

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IN CONTINUING EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM SUPSI'S CIRCULAR AND TRANSFORMATIVE ECOSYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the University of Applied Sciences and Arts (SUPSI) Continuing Education (CE) model as a transferable example of how university lifelong learning (ULLL) can be embedded in institutional culture and regional engagement. Grounded in a circular and transformative logic, the model integrates four core elements: participatory governance, innovative CE formats, partnership networks and a digital environment. These dimensions foster collaboration, support transformation at multiple levels, and address key challenges such as demographic change and evolving learning needs. The paper examines this through two practice-oriented questions: how participatory governance can drive institutional transformation and under which conditions such a circular approach can be transferred to other contexts. It reflects on the development of this model and its potential relevance for other higher education institutions (HEIs).

A SWISS PERSPECTIVE ON CONTINUING EDUCATION

In the Swiss higher education system, ULLL is formally recognised as one of the core missions of universities of applied sciences (UAS). The Federal Act on the Funding and Coordination of the Higher Education Sector (LPSU, 2011) places CE on equal footing with undergraduate and graduate programmes, as well as applied research (Federal Council, 2011). This means that UAS have a statutory obligation to provide accredited CE, ensuring parity of academic standards, but CE operates under a self-financing model: it receives no regular public funding. This hybrid configuration shapes how UAS design and deliver their programmes, ensuring both academic quality and responsiveness to professional needs (Federal Council, 2017).

Programmes follow nationally defined parameters (swissuniversities, 2020) that formalise ECTS-recognised formats such as Certificates, Diplomas and Masters of Advanced Studies (CAS/DAS/MAS). Admission requires tertiary education and professional experience, reinforcing the link between research and practice.

Within this framework, CE plays a strategic role in addressing labour market transitions and maintaining employability (SERI, 2019). At SUPSI, CE is framed as both a driver of

institutional development and a lever for territorial engagement across departments and affiliated schools. Its transdisciplinary orientation and alignment with lifelong learning policies make it a key element of the university's mission to foster inclusion, adaptability, and innovation.

Figure 1 illustrates this trajectory, showing how participation in SUPSI's CE programmes more than doubled from **5,769** participants in 2011–12 to **11,433** in 2022–23. Beyond the numbers, the figure illustrates key milestones in SUPSI's CE evolution.

Between 2014 and 2023, major developments happened such as:

- the introduction of modular MAS across all disciplinary areas in 2014, offering greater flexibility and stackability;
- the Federal Act on Continuing Education in 2017, which formally recognised lifelong learning as a national priority;
- the creation of tailor-made programmes co-designed with employers;
- the launch of alumni clubs; and
- the establishment of new digital infrastructures progressively strengthened the strategic role of CE within SUPSI and its contribution to the broader Swiss higher education landscape.

Rather than producing a temporary surge in participation, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated existing structural changes, consolidating digital infrastructure and participatory governance as permanent features of the CE system. This evolution also reinforced CE's position as SUPSI's third institutional mission and introduced a systematic approach to monitoring outcomes, embedding data and stakeholder feedback into decision-making. It laid the groundwork for the recent development of new short formats, such as SAS+ and Advanced Training+, which embody a flexible and modular approach to CE.

Participation growth in CE at SUPSI (2011-2023)

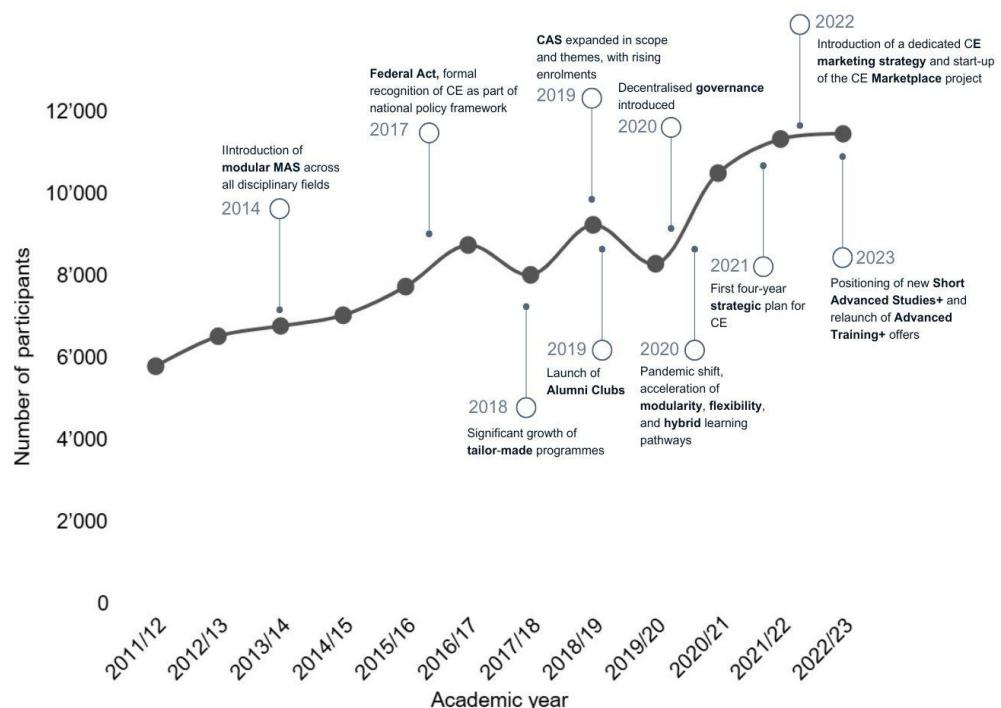


Figure 1: Participation growth and key milestones in CE at SUPSI (2011–2023)

Reframing CE as a circular and transformative ecosystem

This increase in participation reflects more than numerical growth. It marks a broader shift in how CE is conceived and practiced at SUPSI: no longer a service-oriented logic but a shared institutional responsibility and a strategic space for collaborative learning, professional development, and social innovation. The transformation has been shaped through structured processes of co-construction, such as interdepartmental working groups with CE mandate holders, pilot projects exploring new modular and transversal formats, and regular dialogue spaces with alumni clubs and external partners.

Within this evolving system, disruptions such as fluctuating demand, logistical constraints, or changing participant profiles are not seen as setbacks but as triggers for redesign and learning. Increasingly diverse learner groups have prompted the development of refined profiling tools, while digital instruments such as the CE marketplace enable real-time monitoring of enrolments and trends, supporting rapid adjustments and evidence-based decisions. In this sense, the SUPSI CE approach aligns with Taleb's notion of *antifragility* (2012), reinterpreted for learning ecosystems as the ability to improve and adapt through disruption. Rather than merely resisting shocks, CE grows stronger by transforming challenges (such as demographic shifts, digital transition, or the pandemic) into opportunities for innovation and institutional learning.

What has emerged is a participatory framework rooted in concrete practices that enable mutual learning across departments, disciplines, and stakeholders. Co-design workshops, participant surveys, alumni initiatives, and communities of practice with external partners ensure that CE evolves through evidence-based improvement rather than top-down directives. This iterative process embodies the logic of a circular system: knowledge, feedback, and experience circulate continuously across institutional boundaries, reinforcing adaptability and shared ownership. This approach resonates with theories of collaborative learning and organisational innovation.

As Thunnissen (2023) points out, ULLL operates as an interdependent learning ecosystem in which shared responsibility among stakeholders enhances adaptability and innovation. This understanding underpins SUPSI's CE model as a learning organisation capable of transforming feedback into strategy and experimentation into institutional growth.

While recent European debates on micro-credentials and flexible learning, as discussed during the 55th EUCEN Conference (2025), have emphasised their role in supporting ULLL, the Swiss university CE system has long embodied these principles through its modular architecture (MAS, DAS, CAS). This tradition, now extended to new formats such as SAS+ and Advanced Training+, reflects an early commitment to flexibility and personalisation in ULLL. In this sense, Swiss CE can be regarded as a pioneer of adaptive pathways that anticipate current European priorities.

METHODS AND EVALUATION APPROACH

The development and consolidation of SUPSI's CE model are supported by a structured system of monitoring and evaluation that ensures both accountability and institutional learning. This system combines the cantonal performance agreement with the internal quality management system, driving continuous improvement through participatory evaluation.

Data collection follows a mixed-method and multi-level design that integrates quantitative indicators and qualitative feedback from multiple stakeholders. Evidence is gathered through

annual CE graduate surveys, continuous marketplace analytics, triennial focus groups across departments and affiliated schools, and peer reviews conducted by experts from other Swiss HEIs.

Findings from these activities are reviewed annually by the CE Commission, which acts as a facilitative hub translating evidence into action, sharing good practices across the network and embedding results into institutional improvement plans. This cyclical process turns evaluation into collective learning, reinforcing the circular and transformative nature of the CE ecosystem.

Table 1 summarises how evidence collected at multiple levels creates a continuous feedback loop for improvement and strategy.

Data Source	Frequency	Method/Participants	Purpose
CE graduate survey	Annual	Mixed CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) + online survey of CE graduates	Track employability and perceived impact
Departmental and school focus groups	Every 3 years	Participants, teachers, admin staff, alumni external stakeholders	Identify strengths and improvement areas
CE Marketplace analytics	Continuous	Enrolment and user behaviour data	Monitor accessibility and learner trends
CE Commission annual review	Annual	Directorate and mandate holders	Define improvement measures and follow-up

Table 1: Data sources and evaluation mechanisms.

Findings and institutional learning

The data collected through these mechanisms provide a longitudinal view of CE performance and impact, showing how perceptions and outcomes have evolved over time. Between 2016 and 2023, average satisfaction ratings increased from 7.6/10 to 8.2/10, reaching **94.7% overall satisfaction** in 2023, with 54% “very satisfied” and 40.7% “satisfied.” These results confirm the consolidation of a participatory, evidence-based model in which quality enhancement is guided by data and stakeholder feedback.

Focus group discussions underline CE’s main strengths, namely quality, flexibility and professional relevance, while identifying areas for improvement, particularly communication, visibility and strategic alignment across departments and affiliated schools. Building on these insights, SUPSI CE has reinforced an evidence-driven culture where shared reflection supports collective improvement and organisational learning.

Overall, findings show that the SUPSI CE model not only sustains high satisfaction but also strengthens institutional learning, turning feedback into a driver of continuous improvement and demonstrating how learning organisations transform evidence into strategic action.

FOUR INTERACTING ELEMENTS IN A SELF-ACTIVATING ECOSYSTEM

Rooted in systems thinking and inspired by the circular economy, SUPSI’s CE model is composed of four stable core elements: governance & strategy, innovative CE Formats, alumni and partnership networks and marketplace.

Rather than being organised linearly or governed through a fixed structure, these elements act as dynamic agents within a self-activating ecosystem. As shown in Figure 2, their

interplay is not directed by a central controller but emerges organically from within the system. Any actor, individual, group, or institution, can enter from any point, triggering new cycles of collaboration and innovation. This logic of continuous interaction and mutual influence enables the system to generate transformation. Inputs such as new needs, ideas or insights are absorbed by the ecosystem and circulate across components, generating outputs in the form of learning formats, partnerships or strategic initiatives. Crucially, this participatory governance reflects contemporary shifts in organisational models, where distributed responsibility, iterative learning and role fluidity are defining features of the system.

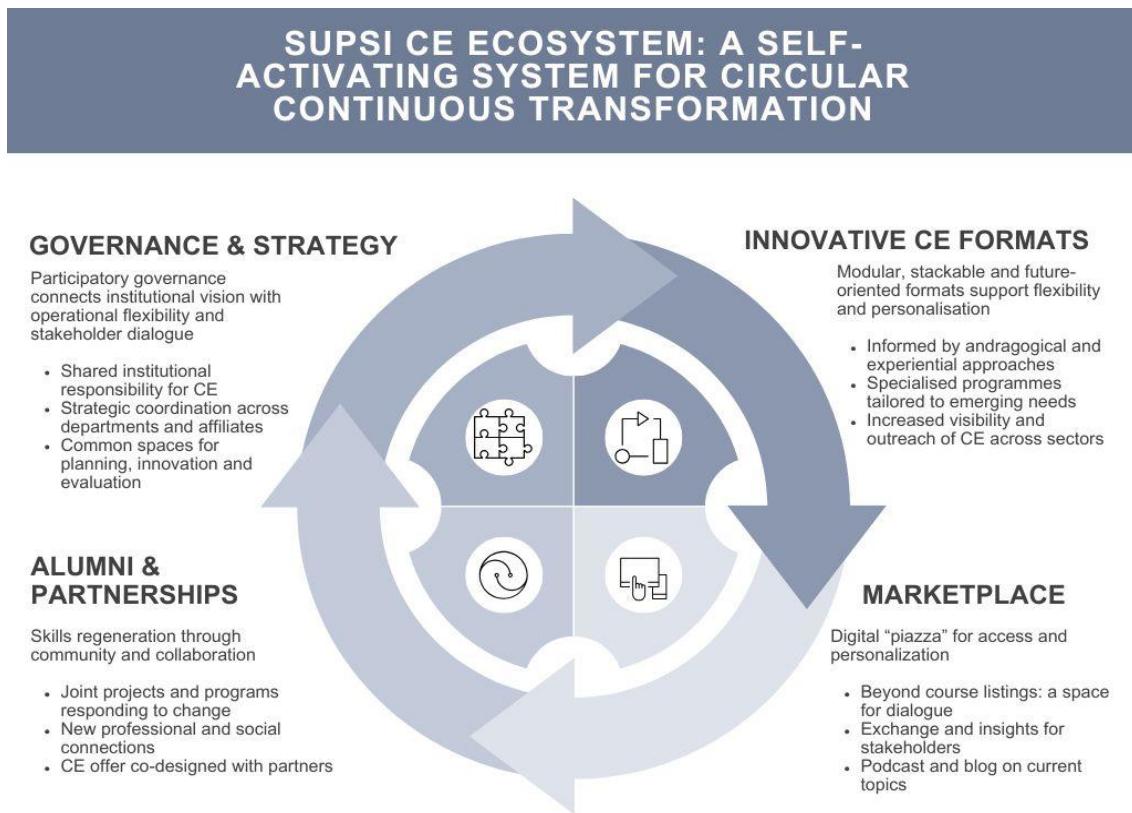


Figure 2: Concept map for the SUPSI CE circular and transformative approach. Interaction and mutual influence sustain ongoing innovation. Entry can occur from any point; transformation is emergent.

How the ecosystem works in practice

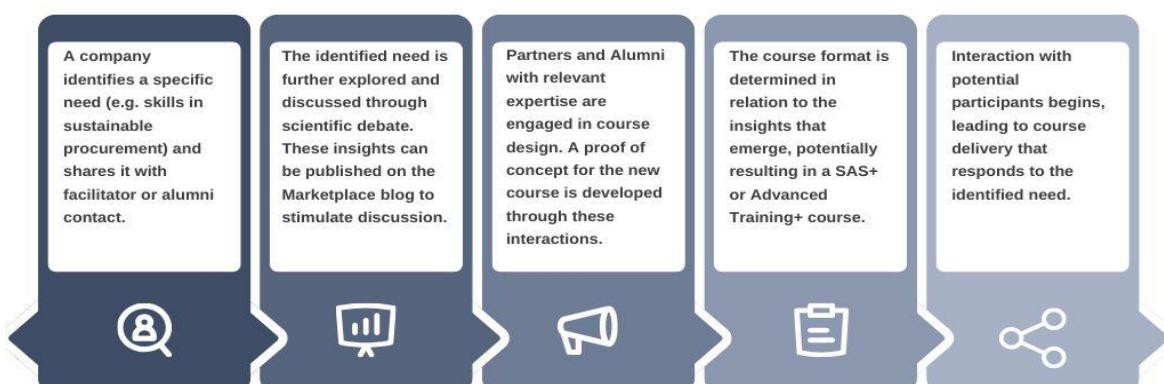


Figure 3: Illustrative example of how a learning need can be addressed within the CE ecosystem. The steps illustrate one possible application of the circular approach.



Participatory governance: the engine of a circular and transformative CE model

Collaborative governance provides the foundation that enables the other three components to function, interact, and evolve coherently.

Rather than operating as a standalone service, CE is structurally embedded within SUPSI's institutional mission. Governance acts as connective tissue across departments and affiliated schools, sustained by a participatory framework that unites strategic vision with operational flexibility.

Formal arenas such as the strategic and operational CE commissions, held approximately every two months, bring together the central CE Directorate team, departmental mandate holders, and Heads of CE programmes. These meetings address key themes including labour market trends, learner diversity, quality, finances, and planning.

This shared infrastructure fosters collaboration and continuous feedback, embedding a culture of experimentation and responsiveness. In this sense, governance becomes a transformative practice rather than a mere organisational mechanism.

Strategic planning follows the same logic: collaborative, iterative, and informed by the institution's collective intelligence. This approach enables CE to anticipate needs, adapt to changing contexts, and co-design future pathways, – all essential in today's complex environments.



Innovative CE formats

SUPSI CE responds to the growing demand for short, flexible, and outcome-oriented learning through two modular formats: Short Advanced Studies+ (SAS+) and Advanced Training+. Both are grounded in adult learning principles and designed to support dynamic, personalised learning pathways. This orientation reflects insights from adaptive learning research, which shows how real-time feedback and iterative design enhance flexibility and learner engagement (Plass & Pawar, 2020). This commitment to flexibility and responsiveness reflects the participatory governance framework outlined above, through which learners and institutions co-design adaptive solutions.

SAS+ are certifying programmes (on average 3–6 ECTS) with a stackable structure that enables professionals to build hybrid and adaptable profiles, responding to emerging skill needs, career shifts, or interdisciplinary goals.

Advanced Training+ consists of short, non-credit-bearing units (4–12 hours) delivered online or in person, focused on updating existing competences. Co-designed with stakeholders and informed by market analysis, they lower access barriers and often serve as entry points to more structured programmes.

Both formats are inspired by andragogy and heutagogy, fostering self-directed and experience-based learning (Knowles, 1968; Blaschke & Hase, 2016). They embody a shift from learner as consumer to prosumer, a co-creator of value and meaning (Toffler, 1980; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

Internal quality processes ensure that learning environments remain aligned with these principles, while CE professionals are trained and supported to act as facilitators of co-created and responsive learning spaces. These flexible formats enhance CE's adaptability and system-wide coherence, contributing to an ecosystem where learning is not delivered but co-produced.



Networks in motion, alumni and stakeholders in CE co-creation

Alumni are not merely former CE participants, but active contributors to its ongoing evolution. Through regular exchanges and thematic clubs, they foster interdisciplinary networks that extend learning beyond individual programmes and time frames. These communities resemble Wenger's (1998) *landscapes of practice*, where knowledge circulates across organisational boundaries and participants often re-engage through new offerings.

Alumni also serve as strategic bridges to the labour market, offering insights into emerging trends, evolving skill needs, and sectoral transformations. Their contributions enhance CE's relevance and capacity to anticipate change.

More than 100 external partners, including companies, public institutions, and professional associations, are actively involved in the co-design of CE programmes. These collaborations do not merely inform the offer: they shape it, ensuring applied relevance and mutual benefit.

Co-created learning paths, developed through collaboration among SUPSI CE, alumni, and stakeholders, fuel a dynamic system that grows stronger through change. CE embraces transformation rather than stability. In practice, this means that shifts in labour market demand, emerging professional profiles, or unexpected disruptions are treated as opportunities for redesign and innovation, an approach that echoes Taleb's idea of systems that thrive precisely because of stressors (2012).



Marketplace, a digital access point and engagement driver

The marketplace serves as SUPSI CE's digital gateway, making the full offer visible and fostering engagement among participants, alumni, and employers. Beyond a promotional tool, it connects learning with real-world needs across sectors and life stages.

The platform integrates curated content (e.g., augmenta.blog SUPSI, podcast) with personalised features like course suggestions, learning paths, and digital credentials. Autonomous course selection, guided admissions, and direct payment options reduce barriers and simplify administration, reinforcing SUPSI CE's commitment to inclusivity and quality.

An internal analysis (2024) confirmed the platform's role in supporting key learner phases, from exploration to loyalty, by meeting expectations for practical skills, recognised credentials, and added value.

The marketplace also sustains long-term engagement through interactive tools, coaching, and SEO strategies. In line with SUPSI's phygital vision (Grewal et al., 2020), it blends digital functionalities with in-person experiences, complementing, rather than replacing, relational and collaborative learning. This approach aligns with core ULLL principles, such as transparency, accessibility, and personalisation (ZUW, 2014), positioning the marketplace as strategic infrastructure for visibility, usability, and connection.

The interplay between digital, organisational, and human components shows how the SUPSI CE ecosystem transforms innovation into continuous learning and renewal.

FROM PRACTICE TO PRINCIPLE: INSIGHTS FOR BROADER APPLICATION

The SUPSI CE model is not a fixed template, but a flexible and evolving ecosystem that adapts to institutional and contextual change. From this experience, several transferable lessons emerge for other HEIs.

First, **distributed governance matters**: CE thrives when responsibility is shared across departments and schools rather than centralised in a single unit. This approach reinforces ownership, responsiveness, and learning at all levels.

Second, **short and modular formats**, such as CAS, SAS+, and Advanced Training+, have proven effective in reaching diverse learner groups and responding quickly to market shifts. Their flexibility supports work-life balance for professionals and enables institutions to innovate iteratively.

Third, dedicated **digital infrastructure** (exemplified by the SUPSI CE marketplace) can lower access barriers, generate real-time insights on enrolments and learner profiles, and foster **alumni engagement**. This combination strengthens both visibility and adaptability.

Together, these lessons show that CE can be both **transformative** and **sustainable** when treated not as an add-on, but as a strategic and structural mission. Embedded in governance, strategy, and knowledge flows, CE enhances institutional resilience and responsiveness, while expanding its societal impact. While the SUPSI model is shaped by the Swiss institutional framework, its circular and participatory logic can be transferred to other contexts provided that local governance frameworks enable dialogue, shared accountability, and adaptive learning.

Over the past decade, the circular CE model has led to tangible improvements in participation, satisfaction, and internal collaboration. Its benefits extend to learners, faculty, and administrators, who engage in shared processes of reflection and design. Yet, sustaining this model requires continuous coordination and institutional commitment, as decentralised governance demands time, communication, and trust among actors. These trade-offs show that transferability lies more in the principles than in the structures, in the way institutions learn, rather than how they are organised.

CONCLUSION: FROM CIRCULARITY TO IMPACT

This paper has outlined how CE at SUPSI has evolved into a circular and transformative ecosystem, embedded in governance, strategy, and institutional practice. It demonstrates that treating CE as a strategic mission, rather than a subsidiary service, generates measurable impact in participation, innovation, and regional engagement. The lessons drawn (distributed governance, modular formats, and dedicated digital infrastructure) are not prescriptive models, but transferable levers for universities seeking to strengthen ULLL.

In a context marked by demographic shifts, rapid labour market transitions, and the growing demand for lifelong learning, higher education institutions have both the responsibility and the opportunity to embed CE structurally.

The SUPSI model shows that CE serves not only as a tool for employability but also as a driver of social innovation, provided it is sustained through institutional commitment, iterative design, and responsiveness to change. By reframing CE as a core academic function, universities can contribute more directly to inclusion, sustainability, and the future of work across Europe.

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