

EDITORIAL ENHANCING UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING CULTURES

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Lifelong learning (LLL) has become a defining agenda for higher education systems facing profound global transformations that are reshaping societies, labour markets, and the very meaning of participation in social and economic life. Far from representing a discrete phase of formal education, LLL is now widely understood as a *lifelong* and *life-wide* process (Aspin & Chapman, 2000; UNESCO, 2016). It is a process that accompanies individuals across shifting personal trajectories, technological transitions, and ecological landscapes. From this perspective, fostering robust cultures of LLL is crucial (El Amoud, Weait, & Steering Committee of [eucen](#), 2025) not only for economic competitiveness but also for social resilience, democratic participation, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

This issue of the *European Journal of University Lifelong Learning* originates from the 2025 Lille Conference, “*Enhancing University Lifelong Learning Culture in Europe*,” and reflects its core ambition: to explore and understand how universities can actively contribute to building sustainable, equitable, and interconnected LLL ecosystems across Europe and beyond. While rooted in European debates, the contributions gathered here deliberately extend beyond a single geographical frame, engaging with diverse institutional and policy contexts. Together, they share the common conviction that universities are increasingly called to assume a transformative role, acting as hubs connecting public and private organisations, regional and national authorities, employers, educational systems, learners, and citizens within complex learning ecologies. This ecosystemic vision resonates with sociological understandings of multi-actor governance and territorial development (Sotarauta, 2016), as well as with contemporary policy frameworks that emphasise strategic coordination, accessibility, and shared responsibility for learning across the life course (OECD, 2021; CEDEFOP, 2020). Rather than treating LLL as an add-on to traditional university missions, all contributions invite a rethinking of higher education’s role within broader social, economic, and civic transformations.

The structure of this issue relies on three thematic pillars: strategy and leadership in university lifelong learning; LLL ecosystems and the role of universities; flexible learning pathways. In order to provide a coherent narrative that reflects both the complexity and the interconnectedness of LLL from an international perspective, the papers will follow a conceptual progression that moves from macro-level policy frameworks, through meso-level institutional practices, to micro-level learner experiences.

Strategic and Policy Frameworks for Lifelong Learning

The opening section situates the debate within the broader policy architectures that shape opportunities, constraints, and imaginaries of learning across the lifespan. As emphasised by the Lille conference, encouraging individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate in LLL and convincing them of its value requires more than just rhetorical commitment. It depends on clear entitlements, supportive frameworks, transparent funding mechanisms, and equitable systems for recognising skills and prior learning. In this context, Mary Mahoney's discussion paper on the UK's Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) offers a particularly instructive lens. As higher education systems explore modular learning, micro-credentials, and new forms of portability and movement across educational sectors, this analysis of the LLE as a systemic funding reform highlights both its transformative potential and its inherent tensions, exemplifying how strategic support instruments can reshape learning trajectories, either expanding or restricting learner participation. At the same time, Mahoney critically interrogates the risks associated with market-driven rationales and skills-centric narratives, contributing to broader debates on how welfare regimes redistribute learning risks across the life course (Schuller & Watson, 2009). The paper also then invites reflection on the principal enablers: financial incentives, personal training accounts, and transparent recognition mechanisms. Complementing this policy-focused perspective, the research paper by Lindsey El Amoud examines stakeholder perspectives on LLL in Irish higher education, highlighting another crucial dimension: the diversity of meanings attributed to LLL across actors. Its phenomenographic method uncovers multiple and sometimes competing understandings and distinct imaginaries of LLL, which range from employability-oriented upskilling strategies to more emancipatory visions inspired by the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). This multiplicity underscores another key challenge: building shared ecosystems requires a common language, yet also sensitivity to local, sectoral, institutional and cultural diversity. Taken together, these contributions suggest that LLL is not only a set of policies or a policy object, but a cultural and political project, one that unfolds through negotiation, shared vision, continuous alignment among stakeholders and constant redefinition of shared priorities.

Building Lifelong Learning Ecosystems: Leadership, Governance and Collaboration

While policy frameworks and strategies provide the architecture within which LLL can flourish, universities remain the pivotal actors responsible for translating these visions into sustainable organisational practices. They are increasingly expected to integrate them into their missions in ways that are structurally coherent and not merely additive. From this standpoint, the innovative practice papers gathered in the second

section of the issue turn to the meso-level, exploring how institutions design, govern and sustain LLL ecosystems that are both resilient and responsive.

The SUPSI case, presented by Sara Benedetti and Nadia Bregoli, foregrounds strategic leadership in continuing education, illustrating how a circular and transformative ecosystem can emerge from organisational reflexivity, collaborative decision-making, and continuous alignment between applied research and educational provision. This model resonates with theories of distributed leadership and organisational learning (Bleiklie et al., 2015), highlighting how leadership functions less as hierarchical control and more as an enabling capacity. A complementary institutional perspective is offered by TU Delft's contribution – proposed by Bertien Broekhans, Elke Spiessens, and Cora Van Haaren – which focuses on building an impactful and coherent university lifelong learning portfolio. By emphasising strategic alignment, measurable impact, portfolio rationalisation, and stakeholder co-creation, the article reflects wider European debates on shared degrees, micro-credentials initiatives, strategic planning, and institutional positioning within competitive yet collaborative landscapes. Shifting the lens further inward, and widening the scope beyond the European context, the contribution by Shermain Puah, Sok Mui Lim, Shimin Ngoh, and Jing Shi explores an innovative practice implemented at the Singapore Institute of Technology. More specifically, the authors examine the role of coaching as a relational infrastructure within LLL ecosystems, demonstrating how coaching practices enhance learner agency, reflective competence, and adaptability, capacities that are crucial for navigating technological, ecological and professional transitions. This micro-level intervention, therefore, places a direct emphasis on learner-centred approaches and on addressing barriers such as time constraints, confidence and limited access to information. Across these papers, ecosystems emerge not merely as structural configurations, but as living cultural and relational arrangements grounded in leadership practices, collaboration, and institutional imagination.

Flexible and Inclusive Learning Pathways: Micro-Credentials, Recognition and Learner Agency

Having examined institutional models, the issue then moves toward the lived experiences of learners, stressing how the creation of flexible, accessible, and recognisable pathways is essential for reaching diverse learners and addressing the barriers that prevent engagement in LLL. More specifically, the focus is placed on individuals engaged in learning processes across their life course, on the concrete pathways through which LLL cultures are enacted, and on the mechanisms that allow universities, in particular, to respond to the needs of learners in a transforming world. Technological acceleration, green transition, and demographic changes require new skills and new forms of recognition, and flexibility becomes a key condition for participation, yet also a site of potential inequality. The section begins with micro-credentials as a cornerstone for bridging initial and continuing education, as argued in the innovative practice paper by Pierre Artois, Christelle De Beys, Laetitia Linden, and Cécile Pinson. Taking inspiration from the incorporation of a 14-hour micro-credential in project management into the Masters' programme in Human Resource Management (HRM), at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, the authors illustrate how modularity, portability, and responsiveness – qualities central to future European degree models and cross-country frameworks – can support learner mobility.

The paper proposed by Wim De Boer further explores sectoral innovation, looking at flexible pathways for empowering LLL in engineering education, which challenges traditional assumptions of curricular rigidity within STEM disciplines. This is followed by the author's analysis of competence forecasting and tailored course design in the field of battery systems, demonstrating how data-informed approaches to designing training can align LLL provision with emerging technological demands central to Europe's energy transition.

The final two contributions in this section explicitly foreground their commitment to inclusive and equitable LLL ecosystems. In particular, the innovative practice paper by Claudia Bergmüller-Hauptmann, Monica Bravo Granström, Jaqueline Garcia Ferreira Fuchs, and Violet Grössl builds on a specific programme called "IGEL – Integration and Equity for International Teachers", implemented at the University of Education Weingarten, in Germany, to engage more broadly with how university continuing education can enable migrant teachers to re-enter the profession, addressing both credential recognition challenges and socio-cultural integration. Remaining within the domain of migration processes, but turning to a different national context, specifically the Italian one, the research paper by Enrica Sgobba, Teresa Ester Ciciirelli, and Anna Fausta Scardigno explores intersecting inequalities between gender and mobile condition in learning trajectories, a topic strongly aligned with equity-driven institutional agendas seeking to counteract learner barriers such as cost, time, and limited access to information and recognition, in a feasible way. Running through this section is a shared insight: flexibility, if not intentionally designed, risks reinforcing existing inequalities. Learner agency, recognition of prior experience, and structural support, therefore, remain central to the ethical project of LLL.

A Life-course Perspective

LLL is not only a strategy for professional employability but a foundation for personal flourishing across all ages. The issue concludes by broadening the temporal horizon of this life-course perspective and deepening the very meaning of *lifelong and life-wide* learning, thanks to the thought-provoking interview "Later-Life Learning at Universities. Three Questions to Janick Naveteur". This conversation, led by Kathleen O'Connor, reconnects LLL with wellbeing, cognitive vitality, social participation, and meaning in older adulthood, within a rapidly ageing Europe. In dialogue with scholarship on learning and ageing (Formosa, 2014), Naveteur's reflections elegantly reconnect the issue's themes - ecosystems, strategy, and pathways - within the lived experience of learners who return to education far beyond the traditional working years.

Conclusion: Weaving Lifelong Learning Cultures Across Systems, Institutions and Lives

Across all its contributions, this issue offers a rich and multi-layered portrait of contemporary university lifelong learning, one that reflects both its transformative potential and its unresolved tensions. Common to all these papers is a shared recognition that LLL cannot be reduced to a technical adjustment of existing educational systems. Rather, it emerges as a cultural, institutional, and political project that unfolds across policies, organisations, and lived experiences. In doing so, the issue affirms several key insights, aligned with the Lille conference vision.

The first of these key threads concerns the ecosystemic nature of LLL. Across policy analyses, institutional case studies, and learner-centred investigations, LLL consistently appears as a multi-actor endeavour, requiring coordination among universities, public authorities, employers, communities, and learners themselves. Universities occupy a central yet non-exclusive position within these ecosystems: they act as convenors, brokers and innovators, but their effectiveness depends on the quality of partnerships, governance arrangements and shared visions they are able to cultivate, addressing both enablers and barriers. In this sense, LLL ecosystems are not simply assembled; they are continuously negotiated and reconfigured.

A second unifying element is the emphasis on innovative leadership and organisational culture. Several contributions demonstrate that embedding LLL within university missions requires more than the creation of new programmes or units. It calls for strategic leadership capable of aligning institutional values, incentive structures, and professional practices. Whether through circular governance models, portfolio rationalisation or relational infrastructures such as coaching, the papers highlight how leadership functions as an enabling force that shapes the conditions under which LLL can evolve.

A third, closely related thread concerns learner agency and inclusion. Flexible pathways, micro-credentials and recognition mechanisms are presented not as ends in themselves, but as tools whose social value depends on how they are designed and governed to meet the demands of a changing world. Across different contexts, the contributions remind us that flexibility without intentional attention to equity risks reproducing existing inequalities. Conversely, when combined with recognition of prior learning, support structures and inclusive pedagogies, flexible pathways can open meaningful opportunities for diverse learners: migrants, adult returners, professionals in transition, and learners later in life.

Importantly, the issue also reflects methodological and epistemic diversity. The collection brings together a discussion paper, two research papers, and a rich set of innovative practice papers, alongside the journal's signature interview. This plurality mirrors the very nature of LLL as a field situated at the intersection of research, policy, and practice. Rather than privileging a single epistemic stance, the issue invites dialogue across forms of knowledge production, reinforcing the idea that understanding and advancing LLL requires multiple lenses.

Finally, the life-course perspective that closes the issue serves as a reminder that LLL is ultimately about people, not systems alone. Beyond employability and skills development, learning across the life span supports wellbeing, social participation and active citizenship. In weaving together its three thematic pillars - ecosystems, strategies and pathways - with lived experience, the issue gestures toward a more expansive and humane vision of university lifelong learning, and contributes to an ongoing international reflection on how higher education institutions can cultivate resilient, inclusive and future-oriented LLL cultures. In a transforming world marked by uncertainty and transition, such cultures are not only desirable, but essential for enabling individuals, institutions and societies to navigate change with agency, dignity and hope.

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