making. Research shows (Graafland & Schijven, 2015) that even experienced healthcare professionals find it difficult to observe and interpret important information during high-risk procedures. Human judgement is influenced by many emotional, cognitive and social factors. The limited capacity of the human brain's working memory leads to information omission, creating a selective perception based on past experiences and preferences. Consequently, two people may have very different observations of the same reality (Graafland & Schijven, 2015). Stress further complicates observation and interpretation by reducing concentration and problem-solving capacity. In stressful situations, people often rely on routine expertise, making quick decisions based on past experiences. While effective in routine cases, this approach is problematic in non-routine situations, where it is essential to switch to the slower and analytical thinking of adaptive expertise (Pelgrim et al., 2022; Graafland & Schijven, 2015).

Training situational awareness will help professionals recognise non-routine situations and facilitate a shift to analytical thinking. It is suitable for interprofessional team training, as medical care is almost always done in a team. Therefore, it is important that all members of the team have a high level of situational awareness (Weller et al., 2024; Graafland & Schijven, 2015). Currently, situational awareness is not structurally trained in healthcare. Healthcare professionals practice this skill independently in high-risk environments such as operating rooms. Additionally, there is a safety training programme for multidisciplinary teams in emergency care called Crew Resource Management (CRM) (Graafland & Schijven, 2015). With our new training, we aim to train healthcare professionals structurally in situational awareness, to improve team performance, enhance patient safety and ensure that all team members are prepared to handle both routine and non-routine situations effectively, thereby becoming better adaptive experts.

DESIGN

Building upon earlier experiences with interdisciplinary education (e.g., between medical students, healthcare professionals, art students and professionals), we recognised that situational awareness training can be attained through interdisciplinary CPD that incorporates visual arts. Participants became more aware of and open to other perspectives, enhancing their observation and interpretation skills. They accepted more ambiguity, gained more insight into their mental processes and learned to reflect more in the moment, all crucial factorsthat can assist problem solving and adapting to non-routine situations (Christophe, Jumelet, & Schillings, 2022). Beyond our own experience, much has been written about the use, qualities and learning outcomes of the arts in medical education (Haidet et al., 2016). There is a growing body of research showing that the arts can improve clinical, communication and personal skills in healthcare professionals (Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

The current training is based on the following learning goals: 1) to develop enhanced self-awareness regarding methods of observation and interpretation; 2) to improve observational skills and the transfer of observations to colleagues; 3) to gain more insight in the (disciplinary) perspectives of other professionals; and 4) to apply the training experiences regarding observation, interpretation and anticipating to workplace case studies. These learning goals were not explicitly mentioned during the training.

DEVELOPMENT

The learning activities were developed with an interdisciplinary trainers’ team, more specifically, an educationalist, a physician, a visual artist and a physician who has experience with applying the visual arts in her daily practice. This team created three

assignments: 1) observing a painting employing Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS): a method to look at art together in a structured way and to have an open conversation about it (Reilly, Ring, & Duke, 2005); 2) observing a painting and transferring observations; and 3) applying the skills learned to a workplace case study. The first two assignments were devised to achieve learning goals 1-3 and the third assignment for learning goal 4.

With the first assignment, the participants look at a painting through VTS for 30 minutes. A certified VTS discussion leader asks questions that encourage observing without judgement and listening to each other's observations with respect. This method is about searching for meanings together and learning to adjust your opinions (Reilly, Ring, & Duke, 2005). For the second assignment participants form a group of three. A painting is depicted digitally, and the first person in the group observes the painting closely and describes their observations. The second person sits with their back to the painting and tries to draw the first person's observations. The third person observes the whole process. Then, after 15 minutes of describing, observing and drawing, the second person is permitted to turn around to see the actual painting and the difference between what they interpreted from the description . The three participants shortly discuss the assignment within their group: how was it for each one? What stood out? In this way, different interpretations become visible. Next, this evaluation will be transferred to the whole group: how was this assignment for the participants? What did they learn from it? Altogether, the second assignment will take 45 minutes. For the third assignment, a workplace case study is discussed, brought in beforehand from the participants themselves. Participants form groups of up to six people and discuss how they can use what they experienced with the arts in the case study. This assignment takes 30 minutes and concludes with a whole-group discussion of the outcomes of the subgroups.

IMPLEMENTATION

The pilot phase of the training was conducted in November 2023 at the Children's Hospital of the UMC Utrecht, with 44 participants from different healthcare professions: nurses, physicians, team managers, secretarial staff and nursing educators. The training took place during a regular education afternoon. Unfortunately, we had to opt for two assignments instead of three, due to the two-hour timeframe. The training was led by the visual artist and the physician who has experience with applying the visual arts in her daily practice. We chose to carry out assignment 1 and 2 and integrate assignment 3 into these assignments as much as possible, trying to make a connection between the skills learned and the healthcare professionals' workplace. For assignment 1, the group was divided into two. Each group was accompanied by one of the teachers to look closely at a painting in the building. In principle,

Figure 1 - Gabriel Metsu, the sick child, (1664-1666). Oil paint on canvas. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Metsu, 1664).

any painting is suitable for this form of teaching.
For the second assignment, Gabriel Metsu's painting 'the sick child'was chosen, with the idea that this might align with the interest of the participants who take care of sick children every day (Figure 1). After the second assignment, the training ended with an evaluation, where we discussed the learning experiences and tried to connect them to the professionals' daily work.

EVALUATION

At the end of the training the participants were asked to anonymously complete a questionnaire. This consisted of open-ended questions and questions that could be answered using a 5-point Likert scale (1: totally disagree - 5: totally agree). The open-ended questions asked whether this was a useful training, what the participants learned from it and what they will use in their daily work. The Likert scale questions were directed to the learning goals: 1) by practicing observing through looking at a painting, I am more aware of my own way of observing; 2) through this workshop, I think I am better able to transfer my own observations to my colleagues; 3) I will apply the experience gained from this workshop in my current work in the clinic. The evaluation form was a teaching evaluation, so there has not yet been any solid research on the learning outcomes of this training. However, the results may give an indication of how the training was experienced by the participants. Figure 2 summarises the answers to the three statements, showing 50% or more agreed and totally agreed the training helped reaching the learning goals.

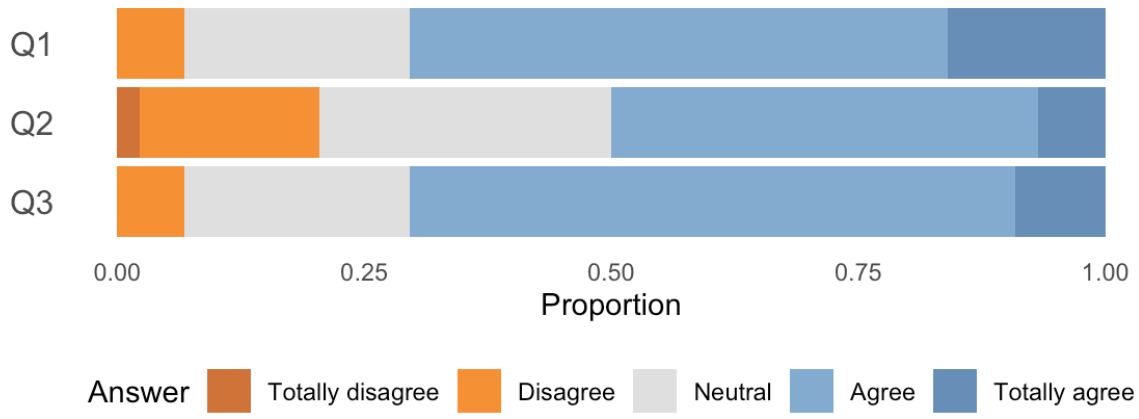

Figure 2 - Answers on obtained learning goals in proportion (N=44).

The open-ended questions show five recurring topics. First, it taught participants the importance of taking a step back sometimes, to stand still to see the bigger picture. The participants realisd that this bigger picture disappears during stress. This corresponds well to situational awareness and stress complicating observation and interpretation (Graafland & Schijven, 2015). Second, the training broadened participants' views, and they learned to see things from other perspectives. It made them realise that everyone observes and interprets things differently in the same situation. Third, they learned the importance of asking for help and helping each other. These topics underline the added value of the interprofessional and interdisciplinary nature of the training (Angerer et al., 2021; WHO, 2010). Fourth, participants made some suggestions to improve the workshop. They had expected the training to focus more on workplace case studies, so that there was a better connection with their daily work. Furthermore, they found the group of participants too big and recommended that the area for assignment 1 should be quiet for good concentration and communication. Fifth, for some

participants the training was not useful or only slightly useful, because it added nothing to their daily work.

Participants indicated in the evaluation form that they plan to apply the following skills to their daily work: they intend to take more time to take a step back from situations, observe a situation better by looking more objectively and asking the other person what they see, because together you see more. They plan to not interpret too quickly and to transfer information in more detail, because they learned that the words you say can be interpreted differently by another person. Also, they think they will work with a more open attitude, try to ask for help earlier and to listen better to each other and the patient.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Overall, we can look back positively on a first pilot of this innovative training. Without explicitly mentioning the learning objectives, these were brought up multiple times in the answers to the open-ended evaluation questions. Participants learned to slow down when a situation calls for it, to become more aware of different perspectives and the importance of helping each other. Also, most of the participants agreed that they had improved their skills in observing and transferring the observed, and they intend to apply the learned experiences in their work.

More solid research is needed to draw conclusions on the effects of this training. We agree with the participants that the group of participants was too big for this type of education. Also, the training should focus more on the workplace by adding assignment 3 into the training. Therefore, a minimum of 2.5 to 3 hours is needed. Slowing down, asking for help or having a more open attitude can, for example, help to deal with an angry patient or managing an overwhelming workload.

For the follow-up, we are exploring where to embed this training in our academic hospital. One of our considerations is to give the training a truly interdisciplinary character by having healthcare professionals learn together with professionals in the visual arts, rather than just using art for the medical profession.

Looking at the professional skills required in rapidly changing healthcare, we consider adaptive expertise and situational awareness important for future healthcare workers. This interprofessional and interdisciplinary training is an important addition to the current disciplinary training offers in CPD for healthcare professionals.

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STRATEGIC STACKING: THE INTEGRATED MODULAR APPROACH TO INDUSTRY-DRIVEN LIFELONG LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines two innovative advanced master's programmes in West Flanders within the context of University Lifelong Learning at KU Leuven, focusing on both strategic content and structural design decisions. The integration of the Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3) framework into curriculum development forms the starting point. The content of the new programmes is strategically aligned with regional economic priorities, targeting state-of-the-art technologies to digitally transform local industries, resulting in the specific master's programmes in 'Artificial Intelligence in Business and Industry' and 'Smart Operations and Maintenance in Industry.' A collaborative model of 'advisory groups,' comprising both academic and industrial regional stakeholders, ensures ongoing alignment with industry needs while also not overlooking a broad perspective on research and education. Regarding programme structure, the paper advocates for the adoption of 'postgraduate certificates' as stackable credentials within a standardised pathway towards a full master's degree. This approach aims to offer flexibility without compromising the educational goal of ensuring comprehensive understanding. Initial outcomes are presented, along with challenges such as student recruitment and sustainable funding.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) has undergone significant evolution, manifesting in various forms over the years (Bengtsson, 2013; de Viron and Davies, 2023). When developing their lifelong learning (LLL) strategies, universities should consider their unique contexts and tailor their approaches accordingly. This paper frames, describes, and critically assesses an implementation strategy for ULLL at KU Leuven, with a specific focus on West Flanders. We introduce two innovative advanced master's programmes and highlight two strategic design decisions.

At a higher contextual level, we examine the decision concerning programme content. This involves aligning the master's programmes with regional economic spearheads, particularly state-of-the-art technologies aimed at digitally transforming traditional local industries. Section 1.1 situates this decision within the broader framework of research and innovation policies, specifically exploring the 'Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation' (RIS3) framework, which may be less familiar in educational circles.

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Section 1.2 details the practical application of this approach to the master's programmes. We propose a representative advisory group model that includes both academics and regional industrial stakeholders. This collaborative model balances demand-driven (short-term industry needs) and supply-driven (ongoing research) approaches to ULLL.

At an educational level, the paper examines the decision regarding programme structure. This involves making the master's programmes more flexible by 'unbundling' them into smaller units. This discussion contributes to the well-known debate on the role of microcredentials in ULLL, as briefly outlined in section 2.1. Section 2.2 expands on our critical application of this trend to the master's programmes. Here too, we advocate for balance: a stackable yet standardised pathway to a master's degree that is comprehensive enough to qualify as a 'postgraduate certificate' in the Flemish context. In the reflections section, we address the challenges and limitations of this approach before concluding.

BACKGROUND

Flanders has long promoted LLL with extensive supportive policies, yet performance remains suboptimal. OECD data confirms that participation in LLL in Flanders is notably low, including in higher education (HE). Only a small proportion of (working) adults engage in LLL initiatives after obtaining their degrees (OECD, 2019; VLOR, 2021; Flemish Government, Work and Social Economy Department, 2021).

To boost LLL in HE, the Flemish government launched a targeted initiative at the end of 2019 specifically for West Flanders, a region historically underserved in educational offerings. This initiative involved a one-time financial allocation of €6.5 million for HE institutions in West Flanders to develop a LLL offering. Within this funding framework, KU Leuven, the largest university active in West Flanders, took the lead in designing two new *advanced* master's programmes, aimed at (working) adults who already hold a master's degree.[1]

STRATEGIC DESIGN DECISIONS FOR CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF TWO NEW ADVANCED MASTER'S PROGRAMMES

As mentioned, the funding allocated by the Flemish government for the development of new master's degrees was regionally focused, specifically earmarked for programmes to be established in West Flanders. However, in terms of content and curriculum (1) as well as programme structure (2), there was freedom and flexibility.

1. Content: from the RIS3 framework to masters in the high-tech domains of artificial intelligence and smart manufacturing

1.1 The RIS3 framework

The guiding strategic framework applied in selecting the fields for these new master's programmes was the 'Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation' (RIS3), which originates from European research and innovation policies. RIS3 is a place-based approach promoted by the European Union to boost economic growth by focusing on a region's strengths and competitive advantages in specific areas of research and innovation. The idea is to identify and prioritise domains where a region has the greatest strategic potential to excel and then concentrate resources and efforts in those domains to stimulate innovation, economic development, and job creation. Each region develops its own RIS3 strategy based on its unique strengths and opportunities (European Commission, 2014, p. 2).

[1] For the sake of brevity, from now on we will refer to them simply as 'masters' rather than 'advanced masters' or 'manama's', the Flemish term ('master-na-master', Dutch for 'master-after-master').

Universities are key stakeholders in RIS3, often concentrating on investments in research projects and infrastructure, such as incubators and technology parks, rather than primarily focusing on 'human capital.' As a result, RIS3 is not typically linked to the creation of new LLL programmes. However, by integrating RIS3 with an LLL perspective, universities have the potential to strengthen their research and innovation missions and underpin their specific contribution to LLL with research (as already recommended in the European Universities' Charter on LLL of 2008).

1.2 Masters in high-tech domains

West Flanders has a historically strong industrial ecosystem, with numerous innovative industrial and manufacturing companies, many of which are SMEs, based in cities like Kortrijk and Bruges (POM West Flanders, 2023, p.61). Notably, the region's mechanical engineering sector is a pioneering high-tech economic cluster in the Flemish industry.[2] This unique economic strength or 'smart specialisation' domain, as referred to in the RIS3 framework, is supported by joint efforts from all 'triple helix' stakeholders (Suarsana et al., 2023, p. 17 sqq.). For example, there has been investment in high-end infrastructure, such as five dedicated labs for mechanical engineering, mechatronics, and industrial systems engineering. These labs are a collaboration between KU Leuven Bruges Campus, Ghent University Kortrijk Campus, Howest University of Applied Sciences and Sirris, with support from the POM West Flanders (Regional Development Agency), TUA West (Technical University Alliance for Economic Transformation in West Flanders), and financial support from the ERDF. Moreover, Flanders Make, one of the four Flemish Strategic Research Centres dedicated to modernising the manufacturing industry, recently established a new high-tech center in Kortrijk, serving as an experimental hub for industrial companies.

Aligned with the RIS3 framework, the strategic decision was made to focus the masters on the industrial modernisation of this regional ecosystem, specifically the digital transformation of the (manufacturing) industry. This has concretely translated into two master's programmes that focus on teaching digital technologies to highly skilled technical profiles (such as engineers):

- 'Smart Operations and Maintenance in Industry' focuses on different state-of-the-art technologies that enhance industrial production environments.
- 'Artificial Intelligence in Business and Industry' concentrates on the transversal technology of artificial intelligence.

For curriculum refinement, we continued to operate within the RIS3 framework, actively involving regional stakeholders. Such a multi-stakeholder approach also aligns with policy literature on successful ULLL strategies, which emphasise the need for designing programmes that are not developed in a vacuum but embedded within the local ecosystem. Scholars suggest triple helix collaborative activities with regional organisations to facilitate the implementation of ULLL (Varadarajan et al., 2023, p. 12 sqq.; UNESCO, 2023, p. 28).

Given the strong technological orientation of the masters, it is imperative to involve regional industrial stakeholders not only in designing the new programmes but also in their ongoing operation. This ensures that the curricula, which feature industry-linked characteristics (such as guest lectures, company visits, and industrial thesis topics), remain up-to-date with the fast-paced evolution of industrial practices. To maintain this consistent alignment with the professional field, we have established 'advisory groups.' These groups, though, include not only industrial companies and practitioners but also academics and researchers, to achieve a

[2] According to a recent study, 42% of Flemish wage earners within the mechanical engineering and mechatronics sector are employed in West Flanders. West Flanders accounts for 59% of the total number of self-employed and 29% of the active companies in the sector across Flanders (POM West Flanders, 2023).

balanced mix of representatives. This collaborative model ensures that sufficient industry-driven (demand-driven) characteristics are incorporated while also maintaining a research-driven (supply-driven) approach, which is a distinctive feature of ULLL.

We strived for a similar balance in the format of the new master's programmes, which is reflected in the structure of the masters, as the next section will show.

2. Structure: from microcredential to macrocredential

2.1 The microcredentials debate

At the educational level, regarding programme structure, there is a general demand from the market to make the delivery of ULLL programmes more flexible (e.g., Atchoaerana, 2021). As stated by Unesco (2022, p. 2):

> "*In order for HEIs to transform into LLL institutions, they must undergo a fundamental shift, from soliciting the participation of young students coming from secondary schools to welcoming a diversity of learners who are (re)entering higher education at different ages and stages of their personal and professional lives (…) Offering more flexible provision is key to accommodating non-traditional students' diverse backgrounds, professional and personal commitments, and individual learning styles and life experiences*."

Flexibility can be incorporated into university curricula in various ways, such as through multimodal delivery, blended approaches, and the use of technology (e.g., Atchoaerana, 2021, p. 313). One of the most global trends in ULLL is the introduction of 'microcredentials' as flexible trajectories into and within HE, as also advocated in the Education 2030 Agenda of the United Nations. In recent years, scholarly research on microcredentials has increased significantly (e.g., Varadarajan et al., 2023). However, much of this burgeoning literature is conceptual rather than empirical: the main challenge remains the lack of a universally accepted standard. Nonetheless, delving into this discussion is beyond the scope of this practice paper.[3]

Microcredentials, as the name implies, are a much shorter form of qualification than a degree programme. They are said to have the potential to become a common provision of learning for professional development because they provide standalone chunks of learning that can deliver up-to-date knowledge and skills in a timely and flexible way (Golding and Rossade, 2022). In short, microcredentials enable more versatile and personalised learning, allowing learners to choose their course credentials from different programmes and providers and to learn at their own pace (Cowie and Sakui, 2022, p. 21).

However, critics from educational and societal perspectives argue that this '(cherry-)picking' format might result in fragmented and incoherent learning, thereby undermining the mission of universities to offer education of a holistic nature. Ralston (2021, p. 8) fervently criticises this pervasive demand-driven approach. He argues that universities risk prioritising business interests and market demands over educational integrity by quickly unbundling degrees to generate revenue. Kušić et al. (2022, p. 155) similarly view microcredentialing as an outgrowth of "the neoliberal learning economy."

2.2 A stackable yet standardised learning path towards master´s degrees: 'postgraduate certificate'

For the structure of the new masters, our starting point was the complete conception and development of the 60 ECTS master's programme. Within each comprehensive master's

[3] For systematic recent overviews of the microcredentials debate, see Cowie and Rakui, 2022; Thi Ngoc Ha et al., 2022; Golding and Rossade, (2022), and Varadarajan et al., 2023.

programme, we then unbundled/clustered a number of core courses, totaling about 20 ECTS. These basic packages of master's courses together serve as a solid foundation in the domain. We also had these integral subsets of master's courses accredited as separate programmes, namely 'postgraduate certificates.' The term 'postgraduate' may be misleading in the international educational context, for in the Flemish context, 'postgraduate' does not refer to the continuation after an undergraduate degree. Instead, it is a formally certified form of HE training, typically aimed at professionals, and consisting of a minimum of 20 ECTS credits.

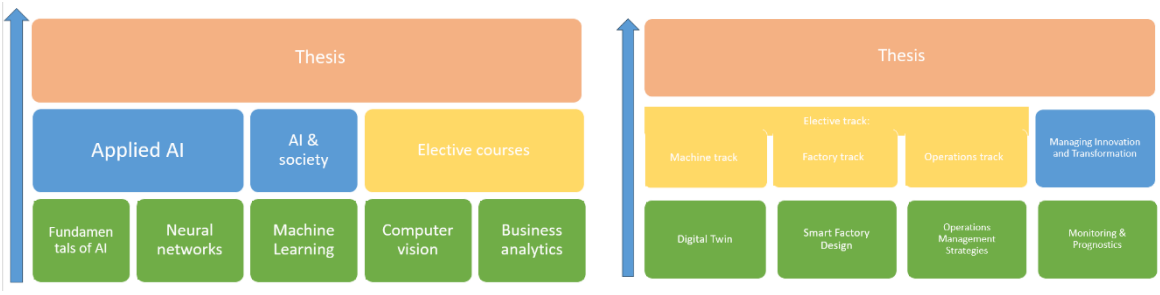

Figure 1: The postgraduate certificates (courses in green) embedded in the Master's programmes

This design intervention enables students to progress stepwise and sequentially. Students who are not ready to commit to a full degree programme can initiate their learning journey with the 'embedded' postgraduate certificate. In the second year, they can pursue the remaining courses (20 ECTS). In the third year, they can complete a master's thesis (20 ECTS) as the capstone of the full master´s degree, which remains the point of reference. By doing so, we offer a standardised three-year model pathway from 'microcredential' to 'macrocredential,' with educational experts setting this standard.

REFLECTIONS

Brief operational period

Before discussing the results, it is important to note a primary limitation: the relatively brief operational period – 'Artificial Intelligence in Business and Industry' has been running for three academic years (2021-2024), and 'Smart Operations and Maintenance in Industry' only two (2022-2024). This short duration necessitates caution in drawing significant conclusions.

A partial success story

The 'embedded postgraduate certificate' design decision appears to be an effective strategic move: a significant majority of professionals begin their learning journey by enrolling in the postgraduate programme, and most successfully obtain this certificate. Initial evaluation surveys reveal that, although this certificate is not at the degree level, it holds significant value for professionals, particularly in enhancing their personal CVs[4]. Employers also report being satisfied with the knowledge and skills acquired by graduates. The bigger challenge, however, lies not in covering participation fees but in freeing up key employees – often essential figures in industrial companies – to attend.

[4] According to a recent survey by Acco Learn (2024, p.22), a Flemish educational and scientific publisher, 50% of the active population in Flanders consider it important to obtain an official certificate when they pursue additional training. However, it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions about the further career steps of the alumni of the two master's programs.

What professionals found particularly valuable was the chance to build a strong network of peers with shared expertise and interests. This networking opportunity serves as a powerful motivator, yet it is often overlooked in microcredentialing, where learning paths are typically highly individualised. The clustering of smaller courses into a postgraduate programme offers students not only a cohesive and stepwise trajectory but also a collective, cohort-based one.

In light of the full master's degree programme, we must nuance this success. While most professionals who start the programme do succeed in obtaining the postgraduate certificate, they do not continue along the proposed three-year path. Approximately 80% 'drop out' at this stage. It is difficult to determine whether they would have begun the programme *at all* if the embedded postgraduate certificate did not exist. Of course, this may be because the programme is an *advanced* master, and they already possess a master's degree, so the added value of an additional master's degree might seem limited.

A select cohort of students

The programmes are indeed designed for a rather select cohort: both masters are aimed at students who have completed an initial master's programme in a technological area, such as engineering. This highly skilled technical target audience is in high demand in the industry, making them very busy profiles, especially those working in SMEs, of which the region is rich. Moreover, both programmes are of a specialised nature, partly due to the strategic decision to align the content of the new masters closely with specific economic priorities outlined in the RIS3 framework. This necessitates extensive outreach efforts to attract a sufficient number of students.

A sustainable business model

The limited number of students certainly poses challenges to the financial viability. In the Flemish context, advanced masters are not typically subsidised, unlike initial masters (VLOR 2021, p. 11). One possible solution is to explore alternative funding sources, such as sponsorship from industry partners (similar to endowed chairs for research). This approach makes sense given the strong industrial involvement, but it must be implemented in a way that ensures that the neutrality and objectivity of the course content remains uncompromised. Nevertheless, the uncertainty of what will happen when the seed funding runs out is a major concern for the upcoming years.

CONCLUSION

One size of ULLL strategy does not fit all. This paper focuses on two new master's programmes within the specific context of West Flanders as part of the implementation of ULLL at KU Leuven. More specifically, it examines two strategic design decisions regarding content and structure, both of which can be summarised as 'balanced':

- In terms of content, the programmes align closely with regional economic priorities outlined in the RIS3 framework. To operationalise this, we established advisory groups comprising both regional industrial and academic stakeholders, which serve as an example of a model where a more short-term demand-driven (primarily industry-led) and supply-driven (research-driven) approach nicely collide.
- Regarding structure, we diverge from a purely 'market-driven' discourse of unbundling the degrees down to granular levels. Instead, from the supply side, we propose a stackable, standardised cohort-based trajectory ('embedded postgraduate certificate') leading towards the full master's degree.

We acknowledge that these strategic design decisions were feasible primarily because we could essentially start from scratch. Adapting existing programmes poses different

challenges. Integrating regional economic priorities and local industry embeddedness, such as through RIS3, and flexibility, such as through micro-credentials, into established degrees and programmes within the HE system is a pertinent and frequently posed question (Golding and Rossade, 2022).

Nevertheless, while increasing student enrolment numbers and developing a sustainable business model post-funding are critical for the long-term effectiveness of the 'Artificial Intelligence in Business and Industry' and 'Smart Operations and Maintenance in Industry' masters, these programmes do show promise in initiating professionals into specialised fields aligned with regional economic spearheads and achieving comprehensive certification success.

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FLEXIBLE MECHANISMS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF FLECSLAB

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ABSTRACT

Flexible Learning Communities Supporting Lifelong Learning Across Borders (FLECSLAB) is an Erasmus+ project developed within one of the 60 European university alliances, EUTOPIA. The distinctiveness of FLECSLAB's approach is its use of the alliance as the driving force for integrating an innovative lifelong learning (LLL) package into the existing curriculum of the partner universities, thus differing from the common practices used to respond to adult learners. This practice-oriented paper reports on our observations in a selection of CLCs identified to test the potential and the conditions for such an approach.

CONTEXT- TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Educating large numbers of mature learners across disciplines is not a mainstream activity for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe. Universities focus primarily on full-time degree seeking students and the teaching and learning processes are adjusted to a young population coming out of secondary schools. However, the societal context is transforming rapidly (e.g., Ehlers 2020; 2024). Lifetime employment is, accordingly, changing into lifetime employability, and accelerated technological change requires permanent reskilling and re-education of workers. This brings significant implications for the current curriculum system as we know it, and life-long and life-wide education (summarised as LLL) of the labour force can be better conceptualised as a shared responsibility between the employers and the formal education system. In this context, universities face an urgent need to contribute to and expand their LLL capacities.

Further, the demand for more flexible learning pathways has become a major trend at European HEIs: "*80% of HEIs see a need for more flexible provision for degree programmes and 62% of them confirm a growing demand for short-term (non-degree) learning opportunities.*" (Brekke and Zhang, 2024, p. 2). University graduates increasingly need and desire to expand their competences for coping with multiple and often competing changes in a globalised society. However, when returning to HEIs, adult learners have difficulties finding offerings and support that is compatible with their needs and professional context.

At the same time, implementation of LLL in HEIs is still in its early stagesand proves to be complex. Universities find little guidance on the core educational dimensions and lack necessary business models to identify what would work for them or not. Only a minority of HEIs have developed a strategic and sustainable approach for implementing LLL. Even the recent interest in micro-credentials has not changed this landscape (den Hertog *et al.*, 2023). Overall, there is a lack of knowledge and common understanding and "*more holistic and institution-wide approaches are needed to fully transform HEIs into LLL institutions*" (OECD, 2023, p. 9). LLL in HE should not be conceived as a complementary offer to degree programmes, but rather as the way forward towards combinations of short modular studies based on curriculum components adapted to the needs of all learners (degree seekers and others).

Within the European Universities Initiative (EUI) universities are asked to use academic cooperation to tackle the complex challenges in society. Universities have been specifically encouraged to experiment and diversify their offerings. EUTOPIA, a first-generation alliance, introduced the concept of Connected Learning Communities (CLCs) as the main building blocks for its educational approach. The CLCs provide the organisational structure and thematic framework for interuniversity cooperation and cross-campus learning activities within the alliance. Teams of teachers, students, and other actors in the community join forces in a participatory learning and knowledge creating process (Angouri, Moriau, S'Jegers, 2024).

In the pilot project, EUTOPIA 2050, a range of 30 of these thematic networks came to maturity. The CLCs build on existing good practice for challenge-based learning within current degree programmes. The majority of them responds to the flexibility requirements (Brekke and Zhang, 2024) of LLL as they include learning modes such as co-creation of content, flexible learning pathways, blended learning, simulation techniques, competitions and other formats of active learning.

In March 2021, the six universities involved in the startup of the EUTOPIA alliance introduced a proposal for a Key Action 2 Erasmus+ call: FLECSLAB standing for Flexible Learning Communities Supporting Lifelong Learning Across Borders. The specificity of this project is its use of the European University Alliances as a driving force for internal innovation of existing academic offering rather than the more common practice of creating additional full-fledged programmes and structures.

This paper discusses three ways for opening up to lifelong learners, considering the different ecosystems characterising the context of the LLL process: regulated, semi structured or fragmented. We close the paper with implications for policy and future research.

OBJECTIVES

FLECSLAB addresses the lack of "more holistic and institution wide approaches to fully transform HEIs to LLL institutions" (OECD, 2023, p. 9). The project aims to define the conditions that will help HEIs in setting up flexible learning mechanisms that appeal to the majority of lifelong learners and that enable them to combine their need for updating or complementing present competences with other responsibilities in their private and professional lives. Flexible mechanisms can, for example, take the guise of a blended multimodal approach combining online preparation work and an intensive cross-campus activity/seminar, or an assignment that is not linked to academic calendars and/or teaching schedules. For that purpose, a subset of CLCs was identified to act as testbeds for a double objective:

i. Delivering an analytical instrument to explore the LLL potential of transnational learning communities in HE. The main outcome will be a multimedia toolkit and training guidelines for university staff willing to engage in LLL activities.
ii. Implementing a business model and exploring scenarios for creating and maintaining a high-quality LLL offering. The main outcome will be a policy brief on the conditions to be fulfilled and the incentives needed.

The project's activities are spread over a period of three years (2022-2024) and final reporting is planned for January 2025. The specific objective of this article is to provide insight into the results of the survey covering the testbed CLCs, thereby highlighting characteristics of the educational approach and the contextual factors that can support LLL-oriented development in HEIs.

METHODOLOGY

FLECSLAB assesses the use of the CLCs for reaching out to the growing segment of lifelong learners. CLCs can be a powerful tool for opening up the academic offering to LLL and vice versa. Today's graduates show an interest in remaining connected with academia as a result/in anticipation of changes in the workplace. The time is right, therefore, for using the promising mechanisms emanating from the EUIand, more specifically, EUTOPIA in our case.

Our method of working combines experience in building the CLCs with insights of a group of high-level experts in LLL at the international level, the FLECSLAB Education Expert Committee. This committee includes representatives ranging from industry, civil society, higher education & training, research and policy makers.

Our activities began with the identification of a group of CLCs (see section 1) representing three ecosystems in the EUTOPIA CLC portfolio. We then organised a survey to capture the major conditions for building a LLL educational framework (section 2). Finally, we looked into the contextual factors that resulted in defining different ecosystems for the organisation of the LLL offering in HEI (section 3).

1. Connected Learning Communities as testbeds

The pilot project EUTOPIA 2050 (2019-2022) gradually created a group of 30 CLCs now at the end of their incubation period and involving some 200 members of academic staff and 2000 students in each academic year. The majority of the students are registered for a degree at one of the partner universities and FLECSLAB investigates the potential to open this offering to lifelong learners.

In a bottom-up inspired selection, EUTOPIA identified best practices in research-based learning that prepare students to tackle the global challenges in today's societies. All CLCs resonate with the vision of openness in the alliance and aim to bridge the traditional divides still impacting academia: (i) learning versus research; (ii) academia versus society; (iii) learner versus teacher; and (iv) degree versus flexible learning.

The learners participating in these CLCs experience the value added by the international networks and the cross-campus activities in blended learning formats without the need for long term physical mobility. The partner universities strengthen their potential for innovative knowledge exchange and for better responding to global challenges. For all those characteristics, the CLCs provide the project with interesting cases demonstrating how HEI can expand the existing academic offering to mature learners.

Between 2022 to 2023), FLECSLAB identified a subset of 12 out of 30 CLCs that seemed promising in helping to tackle the shortage of professional and personal competences. When selecting the testbed CLCs, we especially looked at the relevance of the thematic networks for illustrating (i) challenges caused by changes in global context; (ii) rapid development of technology; and (iii) shortages in the labour market. Furthermore, we aimed to assure that the subset of CLCs reflected the efforts of all six university partners, thus reflecting the diversity of national contexts and institutional procedures impacting the efforts of HEIs in the LLL segment.

2. Educational framework for HE LLL

Throughout the project's working period, 12 EUTOPIA Learning Communities were identified for in-depth interviewing to compile good practices and conditions needed for developing the academic offering in LLL. The data was coded and analysed following the principles of thematic analysis and patterns were already identifiable from the first set of interviews (4). This was further corroborated throughout the dataset (total: 11). The participants converged on the 'meta' framework that is necessary for LLL to become part of the established offering of HEIs. Results were reported and presented to the FLECSLAB Education Expert Committee (Delmas M., 2024).

The committee grouped and prioritised six main conditions within an educational framework with the learner at the centre: meeting the needs and expectations of lifelong learners at university requires a holistic approach that prioritises flexibility, accessibility, and excellence in education and should align to the learner's needs, motivation, and characteristics (see also *Figure 1* overleaf).

- *Condition 1- Content and curriculum*: includes alignment with future skills; modular learning offer; open design and development; embedding informal and non-formal learning; and co-designing with external stakeholders.
- *Condition 2 – Innovative learning and teaching*: includes learner-centred approach; prior learning and competences; flexible and innovative teaching; blended learning formats; and empowerment of teaching staff.
- *Condition 3 – Validation, certification and recognition*: includes policy and strategy on recognition of modules; recognition processes of small learning units; and validation of prior learning.
- *Condition 4 - Co-creation, collaboration and connectiveness*: includes vision and strategy; active involvement of and collaboration with stakeholders; and co-creation with stakeholders.
- *Condition 5 - Operational capacity:* includes vision and strategy of the institution regarding LLL maturity; and institutional support and structures.
- *Condition 6 - International and networked institution:* includes trans-institutional and cross-border perspectives; networked and hybrid digital environments.

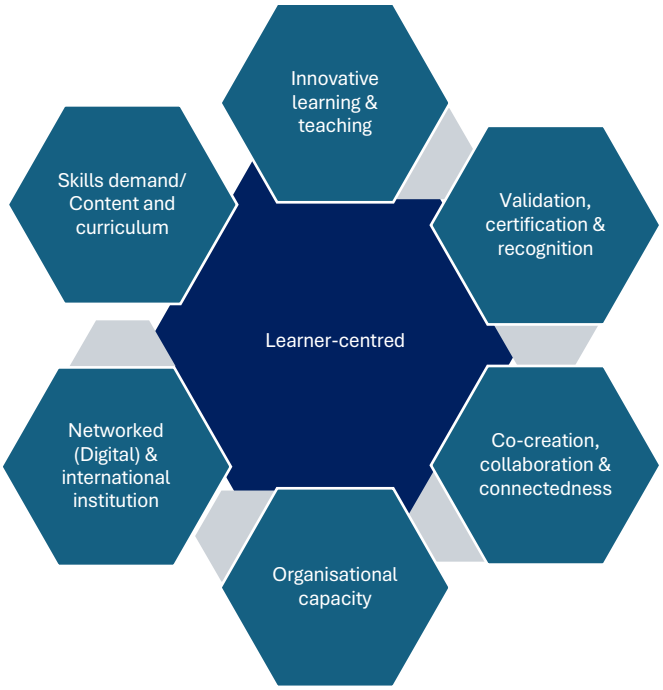

Figure 1: The FLECSLAB framework

Out of the six conditions, the representatives of the CLCs considered “innovative learning and teaching” as part of their daily educational practices and helping to become “networked and international institutions.” The four other conditions need to be strengthened. All CLC representatives confirmed the importance of “co-creation, collaboration and connectedness” across disciplines and stakeholders as this is needed for the challenge-based teaching that lifelong learners expect; ”skills demand” refers to the support and guidance foracademic staff members to maintain their motivation and make the offering sustainable; lifelong learners expect formats for “validation, certification and recognition” over and above traditional degrees and that are aligned with the flexible mechanisms of learning they are looking for. Finally, the “organisational capacity” of HEIs is still considered as the most important barrier for universities willing to play a more significant role in LLL. It is also the crucial condition for developing sustainable business scenarios in this segment of higher education.

A toolbox using the six educational conditions for guiding questions and self-assessment purposes will be available at the end of the project, including training materials for academic staff willing to engage in LLL. Each of the six conditions will be presented with a descriptor and a set of key factors that play a role in helping HEIs open up to non-traditional adult learners and to integrate LLL within their educational offering. The descriptors will serve as a toolkit for HEIs to self-assess their present position in LLL (fiche of the condition “co-creation, collaboration and connectiveness” is attached as an example).

The results of the interviews allow us to distinguish three ecosystems that characterise the interaction between the institutional educational offering, the learners’ expectations, and the context in society. These types of ecosystems are likely to generate different business models, and these will be addressed in the last phase of the project.

3. Towards ecosystems

Finally, the central FLECSLAB team reflected on commonalities and differences across the 12 CLCs with a focus on the coherence between (i) the type of learner, (ii) the educational offering, and (iii) the organisational capacity of HEIs for developing a

sustainable business model in LLL. The educational experts were asked to share their insights on these contextual factors, thereby adding to the validity of the results. We identified three 'ecosystems' which characterised the context of the LLL process across the 12 CLCs: (a) regulated, (b) semi-structured and (c) fragmented ecosystems.

a. Regulated ecosystems

In the regulated ecosystems, *learners* are well identified and driven by regulations imposed by public authorities and/or professional organisations. Learners look for short programmes that can be combined with professional and family-related responsibilities. The *educational offering* often originates from the HEI providing the initial degree required for entering the profession. The ecosystem targets learners in need of updated competences, but also offers full degrees / bridging programmes creating access to the profession for non-modal entrants. The underlying *business model* is based on stable contracts between regulatory authorities / professional organisations and suppliers of the educational offering. There is limited competition in this LLL segment, and resources given to suppliers often do not cover the needs and full cost of the offerings.

Concrete examples of regulated ecosystems include academic offerings of initial degrees and updating of competences imposed by law or required by professional organisations; regulated professions typical for public services such as health, education, and security; public services confronted with growing demand due to societal changes and resulting in labour shortages. In the regulated ecosystems, LLL has the double potential to (i) preparepeople that are willing to enter the sector but do not fulfill the requirements and (ii) provide updates and complementary competences for existing staff. The cross-campus connected learning activities focus on skills needed for dealing with superdiversity, use of innovative technologies and better management of scarce human resources. EUTOPIA communities such as Nursing Care in Complex Care Situations; Leading Strategic Innovation in Healthcare; and Urban Education are examples of regulated ecosystems.

b. Semi-structured ecosystems

The *learners* in semi-structured ecosystems are driven by self-perceived needs or ambition to widen /complement /update competences acquired in the initial degree. The learner is difficult to identify but the ecosystem signals the needs through, for example, statements of employers' organisations and indications for mismatch on the labour market. The *educational offering* usually takes the format of (short) programmes at postgraduate or co-curricular level. It is embedded in semi-permanent structures such as summer schools, business schools, living labs and learning platforms. The LLL segment is a competitive one and non-academic players have an important part of the market. The underlying *business model* refers to permanent facilities giving access and visibility to the educational offering and promoting the offering, as is the case in business schools and living labs. A sustainable approach is often characterised by intensive cooperation between academia, learners, and stakeholders in society (public or private).

Examples of EUTOPIA communities illustrating the semi-structured ecosystem are: Technological Business Development; Fundamentals of Television Direction; IMPACT (Interdisciplinary learning platforM for sPort 4 sociAl Change iniTiatives) and Design and Science. This group of testbed communities is characterised by academic partners that have experience in innovation related activities and are therefore supported by long term agreements with public and private stakeholders in society.

c. Fragmented ecosystems

The *learners* in the fragmented ecosystem are similar to those in the semi-structured ecosystem, characterised by self-perceived needs and being difficult to identify. The signals indicating the specific nature of the LLL needs, however, are less clear than those of the structured case. The lobby groups related to the fragmented ecosystem are less organised and/or powerful. In this ecosystem the *educational offering* is not structured and is "hidden" in learning components spread across a wide variety of degree programmes or summer schools. Due to a lack of an institutional approach, the underlying *business model* illustrates the difficulty in bridging the potential of HEIs and the needs of the learners. Private and online competitors organise ad hoc offerings that often focus on "trendy" competences and the use of academic experts to develop typically short units. The academic offering of learning components is fully integrated in the academic curriculum of degree programmes and the academic partners are highly research oriented. The LLL development is hindered by a lack of structural links with stakeholders outside academia.

Examples of EUTOPIA communities that represent fragmented ecosystems are Multilingualism and Diversity; International Journalism; Text and Discourse Analysis; Additive Manufacturing; and Veganism vs. Animal Protein Consumption.

CONCLUSIONS

This is the first paper integrating our findings from FLECSLAB with the EUTOPIA CLC model. The first stage of the project resulted in a coherent educational framework based on six fully described conditions. Three ecosystems have been identified depending on learners' needs, educational offerings, and context settings.

The process demonstrated that the EUTOPIA Connected Communities are a sustainable, robust basis, and well designed for implementation of LLL. The most important characteristics enabling these Connected Communities as LLL spaces are thematic networks dealing with the complexity of challenges in society, co-creation between learners, teachers, and other stakeholders, blended teaching formats and creating bridges between learning/ research/ innovation.

FLECSLAB has confronted the present academic model with a magnifying glass on barriers and enablers for LLL. In summary, and as compared to degree education students, lifelong learners are critical and look for a personalised approach. They are more aware of their desired learning outcomes and expect an immediate 'return on investment.'

The project has also captured the core conditions for HE to open their offering to lifelong learners. Strong points of the academic offering turn into conditions for convincing mature learners: innovative learning & teaching methods, networking with peers and reputable specialists, and access to the latest research. Weak points of academic organisation become disincentives for the learner and endanger development of the LLL academic offering: recognition of LLL; impact on workload of academic staff and administrative support; identification of LLL segments; lack of flexible workspace; performing learning platforms.

Performing Connected Communities show the way to a sustainable model by developing stable cooperation with stakeholders from the public sector, cultural organisations, and the business world. Further research is needed to identify the business models suited for the future DNA of HE and that will allow a sustainable role for HEIs on the LLL segment. As such, FLECSLAB opens a much wider debate: should academia adapt their organisations for embedding LLL? How can the teaching process be truly learner-centred? What are the tools

for widening learning opportunities and facilitating more flexible learning pathways throughout life?

Our work paves the way towards identifying these crucial questions and provides some preliminary answers. We hope the future political agenda will feed into our work and will draw on the European University Alliances as change agents for bringing LLL into the mainstream and core of academic practice.

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STRENGTHENING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY THROUGH UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING - THE DEMOCRAT HORIZON PROJECT AS EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE

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Keywords: *University lifelong learning, education for democracy, responsible democratic citizenship, civil engagement, teacher training*

ABSTRACT

Universities can play an important role in advancing liberal democracy through lifelong learning (LLL) programmes and contribute to a just and accountable society. The Democrat project, funded by the EC Horizon programme, seeks to strengthen democratic competences in education and may help provide inspiration for university lifelong learning (ULLL) practices. The project emphasises a participatory curriculum redesign and innovative teaching methods to foster responsible democratic citizenship (RDC). This innovative practice paper aims to: (a) highlight how the Democrat project's outcomes provide an innovate approach for embedding democratic values and competences within educational frameworks in ULLL, (b) explore the potential of these practices and how they might contribute to expand ULLL, fostering a more engaged and responsible citizenship, and (c) contribute to the broader mission of sustaining liberal democracy in society.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly politically polarised world, where extreme positions often manifest in radical communication and attitudes—sometimes even political governments inciting violent movements—it is essential to reinforce core humanistic and democratic values for all generations. Principles such as intercultural dialogue, citizenship commitment, and valuing human rights and peace, which have long been considered fundamental to societal cohesion, must be reaffirmed as essential pillars of a just and stable society.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all UN member states in 2015, provides a roadmap for global peace and prosperity. Goal 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) specifically emphasises that education should promote sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and an appreciation for cultural diversity (United Nations, 2015). Universities can play a key role in advancing this agenda by promoting understanding of liberal democracy, fostering just societies, and ensuring accountable institutions. The

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European Commission also underscores the importance of universities in promoting citizenship, tolerance, equality and diversity to protect European democracies (European Commission, 2022a). According to the Council of Europe, education for democratic citizenship should equip learners with knowledge, skills, and understanding to empower them to exercise and defend their democratic rights, value diversity, and actively participate in democratic life, promoting and protecting democracy and the rule of law (Council of Europe, 2024).

In this sense, universities and their LLL programmes are well positioned to help strengthen democratic education and liberal democracy. This can be achieved through initiatives such as teaching and training programmes that provide teachers with the tools and knowledge to incorporate democratic approaches into daily practice. Integrating democratic citizenship education into ULLL programmes could foster liberal democracy and promote active citizenship, contributing to progress in that direction. This paper outlines the Democrat project, funded by the EC Horizon programme, which promotes RDC through participatory curriculum redesign and innovative teaching methods. The project's outcomes, like the RDC competence framework, the European curriculum for EfD, and the Living Lab approach, can be integrated into ULLL practices, reinforcing democratic values and democratic citizenship in higher education (HE). Universities could embed democratic values relatively easily into their core activities by, for example, ensuring equal access to HE, employing participatory learning methods, offering democracy-oriented teacher training, enhancing community engagement and designing inclusive curricula to cultivate humanistic attitudes and responsible citizenship. In so doing, universities would be contributing to a more fair and accountable society in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This paper explores how the Democrat project aids universities, and particularly ULLL, in promoting democratic values, with outcomes beneficial for teaching staff, learners, and the society at large.

In this context, ULLL programmes could focus not only on addressing labour market skills gaps, but also prioritise the stimulation of democratic attitudes and citizenship education for both staff and students. ULLL serves as a key tool to address labour market needs but it can also extend beyond this function by supporting diverse learners, tackling societal challenges, and upholding democratic values by fostering civic missions. Despite this mandate, universities often face criticism for insufficiently promoting and safeguarding a pluralistic, diverse, and open society. To support democratic principles through education, institutions could consider adopting a holistic approach that integrates these values into every educational level. This approach aims to ensure that ULLL efforts not only enhance workforce skills but also enrich democratic engagement and societal cohesion (e.g. Hoggan-Kloubert et al., 2023, Benson et al., 2017).

The Democrat project exemplifies effective practices for strengthening liberal democracy through ULLL in the EU. By reshaping education for RDC with participatory curriculum redesign and innovative learning methods, the project serves as a model for integrating democratic and sustainability-oriented teaching practices in HE and ULLL. The project's outcomes on democratic education can be adapted for HE, promoting ULLL models that are more connected to individuals, democratic values, community engagement and societal needs. Embedding democratic values in teacher training and curriculum design could foster community engagement and responsible citizenship within HE (Davies & de Viron, 2023; Alt & Niril, 2018). Furthermore, the project has initiated small local projects to test innovative practices that enhance democratic attitudes in educational institutions. The following sections outline the context and the practices of the Democrat project, demonstrating its relevance to ULLL.

THE DEMOCRAT PROJECT AS EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE

Facing unprecedented global and multifaceted challenges, including the Anthropocene crisis, digital innovation, socioeconomic disparities and geopolitical uncertainties, the Democrat project emerges as good practice for strengthening liberal democracy in the EU. It responds to current challenges and aligns with EU values, the United Nations 2030 Agenda, and the SDGs, with EfD playing a pivotal role in defending, strengthening, and deepening liberal democracy. Beyond formal rules, EfD adopts a holistic approach, fostering competences (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) to cultivate RDC. Democrat proposes a multidisciplinary RDC competence framework, facilitating LLL opportunities that align with the EU's commitment to participatory democracy and sustainable development. The project's ambitious research and innovation programme incorporates participatory and co-creation methodologies. By collaborating with diverse stakeholders, including public authorities, municipalities, schools, students and NGOs across EU member states, the project establishes national and transnational "Living Labs" to serve as incubators for real, open, and local innovative learning projects, fostering exchange of experiences, mutual learning, and co-development of educational practices (Democrat project, 2024).

Democrat's three-year work programme focuses on:

1. **Building evidence to redesigning curricula,** encouraging student participation in democracy, aligning with ULLL's goal of preparing individuals for a changing world.
2. **Developing toolkits for humanistic and civic education**, enhancing active democratic citizenship and addressing ULLL's challenges with new tools and flexible delivery.
3. **Strengthening democratic education processes**, involving citizens, ensuring ULLL equips individuals with resilience and agility for future challenges.

METHODOLOGY OF THE DEMOCRAT PROJECT

The Democrat project's methodology is rooted in open social innovation and co-creation, emphasising collaboration with the educational community. Beginning with conceptual research, the consortium explored foundational definitions and historical debates on democratic values from the EU and Agenda 2023. This work was fundamental to the development of a RDC competence framework, highlighting four key competencies: Solidary Participation, Deliberation, Judgement and Democratic Resilience. The project has recently transitioned to practical applications through Living Labs and Local Pilot Projects (LPPs) in six European countries. Educational stakeholders, including local schools, collaboratively test and refine curricula to suit their unique contexts. A comprehensive evaluation combining quantitative and qualitative assessments measured the impact of these interventions for continuous improvement. Ultimately, the Democrat project sought to create a European curriculum for EfD and a toolkit for democratic education that fosters active participation and engagement within educational communities, embedding democratic principles into both content and process.

Building Foundations for the RDC Framework and Educational Interventions

The Democrat consortium began with identifying specific social challenges, particularly those that pose risks to liberal democracy. This phase included conceptual research which involved exploring definitions, concepts, and historical debates grounded in the values upheld by the EU and Agenda 2023. The goal was to understand the structural challenges threatening democracy, identify research gaps, and outline a RDC competence framework. Once these challenges were defined, the project designed solutions centred on educational interventions,

based on a literature review and a competence identification process. The RDC competence framework (Toscano et al., 2023) provided knowledge about skills to promote democratic values within educational communities, emphasising the four key aforementioned competencies (i.e. Solidary Participation, Deliberation, Judgement, and Democratic Resilience). This groundwork supports the creation of LPPs for democracy education, a European curriculum for EfD, tools to assess and enhance democratic skills in teachers and students, and evaluating the impact of LPPs. All Democrat project resources are specifically tailored to support teachers and schools in embedding democratic education principles effectively.

Testing and Refinement through Living Labs and LPPs

The Democrat project uses Living Labs and LPPs to test and refine the RDC competence framework and the European curriculum for EfD. Living Labs and LPPs are real-life innovation ecosystems, using iterative feedback to create sustainable impacts and allow for real-world testing of the developed resources. In this framework, Living Labs and the LPPs develop, implement, and test curricula, bridging research and practice in education and scaling evidence-based tools (see ENoLL, 2016; McCormick, 2016). In other words, Living Labs are collaborative spaces involving teachers, students, parents and NGOs to co-create educational practices and policies across six European countries: Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain. They promote community engagement and iterative feedback to refine project tools. An example is the Irish Living Lab at the Dublin City University (DCU) that hosted a transnational workshop in June 2024. The workshop offered a collaborative platform where teachers, teacher educators, researchers, policymakers and young people presented 12 LPPs aimed at fostering democratic education. The participants identified challenges, developed solutions, and engaged in discussion about validating the competence framework and curriculum for democratic education. The LPPs, controlled educational settings within the Living Labs of the six countries, focus on piloting specific competencies identified by the Democrat project. By tailoring interventions to local contexts, LPPs ensure adaptability to various education systems. An example of a LPP in Spain is the “Read Right-Read Rights” project at Escola Carrilet (a maximum complexity school due to the low socioeconomic context of the municipality where it is located), a Catalan primary school project that uses children's rights to develop democratic thinking in the educational community. This project aligns with the competencies outlined in the RDC competence framework and integrates them into the core curriculum established by the Department of Education in Catalonia. Project activities are reported to the Democrat project, specifically to the University of Barcelona (UB), which is coordinating the Living Lab in Spain. The progress and challenges of the LPPs are shared with the Democrat project consortium and educational stakeholders at international workshops and conferences. Through these local pilots, the project tests innovative curriculum designs, gathering insights to adjust for each educational setting. The LPPs started in spring 2024.

Assessment and Evaluation

To evaluate the impact of the Living Labs and the LPPs, the Democrat project has employed an evaluation that combines quantitative and qualitative methods, including pre-post assessments, reflective reports, and focus groups. This approach facilitates both physical and virtual collaboration, engaging all relevant stakeholders. The assessment tool measures learners' development in four key areas of RDC competencies mentioned in the previous page. It includes a competence overview for background on RDC, a teacher’s evaluation tool for class-level assessments, and a student self-assessment tool to track individual progress. The teacher’s evaluation tool can be used by teachers to assess their teaching methods, understand competency levels, and structure instruction to advance learners from minimal to advanced levels of competency. Additionally, it serves as a diagnostic tool that can be used before and after interventions to track competency development. The student self-

assessment tool provides students with a procedure for evaluating their competency levels. The tool can be used before, during, and after interventions as part of formative or summative assessments. Students can compare their results over time to reflect on their progress and areas for improvement. An RDC map visually represents competency levels, helping teachers and students easily gauge progress and identify areas for growth. All RDC competence evaluation tools are grounded in research, drawing from frameworks like the Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) (Council of Europe, December 2020. These tools are currently being tested across the project's six Living Lab countries for validity, reliability, and usability in diverse educational contexts. Further specific images of the Living Labs work and pilot projects of the Living Lab country partners, as well as the assessment process, cannot be published at this stage of the project, as this milestone has not yet been completed.

Continuous Improvement of Toolkit

The insights gained from testing are instrumental in developing a comprehensive toolkit for democratic education, which will serve as a practical resource for educators and policymakers. The toolkit will incorporate feedback from the pilot phases and offers scalable solutions for implementing democracy education in various contexts. Findings are shared widely to maximize impact, with the Democrat Agora platform supporting resource sharing and dialogue across national and transnational educational communities. The methodological approach goes beyond traditional classroom settings and Democrat aims to enhance the educational environment through the further development of a European curriculum for EfD. This includes integrating dynamic and innovative practical units into the curriculum, enabling students and educators to actively participate in real-world democratic processes and civic activities.

In sum, the Democrat project's methodology integrates democratic principles in its content and process, fostering an educational environment that models democratic practices through co-creation, iterative testing, and reflection. This approach aims not only to teach democracy but also to embody democratic values in educational institutions.

PROGRESS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF THE DEMOCRAT PROJECT

The Democrat project has made significant progress in its mission to enhance EfD across the consortium countries. A comprehensive conceptual RDC competence framework has been developed and is grounded in extensive desk research conducted in the six Living Lab countries – Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Spain and Poland. The project partners have successfully established the Living Labs, LPPs, and conducted various research, innovation and education activities, including national and transnational workshops. The Democrat's vision and the RDC competence framework have been finalised, and the framework is currently undergoing further revision following the evaluation of the LPPs and the European Commission.

In parallel, the project launched an Agora platform, facilitating communication and resource sharing among stakeholders in each Living Lab country. The Democrat Agora is an interactive platform aimed at enhancing audience engagement and facilitating discussions, information exchange, and sharing experiences. To encourage the involvement of international stakeholders and disseminate project outcomes, the transnational Agora features, for example, online sessions known as Democracy Talks, where EfD academic experts share their knowledge and gain insights into the Democrat project.

An outline of the European EfD curriculum has been developed, and initial discussions have begun regarding its content, with a draft presented during the second round of national workshops. The Living Labs are actively engaging with LPPs to gather insights for practical implementation.

Looking ahead, the next steps involve adapting the designed European EfD curricula for the implementation of LPPs, aimed at testing and refining the competence framework and curricula through innovative learning approaches. Additionally, the conceptual RDC competence framework and assessment tools for RDC competences will be culminating in a comprehensive toolbox that will include policy recommendations and be made publicly available in multiple languages.

The project also faces challenges, however. Stressed educational systems, characterised by teachers' heavy workloads, hinder involvement in the project. Therefore, the project proposes greater engagement with NGOs and other relevant actors. Furthermore, the diversity of languages calls for the need of localised adaptations of bottom-up approaches. A critical area of focus will be now the application of the assessment methods for democratic competencies, ensuring that outcomes are not confined to LPPs but are scalable and impactful across broader educational contexts. Ensuring the effectiveness and scalability of the LPPs requires a robust monitoring and evaluation system to track the progress and impact of the interventions and to see how impactful the EfD competence development has been for teachers and students.

CONCLUSIONS: DEMOCRAT AS AN INSPIRING SOURCE FOR ULLL

Considering the outcomes of the Democrat project, how can these be applied in HE and ULLL practices? ULLL programmes, by adopting the Democrat project's methodologies and outcomes, have the potential to reinforce the mission of HE to support liberal democracy and contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Embedding democratic values in teacher training, curricula design, and community activities can contribute to promoting a more just and accountable society. The successful integration of the Democrat project's outcomes into ULLL practices would benefit individual learners and strengthen societal cohesion and democratic resilience. Outcomes can support ULLL practices by providing a structured approach to embedding democratic education within HE. An integration of the RDC competence framework into ULLL curricula could ensure that courses emphasise democratic principles, active citizenship, and humanistic values. This approach would foster critical thinking, civic engagement, and a deeper understanding of democratic processes among teaching staff and students. It would also, however, be crucial that HEIs' managerial levels see the potential and need for this type of approach and help facilitate its implementation.

Another focus could be on using the RDC competence framework and the European EfD curriculum to design comprehensive training programmes for HE teachers. These programmes can focus on equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to promote democratic values and participatory learning environments. Educators trained through ULLL to implement these innovative methodologies will be better equipped to cultivate critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and democratic attitudes among students. This will contribute to a culture of active citizenship and resilience, preparing individuals to address contemporary global challenges more effectively. Moreover, the RDC assessment tools for teachers and students could guide universities in assessing the individual impact of the EfD competence development and foster innovative educational practices. These real-life innovation ecosystems can bridge the gap between research and practice, allowing for the co-creation of curricula that meet local needs and enhance democratic competencies.

Like the Democrat project, universities could start fostering collaborations with public authorities, NGOs, and community stakeholders to create a supportive network for democratic education. These partnerships can help facilitate the exchange of ideas, resources, and best practices, enhancing the impact of ULLL programmes.

By embedding a culture of democratic engagement and community involvement, ULLL would be reinforcing democratic principles and supporting sustainable development. This would contribute to strengthening liberal democracy through ULLL, ensuring that universities contribute to mainstreaming democratic citizenship. In short, the Democrat project inspires the use of ULLL in advancing democratic education and contributing to societal progress. Its innovative approaches offer valuable lessons for embedding democratic values into HE, fostering universities as spaces of democratic practice and sustainable development. By aligning ULLL programmes with the outcomes the Democrat project, universities have the potential to influence the development of engaged and socially responsible staff and students, contributing to the broader context of democratic societies. However, without support from the managerial levels of HEIs, this innovative approach might be difficult to implement. Universities' commitment to promoting democracy is also often shaped and constrained by legal regulations and national government priorities explicitly mandating that HEIs foster democratic citizenship, human rights, social justice and participation, while maintaining a balance that respects institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

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A POSITIVE CHANGE FOR THE UNIVERSITY. THE CASE OF THE LIFELONG LEARNING QUALITY ASSURANCE IN FRENCH INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

How have the quality approaches specific to lifelong learning (LLL) contributed to positive changes in universities over the last 15 years? This paper aims to offer an answer: by advocating for a particular model of quality approach. If the notion of "quality" has gradually gained traction in universities, it has not done so in a single mode and with a single objective, as illustrated by the example of French universities on which I focus here. Alongside quality approaches designed for "attractiveness" or "excellence," LLL, in my opinion, promotes a "regenerative" model well described by Harvey in his "*Quality Culture: Understandings, Boundaries and Linkages*" paper. Focusing on the internal resources of organisations, this model finds expression in the context of an initiative: the development of a certification emanating from a professional network common to all French universities, known as "University Continuing Education." Promoting a collective approach to quality and encouraging the construction of a professional university network specific to LLL programs, this quality assurance may outline another model: the "relational quality."

QUALITY: A REAL MESS?

How have the quality approaches specific to lifelong learning contributed to positive changes in universities over the last 15 years? This is the question that I wish to examine in the context of this article, with regard to all activities related to LifeLongLearning. Or, more specifically, (to use Harvey's words in his "Analytic Quality Glossary" (2004-2018)), the quality approaches contribution to "organisational standards": "specification of principles and procedures by which the institution assures that it provides an appropriate learning and research environment." Focusing on the case of French universities, and more precisely, on the "Formation Continue Universitaire" (FCU) Quality Assurance, this paper aims to present a hypothesis: lifelong learning contributes to the promotion of a model of university development based on "continuous improvement," – the "regenerative quality culture."

Is this a paradoxical statement? Quality's *raison d'être* seems to be to create connections and optimise the interactions of the various actors involved in an organisation. Or, to quote Lucander, to promote a "collaborative development (...) involving teaching staff as well as other internal stakeholders (students, program directors, and academic management)" (Lucander, 2020, p.137). Therefore, asserting that quality pertains to different models implies that it is also a source of disorder and possible disagreement.

This idea is, for example, at the heart of a Elken and Stensaker's paper evoking a "multitude of concepts," or a "considerable fragmentation regarding the terminology used," as well as a certain conceptual void not filled by "few overarching concepts that would provide a concise analytical toolbox for studying the overall institutional attempts in working with quality" (Elken, 2018, p.189).

Putting aside differences in terms of actors (external or internal QA, see Blanco, 2015) or methods (bottom-up or top-down, see Lucander, 2020), I will focus on the following observation: the university, and more broadly, higher education, is a place where several quality models coexist, among which is the one specific to the lifelong learning activities I intend to analyse here. Based on the abundant scientific literature available, I propose to distinguish three models:

1. A "quality for attractiveness" that aims to enhance the appeal of a university.
2. "Excellence quality" that aims for success and achievement.
3. "Regenerative quality" that focuses on the "continuous improvement" notion.

These three conceptions of quality do not refer to the same objectives, actors and skills, as demonstrated by the French example.

Quality for attraction

Building reputation can here be seen as an end in itself, even if this quest for "university attraction" can indeed be framed (as Biggs suggests) within a "quality as value for money" (Biggs, 2001, p.221): its aim is then to attract students, socio-economic partners or even patrons. Involving strong strategy and communication skills, this model relies on a strong investment in terms of human resources. As Dill suggests, it can be thought of in terms of an "invisible hand" approach to academic quality assurance (Dill, 2000, p.36): administrators sometimes believe "*that academic quality would occur automatically if they recruited the best faculty members and students and left them alone*."

Attractiveness is indeed at the heart of an ambitious quality approach carried out within French universities starting in 2018: the "Bienvenue en France" (literally "Welcome to France") label initiative. It is based on "five categories**,** each broken down into four criteria," the latter being ranked from the perspective of the foreign student: "*Some criteria are considered vital to making sure the student immediately feels at ease* [and] *are referred to as "Welcome Package" criteria*" (Campus France, 2023).

Evaluated based on indicators drawn from this framework, universities are subsequently assigned one of three levels of "hospitality" (my words), the highest corresponding to the achievement of all criteria. In this latter case, the attractiveness is real: a university becomes a genuine tool for setting up in a foreign country, offering assistance with employment and support for entrepreneurship.

The mixed results presented in the "2019-2022 report", however, invite us to question the interest of such a "quality for attractiveness" model. As Simon Margison mischievously puts it: "*Although most activity in higher education is nation-bound, a distinctive global dimension is growing in importance, connecting with each national system of higher education while also being external to them*" (Marginson, 2008, p.303).

Quality as performance

The second model I would like to discuss refers to the "excellence quality" theorised by Harvey and Stensaker: it is "*operationalised as exceptionally high standards of academic*

achievement" and "*quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed*" (Harvey, 2008, p.432). Quality takes on a competitive nature here, and its main promoter would be a Europe engaged in a "search for excellence" (Harvey, 2008, p.432) the best examples of which, according to Harvey and Stensaker, are the Bologna process and the work of the European Universities Association (EUA), both concerning the definition of the European Qualifications Framework, and more broadly a redefinition of our university degrees.

To those examples, I would personally add an initiative like the Horizon Europe research program. A success in one of its extremely selective calls for projects constitutes a pinnacle in the careers of the members of a research team (scientists and other staff). Here, quality goes hand in hand with performance, and is measured (to use Goff's terms) by the desire to achieve the "gold standards whatever the discipline is" and indicators such as the "university ranking" or "league tables" (Goff, 2017, p.185).

Rankings and results do not, however, overshadow the role played by frameworks and quality of service indicators. Firstly, service in terms of good management of research contracts, as exemplified in the case of the audit plans of the Horizon 2020 program which gave rise to recommendations (and possibly warnings) in order to obtain a certificate on financial statement (MESR, 2018).

Then, service to staff and research directors certified through a certification awarded directly by the European Community: the HRS4R ("Human Resources Strategy for Research") label which signals a "*commitment to implement fair and transparent recruitment and appraisal procedures for researchers*" (Euraxess, 2024). Deployed from 2018, it is obtained after carrying out an "internal analysis" of the establishment, the identification of "prospects for improvement" and the implementation of an action plan which is subject to evaluation (for a perfect example: EHESP, 2023). In both cases, a quality approach serves a university policy aiming to take a "*place in the knowledge economy*" (Blanco Ramirez, 2015, p.362).

The possible conflicts between these two quality models are immediately evident. "Quality for attractiveness," for example, can be seen as a form of valorisation, and more broadly as a way for a university to establish its place within society through an economy of reputation or media visibility. In doing so, it pursues objectives other than an "excellence quality", focusing on indicators of success determined by structures recognised for their expertise in scientific matters. Are these significant in terms of notoriety building, especially with student audiences?

UNIVERSITIES AS LIFELONG LEARNERS?

Focusing on the economic and social environment of the university, these two models place themselves at odds with the third model: a "regenerative quality" that, according to Harvey and Stensacker (who propose it as one of their four "ideal types" of quality), relies on "internal developments." It is not directly linked to a "reward", as in the case of the "reactive quality culture", and does not intend to respond to an "external demand" (like the "responsive quality culture"). In being "regenerative," one should actually understand an institutional will: mobilising a transformative capacity immanent in the university as an organisation and engaging in a process of "*ongoing reconceptualisation of what it knows, where it is going and even the language in which it frames its future direction*" (Harvey, 2008, p.436-437).

"Regenerative" quality: the lifelong learning model?

Lifelong learning quality approaches in French universities indeed falls under this last model, with an additional specificity – the search for "internal regeneration" (Harvey, 2008, p.437) was a collective effort, shared between institutions grouped within the FCU network (which

brings together all the lifelong learning services of universities). The FCU's president from 2013 to 2017, Alain Gonzalez, presents in eloquent terms a joint work that began in 2010: "At first, it was an informal working group that allowed exchanges between universities that were ISO 9001 certified. By talking and sharing tips and tricks, we realized that our organisations were not so different from one institution to another, that we understood each other and that we could even exchange with the entire network"[1].

Emphasising the informal and spontaneous nature of these exchanges, these remarks stand in stark contrast to the "attractive" or "excellence" quality model and perhaps even outline a new model which I propose to name "relational quality." "Sharing tips and tricks" does not just aim at gaining efficiency: it is also a way to promote a common professional culture within universities and to demonstrate that the professions linked to it are capable of becoming a force for proposal. In this respect, the FCU network can be compared to other organisations. The creation in 2010 of "Cap recherche" (literally: "Heading for research"), for example, brings together "*professionals in research support in charge of supporting projects*" (CR, 2024, *my translation*). Similarly, the "Réseau Qualité en ESR" (RELIER, literally: "Quality Network in higher education"), created in 2012, intends to support "*the approaches of organisation, steering, evaluation, quality, improvement and risk management through quality*" (Relier, 2024, *my translation*).

A networking Quality Assurance?

Among those, the FCU network stands out for one proposal: the development of a quality assurance system, which was included (alongside ISO21001) in 2016 on the QA national list by the national French authority in charge of vocational education and training regulation (the CNEFOP). According to Alain Gonzalez, this label was conceived as an instrument enhancing the shared development of lifelong learning management skills within universities. "*The FCU certification had a specificity: the framework emphasised continuous improvement. The idea was to establish shared processes and very quickly we formed within the association a support group for the institutions that wanted to enter into a quality approach*"[2].

Seemingly taking Harvey's proposals almost literally, this framework aims to enhance the learning capacities of university organisations. This is first evidenced with the diagnostic phase, which was based on a reflexivity exercise: a self-assessment process which, according to Smutná and Farana (2009, p.122) "*is a comprehensive, systematic and regular review of an organisation's activities and results*" offering the possibility to "*discern clearly its strengths and areas in which improvements can be made*" and that gives way to "*planned improvement actions which are then monitored for progress*." In the FCU certification case, this process relied on six criteria and a 21 indicators grid which had to be filled by an internal steering committee assigning a score out of 5 and formulating possible improvement tracks for each one of those multiple items.

After reflexivity comes an effort of mutual openness to the different university lifelong learning professional cultures. Indeed, a second phase (halfway through the planned quality process) requires the organisation of cross audits – two universities committed to mutually evaluating each other on the basis of the FCU framework. Enabling the sharing of know-how, experiences (and doubts), the process values the construction of a university professional network. We are still within the "relational quality" model, as shown by these words of Alain Gonzalez: "*The idea was to avoid inbreeding and find an alternative to internal audits in order not to put colleagues in the unpleasant and ineffective position to evaluate their colleagues. We thus played on geographical proximity and on similarities between universities. It is*

[1] Alain Gonzalez, *my translation*. Videoconference interview conducted with me on June 12, 2004.
[2] Alain Gonzalez, *my translation*. Videoconference interview conducted with me on June 12, 2004.

difficult for an institution that does not provide continuing education in medicine to understand precisely the activity of an establishment that does."

The objective was twofold. (1) To build a collective "quality culture" through the construction of a group of auditors. Having participated in such visits, these staff members were able to contribute to the "shared process" elaboration. (2) To prepare universities for the final audit which was carried out by an independent organisation, the Bureau Veritas. This audit firm also contributed to the construction of the entire process described here in order to have the value of FCU certification recognised at the national level.

CONCLUSION

Although barely known in French universities just 15 years ago, the notion of "quality" has now become mainstream as evidenced by the new framework produced by the HCERES (accreditation agency for all French establishments). Lifelong learning activities have contributed, like other academic fields (e.g., research, student's experience), to this evolution. However, its main tribute to French universities seems to me to lie in the promotion of a quality assurance model that can be presented by taking up Biggs' famous distinction. More than of a "retrospective QA" driven by a demand for "accountability" and mobilising "indicators of performance [that] concentrate on administrative procedures", the FCU certification initiative falls under a "prospective QA" that aims to review "how well the whole institution works in achieving its mission, and how it may be improved" (Biggs, 2001, p.222-223).

In the case of French universities, this "seminal" distinction between retrospective and prospective QA does not seem "simplistic" as Goff (2017, p.182) claims: by "prospective," we should understand the desire to collectively organise an "upskill" of universities' organisations and their personnel. Benefiting from the support of a national network, and opting for an "in-house" certification, French universities have turned lifelong learning education into a genuine learning ground for universities as a whole.

Their "continuing education services" have indeed become resource centres for institutions facing new quality requirements. As Alexandra Bodin, who succeeded Alain Gonzalez as quality manager of the FCU network, says: "*There is new thinking. In some institutions, vocational training departments or services have become models. Within some universities, we see the emergence of "continuous improvement departments" or "quality services," whose agents and staff originally come from continuing education activities management*"[3].

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ACTIVE AGEING IN A LEARNING CITY-REGION: THE SENIOR ACADEMY OF PÉCS

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Key words: *collaboration, learning city-community, intergenerational and senior learning, health and wellbeing*

ABSTRACT

This innovative practice paper will elaborate upon the roles and responsibilities of the University of Pécs in formulating the Pécs Learning City-Region. This programme aims to integrate and build on the diverse learning needs of vulnerable social groups to reach for better health and wellbeing through lifelong learning (LLL) actions. In addition to reviewing some specific examples of collaboration with civic activists in increasing participation around intergenerational and intercultural learning for improved health, sustainable community and skills development, this paper will highlight the model of the senior academy of Pécs. This model, based on geronto-education principles as a key part of university lifelong learning, is framed into senior citizens' collaboration so as to facilitate active ageing, diversity, and better learning performance in later life. This innovative practice reflects the inclusive character of Pécs as a learning city that has been formed by a bottom-up approach.

IN THE MAKING: A LEARNING CITY PROVIDES INCLUSIVE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

The University of Pécs has been engaged in building a learning city-region model in Pécs for almost twenty-years. It has been supported by the municipality and its main stakeholders in raising participation and performance of its citizens and to embrace LLL amongst vulnerable people through civic activism in the development of learning opportunities based on learning needs. This focus resonates with the impact of sustainable development goals (SDGs) in transforming Pécs as a learning city to demonstrate roles and responsibilities of quality education and the importance of providing LLL opportunities for all.

This inclusive and balanced scope of the learning city has been promoted by a number of initiatives, like the EcCoWeLL model of PASCAL International Observatory, which was adapted by the learning city model of Cork in Ireland (Neylon and Barret, 2013, 2020), and transferred into the Pécs learning city-region construction by the University of Pécs. The intention was to promote and develop an integrative structure to emphasise collaboration amongst learning providers to offer opportunities of learning in community formations with intercultural and intergenerational focuses. Another impact was a research initiative of PASCAL called the PURE project (PASCAL Universities' Regional Engagement) to investigate the roles and responsibilities of universities in promoting regional development, social capital, and LLL (PASCAL PURE, n.d).

A significant role of university lifelong learning has become to underline the roles of mutuality, trust, and equity as basic principles in shaping learning city activities to balance the economic with social, community and well-being dimensions. PURE as example was a reliable reference to help developing an innovative model capable of engaging main stakeholders and their members as civic activists, e.g., senior citizens, building bridges between learning, smart and creative aspects of the learning city, and enhancing the focus on citizenship, social inclusion and wellbeing (Németh, 2022a). However, it is necessary to underline that the impact of smart city-region approaches and initiatives, creative focuses and models, and increased attention to local and regional ecosystems have shifted discourse to recognise the economic realities involved in skills development, effective knowledge transfer, and a more competitive workforce in response to digital and technological challenges, AI and matters of sustainable environments and communities. (Singapore's Skills Future Priorities, 2023). These considerations have served as innovative inputs to transform Pécs Learning City to a greater balance between economic realities and socially driven challenges.

COLLABORATIVE LIFELONG LEARNING INITIATIVES AND PRACTICES IN LEARNING CITY PÉCS

The City of Cork and its 'Learning Neighbourhood' composite model served as the primary source of community-oriented learning city development for Pécs. In the Cork model, certain districts were successful in organising their learning festival programmes based on activities and potentials of lifelong learning communities with intergenerational and intercultural characters (Ó Tuama, 2020). The integration of this case into international learning city developments through UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) made it possible for Pécs to learn from good practice and adapt this into the development of potential learning opportunities offered by local community groups dedicated to intergenerational learning, social inclusion, equal opportunities and active citizenship. These concerns have influenced the University of Pécs to address learning city oriented LLL as necessary to deal with and, therefore, claim to transform the learning city-region model of Pécs into a collaborative format so as to demonstrate equity, care, solidarity and respect amongst community citizens.

Cases of collaborative learning supporting the innovative practice of the learning city of Pécs have helped in joining the GNLC cluster of health and wellbeing to connect wellbeing and social inclusion centred actions to those of socially driven demands from people of smaller communities with learning difficulties. Examples of promoting health and wellbeing have included the formation of a 'kiddy-ladder' action of family-learning, expanding learning opportunities for members of the Association of Parkinson patients or healthy-living programmes for young mothers with the label of 'Conscious Way of Life.' These examples reflect particularly sensitive forms of community-based engagement and collaboration amongst learning providers, shifting citizens' needs into the axis of actions and reflections of the learning City and its annual Learning City Festival.

Another recently identified collaborative learning model that reflects innovative practice is the 'Creative and Experience-based Space.' This model offers action-oriented learning for members of the community by offering creative steps in arts and crafts in community spaces through reflective forms of drawing and painting to help develop mental health and wellbeing. Several other neighbourhood-based initiatives have also become successful through generating action-based learning to facilitate understanding, respect citizens' diversities and to address community problems referring to challenging issues such as environmental issues, social exclusion, deprivation, poverty, homelessness and unemployment. Moreover, these initiatives have been successful in emphasising effective actions to tackle such matters with community collaboration, resulting in creative and innovative models of LLL (Németh,

2023). In this respect, the Learning City Programme and the Learning City Festival of Pécs has demonstrated the importance of facilitating diversity and inclusion and initiated the combination of smart, creative and learning city composite factors to further develop the Learning City-Region based on UNESCO guiding principles (UNESCO, 2015). Therefore, Pécs Learning City has incorporated the Senior Academy of the University of Pécs to help support active ageing for improved identity, belongingness and trust as an effective community form of LLL in the learning city. This model integrates intergenerational capacities and intercultural orientations based on the learning needs of senior citizens and, consequently, is connected to several types and forms of learning under the model of active ageing for better health and wellbeing.

Since 2017, the University of Pécs has channelled a good amount of knowledge from the aforementioned populations into both the framework and content of the Pécs Learning City Programme, especially the contexts, thematisation and citizen-focused approaches. Another clear goal has been to connect the Learning City Festival to the organisation of annual conferences, talks and seminars to create a wider community of collaborators around Pécs Learning City to collect and share good knowledge around lifelong learning trends both locally and globally. Again, environmental and climate dimensions have always been at the forefront in these events, not just in2017 but in every year to follow. This is not simply because of the SDGs integrated, but a natural consequence of growing citizen and community concerns around what to address and how.

Eight Learning City Festivals have been thematised around the following topics and sub-topics, where people can easily detect community orientations (bolded) to transfer innovative practice from micro to meso levels of learning in local and regional settings in comparison to international trends:

- (2017): Culture – Environment – **Knowledge Transfer and Skills Development**
- (2018): Experiential Learning: Environmentally-conscious? Sustainable Pécs and its Region – Place and Values/Cultural Heritages of Pécs – **Easier Together? Intergenerational Learning and Collaborations for Skills-Development**
- (2019): **Learning Community and Community Learning: Art and Culture Get People Together** – Learning through Sports for Health – Learning Environment/Learning and Environment
- (2020): Learning Together: Culture and Community: TECH-good Smart City – **City, Space and Environment: Learning Culture of Active and Sustainable Communities** – Intergenerational and intercultural Learning
- (2021): **Connections in and through Learning: Communities, Culture and Values** – **Environment, Settlement and Community** – Space, Form and Meaning – Jobs, Performance and Skills – Voluntary work, Inclusion and Aid – Teacher, Learner and Community
- (2022): **Inspiring Each Other with Learning: Value, Tradition and Identity in Learning -** Exchange between Environment, Culture and Economy
- (2023): **The Joy and Benefits of Learning: Transforming the Learning City into a Smart and Creative Community** – Identity/Belongingness and Tradition – Environment and Healthy Living
- (2024): **Pécs - the Sustainable Learning City: Green City - Sustainable Knowledge Transfers and Skills Development**

The Learning City Pécs Programme has organised not only annual Learning City Festivals, but also six thematic conferences, talks, and webinars. Those international events have been achieved in association with distinguished HEIs, eucen, PASCAL, ASEM LLL HUB, UNESCO UIL and several GNLC partners to help better understand and effectively reflect to collaborations amongst citizens supported by international examples and models of good

practice. UIL framed those upcoming challenges to LLL within an inspiring handbook and provided good reason to bridge social, environmental, and technological challenges to encourage cities and regions to respond in effective and human ways (UNESCO UIL, 2022).

THE INNOVATIVE ASPECTS OF THE SENIOR ACADEMY OF PÉCS AS LEARNING CITY PARTNER AND STAKEHOLDER PLATFORM

The Senior Academy of Pécs, an organisation of informal learning, was founded in 2014 and legally formed into a foundation to operate in association with the University of Pecs. In June 2024, the academy has successfully delivered its 20th semester with more than 900 registered 60+ year old participants. This format, usually includes seven lectures per semester around the questions and challenging dimensions of ageing combined with life-focused lectures to address specific matters of economy, society, and environment as they affect the lives of senior citizens.

The main general topics of the academy are: society, learning, psychology, economy, history and cultural studies. At the end of each semester, students receive certifications. Besides lectures, the academy also offers special courses on certain topics (e.g., English and German language, local history, ecology, IT, psychology, history of art, anthropology). It also, however, has its own self-organising learning groups: the Senior Tourists, Bridge Club, Bibliotherapy Group and Table Tennis Team. A significant priority of the academy is to support community development and senior volunteering in Pécs by using the resources of a learning city.

Based on a society-oriented approach, they have an innovative view on ageing and their aim is to achieve active and successful ageing (EC, 2006) with intergenerational learning, learning in workplaces, diverse learning activities and complex lifelong guidance. Helping the elderly stay up to date, one of the most common motivations in older age is to follow the development of society and science. In this regard, Geronto-education as a disciplinary approach has been deeply applied to help understanding and reflecting, for example, to inventions, new expressions or scientific discoveries, to interpret arts or to follow progress in life. It is a rather general recognition that the elderly would like to join in conversations and understand others, be able to answer if a grandchild has a question, or offer new viewpoints based on their age and experience in case they are motivated with sensitive modalities of knowledge transfer (Baltes & Smith, 2003).

Solitude poses a serious health risk in older age and is a strong determinant of quality of life. Learning generates opportunities to communicate with other people and learning creates fellowships, social contacts, and new social roles. Moreover, it allows people to meet others with mutual understandings, who can help us if needed, and whom we can help as well. Intergenerational learning has many good practices to bring together older and younger people who can also learn from each other (e.g., a grandmother teaches her granddaughter to knit who, in exchange, shows her how to use Facebook). It is well-reflected in the behaviour of participants of the Senior Academy that for many older adults the actual subject of learning is not always the main motivating factor. Rather, they join learning groups because of communicational needs, to be together, and to spend time meaningfully which is clearly reflected by the term active ageing (Walker, 2002).

Achieving active citizenship and participation in social decisions, political elections, and community actions are important for a democratic society at every stage of adulthood. In post-socialist countries like Hungary, the elderly have mostly been socialised not to think independently, not to voice their opinion or initiate changes. This creates difficulties in teaching when participants are not active and have no suggestions on how to improve the learning process.

Referring to prevention, learning is constantly influenced by ageing. Learning is an excellent way to stay young. Participants of the Senior Academy of Pécs clearly signalled that physical activities stimulate mental efficiency and vice versa and that learning can result in better physical capacity. For them, physical activity is a protective factor against neurodegeneration and plays a role in delaying normal and pathological ageing (Mandolesi et al., 2018).

Ageing derives from loss of functions: the longer we live able to support ourselves the later we age. Being active in most aspects of life means successful ageing. Reflections on senior learning signal that organising spare-time activities is challenging for seniors despite people having more free time in older age. It is challenging to spend it with quality, varied activities with feasible challenges. The Senior Academy offers support to help seniors realise collectively that whether spending time indoors or outdoors, alone or in community, face to face or online, spare-time activities help them experience the world around them and building relationships with others, learning new skills and, moreover, collecting and sharing (Boudiny, 2013 and Bowling, 2005).

The economic function of geronto-education is becoming more important in ageing societies. By 2030, 30% of European workers will be ageing workers (aged 55-64). Therefore, maintaining their working capacity is one of the most important preconditions for economic sustainability (Eurofound, 2024). Responding to employment issues, the academy cooperates with a senior employment agency.

Another significant aspect of the Senior Academy of Pécs is that it has so far collaborated with several stakeholders in promoting active ageing through a number of programmes and activities to promote LLL with intergenerational dimensions. This is why the Senior Academy can be recognised as an innovative practice whereby senior citizens can be integrated into their community as active citizens and motivate both fellow elderly citizens and members of their families to experience the joy and power of learning through collecting and sharing good knowledge and practice in a number of focuses in accordance with the mission of, for example, the U3A movement in the UK (U3A Mission). The University of Pécs has understood the positive role and impact of this good practice to enhance the benefits of LLL in local settings and, therefore, worked to embed community-based participatory actions into the framework of the learning city.

In this regard, let us underline that the innovative character of this practice is the formation and development of the Senior Academy as a specific knowledge sharing format with the following principles and values:

- The Senior Academy programme is formulated, for each incoming semester of the University of Pécs, based upon the needs of members indicated in a questionnaire of programme planning;
- The Senior Academy has a special principle of disseminating science, culture, and arts to be combined with valuable practices from the city-region;
- The Senior Academy is supported by all faculties of the University of Pécs and works as an inclusive platform for senior citizens of Pécs and its region to engage with and enjoy LLL;
- The Senior Academy is a collaborative partner of Pécs Learning City together with other senior citizens' clubs and communities in town;
- The Senior Academy of the University of Pécs has been collaborating with other U3As in Hungary organised by universities in Budapest, Debrecen and Kecskemét;
- The Senior Academy has already participated in several EU-funded projects to transfer and exchange its innovate practice to other senior academies, U3As in neighbouring countries of Croatia, Slovenia, Austria and Italy. This dimension represents the need for collecting and sharing amongst senior academies.

- The Senior Academy in Pécs has made use of the UNESCO GNLC platform to get connected to other Learning Cities of the UNESCO community to exchange active ageing practices as part of health and wellbeing and other respected UNESCO goals;
- The University of Pécs provides a valuable research and study component so as to develop its Senior Academy with analytical work, comparative studies, and critical reflections.

CONCLUSIONS

Collaborative forms of LLL for social inclusion and wellbeing can be recognised as a particular direction and dimension of LLL embedded into learning city developments. Higher education institutions play special responsibilities in promoting the participation of vulnerable groups of citizens in urban environments of a city-region so as to develop social cohesion, respect, and active citizenship as prerequisites of developing and sustainable communities. (Nemeth, 2022b) Senior citizens play significant roles and call for collaborative actions through LLL and active ageing based on mutuality, equity, and solidarity. This is where universities have to work together with civic activists like senior citizens and their platforms so as to formulate learning cities for the benefits of citizens and their communities and to ensure that no one is left behind.

The strong ties that the University of Pécs has with ASEM LLL Hub and its Research Network on Learning Cities, Pascal International Observatory and, moreover, with eucen together with its UNESCO GNLC membership, allows our university to further embrace university lifelong learning with international exchanges in research, development, and innovation. All these connections and collaborations puts our institution in a position to enhance the quality of intergenerational knowledge transfer and dialogue through its Senior Academy and other distinguished activities as part of the Pécs Learning City (an innovative practice recognised by UNESCO in 2017 by the *UNESCO Global Learning City* Award).

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LEARNING FROM LIFE - EXCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM. THREE QUESTIONS TO ANNE BURKE

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Since 2017, the Irish government has formally recognised the Traveller community as a distinct ethnic group (Pavee Point, 2017). In Ireland's latest census from 2022, the number of Travellers was counted as 32,949, meaning that Irish Travellers make up less than 1% of the population (Central Statistics Office, 2023).

However, Travellers remain one of the most marginalised groups in Irish society. According to Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin (2018), Irish Travellers have historically experienced disadvantage in relation to education, health, housing and employment. As a result, Travellers face higher rates of mortality, disability, and morbidity than the general population. Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin (2018) concluded that "a process of cumulative disadvantage operates over time, whereby a lifetime of more challenging experiences combines to produce poorer outcomes."

Within the education sector, progression for Travellers remains poorer than the rest of the population. While the vast majority of Traveller children attend primary school, retention rates in post-primary education are considerably lower for Travellers. The latest data published by Ireland's Department of Education reflects the cohort who entered post-primary in 2016. Of that cohort, 72.2% of Travellers completed the Junior Certificate[1] compared to 97.6% of the entire school enrolments for the 2016 cohort, while only 32.4% completed the Leaving Certificate[2] compared to 91.7% for the full cohort (Department of Education, 2023).

Within higher education, Travellers are almost invisible (Brennan, Cummins, Ó Súilleabhán, McGovern, & Quilligan, 2024). Only approximately 1% of Travellers hold a higher education qualification compared to over 40% of the total population (Higher Education Authority & Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022).

[1] The Junior Certificate is a state exam completed at the end of the junior cycle in secondary cycle (i.e., at the end of third year).
[2] The Leaving Certificate is the final state exam of the Irish secondary school system and the higher education matriculation exam.

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In 2018, the Southern Traveller Health Network (STHN) took the initiative to attempt to address some of this disadvantage by reaching out to Adult Continuing Education (ACE) at University College Cork (UCC) to explore the co-creation of a leadership development programme for a group of Traveller women. Following the development of a true partnership approach, a part-time Diploma in Leadership in the Community (EQF level 5, 60 ECTS) was launched in the academic year 2019/2020 (Cummins, Leane, McGovern, Byrne, & STHN, 2022). Twenty-one women ultimately completed the course, and their graduation made headline news throughout Ireland (University College Cork, 2022).

Anne Burke, who works with the Southern Traveller Health Network in Ireland, was instrumental in the development, delivery, and ultimate success of the course. Anne is an Irish Traveller and works tirelessly to advocate for the travelling community, particularly to increase participation in education initiatives and achieve equality of education for Travellers.

Lyndsey El Amoud: What would you identify as the key barriers to higher education for marginalised groups such as Irish Travellers?

Anne Burke: The key barrier is getting through second level and that is where the big issue is for us. Traveller children are coming from a primary system where they do not have good literacy and numeracy. When they go into secondary schools, what we are finding is that they are no sooner in the door than there is almost a mission on to get them back out: to expel them or to put them on a reduced timetable, to do anything with them but actually try to grapple with the core issue of identity. There is no sense of belonging with the Traveller children in school; everything around them is about white Irish settled people. There is no representation there: there are no teachers there that are Travellers or that even have cultural competency. As Travellers, we almost live in a bubble. We live on the margins, excluded from society but we have to interact in school. We have traveller children going in at the age of four and quickly by the time they are six or seven, they are thinking "*there's something different here, there's something wrong here. This isn't for me - I don't belong here*." It is not a healthy learning environment for them.

We are also struggling with the parents and trying to develop a sense of expectation as well because they have come through a system that they have been traumatised through. And then with the mental health crisis, parents are scared now. They are saying "*I send them into school, for what? They are getting nothing out of it, and they will probably end up being traumatised like I am*."

I fought to desegregate the system for travellers. I fought hard for that. But after fighting for it, I am wondering to myself, would our children not be better off where they feel safe, where they feel understood, where they feel heard? Would they not be better off in a space like that besides being lost in those systems that do not care about them and all they want to do is get them out?

I know we are talking about higher education here, but really and truly, apart from the odd mature student we get to go back or the ones that are hiding their identity, there are so few Travellers going to third level. For the ones that are hiding their identity,

then I'm sure finance has become a barrier because they are afraid to access Traveller supports because that will out them and some of them feel guilty because they say "*well I hid my identity and I do not have the right to go and get help because I hid it all my life*." That then becomes another trauma and another burden.

All that internalised oppression, that's a huge barrier. All the spaces that you go back into, even going to school to help your child, it is triggering. You are brought back to that time when you were treated so badly, and you did not know any better. It is bad enough to be treated badly when you understand what is going on. But when you do not understand what is going on, you do not know what you have done wrong. You think "*well there must be something wrong with me*." I thought that when I first started going to school. I really believed that there was a problem with me. As you get older, then you start looking at other Travellers and you think "*well, maybe if they did not do that or maybe if they did not do this*." I believed if I was more like a settled person, I would be more accepted.

It is a societal problem, but it is forced on us to create the awareness around it, to do something about it. Racism is the big barrier. It is everywhere. Life is hard enough; it is hard for everyone. But that extra thing, no matter what you are going through, you have to have a thought in your head. Every settled space you go into, you have to have that thought in your head "*I have to be on my guard here. If I hear stuff, I have to know how I want to react to it*." You cannot live your life like that. That really impacts on your mental health.

Lyndsey El Amoud: Telling us a little about the programme, what do you think were the key conditions for the success of the Irish Traveller women leadership programme in UCC?

Anne Burke: The support, the understanding, the empathy, the wrap around supports, almost pre-empting what is going to go wrong here and getting in there beforehand and trying to troubleshoot and make sure that it was as good an experience as it could possibly be. Even to be hit with COVID and having to adapt to all that, I think if there was ever a testament to people's will once, they decide to do something, it was this course. In other circumstances it would not have happened like that. If we as a Traveller organisation could not have done that pre-development work with them, if we had not created that safe space for them where they felt secure, and if we had not come across yourselves who were also of the mind and fully understanding of what these women, the sacrifices they were making, and how difficult the challenge it was going to be for them. We had all of that, it was just like we had the magic recipe there and it worked so well. And we have built on that as well, so twenty women did not finish the course and then we said goodbye, we were there afterwards as well. So, we were there before and we were there afterwards, and we made sure that we were not just going to drop them after they did that, we were going to try and find pathways either for a future in education or a future in work and we still offer that support.

I think we are living in a world now where everything is quick and fast and get you in and get you out, and compassion and empathy are gone. Systems are now like a revolving door and that is the problem with the world today. I certainly think that

whether it be health or whether it be anything, the human side of things is gone, and you have to mind the human. There were a couple of women who wanted so desperately to get on that course and I thought "*they have no literacy, they are definitely not going to do this. No, we should not let them through*." And then a part of me, a part of my heart said, "*who am I to deny somebody an opportunity if they really, really want to do this?*" In the end, they didn't drop out. They were the ones that worked harder.

Lyndsey El Amoud: What would your call to action be for universities across Europe when it comes to marginalised groups?

Anne Burke: Where I see things working well with Indigenous people is where you have community organisations linking with the colleges and the colleges linking with the organisations. Because you cannot walk out onto the street and say to an Indigenous person "*come on, you have to go to college here*." You have to find them where they are at, wherever that is, you go and you find them. You cannot sit and wait for them, expecting them to come in. Reach out to NGOs. Send your students into the NGO. Develop networks with NGOs, strong, meaningful partnerships that are like what we did, strong partnerships, not tokenistic ones, not sending somebody a form to fill out asking "*are you interested in this?*" But actually, go out and sit with people, have a cup of tea with people, listen to the problems, listen to the issues, read up, understand, create an awareness. Reach out – they are never going to come to you. These people are already traumatised, they are not going to further traumatise themselves. Create pathways and create stepping stones. If we want a good, healthy, vibrant, thriving society, inclusion, inclusion, inclusion, everybody needs to be included!

Lyndsey El Amoud: Thank you very much.

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