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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.

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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 Cicirelli, 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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THE RELEVANCE OF THE NEW UK FUNDING SYSTEM, THE LIFELONG LEARNING ENTITLEMENT (LLE) TO ULLL IN EUROPE

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Discussion Paper

Keywords: *University lifelong learning; continuing education; higher education funding; lifelong learning entitlement.*

ABSTRACT

The Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), a new funding mechanism for both further and higher education in England, commences in 2026/27. It represents a core system change based on national economic imperatives and the need for flexibility to deliver these through learning. It introduces a new single funding system, access to loans for learners aged 18 to 60, flexible study options in further and/or higher education and freedom to move in and out of learning for different reasons. The LLE signals a major shift in the focus of government to the value of lifelong learning and continuing education. The LLE potentially represents a future model for European ULL.

INTRODUCTION

This discussion paper provides a high-level summary on the introduction of the new Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) in England through the lens of three major impacts for higher education (HE) and three for lifelong learning (LLL)/Continuing Education (CE).

The LLE is a new funding mechanism for both HE and Further Education (FE) and is now scheduled to be rolled out from the beginning of the 2026/27 academic year with a phased approach in the FE sector. It represents a core system change and is driven by both the need to build flexibility and fluidity into the system to enable changes over time and a clear rationale (and funding mechanism) for technical and higher education based on the needs of the economy.

The LLE entitles individuals from the age of 18 up until the age of 60 to take out a government loan for study at FE and HE, and also provides flexibility to move in and out of learning (e.g., full course, part course, individual modules) for different reasons, for example, training, retraining or upskilling, and potentially across different institutions or types of learning provider. The introduction of the LLE also includes the creation of a single funding model for both HE and FE, a breakdown of the binary view of the roles of university (academic) versus further (vocational and technical) education, and a new portal for students to access information on their loan entitlement across their lifespan. Individually and together, these create important impacts for the HE sector as a whole.

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WHY IS THE LLE RELEVANT TO LLL/CE AND EUROPE?

For readers of this journal, the LLE represents a major shift in the narratives about the role of both FE and HE, as well as a potential model for how education and learning needs to be funded going forward. As such, other European countries may also choose to adopt it. Although the LLE has yet to be implemented and will pose challenges for both the HE and FE sector, it signals an important shift in the priorities of governments and the role of LLL/CE.

An in-depth analysis on the challenges inherent in the rollout of the LLE and other aspects is covered in a detailed analysis published by the author in *Education Sciences* in 2024 (Mahoney & Kiernan, 2024). Despite a general election in July 2024 that resulted in a loss for the sitting Conservative Party government to the Labour Party, very little has changed with respect to the LLE since its initial announcement in 2020 and early pilot projects. The education sector continues to be concerned by the lack of clarity on key areas of its implementation. However, the UK government has recently released the long-awaited *Post 16 Education and Skills White Paper,* which provides a crucial piece of the policy jigsaw and contextualises the LLE in the light of the Labour Party's vision and priorities. (HM Government, October 2025)

THREE MAJOR IMPACTS FOR HE

The Department for Education (DFE) website's lead statement on the LLE says that the UK Government is "committed to ensuring the country develops the skills needed to: drive sustained economic growth, break down barriers to opportunity, improve the living standards of hardworking people" and that the new funding system will deliver transformational change by "broadening access to high-quality, flexible education and training, supporting greater learner mobility between institutions, … and enable individuals to learn, upskill and retrain across their working lives…. create[ing] opportunities for both young people and adults to develop the skills needed to succeed in life, contributing to growth across the entire country." (DFE, October 2025)

At a macro level, there are three radical shifts arising from the LLE's introduction and these are reflected in the discourse relating to the rationale for the LLE as a whole and its components. As the DFE's lead statement shows, the discourse linked to the rationale for the funding changes for FE and HE to the new LLE demonstrates a marked shift from 'individual' to 'national' benefit achieved through skills, productivity and growth as the principal drivers, i.e., the utilitarian role of education. This represents a major impact as the statement moves away from the previous notion of 'individual' benefits of learning and education per se to a narrative that implies that a new focus on skills, productivity and growth will allow both individuals and their communities to prosper. The explicit positioning of skills, productivity and growth creates a clear challenge for HE institutions who offer specific types of programmes that do not explicitly or directly lead to jobs or tangible economic gains and/or who focus on learners who are far removed from the job market. This positioning will also pose a challenge to learners who wish to learn simply for learning's sake, where economic growth priorities rank low or not at all on their reasons for study or choice of course. All of these aspects are of relevance to LLL/CE.

It is not surprising that the role of education in supporting England to thrive through growth, innovation and skills has become the principal rationale for the new FE/HE funding methodology. The drivers for this approach are very easy to find in the English context through the long shadow of BREXIT, which resulted in the loss of skilled workers back to European countries and England's isolation from EU research and innovation funding and

collaborative working, as well as the long-term impacts of COVID on the national economy and the rapid expansion of technology globally.

A second major impact of the shift to skills, productivity and growth is that the mechanisms for achieving these need to be embedded in the funding model. More flexible and permeable approaches are required from FE and HE to enable learner movement at different points across their lives and careers. The LLE replaces the current Adult Learner Loan system that operates in FE and the Student Loans Scheme that operates in HE. Merging these will allow learners to undertake learning in radical new ways currently precluded by these funding systems and the current regulatory frameworks operating in FE and HE. Increased partnership working between both FE and HE and approved private providers is embedded in the LLE and the skills priorities will be determined nationally as well as regionally through an emphasis on the needs of 'place.' Exactly how these differing priorities will be satisfied is still largely unknown and remains a point of tension for FE and HE in determining curriculum offerings.

These changes result in a need for very clear communication with learners so they understand how the complex technical and higher education systems operate, the study choices available, the pros and cons of each, the potential financial liabilities they will incur and the scope they have for long term planning to build a LLL 'package' that reflects their career needs up to age 60 (if indeed they even have a clear career plan.) For employers, the challenges are similarly complex. Additionally, there is sector-wide criticism that if the LLE is truly lifelong, then the postgraduate funding regime should also be included in this system change.

THREE MAJOR IMPACTS FOR LLL AND CE

Beyond these direct impacts on HE, the roll out of the LLE is generating other equally important impacts that, until the release of the *Post 16 Education and Skills White Paper*, had not been clearly articulated but were still understood by LLL/CE professionals, policy organisations, and some universities. Tacit in early documentation was an understanding of the vital role of LLL/CE and the need for increased LLL provision as mechanisms to underpin its success linked to the rationale of skills, productivity and growth. This came as no surprise to the LLL/CE community given that a key driver for its work in HE is enabling adults to return to learning to retrain, upskill or change careers, along with other reasons.

The Universities Association for Lifelong Learning, the national LLL association, lobbied hard for the successful change of title to lifelong 'learning' entitlement rather than lifelong 'loan' entitlement but was not successful in increasing the age limit beyond 60 or for the LLE to include postgraduate study. Within LLL/CE there are three clear impacts resulting from the LLE: a major growth in LLL/CE provision, branding, and risks to non-skills focused provision.

The HE sector is rapidly understanding this new driver for innovation in HE and the role and value that LLL/CE play. This is creating radical shifts in both the understanding of the role and value of LLL and a rapid increase in prioritisation of all forms of LLL/CE, largely driven by potential market forces and growth opportunities. New departments are being created within universities branded to show LLL/CE provision. The professions[1]' concerns associated with this are that 'LLL' tags will simply be added to existing course/module descriptors and marketing without acknowledging or understanding the need for changes to

[1] Here, "the professions" refers to professionals working in the field of lifelong learning and continuing education (LLL/CE), including practitioners, programme leaders, policy experts, and professional associations involved in the design, delivery, and governance of adult and continuing education within higher education institutions

reflect this type of provision or learner need. Using LLL as a marketing tag without consideration of additional learning needs is unethical and could result in a learner failing or not completing their studies while still being liable for the debt associated with the course or module. Similarly, the focus on skills, productivity and growth has the potential to remove any non-skills focused LLL/CE provision, including programmes that are designed to support new adult learners or those who are returning to learning. There is the capacity for radical growth and innovative new modes and models of learning in LLL/CE provision, and we continue to anticipate what develops in this space. The LLL/CE sector in the UK is diverse and strong and welcomes the opportunities that the LLE can potentially bring. It will continue to support and guide these developments.

A STEP TOO FAR FOR THE STRUGGLING HE SECTOR?

The final potential impact of the LLE represents one of the largest fears for universities as they will only be funded on the basis of modules completed by a learner rather than full course funding. Broader support and infrastructure costs associated with education provision also need to be covered. As such, one major impact that cannot be overlooked for many English universities tis that the LLE brings with it enormous uncertainty around how to operate within the context of a radical funding model that moves away from full course or year of study fees plus a proportion of part time learners and commercial and research income. The LLE is being introduced into an already stressed HE sector which is shrinking weekly in terms of provision and staffing.

In conclusion, the introduction of the LLE in England will be watched carefully as it represents a tangible approach to creating a more flexible FE/HE system with a potential focus on LLL needs of people, place and nation. The scope for innovation in both HE and LLL/CE provision is exciting and vitally important but whilst the ‘known unknowns’ can and are being managed, the ‘unknown unknowns’ on financing, student support and levels of demand remain incredibly worrying for the HE sector as a whole.

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STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON LIFELONG LEARNING IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Research Paper

Keywords: *lifelong learning, higher education, phenomenography, Ireland*

ABSTRACT

For the last several decades, Lifelong Learning (LLL) has been widely promoted on the international stage as a means of achieving both economic and social benefits including enhanced employability and human capital, active citizenship, social cohesion and individual and societal well-being. However, the practice and implementation of LLL have been less than cohesive with varying degrees of success across the world. As regards approaches to implementing the concept of LLL in higher education (HE), differences at the national level are perhaps even more explicit. In the Irish case, which is the focus of this study, relatively little research exists on the theme of LLL in HE. This paper addresses this gap as it encompasses the first wide-ranging exploration of the perspectives of key stakeholders involved in setting the course for LLL in Irish HE. The research question posed in this paper is how is LLL conceptualised among senior stakeholders within the Irish HE sector? Drawing on seventeen interviews with policymakers and institutional leaders, the study applies a phenomenography design to identify qualitatively different ways of understanding LLL within the sector. Three conceptions emerged: a values-focused view of LLL in Irish HE as a right and public good; a pragmatic view centred on flexible provision and learner pathways; and a labour market view equating LLL in HE with upskilling and continuing professional development. The study contributes original insights by moving beyond policy rhetoric to show how leaders interpret and contest international discourses, revealing the persistence of humanistic perspectives alongside dominant skills agendas.

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the European Council (2011, p.3) called on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) 'to embrace less traditional groups of learners, such as adult learners, as a means of displaying social responsibility and greater openness towards the community at large.' Since then, there have been efforts across European HE to increase LLL participation rates and achieve targets set by the EU, but progress has been rather variable. According to Spexard (2015, p.274; p.280), while there has been 'a general trend regarding LLL as an institutional policy or mission' in HE, 'the actual realisation of these intentions is far from complete.'

The exploratory qualitative study presented in this paper focuses specifically on the Irish case. Drawing on a phenomenographic study of seventeen leaders and policymakers, it provides the first systematic analysis of elite understandings of LLL in Irish HE. By mapping the qualitatively different ways in which LLL is conceived, the study offers novel insights into

how international discourses are interpreted and contested at national level. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on the role of HE in balancing the humanistic and economic purposes of LLL.

THE IRISH CASE

Ireland's engagement with LLL in more general terms has developed unevenly over the past four decades and reflects broader international trends. Initial steps towards a national agenda emerged in the 1980s, when the *Kenny Report* (Commission on Adult Education, 1984) called for a coherent adult education strategy. Through the 1990s, government discourse framed adult education as the 'last educational frontier' (Department of Education and Science, 1998, p.124), highlighting its potential for personal development and community enrichment. In a HE context, this orientation culminated in the *Universities Act,* which explicitly stated that one of the objectives of Irish universities is to 'facilitate LLL through the provision of adult and continuing education' (Universities Act, 1997, Part III, Chapter 1, 12 (j)). Shortly after, the government's *White Paper on Adult Education* (2000) was published, formally establishing LLL as the 'governing principle of educational policy' in Ireland (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p.12). The White Paper also highlighted six key areas where adult education could contribute to society, namely 'consciousness raising; citizenship; cohesion; competitiveness; cultural development; and community building' (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p.12). In this early phase, economic competitiveness was acknowledged but did not dominate, aligning Ireland more closely with UNESCO's humanistic vision of education as a right and a public good (Delors, 1996).

The 2008 financial crisis, however, reshaped policy rhetoric. In the subsequent decade, national strategies increasingly stressed skills, employability, and economic recovery. The *National Skills Strategy to 2025* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) epitomised this trend, foregrounding workforce development and positioning LLL as central to maintaining Ireland's competitive edge. While occasional reference was still made to wellbeing and inclusion, the balance had shifted decisively towards a human capital agenda. Scholars were quick to point to the risks: Slowey (2012) observed the heightened tension between skills-led priorities and democratic commitments to access, Holborow (2012, p.95) warned of universities becoming 'adjuncts of the economy,' and others noted the erosion of the White Paper's progressive ethos (Hurley, 2015; Murphy, 2020). At the same time, institutions themselves pushed back. The Irish Universities Association (2018, p.16), for instance, argued that universities are 'more than talent pipelines,' signalling concern about an overly instrumental policy frame. These tensions mirror developments across the world where scholars have identified similar struggles to reconcile humanistic traditions of adult education with increasingly economistic imperatives (El Amoud, Raymer & Tan, 2025; Barros, 2012; van der Kamp et al., 2002; Taylor, 2001). Ireland's trajectory can thus be read as part of a wider pattern, though shaped by its own economic cycles and policy choices.

More recently, a renewed focus on inclusivity and system reform has emerged. The creation of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in 2020 has provided a stronger institutional anchor for the LLL agenda in Irish HE. Its *Statement of Strategy 2021–2023* prioritised promoting LLL as a means of supporting learning for all, explicitly committing to flexible provision and pathways for under-represented groups (DFHERIS, 2021). This ambition was reinforced in the *National Access Plan 2022–2028*, which emphasises equity, accessibility, and lifelong pathways (HEA & DFHERIS, 2022). Structural initiatives, such as the establishment of the National Tertiary Office in 2022, aim to address fragmentation by creating new routes between further and higher education. Political leadership has also signalled a broadened vision with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science recently highlighting

the goal of building a system 'that works for everyone,' affirming HE's role in reflecting Ireland's social diversity (DFHERIS, 2025).

Nonetheless, the OECD's *Skills Strategy Ireland* review (2023) concluded that Ireland still lacks a coherent, widely communicated national vision for LLL. It identified the need to incentivise both individual participation and employer investment, while improving flexibility and accessibility. This ongoing ambivalence - between economic utility and social purpose, between rhetoric and delivery - forms the backdrop against which senior leaders in Irish HE conceptualise LLL. Their perspectives offer a critical vantage point for understanding how these competing imperatives are interpreted within institutions, and how Ireland might chart a more balanced path in the years ahead.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a phenomenographic design to explore how senior stakeholders in Irish HE conceptualise LLL. Marton (1986, p.31) described how phenomenography 'is a research method for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them.' The focus is thus on surfacing the level of variation within 'people's conceptions of the world' (Marton, 1986, p.32). In contrast to other qualitative approaches, phenomenographic research does not attempt to describe the views of individual research participants, rather it is focused on the collective experiences of groups of people and the range of understanding and experiences within those groups (Harris, 2008). As Marton and Booth (1997, p.117) posited, its aim is 'not to find the singular essence, but the variation and the architecture of this variation in terms of the different aspects that define the phenomena.' Phenomenography adopts a second-order perspective centred on describing 'people's experiences of various aspects of the world' rather than a first-order perspective focused solely on 'various aspects of the world' (Marton, 1981, p.177). As Hajar (2020) outlined, phenomenographers thus describe the world as it is understood by others rather than as it is. This is certainly what this paper is trying to achieve – an exploration of the various ways that LLL in HE in Ireland is understood by a variety of key stakeholders in the sector.

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to capture a wide range of perspectives from organisations central to the LLL ecosystem in Ireland (Patton, 2002). A relevance framework guided this selection, including organisations with a primary focus on LLL in HE; organisations with a primary focus on HE but who also have a strategic focus on LLL; and organisations with a primary focus on aspects of education other than HE but who also have a strategic focus on LLL. Organisations included several Irish universities; the DFHERIS which is responsible for policy, funding and governance of the HE sector; the Irish University Association (IUA) which is the representative body of Irish universities; the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) which is the representative body of Irish institutes of technology and technological universities; the Higher Education Authority (HEA) which has a statutory responsibility for the effective governance and regulation of the HE system in Ireland; Quality and Qualifications Ireland which is an independent state agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland; Aontas which is the national adult learning organisation advocating for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality LLL; Solas which is the state agency with responsibility for the further education and training (FET) sector; Higher Education Lifelong Learning Ireland Network (HELLIN) which advocates for the interests of the adult and mature student populations in the HE sector; and the ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning which is an official network of Asian and European HEIs which Ireland has been hosting since 2020. Within these organisations, participants were chosen on the basis of their leadership roles and strategic influence. The final sample comprised seventeen participants across fourteen

organisations, including university presidents, directors of adult/continuing education units, senior civil servants, and senior representatives of key national agencies and representative bodies. Demographic information such as age or tenure was not collected. Instead, participants' eligibility rested on their strategic roles, ensuring the study captured the perspectives of actors with significant influence over LLL policy and provision in HE.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. This format ensured consistency across interviews while allowing participants to articulate their perspectives in their own terms. Questions were broad and open-ended, in line with phenomenographic guidance (Marton, 1986), and supported by follow-up prompts designed to elicit richer reflections on LLL in the Irish HE context. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, were conducted online, recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim using a secure service.

Analysis was conducted in line with the core principles of phenomenography, which emphasise identifying variation across a collective rather than attributing fixed meanings to individuals. Transcripts were read and re-read, with initial reflections recorded after each interview. Emerging themes were iteratively refined through cycles of close reading, comparison, and abductive engagement with relevant theory (Given, 2008). Key quotations were grouped into clusters of meaning, compared across the sample, and re-organised to identify both commonalities and differences. Through this iterative process, categories of description were developed to capture the distinct ways in which participants conceptualised LLL. The categories were then tested against the entire dataset to ensure stability, distinctiveness, and internal coherence. The final stage involved constructing an outcome space, the hallmark of phenomenographic research (Marton, 1986; Åkerlind, 2005). The outcome space shows how the categories of description are logically related, usually in a hierarchy of inclusiveness. Following Marton and Booth's (1997) quality criteria, the categories were assessed for distinctiveness, logical relation, and parsimony. The step-by-step process used in the analysis phase of this study is summarised in Table 1, which outlines the stages of data handling, theme development, iterative refinement and final construction of the outcome space.

Step	Description of Activity
1.	Created notes following each interview to search for emerging commonalities.
2.	Cleaned transcriptions by listening to all interviews again, while reading the full set of transcripts to identify emerging themes.
3.	Engaged in abductive analysis through several rounds of reading the set of transcripts while reflecting on my own ideas of the topic and the key themes from the literature previously identified.
4.	Undertook several rounds of reading the transcripts focusing more on particular themes of interest for each reading and marking appropriate quotations on each transcript.
5.	Compiled all the highlighted quotations into a single document, separating them from their individual transcripts.
6.	Organised the quotations into groups using broad sub-headings corresponding to tentative emerging themes to bring quotes of similar meaning together to form pools of meaning.
7.	Engaged in comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences among the quotations corresponding to a similar theme.
8.	Undertook an iterative process of sorting and re-sorting the groups of quotes into specific categories with loose subtitles aligned to my research questions, while looking at the data from different viewpoints.
9.	Attempted to build rich descriptions under each loose heading until the categories stabilised.
10.	Refined the titles of the categories of description and the subheadings below them which then became the dimensions of variation to highlight differences in each category.
11.	Re-read all transcripts to test the categories of description against the full range of data.
12.	Explored the similarities and differences between each of the categories of description to establish the relationships between them.
13.	Constructed the final outcome space demonstrating the differences between each category according to key dimensions of variation.

***Table 1**: Steps in Phenomenographic Analysis*

RESULTS

The analysis phase of this study identified three qualitatively distinct ways in which senior stakeholders conceptualise LLL in Irish HE. In keeping with phenomenographic principles, these categories of description represent collective abstractions of the variation in experience rather than individual viewpoints (Marton, 1986; Larsson & Holmström, 2007). A single participant's account could contribute to more than one category, reflecting the complexity and fluidity of perspectives. Each category was defined across four dimensions of variation: the meaning of LLL, its intended audience, how it should be operationalised in HE, and the key drivers underpinning it. Together these categories form the outcome space for the study, displayed in *Table 2*.

Dimensions of Variation	Categories of Description		
	Category A1: Idealistic Values-Focused Conception	***Category B1: Pragmatic Operations-Focused Conception***	***Category C1: Narrow Labour Market Skills-Focused Conception***
Defining LLL	An idea/philosophy that shapes the whole HE system, as well as a tool for developing opportunities for learning for a plethora of reasons.	A practical tool for developing opportunities for learning, primarily focused on opportunities for learning for career development.	A form of CPD activity to respond to skills needs in the economy.
Target Audience	Everyone and anyone looking to learn for whatever reason.	Primarily those seeking career development opportunities.	Professionals/graduates looking to upskill.
Operationalising LLL in HE	Provide holistic opportunities and supports for a wide range of learners.	Provide more flexible opportunities and pathways for learners.	Respond to skills needs in the economy through creation of focused upskilling opportunities.
Key Driver of LLL in HE	Economy & Skills Agenda		

***Table 2**: Outcome Space - How LLL in Irish HE is Conceived Among Key Stakeholders*

It is important to highlight here that the goal of phenomenography is not just to uncover the various ways that people experience a phenomena and present them in categories of description, but it also aims to describe how the categories of description are logically related to one another - what Marton and Booth (1997, p.116) describe as 'the architecture of the variation.' Åkerlind, Bowden and Green (2005, p.95) were keen to highlight that 'the hierarchy is not based on value judgements of better and worse ways of understanding, but on evidence of some categories being inclusive of others' - what they termed 'hierarchical inclusiveness.' Tight (2016, p.320) then explained how 'each higher level encompasses those below it, and the highest level represents the most advanced or developed way of experiencing the phenomenon.' In this study, the idealistic values-focused conception (Category A) was the most inclusive, embedding both pragmatic and skills-oriented elements while still holding to a broader philosophy of LLL. The pragmatic operations-focused conception (Category B) sat between the other two, mediating between holistic and narrowly instrumental views. The narrow labour market skills-focused conception (Category C) was then the most limited way of conceptualising LLL in Irish HE. Figure 1 overleaf illustrates these relationships, showing the values-focused conception as the broadest framing, within which the pragmatic and skills-focused perspectives can be situated.

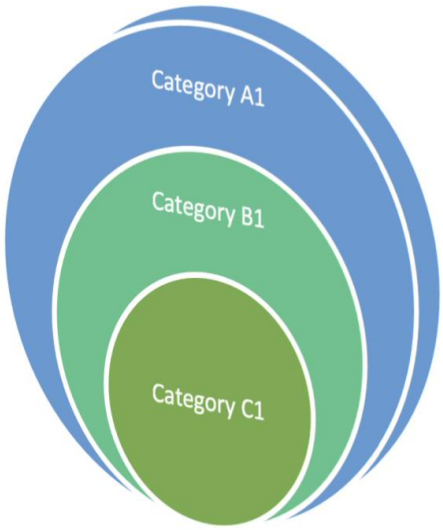

***Figure 1**: Relationships between the Categories of Description in Outcome Space 1*

Category A: Idealistic Values-Focused Conception
This was the most expansive conception of LLL, viewing it as a philosophy underpinning HE. Participants described LLL as 'a curiosity throughout life' (HEA representative) and 'a culture and a way of being' (IUA representative). A university head of adult education described LLL as 'the capacity to be always open and developing… emotionally, psychologically, cognitively, spiritually.' The target audience was conceived as universal – 'anyone who can benefit from it' (QQI representative), including marginalised groups for whom LLL could 'open the doors' (Aontas representative). Participants stressed widening access and creating opportunities 'whether that takes you twenty years or not' (university president). Operationalisation was framed in holistic terms: fostering curiosity, responding to diverse learner needs, and contributing to civic life. A university president emphasised that 'LLL is more than skills development' and should help shape values and democratic engagement. Although most acknowledged that the economy and skills agenda dominates current policy, they regarded that as the 'incorrect driver' (university president). Several expressed concern about income-generation pressures but nonetheless insisted the humanistic ethos of LLL should remain central in Irish HE.

Category B: Pragmatic Operations-Focused Conception
This middle-ground conception emphasised LLL as a practical strategy to balance social and economic purposes. Participants accepted the importance of the skills agenda – 'if the economy is good, it's good for society' (HEA representative) - but also recognised wider benefits. A DFHERIS official described skills as 'a driver of societal well-being as well as economic well-being.' The target audience for LLL in HE was, in principle, broad, but in practice focused on those seeking career development. LLL in Irish HE was described as 'very much weighted in… labour market requirements' (Solas representative). Operationalisation centred on flexibility and pathways, including short courses, modular provision, and stronger connections between further and higher education. One participant described it as 'all about pathways…so that people can choose what's best for them' (university head of adult education). Others stressed humility about HE's role within a wider LLL ecosystem, noting that 'formal education is only a minuscule part of learning anyway' (ASEM LLL Hub). Drivers were acknowledged to be mainly economic, but often framed as opportunities rather than constraints. As one THEA representative suggested, 'if the wind is behind you, use it to get to where you want to go.'

Category C: Narrow Labour Market Skills-Focused Conception
The narrowest conception equated LLL in HE with continuing professional development (CPD) to meet labour market demands. Participants spoke of it as 'anything post-graduation that continues throughout your employment career' (HEA representative) and 'what we're good at…continuous professional development' (university president). Some openly dismissed broader notions, arguing that retirees engaged in personal learning in HE 'aren't lifelong learners' (HEA). Here, the target audience was defined almost exclusively as graduates and working professionals needing to upskill, with limited acknowledgement of non-traditional learners. Operationalisation was seen in terms of short, targeted programmes responding directly to enterprise needs. Universities were described as being 'in that game to make money' (university president), with a HEA representative emphasising that 'training budgets' and industry engagement were key drivers.

DISCUSSION

The three qualitatively different categories identified in this study reveal distinct orientations for LLL in Irish HE: values-focused, pragmatic, and labour market–focused. These categories reflect not only individual perspectives but also the broader discourses circulating in Irish and European policy. Category A (idealistic values-focused conception) resonates strongly with UNESCO's holistic framing of LLL as a right and a public good (Faure et al., 1972; Delors, 1996; UNESCO, 2020). It emphasises inclusivity, curiosity, and social justice, suggesting that HE's mission extends beyond skills and employability. That such perspectives persist among Irish HE leaders is notable, given the dominance of neoliberal and human capital agendas (Brown & Hillman, 2023; Elfert, 2020; Giroux, 2014; Mercille & Murphy, 2015; Roper, 2018). Category B (pragmatic operations-focused conception) represents a middle ground. It acknowledges the inevitability of skills-driven priorities but interprets them in more balanced ways, emphasising flexibility, modularisation, and system responsiveness. This aligns with long-standing international calls for HE to create more open pathways for adult learners (UNESCO, 1998; Martin & Godonoga, 2020). Yet, as others have noted (Flannery & McGarr, 2014; Cendon, 2018), these aspirations have often been slow to translate into practice. The pragmatic category therefore highlights both opportunities for incremental reform and the limitations of a cautious approach, aligning with Tight's (1998) observation that inspirational visions of LLL are often moderated in practice. In contrast, Category C (narrow labour market skills-focused conception) narrows LLL to CPD and upskilling, echoing Regmi's (2015) description of the human capital model. Here, education is valued primarily for its contribution to competitiveness and growth. While prevalent in policy rhetoric and strategy documents such as the *National Skills Strategy* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016), this conception sidelines democratic and personal dimensions of LLL (Biesta, 2006). Its presence among some HE leaders demonstrates the extent to which marketisation discourses (Mercille & Murphy, 2015) have permeated institutional thinking.

Taken together, the outcome space highlights a hierarchical inclusiveness (Marton & Booth, 1997): the values-focused conception encompasses pragmatic and instrumental logics, while the pragmatic mediates between holistic and narrow economic views. This structure suggests that even within a neoliberal policy environment, broader educational purposes remain alive within Irish HE leadership. Compared with the UK, where skills discourses often eclipse humanistic traditions (Brown & Hillman, 2023), some of Ireland's HE leaders appear to retain a stronger orientation towards equity and public good, more akin to Scandinavian contexts. These findings are significant for two reasons. First, they reveal agency at the meso-level: HE leaders are not passive recipients of international agendas but actively interpret and negotiate them. Second, they suggest that despite strong policy pressures, space remains for Irish HE to reassert more balanced and socially just approaches to LLL.

Policy implications are clear. If the labour market conception dominates, widening participation and civic purposes risk being marginalised. Yet the persistence of values-based orientations suggests a foundation upon which policymakers and institutions can build. National strategies could more explicitly integrate democratic and humanistic goals, while institutions might align income-generating activities with inclusive pathways and community engagement. By highlighting these conceptual variations, the study not only extends Irish scholarship but also contributes to wider European debates on how LLL is understood and enacted within HE. It shows that even within neoliberal contexts, alternative logics remain present, providing a platform for more balanced and socially just LLL policies.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the first phenomenographic analysis of how senior stakeholders in Irish HE conceptualise LLL. Three categories of description - idealistic values-focused, pragmatic operations-focused, and narrow labour market skills-focused - capture the spectrum of perspectives, and their hierarchical inclusiveness demonstrates the ways in which broader educational visions coexist with and subsume more instrumental logics. The originality of this study lies in shifting attention from policy texts to the conceptualisations of senior leaders themselves, offering insights into how international discourses are interpreted, blended, and resisted in the Irish context. While previous research has identified the tensions between humanistic and economic purposes of LLL globally, this study shows how such tensions are negotiated at the leadership level of HE institutions and agencies. By mapping these conceptualisations, the study contributes both to Irish and European scholarship. It underscores the importance of recognising variation in how LLL is understood, and of designing policies that do not reduce it to skills and employability alone. The outcome space developed here provides a conceptual tool that could be applied in other national contexts, offering comparative insights into how HE systems balance economic imperatives with their civic and cultural missions. Future research might extend this approach to other European settings, or to institutional leaders' decision-making processes, to better understand how conceptualisations translate into practice. What emerges clearly, however, is that Irish HE leadership contains within it both constraints and possibilities: while neoliberal pressures are evident, so too is a persistent commitment to LLL as a public good.

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

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Keywords: *University lifelong learning (ULLL), Circular and transformative continuing education, Participatory governance, Modular learning formats, Alumni and labour market partnerships*

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.

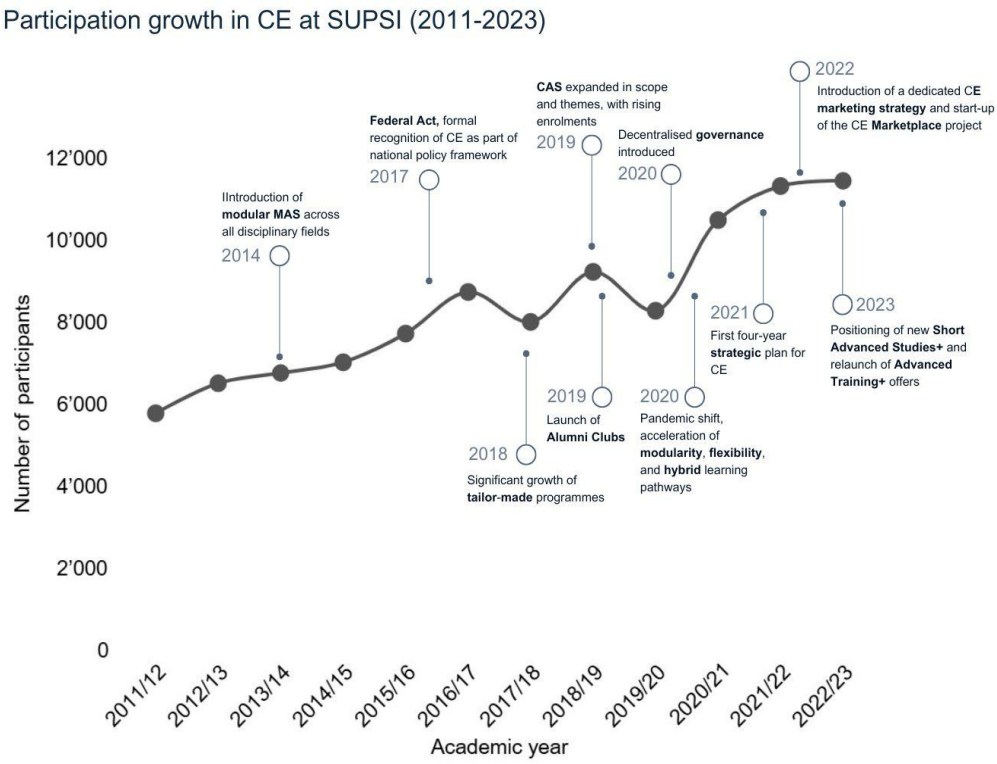

***Figure 1**: Participation growth and key milestones in CE at SUPSI (2011–2023)*

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.

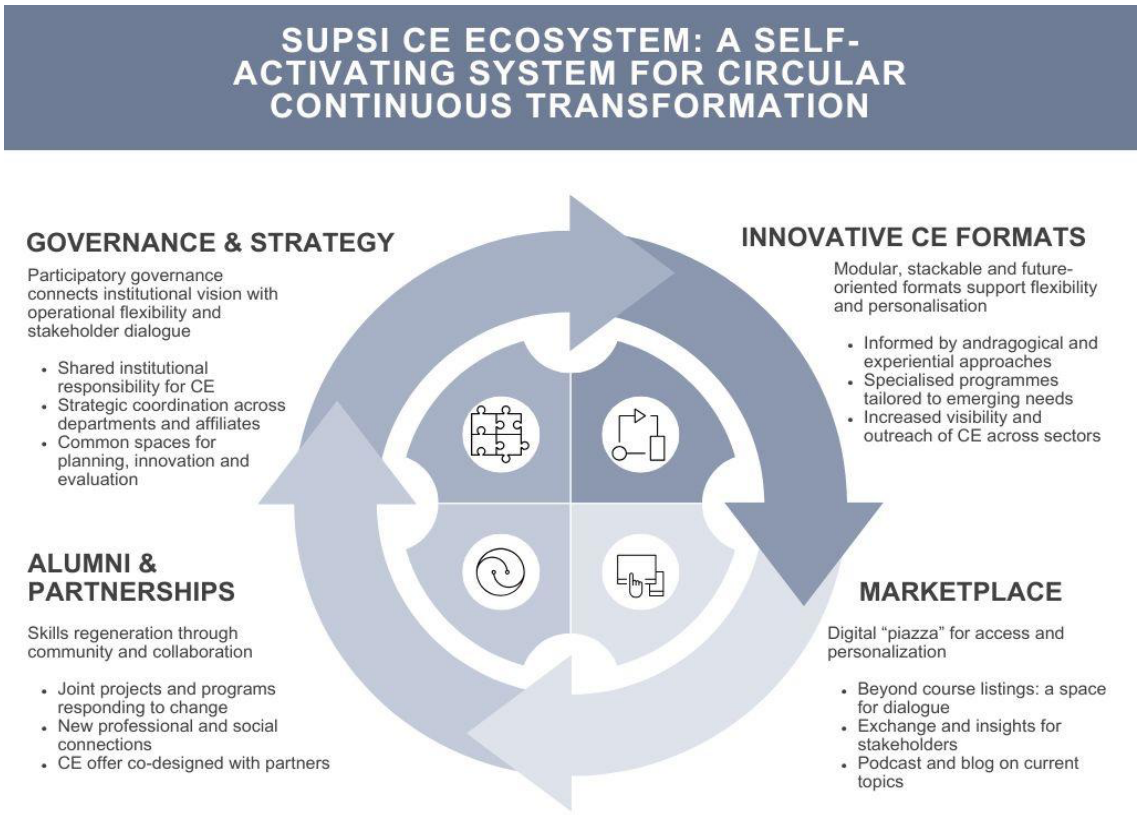

***Figure 2**: Concept map for the SUPSI CE circular and transformative approach. Interaction and mutual influence sustain ongoing innovation. Entry can occur from any point; transformation is emergent.*

How the ecosystem works in practice

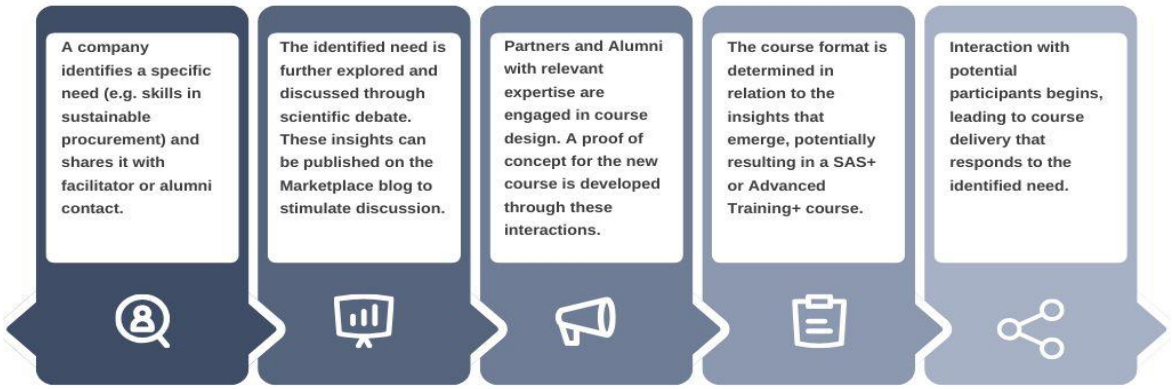

***Figure 3**: Illustrative example of how a learning need can be addressed within the CE ecosystem. The steps illustrate one possible application of the circular approach.*

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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TOWARDS AN IMPACTFUL UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING OFFER. LEARNING FOR LIFE WITH TU DELFT

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Keywords: *Lifelong learning, institutional innovation, impact-driven, technology context*

ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning (LLL) is gaining strategic importance in universities as societies face urgent challenges in areas such as digitalisation, energy transition, and climate resilience. Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to serve not only degree-seeking students but also professionals in need of flexible and relevant learning opportunities.

This paper explores how TU Delft, a public university of technology in the Netherlands, has worked to integrate LLL into its institutional strategy and daily practice. It focuses on the tensions between the established structures and culture of the university - largely shaped by degree education and research - and the emerging demands associated with continuing education. Through a decade of experience with open and online learning, internal and external collaboration, TU Delft is gradually adapting its organisation, governance, and educational offer. This paper reflects on the challenges encountered, the strategies employed, and the lessons learned. The analysis may offer useful insights for institutions in similar contexts that are exploring how to develop and sustain an impactful LLL offer alongside their traditional missions.

INTRODUCTION: LLL AS A STRATEGIC UNIVERSITY TASK IN A CHANGING WORLD

In recent years, the importance of lifelong learning (LLL) has grown significantly. Societal developments such as digitalisation, sustainability transitions and the increasing pace of technological innovation require professionals to keep learning throughout their careers. Governments, industries, and learners are looking to higher education to support this ongoing development (Cendon 2021; Li 2024). Universities have a long tradition of providing education for professionals through postgraduate courses, executive programmes, and continuing education initiatives. Research, valorisation, and consultancy activities are deeply rooted in the university, as academics sought to disseminate their expertise for societal advantage. However, offering learning experiences specifically designed for professionals is still unexplored territory for many academic institutions.

This expanding role for universities raises questions about how best to align campus-based education and continuing education within their institutional framework. While both types of education share a foundation in academic expertise, they often differ in objectives, formats, and target audiences. Traditional university structures - optimised for full-time degree programmes - may not easily accommodate the more flexible, demand-driven, and learner- and practice-oriented nature of LLL.

This paper explores how TU Delft, the oldest and largest public technical university in the Netherlands, has responded to the shift from delivering traditional education to more flexible forms of education in response to emerging societal needs. Since 2012, TU Delft has been active in open and online education and has gradually developed an institutional strategy and embedding of LLL. This evolution has required the university to reconsider aspects of its internal organisation, educational design, and external engagement and context to be able to serve another type of learner alongside its traditional degree students.

Rather than advocating a fundamental transformation, this paper aims to offer a grounded reflection on how a university may incrementally develop an impactful LLL offer from within its existing structures. We examine the approaches TU Delft has adopted, the barriers it has encountered, and the lessons it has drawn. Although this is a Dutch case, the experiences described may be relevant to an international audience of institutional leaders and policymakers who are working to strengthen LLL as an integral part of higher education.

NAVIGATING STRUCTURAL TENSIONS: LIFELONG LEARNING IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

LLL is increasingly seen as a core responsibility of public universities, especially in times of rapid technological and societal transition. However, expanding a university's educational remit to systematically include continuing education often reveals tensions between established institutional structures and the demands of more agile learning provision.

At TU Delft, the gradual move towards a strategic LLL offer has taken place within an institutional setting optimised for degree education and academic research. The governance model of TU Delft prioritises disciplinary depth and standardised processes developed for campus-based students. These characteristics do serve degree education but do not 1:1 translate to serving professional learners, who demand flexible, applied, targeted, and just-in-time learning options that respond to their changing roles, recent technologies, and job-to-be-done needs.

A first tension is related to the institutional setting. Autonomous faculties that have traditionally ensured academic freedom and innovation within disciplinary education based on academic initiative and research interests need to start focusing on the demand rather than on the supply.

In addition, their internal systems—such as course approval, registration, quality assurance, and financial processes—are typically designed with degree programmes in mind. These systems may lack the flexibility needed to support shorter formats, rolling enrolments, or co-designed programmes with external partners.

And last, the non-degree learning offer requires new ways of defining learning outcomes. In degree education, learning objectives are usually determined by academic staff based on theory, disciplinary standards and curricular structures. In LLL, however, relevance is often expected to meet the context of application, industry context and societal challenges faced by learners, employers, and sectors. The learning objectives of typical academic courses do

not by definition align with the needs of professionals who face the next job to be done (Loizzo et al., 2017; Radford et al., 2015). Translating these professional needs into coherent educational offerings that align with the university's strengths requires reframing/repositioning of content and, at times, a shift in mindset of teachers.

Thus, tensions manifest with regards to the balance between academic autonomy and demand orientation, effective internal processes, and presentation of content and learning outcomes.

The differences between degree education vs professional offer do not necessarily imply that one approach should replace the other. Rather, the challenge lies in enabling both to co-exist and strengthen each other. This requires mechanisms for dialogue across organisational boundaries, adjustments in policies and systems, and a shared understanding of the value of serving professionals as part of the university's mission. In the next section, we describe how TU Delft has responded to these challenges by gradually building a strategic framework for LLL, while working to adapt internal practices and systems. Its journey illustrates how universities may begin to evolve their structures—not by abandoning their core principles, but by application of these principles to complementary practices that serve another educational purpose.

STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO THE TENSIONS: TU DELFT'S APPROACH

This section outlines four key strategic considerations through which the university has worked to align its continuing education ambitions with its institutional structures and practices.

From open education to strategic positioning in university

TU Delft started in 2012 with the development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), driven by individual lecturers and supported by a small innovation team. These efforts aimed to broaden access to university-level education and share expertise with a global audience. The initiative aligned with the university's social mission and educational innovation agenda but operated largely outside the formal structures of degree education.

As the offer expanded, so did the recognition that continuing education could serve global learners including professionals in the Netherlands and beyond who were navigating sectoral and technological transitions. Over time, this recognition contributed to a strategic reframing of LLL: from an outreach activity to a structural responsibility, requiring dedicated organisational support, new policies, and alignment with the university's broader ambitions.

Orienting the offer toward societal needs

As its experience with LLL matured, TU Delft began to shift from a supply-driven approach to one that also considers societal transitions and professional learning needs. In 2023, we started a process inspired by the Theory of Change[1], to set the strategy for future development and organise the offer from a more impact-oriented perspective and according to specific themes, ranging from energy transition to quantum technology. These themes focus on areas of change and support professionals in making their impact for a better society, by contributing as changemakers to creating new systems and solutions in relevant sectors. To follow, new products were developed to support these strategies, ensuring that

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_Change

new topics and transformational learning activities fit within a coherent and highly socially relevant offer.

The shift also required rethinking how learning needs are identified and translated into educational offerings. Articulating those needs—often still abstract or emerging—proved difficult. So far, relations with public and private parties focussed on research innovations, which can in turn be used to serve the human capital agenda and professional development. TU Delft intensified building relationships with public and private parties in various sectors to explore the LLL landscape and articulate their organisational needs. Professionals rarely ask for academic content directly; instead, they seek to solve problems, understand trends, or acquire competencies for changing roles. Translating such needs into university-level learning outcomes involves collaboration between faculties, support services, and external partners, and remains a work in progress.

Developing relevant and qualitative educational offer

Another key consideration in the shift from a supply driven approach to an impact driven learning offer is the quality of the offer, because ensured quality of the knowledge provided remains the most important value a recognised institution offers to its learners. Opening up campus education via MOOCs offered relatively accessible but “low-prestige credentials from high-prestige schools” (Laryea 2021). MOOCs and continuing education activities may offer certificates as proof of the knowledge and skills acquired by learners; however, these are usually not associated with formal academic credits. At first, TU Delft offered continuing education online courses that for the majority had an equivalent in its degree education. That supported dual use: flexibility and high-quality online educational resources for degree courses, and up-to-date and up-to-standard delivery of continuing education. Over time, online learning activities were used to deliver university knowledge and expertise not necessarily part of degree education. To monitor and manage the quality of these activities, the quality assurance cycle for degree education was translated into comparable procedures and standards for continuing education; the two being closely related facilitated the implementation and internal acceptance of the new quality framework for continuing education.

Not only quality, but also a wider variety in learning formats, in addition to traditional online courses, support professional learners in making societal impact. These include micro-credentials, short non-assessed learning activities, summer courses, stackable modules, and customised training for organisations. The aim is to provide a mix of learning experiences that are accessible to a wider group of professionals and responsive to diverse needs. A recurrent challenge is to what extent educational products can be tailored to specific needs, as tailored products are often considered most accessible and relevant for employees. From the university's perspective, to make considerable impact, and as a public institution, it is desirable to deliver at scale. On-demand tailored training solutions might therefore be offered as a prelude to developing a product with open registration and available to many more interested learners. By experimenting with new formats, forms of certification and customisation, TU Delft seeks to enhance the existing offering and align it more closely with the needs of professional learners, hence making the offer more relevant.

Strengthening organisation, support and governance

To embed LLL structurally, TU Delft created a dedicated service organisation—the Extension School for Continuing Education, now called Learning for Life. What began as an innovation team became a university department tasked with supporting faculties in developing and delivering LLL products.

Part of the support consists in offering teaching and learning tools, training and advice distinct from those for degree programmes. This enables lecturers to capitalise on similar mechanisms, checks and balances whilst designing and delivering for a different target audience in different formats. This approach helps to create common ground and acceptance among managers and academics. In this way, LLL activities, including portfolio development, are a shared responsibility; faculty remains accountable for content and the service organisation is responsible for didactic support, business, quality assurance, marketing and administration activities.

In 2023, LLL was formally added to TU Delft's core activities, alongside research, degree education, and knowledge transfer. The Extension School was repositioned within the central administration and given a broader institutional role. This structural shift signaled a recognition of the importance of LLL and provided a basis for scaling efforts, including securing national funding for further professionalisation.

Despite this structural shift, variation between faculties remains a challenge. Different departments have different levels of engagement with LLL, different academic cultures, and different perceptions of its value. A key task for the coming years is to build more consistent institutional coordination, while respecting academic diversity and autonomy.

LESSONS LEARNED AND REFLECTIONS

TU Delft's efforts to develop a relevant LLL offer with societal impact have been shaped by both ambition and constraint. While important progress has been made, the process has also revealed several tensions that are not easily resolved. This section reflects on the lessons learned so far, with a view toward informing similar efforts in other institutional or national contexts.

Bridging internal and external logics

One recurring theme is the challenge of aligning the internal logic of a university—built around disciplinary expertise, academic standards, and established educational formats—with the external logic of professional learning, which is often more context-driven, time-sensitive, and applied in nature. Professionals and their organisations tend to frame learning needs in terms of practical challenges or sectoral transitions, rather than disciplinary content or academic theory.

Developing educational offers that are both academically rigorous and professionally relevant requires negotiation and collaboration. At TU Delft, mechanisms such as theme-based portfolio development and external stakeholder consultations have helped bridge this gap, but the work remains complex. Translating demand into appropriate formats, without over-customisation or excessive administrative overhead, is an ongoing balancing act.

Navigating system constraints

The organisational structure of the university has proven both a strength and a limitation. Existing institutional systems for registration, finance, quality assurance, and communication were developed with degree education in mind, and adapting them to support a different type of learner has required both technical adjustments and creative workarounds. In some cases, stretching the systems has worked; in others, their limitations have highlighted the need for structural innovation.

Rather than aiming for complete system overhauls, TU Delft has opted for incremental adaptation. This includes implementing parallel quality assurance frameworks for continuing education, exploring the use of micro-credentials, and experimenting with product formats

that can later be scaled. Such approaches allow for learning and adjustment while maintaining institutional coherence.

Supporting academic engagement and cultural change

Gaining traction for LLL within the university has required sustained engagement with faculties and academic staff. While there is wide support for the university's social mission, integrating LLL into daily academic practice can be difficult, especially when incentives, support structures, and recognition mechanisms are still evolving. Some faculties have embraced LLL as an extension of their research and teaching; others remain more cautious, often due to workload concerns, lack of familiarity with new formats, or perceived disconnects from core academic work.

The creation of a dedicated support structure in the form of the Extension School has helped address some of these concerns by offering didactic, administrative, and business expertise. However, a key lesson is that LLL cannot be positioned as an external or separate activity. Its long-term sustainability depends on building shared ownership with faculties and aligning incentives, processes, and responsibilities accordingly.

The context matters

TU Delft's development of LLL takes place within an (inter)national context. In the Netherlands, universities are increasingly encouraged to contribute to workforce development and societal transitions, including through national policy frameworks and funding schemes. Participating in international platforms and community - like Edx and OEglobal - and national pilots—such as the microcredentials initiative—has helped TU Delft test new approaches.

At the same time, the diversity of institutional missions, target groups, and governance models across Dutch universities has made coordination at the national level complex. Aligning practices such as quality assurance, certification, and programme design requires time and shared language. TU Delft's experience suggests that having a clear institutional framework for LLL can strengthen a university's ability to engage in national or sector-wide collaboration.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

This paper has examined how TU Delft, a public university of technology in the Netherlands, has worked over the past decade to expand its role in LLL. What began as a grassroots, open education initiative gradually evolved into a strategic, institution-wide effort to support professionals in navigating societal and technological transitions. Along the way, the university encountered a range of structural and cultural tensions—between the established logic of campus-based degree education and the emerging demands of continuing education.

Rather than aiming for radical institutional change, TU Delft has pursued a pragmatic approach: incrementally adapting systems, building organisational support, experimenting with new formats, and fostering collaboration with both internal and external stakeholders. This approach has allowed the university to serve professional learning needs while respecting the principles and practices that underpin its academic work.

The experience to date suggests that developing a relevant and sustainable LLL offer requires more than just educational innovation. It calls for alignment between strategic ambitions, institutional infrastructure, and academic culture. It also requires universities to clarify how serving professionals fits within their broader mission—and how this work relates to their responsibilities in research, degree education, and societal engagement. LLL aims to build on the strengths of an institution to bring new, added value to a new learner audience. However, it also brings the learning activities of universities into the marketplace (Matkin 2022; Gouthro 2002), which is not a very familiar environment for many of them.

TU Delft's case illustrates that serving another type of learner—currently employed professionals -can be a meaningful extension of a university's public tasks. But it also shows that this work involves ongoing negotiation, coordination, and reflection. Many of the challenges faced are not unique to one institution or country. They reflect broader questions about how higher education can contribute to a society in transition, and how universities can balance academic rigour with responsiveness.

In this light, the experience shared here may be useful to other universities seeking to strengthen their LLL offer in ways that are both contextually grounded and forward-looking. While there is no single model, the case of TU Delft demonstrates an approach to incorporate LLL from within: not by replacing what exists, but by expanding what is possible.

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BUILDING LIFELONG LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS THROUGH COACHING: INSIGHTS FROM A COACHING INTERVENTION WITH WORKPLACE LEARNERS

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Innovative Practice

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how coaching can serve as a key mechanism in fostering a support ecosystem for workplace learners on their lifelong learning journey. Unlike traditional students, workplace learners face added pressures from work, family, and study. Drawing on insights from a nine-month coaching intervention implemented in Singapore where workplace learners were supported through coaching conversations with either external professional coaches or internal coach-educators, this paper discusses how coaching helped learners with their goal setting process and cultivated self-directed habits essential for lifelong learning. Coaches' session notes provided a view into how coaches facilitated reflection, accountability, and meaning-making and how learners articulated, refined, and worked toward their goals over time. Their experiences suggest that coaching can be a meaningful support mechanism for workplace learners by helping them gain clearer sight of the goals they are working towards, while reinforcing learners' beliefs in their ability to grow and achieve these goals. For institutions building a coaching support ecosystem, investing in internal coaching capabilities provides a scalable and sustainable starting point. Over time, strategic deployment of both internal and external coaches can foster a richer and more adaptive learning support ecosystem.

BACKGROUND

Singapore's lifelong learning movement

The SkillsFuture movement, launched in 2015, is a nation-wide initiative that saw the development of various programmes and initiatives opened to all Singaporeans to enhance one's capabilities and employability. It encourages Singaporeans to reskill or upskill on competencies that are relevant for their area of work (Tan, 2017). Although the need for continuous learning is increasingly recognised in Singapore with more workplace learners

pursuing training to upskill and/or reskill (SkillsFuture Singapore, 2025), previous research highlighted that attrition rates, especially in the first year or semester of their courses, are greatest in workplace learners as life commitments take precedence over their studies (Stone and O'Shea, 2019).

Workplace learners are typically more diverse than traditional students in their expectations, goals, and motivations for their studies. A qualitative study of workplace learners by colleagues in the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) looked into the experiences of working adults who returned to complete their university education while juggling other commitments (e.g., work, marriage, childcare). They found that workplace learners faced multiple challenges, including greater work-related stress, poorer work-study-life balance, and difficulty managing personal-professional boundaries, alongside the usual academic pressures (Devilly et al., 2021). These findings underscore how workplace learners navigate multiple, and often competing, interests across work, academic commitments, and personal responsibilities. Such tensions shape how they approach learning and highlight why a holistic support mechanism is needed as part of a lifelong learning ecosystem.

While there is a body of research on encouraging lifelong learning and upskilling in Singapore (Gao et al., 2022; Maulod and Lu, 2020), there is still little research investigating how workplace learners can be supported as they transition between work and studies (Stone and O'Shea, 2019). To strengthen the lifelong learning movement in Singapore, perhaps it is time to look beyond creating training programmes for reskilling and upskilling, towards also providing support and intervention for workplace learners who enrol in these programmes. his paper, which presents preliminary insights drawn from a larger coaching study, is therefore supported under SkillsFuture Singapore's Workforce Development Applied Research Fund, which aims to explore approaches to supporting workplace learners in continuous learning.

Coaching as a support strategy

Coaching can be a tool for providing the support workplace learners need. Coaching is different from advising, teaching, or mentoring; it is best described as facilitating a conversation that unlocks one's potential to maximise their own performance (Redshaw, 2000). A coach typically takes a supporting role, and focuses on encouraging learners to learn for themselves, acquire new competencies, and develop more effective skills. Coaching tends to be self-perpetuating, wherein those who have been coached become good coaches themselves, coaching others or themselves (Redshaw, 2000).

This study investigates coaching, defined as "*a one-to-one conversation focused on the enhancement of learning and development through increasing self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility, where the coach facilitates the self-directed learning of the coachee through questioning, active listening, and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate*" (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2018, p. 17). Ultimately, the process of coaching empowers coachees to identify personal barriers to performance, to self-coach, and to have a sense of self responsibility and ownership of their learning (MacLennan, 2017).

The roles of external professional coaches and internal coach-educators

The use of coaching in education has grown alongside a rising body of empirical research over the past decade (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). Coaching is a personalised and dynamic intervention where a coach guides coachees in their professional and personal development through fostering a goal-oriented learning process. Professional coaches are trained to build awareness and facilitate personal growth across various domains of a coachee's life. Solms et al. (2022) found positive effects of a solution-focused coaching approach on improving

post-graduate students' well-being and formulating more effective goals. Professional coaches refer to those who have been trained, assessed and credentialled for coaching, though not usually subject matter experts in their coachee's field.

As coachees may find it easier to directly apply their learning when having been mentored by someone with years of experience in the same area of work (Omeechevarria, 2019), the literature has introduced the concept of a coach-educator who would be "*a person with substantial experience in the same professional field as the client, who also had sound experience of the [coaching] skills and processes of helping others to think things through*" (Pask & Joy, 2007, p. 18). Lawrence et al. (2018) found that a single coaching session with a certified coach-educator increased graduate students' self-awareness, reflection, and intentional professional development planning.

Since 2020, SIT has offered a two-day in-house coach training and assessment for all academic staff to build capability in engaging students through coaching conversations (Lim et al., 2023). The highly practice-oriented workshop covers core coaching fundamentals, with contextualised role plays and assessment of participants' skills. While coach-educators are not professionally certified, the coaching remains goal-directed.

The challenges workplace learners face may be attributed to juggling roles as student and employee and lacking a support system at home or at work. Providing access to coaches can help workplace learners navigate such work-study-life challenges. While both professional coaches and coach-educators facilitate reflective, goal-directed conversations, their backgrounds shape the nature of these interactions. Professional coaches bring coaching conversations with non-academic perspectives and often support broader personal or career-related goals, and areas that can enhance personal effectiveness, such as self-compassion. Coach-educators draw on their subject expertise and proximity to learners' academic journeys, using coaching conversations to translate insights into their studies, learning habits, and learning behaviours. Rather than viewing coach-educators and professional coaches as interchangeable, this study examines how each can contribute differently to a learning ecosystem, and how institutions might strategically adopt either or both approaches.

IMPLEMENTATION

This coaching study was offered to workplace learners from IT-related degree and specialist diploma programmes of two institutions of higher learning. All participants were in employment, either juggling study commitments simultaneously or alternating between work and study semesters. Participants were randomly assigned to either an external professional coach or internal coach-educator. After each coaching session, coaches submitted short session summaries documenting topics discussed, strategies explored, and reflections shared. These summaries offered qualitative insight into how learners engaged with coaching over time and inform the practice-based insights presented in this paper.

Professionally certified and accredited coaches delivered up to six coaching sessions over nine months to a group of workplace learners using a cognitive-behavioural, solution-focused framework (Grant et al., 2009). This approach emphasises strengths and goal attainment rather than problem analysis (Grant et al., 2010). After initial goal setting, coaches supported workplace learners through the self-regulation cycle by developing action plans and monitoring progress between sessions.

Coach-educators, full-time faculty who taught or were teaching the learners, also delivered up to six coaching sessions over nine months to a separate group of workplace learners.

Trained through SIT's 2-day workshop, they used the GROW model (Goal, Reality, Options, Way forward) to structure sessions (Lim et al., 2023; Whitmore, 1992, 2017). Sessions began with goal setting, followed by examining the learner's current reality and resources, exploring options, and developing an action plan (Grant et al., 2010; Whitmore, 2017). This paper focuses on sharing insights about learners' goal-setting processes and how coaching supported progress toward their goals.

COACHING TO SUPPORT LIFELONG LEARNING

Coaches supported learners in revisiting and refining their goals in light of evolving circumstances. A coach-educator described this process: "*The session discussed a shift in some of the goals to better reflect the current work and academic requirements. Current practices and processes were reflected on and evaluated in comparison with the initial plans/goals*." Furthermore, coaching sessions often included exploration based on personal values, helping learners anchor their goals in personal meaning. As one professional coach noted, "*He explored his core values, such as authenticity, compassion, and learning, and is reflecting on how these values align with potential career paths*."

Supporting learners through an iterative and reflective approach to their goals likely made goals more realistic and fostered a greater sense of ownership and control. The act of co-construction and reflection on one's goals and plans for action are at the core of solution-focused coaching. The 'reflective space' created during coaching facilitates dialogue that can produce experiences of new insights and awareness for both coach and coachee (King et al., 2020). In their study, King et al. (2020) reported that coaching enabled the co-construction of goals and plans by supporting repeated instances of reflective thinking, which in turn encourages coachees to take action toward their own solution.

Workplace learners could work on both goals related to professional development as well as academics. A review of coaches' notes revealed that professional coaches tend to bring out goals that are more focused on professional growth and skill-building. Coach-educators tend to have more conversations on goals surrounding academic performance and academic life. Given that coach-educators are primarily educators with teaching responsibilities, equipping them with coaching skills offers a strategic way to enhance academic success without compromising their core role. It appeared that different types of assigned coaches may draw out different goals from the learners.

The coaches' notes also shed light on the goal planning process. Coaches engaged participants in activities that encouraged structured goal setting. One professional coach described having a focus on goal planning in the coaching sessions, stating that it led a participant to "*crystalise her goals a bit more and use the SMART template to articulate her goals more clearly that would allow her to easily track and work on her goals' progress.*" Coaches also facilitated self-reflection and realistic appraisal. One professional coach noted, "*We explored the expectations that he holds for himself and this helped him to realise the need to examine his expectations to see if they are realistic.*" Coaches played a role in maintaining accountability, as described in another quote by a coach-educator: "*Try to break that down into something where they could be, you know, accountable to themselves and make kind of small progress and understanding what's the kind of minimal step for progress in each of those goals*." These findings highlight that while goal planning skills were being developed, learners were likely still early in the process of developing autonomy and consistency in goal planning.

Finally, coaches emphasised the importance of affirmation and encouragement, which appeared to foster learners' confidence and intrinsic motivation for working towards their goals. For example, one professional coach noted the experience of "*providing ongoing*

support and acknowledging the client's progress to reinforce positive behaviours and confidence." The consistent reinforcement and affirmation from one's coach may be seen as a mechanism through which learners began to recognise their own progress and capabilities. This has been demonstrated in studies such as Will et al. (2019), where the authors found that coaches' positive supportive behaviour was found to be important at every stage, from contacting coachees to concluding the coaching session.

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

This paper discusses how coaching, delivered by either internal coach-educators or external professional coaches, may be a strategy for providing support to workplace learners in lifelong learning programmes. Insights from a nine-month coaching programme suggest that coaching from both coach-educators and professional coaches helped learners gain clearer sight of the goals they are working towards, while reinforcing learners' beliefs in their ability to grow and achieve these goals.

Coaching as an intervention has important implications for advancing lifelong learning in Singapore, particularly in moving beyond a skills-focused model (Tan, 2017). A key challenge Singapore currently faces in the promotion of lifelong learning is the "lack of a strong lifelong learning culture that underscores not just skills but also the habits of mind needed for lifelong learning" (Tan, 2017, p. 17). As noted by then Senior Minister and now President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Singapore must aspire to a culture similar to that of Germany and Switzerland, one that values mastery and earns respect through deep expertise (Shanmugaratnam, 2015). A natural next step in advancing such a culture is to strengthen learners' ability to direct, manage, and sustain their own development. Another suggestion is the implementation of workplace coaching and mentoring as a strategic solution, targeting individual and organisational performances and sustainable well-being (Lim & Ibrahim, 2024). As noted above, workplace learners often juggle competing demands across life, work, and study, making it difficult for them to engage meaningfully with one's learning goals. Coaching offers a structured space for learners to pause, reflect, and make sense of these demands, and in doing so, helps cultivate the habits of mind needed for lifelong learning, such as clarity of purpose and self-awareness. These habits complement Singapore's broader lifelong learning agenda by reinforcing not only the acquisition of new skills, but also the deeper dispositions that enable learners to continue learning across different stages of their lives and careers.

As universities support a growing population of workplace learners, developing internal coaching capability through faculty training offers a sustainable entry point. Educators may be trained to add coaching to their "toolbox" and guide learners' reflection through questions rather than providing answers (Grant, 2012). Shahdadpuri et al. (2024) outlined ways to build coaching capability and culture within the education context. Professional coaches can then be strategically engaged for structured, deeper reflection outside the purview of academic support, for example, during major transitions or with at-risk learners. Their external positioning provides psychological distance, allowing learners to openly explore broader life and personal matters (Jones et al., 2016), while coach-educators support ongoing, more spontaneous conversations at identified coachable moments.

While coaching is a valuable support mechanism, there are considerations for implementation. Training educators with in-house coaching programmes can strengthen their coaching skills and foster a culture of coaching within higher education institutions (Shahdadpuri et al., 2024). However, coach-educators are often stretched by their primary job responsibilities, leaving them little time or energy to engage learners in coaching conversations. This is an important consideration for institutions attempting to build internal coaching capacity as it may be necessary to consider protecting time for coaching within

one's workload. Engaging professionally trained and accredited coaches may be an alternative effective solution. However, this can be costly and require larger budgets. Institutions considering external coaches should weigh financial implications, decide how costs are passed on through training fees, and identify which learners to engage. Low-bono or pro-bono coaching may also be possible from coaches accruing hours for accreditation.

In conclusion, coaching can serve as a key mechanism in fostering a support ecosystem for workplace learners on their lifelong learning journey. We should support lifelong learning not just through and for skills training, but by fostering habits of mind such as self-direction and reflection, which are essential for cultivating a sustainable culture of lifelong learning.

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BRIDGING INITIAL AND LIFELONG LEARNING. MICRO-CREDENTIALS AS A GATEWAY FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Micro-credentials provide flexible and targeted opportunities for learners to acquire competencies that enhance their academic degrees. While their significance in improving employability is gaining recognition, their impact on preparing students for lifelong learning has received less attention. This article highlights an innovative initiative at Université libre de Bruxelles, where Master's students in Human Resource Management were introduced to a micro-credential in project management. Our findings indicate that such initiatives offer students an early experience with modular, competency-based learning and foster an awareness of the importance of continuous upskilling throughout their careers. By positioning micro-credentials as a gateway to university lifelong learning (ULLL), this paper contends that universities can establish themselves as keystones of lifelong learning cultures and create meaningful connections between initial education and future learning pathways.

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly evolving labour market, higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to effectively prepare students for professional integration and to instil in them a commitment to lifelong learning (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2021; Brown et al., 2021). Traditionally, degree programs offer considerable disciplinary depth and academic rigor; however, they often fall short in familiarising students with the modular, flexible, and self-directed learning practices that define ULLL.

Recently, micro-credentials have emerged as a prominent tool for addressing this gap. These short, targeted certifications validate specific skills that are frequently aligned with labour market demands (Oliver, 2019; Cartiş et al., 2022). While much of the policy discussion focuses on their impact on employability and reskilling (Lang, 2023; Sanchez Barrioluengo, 2025), micro-credentials also possess considerable pedagogical potential. By introducing students to competency-based frameworks and modular certification systems, they can serve as gateways into a culture of continuous education.

This article examines the dual role of a specific initiative: the incorporation of a 14-hour micro-credential in project management into the Master's program in Human Resource Management (HRM) at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. In today's human resources landscape, skills in project management, digitalisation, and data analysis have become increasingly essential (Sparrow & Makram, 2015; Schwab, 2017; Hennebert & Bourguignon, 2021). After consulting with a group of employers, we opted to emphasise project management as a crucial transversal skill that is relevant not only to HR but also to broader management fields. This focus is particularly significant at the nexus of education and employment, where the capacity to coordinate, plan, and deliver tangible results is in high demand (Ribeiro, Amaral & Barros, 2021; Martinez, 2022).

Our objective was twofold: to enhance transversal skills for employability and to cultivate students' awareness of lifelong learning as both a personal and professional imperative. By offering students the opportunity to earn a micro-credential, we aimed to create a bridge between their initial university education and ongoing professional development. By emphasising both outcomes, we contend that micro-credentials should be viewed not only as tools for the labour market but also as pedagogical instruments that introduce students to the ecosystems of university lifelong learning and development. This paper presents preliminary insights from our innovative practice.

Our goal is not to evaluate impact in a conventional sense, but rather to contribute to the ongoing reflection on best practices for integrating micro-credentials into higher education curricula, while providing concrete perspectives from the field.

CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

As part of the FSE-funded initiative "Donner du crédit à la formation tout au long de la vie," coordinated by the ULB Continuing Education Office, a program was launched at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). This program took place within the framework of the Master's in Human Resource Management (HRM) during the academic year 2024-2025. A cohort of 83 students participated in a 14-hour micro-credential in project management over one month, which was subsequently reinforced with additional coursework in the second semester. Of these students, 90% were aged between 21 and 25 years. Furthermore, 73.49% identified as female, while 26.51% identified as male, with no participants identifying as non-binary. It is also noteworthy that over 85% of the cohort possessed relevant work experience, primarily through student jobs.

Why give micro-credentials to Master's students?

One of our objectives was to equip students with project management tools while simultaneously introducing them to the concept of modular certification, which they are likely to encounter in their lifelong learning pathways. For many, this micro-credential served as their first experience with an educational structure specifically designed for portability and recognition beyond the university.

Importantly, the micro-credential was integrated into a change management course, positioning it not as a standalone addition but as part of a pedagogical experiment that connects initial academic learning with the lifelong learning ecosystem. This design choice reinforced the understanding that university education is not a closed system but rather part of a broader continuum of learning opportunities.

Micro-credentials facilitate the modularisation of learning and provide students with the chance to gain certified recognition of critical skills that enhance their academic master's degree (Kato et al., 2020; Hotaling & Van Sumeren, 2022). By validating competencies that

are relevant to the labor market, micro-credentials aid in a smoother transition into professional life (Vasilev, 2024). Furthermore, they cultivate an awareness among students nearing the completion of their second cycle about the importance of lifelong learning, empowering graduates to pursue ongoing education after finishing their initial university training (Brown et al., 2021).

The toolkit

The learning objectives were twofold. First, to equip students with practical project management tools pertinent to HR contexts. And second, to familiarise them with the logic and structure of micro-credentials as an emerging format in continuing education. We have integrated the micro-credential into a change management course, which enables us to effectively track the entry, follow-up, and exit points of the training program.

Practically speaking, we designed these micro-credentials as a 14-hour online module, delivered asynchronously and enhanced by peer coaching sessions. The course adopted a competency-based approach (Holubnycha, 2022; Amraouy et al., 2022), with clearly articulated learning outcomes that align with the European Qualifications Framework. The content covered the fundamentals of the project lifecycle, stakeholder analysis, planning tools (such as Gantt charts), risk management, and budgeting. Assessment involved creating a project file that addressed a real-world HR challenge, evaluated using a rubric that emphasised clarity of objectives, project structure, feasibility, and alignment with HRM practices. We have made concerted efforts to ensure that this format can be replicated in other modules or disciplines.

IMPLEMENTATION AND METHODOLOGY

To document and analyse the outcomes of this pilot program, we employed a mixed-methods approach (Artois, Moriau & Wagener, 2025). Our data collection comprised three key components designed to determine whether students could envision a long-term learning journey.

Initially, we administered a pre- and post-intervention questionnaire to all participating students. This questionnaire assessed their perceptions of employability, confidence in their skills, and familiarity with the principles of lifelong learning. For this last point, the questions aimed to explore how the micro-credential influenced their views on continuing education, their openness to further modular certifications, and their willingness to invest in training beyond graduation. This aspect was crucial for evaluating how the pilot not only fostered competencies but also shaped students' perspectives on learning as a lifelong endeavour.

Secondly, we conducted two group interviews with volunteers from the cohort to gain insights into their motivations, perceived relevance of the program, barriers to completion, and their vision of the lifelong learning process.

Lastly, we carried out semi-structured interviews with HR managers from organisations that regularly host interns from our program.

The questionnaire was designed to assess self-evaluated competencies in project management, perceived expectations within the labour market, and the willingness to pursue additional micro-credentials in the future. It included a combination of Likert-scale questions and open-ended prompts to enhance the group interviews.

These qualitative interviews allowed us to explore students' perceptions of this innovative learning format as well as employers' evaluations of its value. We also focused on the

connections students made between this module, their overall educational journey, and their professional aspirations.

While the scope and scale were somewhat limited, this methodological design facilitated triangulation of perspectives and provided valuable insights into the expectations, concerns, and ambitions of students engaging with this new certification model. This approach not only enabled us to capture both the intended and unintended effects of the intervention (Mutanaffisah, 2022) but also assessed students' readiness to embrace lifelong learning practices and how micro-credentials can reshape students' understanding of their learning trajectories.

INITIAL OUTCOMES AND REFLECTIONS

The initial findings suggest a generally positive response to the micro-credential among students. Many participants recognised the importance of ongoing learning after graduation, viewing the micro-credential format as a pathway to further upskilling and reskilling opportunities.

Students particularly appreciated the module's practical focus, noting a boost in their confidence regarding project management skills. This perceived enhancement was especially significant among those with limited prior experience in hands-on, project-based assignments within their academic programs. The module helped them understand how to apply their HR knowledge in complex and dynamic work settings. In terms of content assessment, 39.75% of students strongly agreed, and 34.93% agreed that it would benefit their future professional development, while only 3.61% disagreed. The remaining 21.71% neither agreed nor disagreed.

The main motivators for students, listed in order of significance, are certification, the perceived added value for professional development, and the establishment of a competitive edge in the job market. Interest in micro-credentials saw a noteworthy increase, rising from 16.86% before the program to 73.49% afterward. Additionally, we noted that interest in micro-credentials grows when they are linked to academic credits for students, although this correlation does not apply to professionals. Group interviews revealed that students are familiar with the concept of credits, associating them with the time commitment required and the level of difficulty. In contrast, professionals generally do not see added value in connecting ECTS credits with certification.

Despite the positive aspects, tensions did arise among students. Several individuals reported challenges in balancing the demands of the micro-credential with other end-of-program requirements. Although participation was voluntary, some students perceived it as an implicit expectation to excel in the change management course, which contributed to their stress. Additionally, others noted that the absence of ECTS credits made it challenging to justify the time investment, given their already demanding academic workload. These observations underscore the necessity for clearer communication regarding the voluntary nature and added value of these modules, as well as a more holistic approach to the overall learning journey.

During group interviews, we discovered a connection between the reported challenges and a lack of clarity regarding future professional roles. More than two-thirds of participants had never held a position in human resources; their experience was confined to student jobs, internships, summer work, or part-time roles. We also observed a widespread belief in a lack of self-efficacy, particularly among female students and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

From the perspective of employers, the pilot program sparked interest and conditional enthusiasm. Most HR managers acknowledged the initiative's worth, especially its efforts to clarify the skill sets of graduates. However, concerns were raised regarding standardisation, comparability among institutions, and the long-term recognition of such credentials in recruitment processes. The novelty of the term "micro-credential" and the lack of shared benchmarks made it difficult for many to assess its significance or relevance. The majority of the group had not heard of micro-credentials prior to this initiative.

In addition to individual feedback, the experiment prompted the teaching team to engage in deeper reflections. Staff members noted an increase in students' autonomy and problem-solving skills. They also observed a rising interest in project management principles, which, despite their alignment with HRM practices, are often underrepresented in the curriculum. This experience inspired us to explore new digital tools and reconsider how we can make transversal skills more visible and accessible.

Notably, the students' exposure to micro-credentials sparked additional curiosity. Nearly 74% of participants expressed a desire to pursue similar formats after graduation. This shift suggests that micro-credentials may not only serve to enhance skills but also cultivate a mindset of continuous learning. This aligns with broader educational objectives aimed at promoting learner autonomy, critical thinking, openness to future training opportunities, and preparing students to become lifelong learners (European Commission, 2020).

DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The findings emphasise the dual role of micro-credentials. They serve as enhancers of competencies and catalysts for lifelong learning pathways. Our innovative approach highlights both the potential and the complexities associated with incorporating micro-credentials into academic programs (Epaphras & Wachira, 2025; Selvaratnam & Sankey, 2021). While linking initial and ongoing training is a key objective, it poses significant challenges in implementation. Expectations among learners vary, as does the representation of certification.

From a pedagogical standpoint, micro-credentials operate as a transitional pedagogy (Kift, 2023). They familiarise students with formats they will later encounter in continuing education—specifically, short, stackable, skill-based certifications. The integration of modularised learning within a course enhances engagement by enabling students to acquire targeted, applicable skills (Ribeiro et al., 2024). The focus on project management establishes a meaningful connection between theory and practice, effectively preparing students for internships and equipping them with essential insights. This early exposure demystifies the concept of lifelong learning, transforming it from an abstract principle into a tangible, lived experience.

The asynchronous format and practical emphasis of the module significantly enhance accessibility and motivation, especially for students managing various commitments such as studies, work, and social obligations. This situation is particularly relevant for participants in university lifelong learning programs. However, our findings regarding participation highlighted distinct barriers that have been well-documented in existing literature, including factors such as socio-economic status, gender, time constraints, and socio-cultural influences (Tomaszewski et al., 2022; Günen & Vural, 2023). To effectively meet their goals, the design of micro-credentials must take these factors into account from the beginning.

Nevertheless, this initiative also revealed design-related challenges in our case. If a micro-credential is perceived as peripheral or disconnected from the core curriculum, it may risk

marginalisation. Academic advisors must proactively assist learners, clarifying the links between various subjects and underscoring the significance of this learning.

The absence of formal credit (ECTS) has prompted some students to question the legitimacy and relevance of their learning experiences. This situation highlights the urgent need for clearer integration mechanisms, whereby micro-credentials can either be incorporated into the curriculum or offered alongside institutional incentives. Ideally, universities should establish internal validation systems that progressively recognise micro-credentials within students' academic or professional portfolios. Practically speaking, this means enhancing portability and stackability for learners to encourage participation in the micro-credentials framework (Bowles & Ghosh, 2025).

An important insight pertains to the ecosystem surrounding micro-credentials. While students acknowledge their immediate advantages, the limited recognition by employers generates a sense of uncertainty (Thi Ngoc Ha et al., 2024). How can we effectively engage with students and recent graduates when micro-credentials remain largely misunderstood by employers? Our discussions highlighted that the term "micro-credential" lacks clarity among employers, which can hinder the establishment of a culture of lifelong learning.

Currently, there exists a semantic and strategic gap. While employers may recognise the value of skills such as project management, they do not necessarily associate these skills with micro-credentials as a formal tool (Cartis et al., 2022). This disconnect undermines the potential effectiveness of these certifications and limits their overall impact. It is essential for universities and policymakers to collaborate with industry stakeholders to foster a shared understanding, establish standardised criteria, and develop recognition systems (Ali et al., 2024) that support ULL ecosystems.

The lack of a shared understanding poses a significant risk of fragmentation. As more institutions expand their offerings of micro-credentials, the likelihood of inconsistent proliferation increases (Harris & Wihak, 2018). This complexity can make it difficult for learners and employers to navigate or compare credentials, ultimately undermining trust in their value. Consequently, a coordinated effort at either the national or European level may be necessary to promote systemic coherence and mutual recognition. In Belgium, there is a notable interest from non-university entities, including public vocational training and employment administrations, as well as private organisations, to explore the issuance of micro-credentials with level 6 or 7 recognition. Although these discussions are still in the early stages, they underscore the challenges faced by university ecosystems.

More broadly, micro-credentials have the potential to redefine the role of universities within the framework of lifelong learning (Enstroem & Schmaltz, 2024). By offering students their initial experience of self-directed, modular learning, micro-credentials encourage the development of habits that are conducive to ongoing personal and professional growth (Yilik, 2021). This approach is particularly valuable in fields such as Human Resource Management (HRM), where adaptability, strategic thinking, and interprofessional coordination are essential.

Micro-credentials as spaces of acculturation to ULL

An essential insight from this pilot program is the role of micro-credentials as platforms for acculturation to university lifelong learning. For many students, this initiative marked their first encounter with a learning format that was intentionally designed to be modular, transferable, and reusable. In contrast to traditional degree programs, micro-credentials were presented as stand-alone units that could theoretically be stacked or combined with other certifications. This paradigm shift encouraged students to reimagine education—not as a linear journey culminating in a diploma, but as a flexible and iterative process that extends throughout one’s

lifetime. However, the challenge remains to ensure that this approach is not viewed as a temporary experiment but rather as an invitation to a more extensive learning continuum. Consequently, universities must craft follow-up opportunities, whether through continuing education offerings, alumni learning pathways, or collaborations with professional training providers. Without such continuity, there is a risk that students may perceive micro-credentials as isolated additions rather than integral components of their lifelong learning journey.

The introduction of micro-credentials encourages a deep reflection on the institutional culture of learning. This initiative has led faculty members to adopt a more competency-based and practice-oriented pedagogy, shifting away from traditional models of knowledge transmission. Additionally, it highlights the importance of student feedback loops and agile course design. While these changes may appear modest, they signify a broader transformation in how universities view their mission and their ongoing relationship with learners throughout their lives (Oliver, 2021).

This pilot program demonstrates that effectively integrating micro-credentials requires careful orchestration, including alignment with labour market needs, a strong pedagogical foundation, institutional commitment, and external validation. Our ecosystemic, user-centred approach, which involves engaging employers and stakeholders from the outset, has shown considerable advantages in terms of recognition. Although micro-credentials are not a silver bullet, when thoughtfully designed, they can foster lifelong learning and drive innovation within higher education.

To enhance the transition from isolated experiences, universities could establish a clear institutional policy that positions initial education as the beginning of a lifelong learning continuum. Strategies might include systematically embedding micro-credentials within both undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, facilitating seamless transitions into continuing education programs, and developing learning pathways tailored for alumni. Additionally, creating recognition frameworks that allow credits earned through micro-credentials to be stacked towards advanced qualifications could signal to students the long-term value of their learning.

Universities ought to strategically align degree programs with pathways for continuing education to cultivate a robust culture of lifelong learning. This approach encourages students to perceive their academic journey not merely as a terminal point, but rather as a foundational framework for ongoing intellectual development and personal growth. Such alignment not only enhances the relevance of academic curricula but also instils in students the importance of adaptability and continuous skill acquisition in an ever-evolving professional landscape.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents an innovative pilot program that integrates a micro-credential in project management into a Master's degree in Human Resource Management. The initiative has yielded promising results in skill development, student motivation, and stakeholder engagement. However, its most significant contribution lies in its introduction of lifelong learning practices to students. When embedded within university curricula, micro-credentials can serve as gateways to ULL. They provide students with their first experience of modular certification, foster awareness of the importance of ongoing education, and encourage the cultivation of lifelong learning identities. Furthermore, our findings suggest that micro-credentials can enhance the ecosystem within a specific field, promoting closer collaboration among universities, businesses, and public authorities.

While further evaluation is necessary, this case suggests that micro-credentials can effectively kickstart lifelong learning journeys. Universities have the opportunity to align their practices with the mission of Universal Lifelong Learning (ULL). Our experience indicates that such initiatives could inspire other institutions to creatively and sustainably bridge initial and continuing education. Indeed, our data show that our module serves not just as an additional skill for students, but as a gateway to fostering a culture of lifelong learning. By enhancing awareness of lifelong learning and modular training approaches, universities can better prepare their students for the uncertainties, changes, and opportunities that lie ahead. In the context of broader digital and societal transformations, micro-credentials may provide crucial pathways for visibility and adaptability, thereby promoting a strong commitment to lifelong learning.

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EMPOWERING LIFELONG LEARNING: BUILDING FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS IN ENGINEERING EDUCATION

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Keywords: *Lifelong learning, university continuing education, flexible learning pathways, modularisation, adult learners, upskilling and reskilling, learning ecosystems, doctoral pathways*

ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning is becoming increasingly essential as professionals seek continuous development and society urges higher education to define new models that support those in the workforce. At Dutch universities, including the University of Twente, there is growing recognition that the traditional 'one-time education' model no longer suffices. At the Faculty of Engineering Technology (ET), we are building a strategic approach to lifelong learning (LLL) that supports professionals in upskilling and reskilling throughout their careers, while ensuring our educational offerings remain relevant, flexible, and aligned with societal needs.

This is a practice paper that shares the steps we are taking to develop a faculty-wide LLL framework, based on internal reflection, stakeholder collaboration, and early implementation experiences aligning it with our university's ambitions.

Our LLL strategy builds on the faculty's strong research foundation and MSc programmes, and has been shaped through internal interviews and external collaborations. We have identified three key models for professional education:

- Participation in master's-level courses
- Masterclasses and tailor-made programmes
- Engineering Doctorate (EngD) pathways for professionals

We are currently focusing on opening up MSc-level courses to professionals, who can enrol in full or partial modules with master's courses that align with our research themes, such as water management, maintenance engineering, sustainable energy technology, and high-tech equipment design. We are also expanding our masterclass and customised programme offerings, which provide compact, targeted learning opportunities for professionals. These are often co-developed with external partners and can act as standalone training or as introductions to more advanced study. The Engineering Doctorate (EngD) programme offers another promising route for professional learners. Traditionally a full-time, post-master's track, we are extending it with part-time variants that better serve working professionals and deepen cooperation with industry on applied innovation.

Across these formats, our aim is to embed LLL into core faculty activities; not as a separate track, but as an integrated extension of education, research, and societal impact. This

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includes improving internal processes at both faculty and university level, creating sustainable support structures, and aligning with funding opportunities through employer engagement and public programmes.

By expanding access and flexibility, our faculty seeks to build a robust LLL offering that supports professionals, strengthens partnerships, and amplifies the impact of our research and education.

DRIVERS OF CHANGE: SOCIETY, LABOUR MARKET, AND THE EVOLVING ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

The demand for LLL becomes more urgent in the face of accelerating technological advancement, demographic shifts, and complex societal challenges. Labour markets are undergoing significant transformations for example, in automation, digitalisation, and the green transition. This is reshaping the skills required across many sectors. Workers must continuously update their knowledge and competencies to remain employable and productive. In parallel, societal expectations are evolving, and more and more individuals are seeking flexible, modular, and relevant learning opportunities throughout their lives.

Traditionally seen as centres of foundational knowledge and innovation, universities are increasingly being challenged to transform their structures, cultures, and educational offerings. The existing model of 'one-time education' no longer stands in a knowledge economy where learning is continuous. Institutions must develop new roles and systems to serve not only full-time students, but also adult professionals seeking to reskill or upskill; often while balancing work, family, and other responsibilities (Cronholm, 2021; Georgia Tech, 2018; OECD, 2017).

This transformation is already underway. Dutch universities, for instance, have called for a systemic repositioning of life-long development within higher education. They advocate for the legal recognition of shorter, flexible learning units (e.g., micro-credentials), modular master's programmes, and non-linear study trajectories (Universiteiten van Nederland, 2023a; 2023b). However, the success of such reform depends not just on policy change, but on institutional willingness to reorganise governance, funding, and educational design.

A key insight from higher education institutes in Europe is the importance of embracing university continuing education as a structural, strategic dimension of higher education (Davies, 2007). Rather than treating it as peripheral or project-based, universities are encouraged to recognise it as a "fourth pillar" alongside research, teaching, and societal impact (Weil, 2023). This shift calls for a reconfiguration of how education is governed: embedding flexibility, modularity, and stakeholder engagement into core processes.

LLL should thus not be seen as an add-on; it is essential for building a resilient, inclusive, and future-proof society. As stated by the Dutch government commission for the regulation of work (Commissie Regulering van Werk, 2020), a structural learning infrastructure must be in place to enable people to adapt and thrive across life stages. Universities, in turn, must transform to fulfil their public mission not only for young students, but for learners at every stage of life. In order to effectively respond to societal transformation, labour market demands, and individual learning needs, universities should fully embed LLL as a core, strategic mission, equal to teaching, research, and service. Certain features of the Dutch higher education system, however, make it particularly challenging to implement innovation in university continuing education. The rigid legal framework of the Higher Education and Research Act is one example: current legislation primarily regulates full bachelor's and master's degree programmes, while short, flexible learning units such as micro-credentials

and modular pathways still lack a clear legal status. This makes it difficult for universities to structurally embed short-format university continuing education. In addition, funding mechanisms are not aligned with LLL. Government funding models incentivise traditional, full-time degree-seeking students, whereas professionals and part-time learners often fall outside these schemes (Universiteiten van Nederland, 2023a; 2023b). As a result, LLL initiatives are financially precarious and typically dependent on temporary projects or employer contributions. A further barrier is the limited collaboration between institutions and regional partners, which constrains the development of seamless LLL pathways (Thunnissen, 2021). De Grip et al. (2018) concluded in their policy report on LLL and competence development that a cultural shift is necessary to realise LLL in the Netherlands. This requires a learning culture in which employers and employees recognise its urgency, given rapid changes in required competences, longer working lives due to postponed retirement, and the increasing flexibilisation of the labour market.

Countries look for ways to accelerate and facilitate a more structural learning infrastructure for LLL. For example, within the Netherlands, a €392 million national LLL programme funded by the government (LLO-Katalysator, 2021; Cedefop & ReferNet, 2025) aims to accelerate LLL through demand-driven solutions, educator professionalisation, and regional learning ecosystems. Led by the Ministry of Education, it unites universities, vocational institutions, employers, and government partners to build a future-proof, skills-oriented learning infrastructure.

A structural change in governance, funding, curriculum design, recognition systems and partnerships with external stakeholders is needed, leading to flexible, inclusive learning pathways that serve diverse learners throughout their lives (Davies, 2007). Designing impactful continuing education offerings requires close alignment with external partners. Co-creation with employers, professionals, and regional stakeholders ensures that educational offerings are grounded in real-world needs and remain responsive to sectoral developments (Thunnissen, 2023; Lam et al., 2023). Moreover, increasing learner diversity in terms of age, background, and goals challenges universities to adopt flexible didactic models that support personalised, work-integrated learning paths (De Boer & Collis, 2005; Väätäjä et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2024).

Universities are exploring ways to respond to societal needs. Even within individual institutions, different approaches emerge, depending on the specific demands of various domains. Learning with and from each other, facilitated by networks such as EUCEN, supports universities on this journey. The following section presents the case of the Faculty of Engineering Technology (ET) at the University of Twente.

STRATEGIC LLL APPROACH AT THE FACULTY OF ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY (ET)

The Faculty of Engineering Technology (ET) at the University of Twente is building a comprehensive strategy for LLL that integrates initial education, research, and societal impact. Our approach builds upon the faculty's domain expertise and the same cutting-edge research that informs our MSc programmes which focus on the fields of mechanical engineering, civil engineering and industrial design engineering. Central to this strategy is ensuring that LLL offerings remain relevant to societal and industrial needs, manageable for academic staff, and financially sustainable.

To develop this strategy and build on the university's ambitions, we began in 2024 by conducting a structured series of interviews with ET colleagues involved in various LLL activities. These interviews and discussions with the faculty board and departments formed

the foundation of our methodology and provided crucial insights into both opportunities and challenges. The findings shaped our understanding of existing offerings, organisational models, and requirements for quality assurance and programme development.

The identified models that came from the interviews and other activities that were undertaken to get insight into our experiences and ideas were the following.

MASTER-LEVEL COURSE PARTICIPATION

We learned that professionals already join existing MSc courses, either fully or partially, for example, within courses about design principles for precision mechanisms and machine learning in engineering. The number remains limited since we are not explicitly catering to this group.

Challenges for professionals joining master's courses include the absence of formal registration and invoicing procedures and courses primarily designed for young full-time students, limiting flexibility. Also, combining different groups of learners could lead to challenges for teachers, because the students differ in their needs and approaches. However, ET has experience accommodating professional learners, and faculty are open to adapting offerings. This approach requires relatively low investment. It is also a way to gain more experience with more diverse groups of learners, and approaches of accommodating them.

MASTERCLASSES AND CUSTOMISED TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Our faculty has experience in offering focused and tailor-made offerings for industry and other parties, i.e., in the area of rubber technology, water management, maintenance engineering, biomechanical engineering and systems engineering for and with employers such as ASML, Philips, governments, and small and medium-sized enterprises. These shorter, intensive offerings meet specific industry/government skill demands and contribute to a stronger collaboration with external partners.

Challenges in masterclasses and tailor-made programmes include no or limited support for teachers in designing and delivering education tailored to this specific group. There is limited administrative support, causing professors to handle many tasks themselves. Also, the returns on investment are uncertain. Despite relying mainly on individual experts, opportunities exist to adapt master's courses for industry, strengthen research and industry ties, and collaborate with other higher education institutions to increase impact and reduce costs. Additionally, aligning these topics with existing master's courses can reduce the investment needed to develop entirely new offerings, making it more feasible for faculty staff to participate within their busy schedules.

ENGINEERING DOCTORATE (ENGD) PROGRAMMES

The EngD is a doctoral-level programme focused on applied research and innovation within an industrial or professional context. Most students are employed at the university and take the 2-year full-time programme. But we learned that it is also possible to provide EngD programmes for professionals and give them more time, for example, with a participant from the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management – Rijkswaterstaat. It effectively combines advanced research with practical innovation for working professionals.

Challenges include limited awareness of the EngD outside the university, and even within the institution, its possibilities are not fully known. Enrolment is rather low and should be increased. Promoting and flexibilising the programme could attract more participants. The

EngD offers valuable opportunities for the university to collaborate intensively with industry and societal partners on real-world challenges.

THE FACULTY APPROACH FOR LLL

Our LLL approach builds on the strong foundation of our master education and research activities, aligned with key thematic areas reflecting industry and societal needs and the university's ambitions to make a societal impact as a fourth-generation university.
We have developed a structured LLL framework comprising three main types of propositions, aimed at serving the continuing education needs of engineering professionals:

- **Contract students for master's courses:** Professionals can enrol in full or partial master's courses, as well as thematic course clusters, to enhance their skills. We aim to expand the number of courses available to professionals, clearly communicating relevant details such as required prior knowledge, types of projects involved, and available participation options. These offerings are accessible through both business-to-business and business-to-consumer channels, with flexible options such as stackable (micro)credentials.
- **Masterclasses and tailor-made programmes:** Customised learning tracks are designed specifically for companies, organisations, or individuals seeking upskilling in emerging areas. We aim to develop a series of short masterclasses and more comprehensive programmes, based on our research activities and MSc courses, in collaboration with external partners from whom participants will join.
- **Engineering Doctorate (EngD) as LLL:** A post-master's programme focused on design-driven industrial innovation, optimised for part-time participation by working professionals.

Strategically, we aim to invest more and expand on experiences from current programmes by embedding LLL as an integral tool for valorisation and dissemination. This enables us to enhance the impact of research and innovation within larger cooperation programmes involving industry and governments. By integrating LLL into these collaborations, we create structured pathways to translate knowledge and project results into practice, increasing societal and industrial benefits. At the same time, costs for the development of masterclasses and tailored programmes, can be supported by the income provided through these funded (research and innovation) programmes.

Another strategy is to better guide participants once they are enrolled in a course or masterclass by familiarising them with our full range of offerings and what might interest them. This could encourage them to take additional courses or masterclasses, or eventually pursue a full master's programme or an EngD. Dedicated support for professionals, providing personalised guidance on these possibilities, is essential for this approach.

Over time, we expect to grow the availability and uptake of LLL options through increased course accessibility, thematic course clusters, and expanded tailored programmes and doctoral offerings, all designed to meet evolving industry and societal demands. We will invest in adapting selected master's courses which are most relevant to our societal partners, and gain more experience in optimising them for the mixed classroom where professionals and traditional students learn together (Brinkhuijsen, De Vries, Bartelse, Oonk, & Gulikers, 2021), i.e., building upon the rich work experience of those professionals (Smith et al, 2024).

This is not easy, as faculty are already very busy and universities in the Netherlands are facing budget cuts. On the other hand, we have already noticed that staff at the University of Twente are more open to catering to a more diverse group of students compared with some years ago. At that time, the idea of opening up master's education for professionals was also

discussed, but teachers were not supportive. This has changed, seemingly due to a stronger societal focus on the possibilities of LLL, as well as government-supported programmes to review legislation and formal structures. These initiatives are backed by large innovation funds specifically focused on LLL (e.g., LLO Katalysator, 2021), and by the attention that LLL receives in other major thematic programmes in which industry, governments, and educational partners cooperate, such as the *Steel Sector in Transition* programme (see: groeienmetgroenstaal.nl/en). Our faculty's support is grounded in a faculty-wide exercise to develop a future-proof educational portfolio (Faculty of Engineering Technology, 2024), in which we defined our ambitions and strategy for the next 10–15 years. A large representation of faculty staff contributed in shaping this strategy. The faculty board and department boards are now implementing innovations aimed at a more diverse student population, and investments in resources and staff to build expertise and gain experience are being made available to support this.

As a faculty, we will continue to learn from programmes within our university and beyond, particularly how to organise our education so that it becomes more accessible for professionals. These steps strengthen the role of LLL in our evolving ecosystem and maximising the impact of our research and education efforts. At the same time, progress remains modest. Lifelong learning is not yet structurally embedded in national funding or fully recognised institutionally. Current practices therefore represent early steps that require continued refinement, stronger organisational support, and clearer positioning within national and European LLL systems.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Universities in the Netherlands are gaining experience in setting up models for LLL. Challenges remain, as LLL is still not part of the funded assignment from the Dutch government, while technological change, demographic shifts, and complex societal challenges increase the need for it. The national programme to accelerate and catalyse ideas and experiences (LLO-Katalysator, 2021) contributes to the ambition of defining new ecosystems in which LLL becomes an integral part of what universities do (Davies, 2007; Weil, 2023). It aims to move beyond traditional 'one-time education' models, serve more diverse learners, including working professionals balancing multiple responsibilities, and support labour markets demanding continuous upskilling and reskilling.

There is now clearly more momentum within universities in the Netherlands to take significant steps: developing strategies, gaining experience, and creating new offerings for professionals. The government is supporting experiments and the development of new ecosystems, and university policies (such as those at the University of Twente) are increasingly focused on LLL. Regional networks between educational institutions and employers are also being strengthened, supported by funded programmes. In addition, the LLL learning networks of universities in the Netherlands are very active and dedicated to supporting inter-university learning on all aspects of LLL, including educational models, staff professionalisation, business models, communication, and cooperation with societal partners.

The ET at the University of Twente aligns its LLL strategy with these broader trends, building on the future-proof portfolio exercise carried out in recent years. Building on its strong research and master's education foundation, ET integrates LLL into its thematic priorities and external collaborations. We foresee LLL as a key mechanism for valorisation and dissemination, amplifying the impact of research and innovation within industry and government partnerships.

We recognise that we are at the start of our journey. While we are already busy, LLL needs to be incorporated into our ways of working, aligned with our mission and vision. We need to gain experience adapting existing course structures, improving administrative support, and raising awareness of programmes like the Engineering Doctorate among professionals. Our strategy focuses on embedding our LLL portfolio in funded projects and alliances, thereby expanding our offerings.

As part of the broader university ambitions, our faculty seeks to expand access to LLL through increased course flexibility, thematic clustering, and tailored programmes that directly respond to the needs of industry, government, and societal needs. While participation of professionals in existing courses, masterclasses, and EngD pathways is growing, current impact remains modest, and the effectiveness of these offerings requires ongoing evaluation. The development of LLL within our faculty and across Dutch universities depends not only on local initiatives but also on systemic conditions. Limited structural funding, partial recognition of micro-credentials, and administrative models insufficiently tailored to professional learners constrain scalability and integration. Similar challenges are observed across European higher education systems. Our efforts contribute within this broader context, illustrating both the potential and the substantial work still needed to embed LLL as a fully integrated and sustainable component of higher education practice.

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TRANSLATING STRATEGIC COMPETENCE FORECASTS INTO TAILORED ULLL COURSES A CASE STUDY OF THE BATTERY SYSTEMS COURSE

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Innovative Practice

Keywords: *Triple helix learning ecosystem, macro-meso-micro alignment, university-industry collaboration, strategic competence forecasting*

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study on the development of the 'Battery Systems course,' showing how strategic competence forecasts can be translated into relevant university lifelong learning (ULLL) programmes.

Rooted in a triple helix learning ecosystem that connects policy, industry, and academia, the course exemplifies macro-meso-micro alignment: from labour market insights (via the Flemish SCOPE initiative) to collaboration between KU Leuven and the tech federation Agoria, and down to pedagogical design.

The case study illustrates how institutional barriers to Lifelong Learning (LLL) - particularly the misalignment between ULLL offerings and the evolving competence needs of the workforce - can be addressed by making academic learning more responsive and future-oriented. It offers a transferable and scalable model for ULLL.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW: (UNIVERSITY) LIFELONG LEARNING

Low participation in (U)LLL – tackling institutional barriers

The need for LLL in today's rapidly changing world is beyond dispute. As European societies navigate major transitions - from digitalisation to the pursuit of sustainability - LLL is increasingly recognised as a crucial driver of adaptability and employability.

However, participation in LLL remains relatively low in practice, particularly in Flanders. According to recent OECD data, only 22.4% of adults in Flanders reported participating in learning activities in the past year, well below the EU benchmark of 60% (Flemish Monitoring Report, 2024). This underperformance is also visible within the domain of ULLL, where only a small proportion of adults return to higher education institutions after completing their initial degrees (OECD, 2019; VLOR, 2021; Flemish Government, 2021).

Understanding the causes of this participation gap is critical. Drawing on Cross's (1981) seminal typology, three categories of barriers to adult learning can be identified: situational

(e.g., lack of time), dispositional (e.g., low self-confidence), and institutional (e.g., misaligned educational offerings[1]). As *institutional* barriers fall within the zone of influence of universities such as KU Leuven, this paper is situated within that broader context - specifically, against the context of the mismatch between ULLL programmes and the real-world needs of adult learners and sectors. In terms of content, many existing ULLL courses lack up-to-date or demand-driven topics. Additionally, in terms of format, these courses are often not tailored to the complex realities faced by adult learners who must balance work, family, and other commitments.

Case study

This paper presents a case study that explores how institutional barriers can be reduced by making 'academic learning' more responsive and future-oriented. It focuses on the development of the Battery Systems course - a concrete example of how high-level insights into strategic labour market skills (via the Flemish SCOPE initiative) can be translated into a relevant ULLL programme through collaboration between academia (PUC - KU Leuven Continue) and industry (technology federation Agoria).

Structure paper

Before discussing the case study in more detail in section three, section two introduces the SCOPE programme as a policy initiative focused on strategic competence forecasting. Section four provides a set of critical reflections on both process and outcomes. Section five concludes by showing how the Battery Systems course demonstrates alignment across macro, meso, and micro levels within a triple helix learning ecosystem that connects policy, industry, and academia, and explores its potential as a scalable model for ULLL.

BACKGROUND: STRATEGIC FORESIGHT AND THE SCOPE FRAMEWORK AT THE MACRO-LEVEL

In the context of ongoing digital and green transitions, insight into future workforce competences is becoming increasingly essential. To support a more strategic approach to competence development, the Flemish government initiated the SCOPE programme (Strategic Competence Prognoses) during the European Social Fund operational programme period 2014-2020. This macro-level policy initiative sought to gather insights from companies of various sizes across Flanders, with the aim of identifying labour market trends and forecasting future competence demands.

Each SCOPE study begins by selecting a specific sector, value chain, or innovation cluster. All studies are grounded in the VLAMT predictive research methodology, which combines qualitative and quantitative approaches.[2] Importantly, each study is shaped by a broad steering group of Flemish companies - ranging from start-ups and SMEs to multinational corporations - ensuring relevance and practical validity. The SCOPE reports adopt a medium- to long-term perspective (5 to 10 years), and deliberately avoid narrow job

[1] According to the Flemish Monitoring Report (2024, 63 & 80), *institutional* barriers hinder 12.3% of respondents from participating in training. Moreover, one of the most frequently cited levers to increase participation is making the training offer more flexible, i.e., adapting courses to (individual) learning needs. This highlights the importance of aligning the course offering better with the needs of the workforce.

[2] The VLAMT methodology ('VLaams ArbeidsMarktonderzoek van de Toekomst', i.e., Flemish Labour Market Research for the Future), formally recognised by the Flemish government as a valid framework for labour-market foresight, follows a structured, multi-step process. It comprises project planning; the establishment of a steering group; desk research; exploratory workshops; interviews, case studies, or surveys; an analysis of the existing training offer; and, finally, the formulation of recommendations and an action plan; cf. https://www.europawse.be/sites/default/files/public/Documenten/methodiek_competentieprognoses.pdf

descriptions. Instead, they explore emerging competence needs across a broad range of functions and educational levels, including vocational and academic pathways.
The outcome of the SCOPE initiative is a set of 27 strategic reports, covering seven Flemish industries such as paper processing, liberal professions, and textiles (Cabus & Vansteenkiste, 2024).

The SCOPE study most relevant to the present case concerns the battery value chain. The study examined the full value chain, from raw material sourcing and cell manufacturing to battery pack integration and end-use systems - extending even to recycling and second-life applications:

This comprehensive mapping revealed the sector's structural complexity, characterised by a diverse range of companies occupying various positions along the chain, some of which were represented in the study's steering group (cf. supra).

Unsurprisingly, substantial competence needs emerged within the battery value chain, a rapidly expanding sector that plays a pivotal role in energy transition. These arise partly from the broader climate transition, which introduces growing technical, regulatory, and policy complexity - complexity that educational systems struggle to absorb at the same pace. This results in a mismatch between rapidly evolving sectoral demands and the slower adjustment capacity of educational provision. It is therefore significant that the European Pact for Skills emphasises competences for the green transition - alongside digital skills - as priority domains. This reinforces the strategic importance of developing specialised knowledge in emerging clean-energy technologies, such as those at the core of the battery value chain.

MAIN SECTION: CASE STUDY: THE BATTERY SYSTEMS COURSE

Institutional collaboration at the meso-level

While the SCOPE programme is rich in *macro-level* insights, their practical implementation depends on effective translation into *concrete* educational offerings. This requires strong meso-level collaboration between institutional actors across the education and industry landscape. In the case of the Battery Systems course, such translation took shape through a partnership between PUC - KU Leuven Continue and the technology federation Agoria, which will be further discussed below.

PUC - KU Leuven Continue: ULLL context & principles

It is widely acknowledged that ULLL can take many different forms, depending on the university's broader context and strategy (Bengtsson, 2013; de Viron & Davies, 2023). At KU Leuven, all LLL initiatives fall under the KU Leuven Association, which encompasses not only the university itself but also a network of university colleges, with 'Continue' serving as the umbrella organisation for these efforts. PUC - KU Leuven Continue operates within this broader context, focusing on designing and delivering academic-level programmes specifically tailored for (working) adults. It is the primary LLL provider within KU Leuven. To illustrate its scale, in the 2023-2024 academic year, PUC - KU Leuven Continue welcomed 8,237 participants across 204 activities (PUC - KU Leuven Continue yearly overview, academic year 2023-2024). Unlike degree-based programmes (bachelor's and master's degrees), which are subsidised by the Flemish government, PUC - KU Leuven Continue operates as a self-sustaining entity.

The approach of PUC - KU Leuven Continue is rooted in the following principles:

- Open enrolment: courses are open to individuals from diverse companies and backgrounds, unlike in-house corporate programmes, where training takes place alongside colleagues.
- Interdisciplinary approach: as a cross-faculty service of KU Leuven, the course offerings span multiple domains, including economics, psychology, law, and IT.
- Cohort-based learning: emphasis is placed on a cohort-based model, where participants begin, progress, and complete the course together as a group.
- Programme variety: while most programmes are focused on professional development, there are also offerings for those interested in personal learning.
- Course formats: the educational offerings include a range of formats - from webinars and study afternoons to year-long programmes. Both in-person, online, and blended learning options are provided to accommodate the diverse needs of learners.

Technology federation Agoria

Agoria is the national leading employers' federation for technology companies, representing sectors such as manufacturing, digital business, and telecommunications. With over 2,000 member companies, Agoria's core mission is to defend the interests of its members, operating on a business model based on membership fees. This mission is achieved through lobbying, advocacy, networking, innovation advice and support, consultancy, and tailored services.

University-industry collaboration as an analytical lens for the partnership

The partnership underpinning the Battery Systems course falls within the broader category of university-industry collaboration (UIC). Metareviews show that most UIC initiatives relate to technology transfer, including collaborative research projects and contract research (Bruneel et al., 2010; Perkmann et al., 2013). By contrast, collaborations focused on education for professionals constitute a smaller, though increasingly important, subset of UIC activities (cf. Laundon et al., 2024, which highlights the benefits of co-creation in ULLL). Much of the literature on barriers and facilitators in UIC is therefore derived from research-oriented collaborations. Nevertheless, several insights are transferable to ULLL-oriented cooperation. Perkmann et al. (2013), for instance, distinguish between individual-level determinants and organisational-level factors that facilitate successful collaboration - both of which proved relevant in the present case.

Role division

Both *organisations* involved exhibited a strong outward-facing orientation and extensive human-capital networks and are accustomed to collaborating with external stakeholders.

In practice, Agoria acted as a sectoral intermediary, bringing in companies, industry speakers, and practice-based expertise. Notably, Agoria had also contributed to the SCOPE study on the battery value chain (cf. supra: 2) and was therefore well positioned to ensure alignment between labour-market intelligence and concrete course content.
PUC - KU Leuven Continue, conversely, took the lead in educational design and delivery, drawing on its pedagogical expertise and proven approaches for adult learners. From the outset, it was agreed that PUC - KU Leuven Continue would serve as the financially responsible organiser, managing course administration and logistics, in line with what Ankrah and Al-Tabbaa (2015) classify as a 'formal targeted agreement.'

Successful collaboration was also strongly shaped by the characteristics of the *individuals* representing both organisations. Agoria is organised through business groups that focus on shared technologies and innovation needs. These groups are led by dedicated leaders who collaborate closely with companies to identify the required competencies in line with technological advancements. For the present partnership, the business groups Mobility & Vehicle Technologies and Energy Systems & Solutions played a central role. Their business group leader had prior research experience, which enabled him to translate industrial needs into academically meaningful insights - an attribute widely recognised in the literature as conducive to effective UIC. On the PUC - KU Leuven Continue side, the programme coordinator contributed extensive expertise in managing projects at the intersection of education and labour-market policy.

The process of pedagogical decision-making at the micro-level

While this section presents a structured, step-by-step account for analytical clarity, the actual development process was far from linear. Instead, it was marked by an iterative dialogue between academic and industrial actors, and between pedagogical considerations and real-world constraints.

Step 1: Focusing the thematic scope

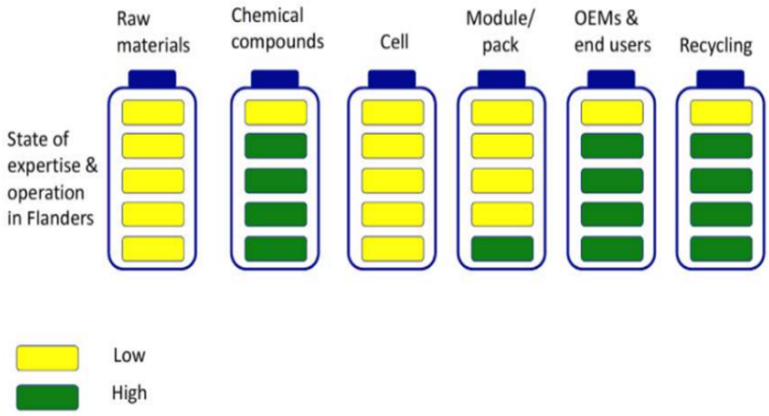
The first step in the design process involved narrowing the thematic focus of the course. Building on the findings of the SCOPE study, the programme targeted the right-hand side of the battery value chain - specifically the application and integration phase (battery packs in applied settings). To further refine the thematic scope, two core domains were identified:

- Automotive and e-mobility, including electric cars and trucks
- Stationary energy systems, such as battery integration in buildings and grid applications

This thematic narrowing was guided by a set of explicit selection criteria derived from the SCOPE mapping exercise:

(1) Relevance to the Flemish industrial landscape,
(2) Concentration of active companies within specific segments of the value chain, and
(3) Documented competence needs related to application-level battery technologies.

As the mapping visual illustrates overleaf, the strongest clusters of Flemish companies (highlighted in green) are predominantly situated within the application and integration phase. Alternative thematic routes - such as raw materials or cell chemistry - were evaluated but discarded due to their limited presence in the regional industrial context.



Step 2: Defining learning outcomes in line with the target audience

With the thematic focus established, the subsequent step involved defining (and refining) the intended learning outcomes, in accordance with the didactic concept of *constructive alignment* - that is, the alignment of intended outcomes and learning activities with outcomes formulated *prior* to the design of teaching activities (Biggs & Tang, 2011; 2014; cf. infra: step 4).

While the SCOPE study addressed (competences across) multiple educational levels (cf. supra: 2), it was essential to specify the educational level for this particular course. In line with the established target audience of PUC - KU Leuven Continue, the course was positioned at the academic 'postgraduate' level and explicitly tailored to a clearly delineated group: highly educated technical professionals, specifically engineers.

Step 3: Mobilising academic and industrial expertise

In line with the collaborative nature of the project, both academic and industrial expertise were actively engaged in the design and delivery of the course. PUC - KU Leuven Continue was able to benefit from the overarching KU Leuven Association, coordinated under the 'Continue' umbrella (cf. supra: 3.1). This structure enabled PUC - KU Leuven Continue to engage and hold exploratory meetings with potential lecturers from both university colleges (e.g., Odisee) and KU Leuven faculties and research units. As such, practice-oriented and fundamental research could be combined, ensuring that the course content reflects different technology readiness levels (or TRLs).

At the same time, Agoria mobilised its industry network, in particular the Mobility & Vehicle Technologies and Energy Systems & Solutions business groups. The business group leader played a central role, leveraging formal and informal networks to identify, select, and engage relevant companies and industry speakers for company visits and other course components (cf. infra: step 4). Importantly, the leader maintains direct contact with CEOs and other key decision makers. This individual-level contribution was instrumental in shaping how industry insights were integrated into the course design (cf. supra: 3.1 on the importance of the individual level in UIC).

To ensure coherence and complementarity, each proposed academic expert, industry speaker, and company visit was reviewed jointly by PUC - KU Leuven Continue and Agoria.

The result was a complementary blend of research-based and industry-based lecturers, aligning with Cronholm's (2021) principle of integrating theory and practice in ULLL, and illustrating the benefits of collaborative, co-creative curriculum design (Laundon, 2024).

Step 4: Constructive alignment

The final step in the course design process involved ensuring **constructive alignment** between the previously defined learning outcomes (step 2) and the selected teaching and learning activities (Biggs & Tang, 2011; 2014). These activities were also evaluated based on:

- Suitability for adult learners, taking into account their full-time employment and professional experience;
- Connection between theory and practice, ensuring that abstract concepts were consistently linked to real-world industrial applications (cf. Cronholm, 2021).

Key design choices included:

- Co-teaching model: Academic lecturers first present the theoretical foundations, followed by industry professionals who illustrate these concepts through applied company cases. This joint delivery provides participants with complementary perspectives on the same topics, linking theory directly to practice (cf. supra: step 3).
- Use of case studies: carefully selected to exemplify challenges and solutions within the two thematic domains (automotive/e-mobility and stationary energy systems), enabling participants to apply theoretical knowledge to practical problems.
- Company visits: structured as active learning experiences, not merely as observational site tours.

Reflecting the principle of constructive alignment in *initial* higher education (cf. Biggs & Tang, 2011; 2014), various assessment strategies were considered to align with the learning outcomes and the participants' professional context. Despite their potential to enhance learning, provide meaningful feedback, and confer credible certification – in line with trends in microcredentialing (cf. Elling & Lam, 2025) - formal assessments were not implemented at this stage.

The resulting course structure comprised twelve sessions, organised into six modules, delivered in a cohort-based format. The sessions integrated theoretical lectures, held at the KU Leuven campus of Ghent, with on-site visits to companies across Flanders. The on-campus sessions are scheduled in the evening, thereby enabling working professionals to balance participation with their professional and personal responsibilities (cf. supra: 1: institutional barrier related to format).

Coordinated outreach

The final preparatory step involved the design of a joint marketing and communication strategy to ensure the course would effectively reach its intended audience of highly educated technical professionals. Our coordinated approach to promotion included a shared communication timeline, co-branding, and targeted outreach through each partner's respective channels, such as email campaigns, newsletters, social media (primarily via LinkedIn), etc.

Co-branding played an important role in strengthening visibility and credibility. By explicitly presenting the course as a joint initiative of a leading academic institution and a key industry federation, the partners were able to build trust among potential participants.

In line with its service model for members (cf. supra: 2), Agoria also negotiated exclusive benefits, such as reduced registration fees. This not only added value for participating companies but also served as a concrete incentive to enrol.

Outcomes and impact

The first edition of the course (2024) rapidly reached full capacity, with enrolment capped at 30 participants due to both didactic and logistical considerations, including the on-site company visits and the networking potential. The course attracted a notably diverse cohort, including economists and business developers. While the second edition (2025) was not fully booked (20 participants), it succeeded in attracting participant profiles more closely aligned with the course's intended target group - namely, highly educated *technical* professionals. The third edition (2026) is now open for registration.

Satisfaction surveys not only indicated improved conceptual *understanding* of battery systems, but also a capacity to *apply* this knowledge in their professional context. This corresponds to the application level in Bloom's taxonomy, a third-order cognitive skill (Bloom et al., 1956). These findings suggest that the course had an indirect impact on industrial innovation, and even on broader strategic domains such as geopolitics.

REFLECTIONS: CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS FROM PRACTICE

In this section, we reflect critically on some of the considerations that emerged during the design and delivery of the course. These reflections relate to both the educational programme itself (4.1-4.3) and the collaborative process (4.4).

Safeguarding neutrality

One recurring concern during the course development was how to ensure the programme's independent and neutral positioning, particularly in light of strong industry involvement. This consideration touches indirectly on the dynamics described in UIC, where partners can have both individual and shared objectives (Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa, 2015, 396). In this case, the challenge lay in balancing the interests of the sector with the programme's independent educational mission. While sector engagement ensured applied relevance, the course deliberately avoided commercialisation, e.g., company visits were curated to serve educational purposes - not to promote individual firms.

Upholding educational vision

A second concern relates to the balance between demand-driven innovation and the broader - transformative - educational mission of ULLL. While responsiveness to professional needs was essential, efforts were made to avoid (hyper-)modularisation, which risks fragmenting learning and undermining systemic thinking (cf. Soltic & Seynhaeve, 2024: on the risks of 'nano-credentialing'). The decision to include an introductory module on the broader energy transition - featuring the trias energetica - illustrates this vision. Although not directly linked to any specific technical competence identified in the SCOPE study, the module helped anchor the programme in a broader sustainability narrative and societal mission, in line with ULLL's transformative potential.

Embedding feedback

Given the pace of technological change, ongoing responsiveness was built into the course design. Structured evaluation forms were used to capture participant feedback, which directly led to the inclusion of a new module on safety regulations in the second edition of the course.[3] The safety topic itself further illustrates the need for up-to-date awareness of regulatory frameworks. In addition, the partnership is currently exploring the development of an active alumni community to ensure ongoing feedback.

A more sustainable model of collaboration?

Finally, this case study raises broader questions about the sustainability of university-industry collaborations (UIC) focused on professional education. While the partnership with Agoria was highly productive, it remained project-based - focused on a single course development trajectory. This reflects a common limitation in many industry-university partnerships, which often take the form of ad hoc, transactional arrangements (Damoc, 2017). To move beyond this model, a more systematic and enduring approach is needed. A potential starting point could be the co-development of a joint mission statement, formalising a shared vision for 'industry-based' ULLL.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A TRIPLE HELIX LEARNING ECOSYSTEM

Complementary roles

The result of this case study is the emergence of a triple helix learning ecosystem[4], connecting policy, industry, and academia (a framework typically used in innovation contexts; cf. Cai & Etzkowitz, 2020[5]) with clear, complementary roles:

[3] The (growing) need for knowledge of safety issues had, in fact, already been identified in the SCOPE study (p22). However, during the design of the first course edition, we (wrongly) decided not to integrate this theme. *"It is crucial to be aware of the specific safety risks associated with working on battery and energy storage systems, and to act accordingly. Developers must be familiar with the standards, guidelines, and regulations applicable to electrical installations. Specifically for battery systems, the presence of direct current and increasingly higher voltages (>750V) are important factors. Fire safety and the ability to assess environment-related risks are also among the expected competencies."*

[4] While the notion of an 'ecosystem' has become widespread in innovation policy discourse, it suffers from conceptual ambiguity. As Van Bree et al. (2020:18) point out, terms like ecosystem, innovation ecosystem, entrepreneurial ecosystem and regional cluster are often used interchangeably without clear typological distinctions.

[5] In their master's thesis, Clifford and Rashid (2009) apply the triple helix model to the context of ULLL, exploring which business model a university could adopt to support LLL for its alumni. The focus on alumni engagement and feedback mechanisms also resonates with the principles of the *quadruple* helix model (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009), in which citizens - in this case, professionals - actively contribute to shaping future course iterations and, by extension, the learning ecosystem.

- Government, through the Flemish SCOPE initiative, took on the role of initiator and funder. By providing macro-level labour market intelligence and competence forecasts, the public partner laid the strategic groundwork for the programme.
- Industry, through the tech federation Agoria, acted as co-creator and intermediary. Beyond representing the needs of individual companies, Agoria ensured that the sectoral perspective remained central.
- Academia, represented by PUC - KU Leuven Continue, assumed the role of coordinator and knowledge integrator. PUC - KU Leuven Continue contributed research-informed expertise, didactic design, and quality assurance. Crucially, it also acted as an internal broker within the university, mobilising academic expertise and ensuring that the programme met institutional standards and values. Thus, universities can act not only as knowledge providers but also as brokers within a learning ecosystem.

Viewed through the UIC lens, this case shows how educational collaborations can broaden the traditional scope of UIC - from technology transfer and research-oriented projects to professional education in ULLL. Both organisational-level and individual-level factors highlighted in UIC literature (Perkmann et al., 2013) were instrumental in enabling this collaboration.

A triple win

This case represents more than a successful collaboration; it constitutes a triple win. For government, through the SCOPE initiative, it is a way to steer the process through strategic choices, aligned with key policy priorities.

For industry, the course answers an explicit need. For the technology federation Agoria, it even functions as a concrete service to its member companies. Additionally, the course presents an opportunity for Agoria itself to expand its membership by engaging companies previously affiliated only with the CRM university system, who through the course become familiar with the federation's offerings.

For academia, the course expands the engagement with industry, bringing research, education, and societal relevance closer together, thereby strengthening the mission of ULLL.

A transferable model of macro-meso-micro alignment

Underpinning this triple win is a shared strategic anchor: the SCOPE initiative functioned as a fixed capstone, offering all stakeholders a clear starting point. This helped avoid vague discussions and enabled rapid convergence on a common goal.

The initiative is a textbook example of macro-meso-micro alignment: from strategic foresight at the policy (macro) level, through institutional collaboration between industry and university (meso level), to tailored, demand-driven training for engineers at the micro level.

This structured alignment within the triple helix framework offers a transferable and scalable model for ULLL. It demonstrates how strategic competence forecasting can be operationalised into relevant, responsive, and future-oriented course offerings, thereby helping to reduce an institutional barrier in ULLL: the mismatch between educational supply and (future) labour market demand.

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FROM MIGRATION TO CLASSROOM: UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION AS PATHWAY TO TEACHER INTEGRATION

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Innovative Practice

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ABSTRACT

In today's globalized world, migration has become a central feature of many societies. However, while many skilled professionals can transfer their qualifications relatively easily to new labour markets, migrated teachers often encounter substantial barriers. To re-enter the teaching profession, they are frequently required to undergo complex requalification processes and pass formal examinations. University continuing education (UCE) can serve as a flexible needs-oriented framework to complement official recognition procedures and promote the integration of migrated teachers into national education systems. This paper presents the programme "IGEL – Integration and Equity for International Teachers" at the University of Education Weingarten, Germany. It outlines the programme's structural framework, didactic approach, and evaluation-based outcomes. It illustrates how targeted UCE programmes can facilitate the re-qualification and labour market integration of migrated teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is an integral part of contemporary European societies, and international professionals contribute significantly to labour markets across sectors. However, systemic barriers often hinder a seamless transition into the host country's workforce, particularly in regulated professions such as teaching. Here, a mismatch between institutional standards, educational structures, and language requirements pose significant challenges for teachers seeking to continue their careers in a new educational system: despite formal qualifications and professional experience, migrated teachers are frequently required to complete extensive requalification procedures, including additional studies, examinations, and advanced language certification (George, 2021; Kremsner, Proyer and Biewer, 2020; Schüssler et al., 2023). This process often leads to prolonged career interruptions, underemployment, or dropout – despite a well-documented shortage of qualified teachers in Germany (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2024; Dohmen, 2024, KMK, 2023).

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This paper presents the bridging programme *IGEL – Integration and Equity for International Teachers* at the University of Education Weingarten, Germany. It explores the programme's structural and didactic design as well as its evidence-based outcomes. IGEL serves as a case study of how University Continuing Education (UCE) within University Lifelong Learning (ULL) can complement formal recognition procedures and support the labour market integration of migrated teachers. Through this lens, the paper identifies key mechanisms for inclusive professional development, highlights transferable practices for European contexts, and advocates for systemic innovations within teacher education policy that strengthen resilient lifelong learning ecosystems.

RECOGNITION PROCESSES FOR INTERNATIONAL TEACHERS IN GERMANY

In Germany, teaching is a regulated profession. Full access to the profession requires official recognition of foreign teaching credentials, which is administered by the education ministries of the 16 federal states. Without this formal recognition, full-time employment as a teacher is generally not permitted. The recognition process typically involves three core requirements:

- a completed teacher education programme from the country of origin,
- a formal aptitude test (if substantial differences are identified), and
- advanced German language proficiency at CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) level C2, or C1 plus an oral colloquium.

Despite the growing demand for qualified teachers in Germany, recognition remains a significant hurdle. In 2022, only 14% of around 2,000 submitted applications for recognition of foreign teaching qualifications resulted in full recognition (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2024). Approximately two-thirds of applicants are required to undertake additional academic training – often in subject didactics or to acquire a second teaching subject – and must pass language exams at the highest CEFR levels (Weizsäcker & Roser, 2020).

These requirements, while designed to ensure educational quality, often fail to acknowledge the substantial professional experience that many migrated teachers bring. As a result, the process can lead to unnecessary delays, drop-outs, or diversion into unrelated fields.

During this period, many affected individuals face professional uncertainty, loss of pedagogical engagement, and financial strain. Career breaks are common, as are part-time jobs outside the education sector taken to support themselves during re-qualification. Women, who make up the majority of participants, are disproportionately disadvantaged, primarily due to their caregiving responsibilities and unequal access to childcare.

To address these challenges, several bridging initiatives have been launched across Germany. These programmes aim to ease transitions into the host country's education system by offering tailored support. They combine language development, subject-specific instruction, and socio-cultural orientation to participants to meet national standards and institutional norms. More broadly, they promote educational equity by acknowledging the potential of a diverse teaching workforce and offering structured pathways towards reintegration (Bergmüller et al., 2025; Kansteiner et al., 2022). The following section presents the IGEL programme as a case study of such an approach, illustrating how UCE can contribute to more inclusive, flexible, and responsive qualification pathways for migrated teachers.

IGEL – A BRIDGING PROGRAMME

Programme Origins

Launched in 2019 at the University of Education Weingarten, the IGEL programme was initially developed in response to the increasing number of refugee teachers from countries such as e. g. Syria, Algeria, Turkey, and meanwhile also Ukraine in Germany. Situated within the university's Academy for Continuing Education, IGEL was conceived as part of a broader University Lifelong Learning (ULL) strategy.

The original concept followed a three-stage model:

a. preparation for requalification studies,
b. support during requalification, and
c. guidance through the transition into employment.

Since 2024, the programme has been broadened to support all internationally trained teachers, not just those with a refugee background. It continues to evolve based on ongoing evaluation and participant feedback. IGEL's integration within the Academy of Continuing Education enables hybrid structure that bridges pre-service teacher education and continuing education. This institutional positioning fosters a collaborative university-led ecosystem that connects individual learners, recognition authorities, schools, and higher education institutions across the federal state of Baden-Württemberg.

The programme is designed to address the linguistic, didactic, and institutional challenges through a practice-oriented, action-based approach. The goal is to enable long-term, situated learning that empowers participants to re-enter the profession with confidence and competence.

Programme Structure

In its current form, IGEL is implemented through four interlinked components (see figure 1) that operationalize the original three-stage framework:

1. *Individual Guidance*: Personal consultations assess prior qualifications, recognition status, and living conditions to determine programme suitability and tailor individual learning paths.
2. *Three-Month Preparatory Programme:* Courses in academic German, school-related language, and the German education system provide sound knowledge for further studies. A language lab supports preparation for C1/C2 proficiency exams preparation.
3. *Accompanying Short Courses*: These include didactics, digital pedagogy, and strategies for multilingual classrooms. A buddy programme with university students offers academic and social support.
4. *Practical Integration*: Participants undertake school placements with tandem partners and receive professional supervision. Reflection sessions focus on classroom management, parent communication and navigating the school environment.

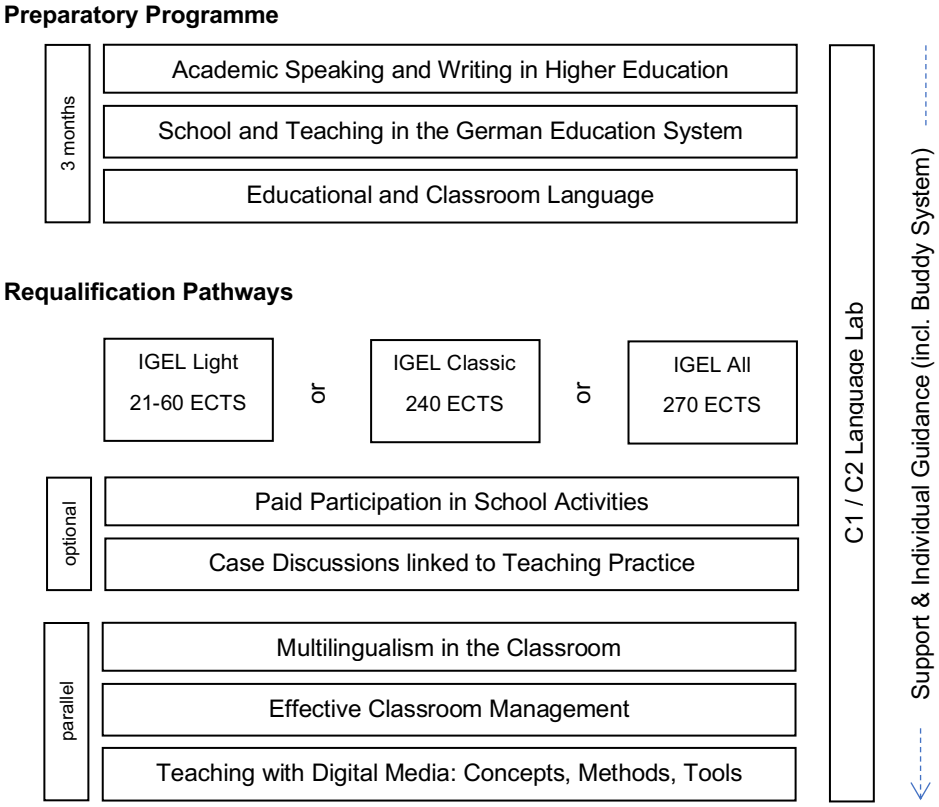

***Figure 1**: Overview of the IGEL programme*

Together, these four components provide a structured, needs-based progression that corresponds to both individual and institutional requirements. By combining personalised guidance, academic preparation, and school-based experience, IGEL enables participants to navigate the requalification process more effectively.

Programme Outcomes

To date, more than 100 migrant teachers have participated in the IGEL programme. From the first cohort onwards, we have analysed their subsequent pathways via project statistics, as well as through ongoing quantitative and qualitative evaluations using questionnaires and interviews. By summer 2024, 68 participants had successfully completed the preparatory programme.
The statistical analyses show that among these participants:

- 69.2% continued their re-qualification studies at the University of Education Weingarten,
- 10.3% enrolled at other institutions,
- 8.8% entered teaching-related roles in preparatory or language support classes,
- 1.5% entered direct recognition procedures without additional studies,
- 7.3% transitioned into other professional fields, and
- 2.9% remained as guest students awaiting study admission.

Among those who began re-qualification studies between 2019 and 2021, the completion rates are encouraging:

- 77.8% of 2019 entrants have completed their programmes,
- 71.4% of those from 2020, and
- currently already 42.7% of the 2021 cohort (the rest was still involved in their studies at that time).

These figures highlight not only the programme's effectiveness but also illustrate the systemic challenges posed by lengthy recognition procedures and individuals' life circumstances.

The questionnaires and interview data confirm that flexible, targeted continuing education programmes like IGEL significantly enhance the chances of professional reintegration for internationally educated teachers. Participants in our programme as well as in comparable programmes throughout Germany report increased confidence, improved language proficiency, stronger professional identity, and a clearer understanding of institutional expectations (cf. e. g. Schüssler et al., 2023).

The modular design of IGEL, combined with its responsiveness to participant needs, makes it a transferable model for other regional and national contexts. It demonstrates how university continuing education can function as an enabling mechanism in the integration of a diverse, multilingual teaching workforce – particularly in times of teacher shortages and increasing cultural diversity in schools.

LESSONS LEARNT

The IGEL programme provides valuable insights into how UCE can effectively support the professional reintegration of internationally trained teachers. Several key success factors have emerged from its implementation and ongoing evaluation:

- *Diversity-sensitive guidance*: Tailored advising that considers prior professional experience, migration histories, legal status, and individual aspirations is essential for building trust and supporting informed decision-making.
- *Flexible formats*: A blended learning approach - combining online, hybrid, and in-person formats – accommodates diverse life situations including caregiving responsibilities, part-time employment, and mobility restrictions.
- *Bridging socialisation gaps*: Successful integration into the German school system requires more than language proficiency. It also involves pedagogical alignment, familiarity with institutional norms, and the (re)development of a professional teacher identity.
- *Practice-oriented components as catalysts*: Supervised school placements and structured reflection sessions enhance participants' professional confidence, classroom readiness and employability.

While the programme's impact is evident, persistent challenges remain – particularly in the areas of financial resources, sustainable funding, and systemic recognition of prior learning. These barriers often limit the scalability of such initiatives and hinder equal participation.

IGEL also highlights the importance of reflexive diversity management within universities. Moving beyond formal commitments to inclusion requires structural adjustments, critical institutional reflection, and a commitment to developing inclusive practices at all levels.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

UCE has the potential to act as a transformative instrument in the professional development of migrated teachers. Bridging programmes such as IGEL demonstrate how scientifically grounded, context-sensitive continuing education can complement formal recognition processes and create inclusive, responsive qualification pathways.

IGEL functions as more than just a re-qualification initiative – it serves as a laboratory for inclusive teacher education, linking higher education institutions, schools, and policy stakeholders. Through its modular, adaptable structure, the programme offers a transferable model for continuing professional development (CPD) in increasingly diverse education systems.

Moreover, by recognising migrated teachers as a strategic target group in CPD planning, programmes such as IGEL advocate the development of adaptive learning ecosystems. This contributes not only to systemic capacity development, but also to a more equitable and representative teaching workforce.

Key elements such as mentoring, job shadowing, and case-based reflections play a crucial role in fostering professional identity and sustainable integration. These mechanisms support not only skills acquisition but also the long-term socialisation of teachers into new educational contexts.

Ultimately, IGEL exemplifies how University Continuing Education (UCE) can respond dynamically to societal change, reduce structural barriers, and unlock the potential of a diverse, multilingual teaching workforce. This diversity enhances educational capacity and promotes a school environment that better reflects the multilingual realities of its pupils. As such, IGEL provides a compelling model for universities across Europe aiming to strengthen lifelong learning ecosystems and ensure equitable access and advance inclusive access to the teaching profession.

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GENDER, SKILLS AND MIGRATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON LIFELONG LEARNING STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Adopting an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989) and a realistic evaluation approach (Pawson & Tilley, 1997), the qualitative research investigates 15 case studies with a migrant background (7 women and 8 men), who referred to the CAP of University of Bari during 2024. The research aims to understand their specific needs and the reasons for the difficulties encountered in the academic integration process. The semi-structured interviews allowed an in-depth exploration of emerging themes while maintaining focus on the key areas of interest. Specifically, the study focused on academic integration and the social and cultural inclusion of the participants.

CONTEXT

In Italy, according to UNHCR statistics, only 7% of refugees access higher education, compared to an average of 42% among the non-refugee population. As highlighted in the 2023 review by Pastore et al., Italian universities miss a shared and systematic procedure for recognising the educational and training qualifications of refugees. This process is limited by several critical factors: the frequent absence of a valid residence permit, a lack of financial support, the incomplete documentation of prior education and the inadequacy of qualification frameworks, which often do not align with the systems of refugees' countries of origin. In addition to these challenges, there are also racial prejudices, linguistic barriers, and significant cultural differences (Perulli, 2023). Furthermore, many migrants are unaware of their own resources and have limited knowledge of available services. Additionally, migrants from less developed countries are frequently regarded as having inferior knowledge (Luce, 2020), a perception shaped by deeply rooted processes of *racialisation* and *gendering* of knowledge (Bencivenga, 2019; Vergès, 2020)[1].

[1] «si, bien évidemment, la «race» n'existe pas, des groupes et des individus font l'objet d'une «racisation», c'est-à-dire d'une construction sociale discriminante, marquée du négatif, à travers l'histoire. Les processus de racisation sont les différents dispositifs — juridiques, culturels, sociaux, politiques - par lesquels des personnes et des groupes sont étiquetés et stigmatisés. «Racisée»/«racisé» n'est donc pas une notion descriptive mais analytique. La racisation, couplée avec le genre et la classe, produit des formes spécifiques d'exclusion.» (Vergès, 2017, p. 17) English translation: «Yes, of course, while 'race' does not exist, groups and individuals are subjected to racialization, that is, a socially constructed and discriminatory process, historically marked by negative attributions. Processes of racialization refer to the various mechanisms - legal, cultural, social, and

Delays in the recognition of prior learning leads to the devaluation of refugees' cultural capital. This constitutes a systematic de-skilling of the individual and a limitation of the right to access higher education and validate educational credentials (Merico, Scardigno, 2022). In this scenario, providing opportunities to validate and recognise prior learning becomes a key tool for rebuilding both personal and social identity (Scardigno, Manuti, Pastore, 2019). It plays a key role in empowering individuals with a migrant background and helping them accessing the labour market, promoting their economic independence and reducing the risk of social exclusion.

In Italy, the Lisbon Convention[2] was ratified through Law No. 148 of 11 July 2002. Specifically, Article 2 of this law establishes that the evaluation of foreign qualifications for the purpose of admission to Higher Education programmes falls under the exclusive authority of the institutions that offer such programmes. Moreover, according to Article 26, paragraph 3-bis of Legislative Decree 251/2007, the recognition of academic qualifications (such as professional certifications, diplomas, certificates and other titles) obtained in the individual's country of origin can be granted to refugees even in the absence of full documentation or with limited supporting evidence.

Anyway, the Italian higher education system is marked by considerable heterogeneity: the approaches adopted vary widely from one university to another and are influenced by contextual factors that differ across regions. These disparities have a substantial impact on academic inclusion processes, resulting in highly unfair opportunities for success depending on the university attended. Moreover, most universities have yet to implement specific procedures designed to meet the needs of refugees. Nonetheless, some institutions have distinguished themselves by developing effective practices, methods and tools, which could represent a model for the national higher education system[3] (Pastore et al., 2023).

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CENTRE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BARI

In this context, part of the RUIAP network (Italian University Network for Lifelong Learning) and operating at the local level, the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CAP) at the University of Bari has been identified as a best practice by the 2023 update of the *European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*[4]. Its core mission is to serve migrants and validate the skills they have acquired through formal, informal and non-formal learning. The choice of this focus was driven by the awareness of "the significant value of the human capital that these social actors represent and bring with them through the increasingly frequent migration flows of recent decades" (Scardigno, Manuti, Pastore, 2019, p.11), as well as by the growing complexity of their integration into the labour market of the host country.

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political - through which individuals and groups are labelled and stigmatized. 'Racialized' is therefore not a descriptive notion but an analytical one. Racialization, when combined with gender and class, produces specific forms of exclusion».

[2] "Each Party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps [...] whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programmes or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence." *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon, 1997)*

[3] One of the best practices to which we refer - the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Bari - will be presented in the following paragraph.

[4] The experience of the CAP aligns with the goals set out in the Memorandum of Understanding issued through Regional Government Resolution No. 980 of June 20, 2017, and signed on June 20, 2018. This agreement aims to develop and implement the Regional System for the Validation and Certification of Competences (SRVCC) and involves the Apulia Region (Department for the Right to Education, Schools, Universities and Vocational Training), the Universities of Bari, Foggia, Salento, and the Polytechnic University of Bari.

The CAP offers services such as legal assistance for obtaining equivalence of previous academic qualifications, soft skills recognition, evaluation of professional and personal skills gained on the job, and translating these competences into recognised professional qualifications or university credits (ECTS).

The Centre plays a key role in supporting beneficiaries throughout the entire process of academic access and integration. The process begins with the intake of individuals who request a preliminary assessment of their educational qualifications. This is followed by a personalised counselling pathway designed to identify the most suitable degree programme, considering both the individual's migratory background and professional goals. During this phase, the Centre also benefits from the support of mentorship and peer education services, which help facilitate academic inclusion and full participation in university life.

The CAP refers to CIMEA[5], the Italian centre of the ENIC-NARIC network, for the comparability of academic qualifications and the EQPR (European Qualification Passport for Refugees), a methodology that enables the "assessment of academic qualifications not supported by adequate documentation (as well as of non-formal and informal learning)" (Sarli, 2018, p. 8). Recognition of the qualification allows applicants to enrol in a degree programme, potentially shorten the length of their studies and obtain legal equivalence with the corresponding Italian qualification.

However, due to the long processing times for the issuance of the statement of comparability or the EQPR, refugee students often enrol in their chosen programme after the academic year has already begun and, in some cases, after the first semester has ended. This delay can further complicate their academic integration.

Beginning with the 2023–2024 academic year, the university, through its Lifelong Learning Centre, has adopted an independent procedure for assessing the entrance qualifications of refugee applicants seeking enrolment in degree programmes (Scardigno et al., 2024). This initiative is in line with the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention and Article 2 of Law 148 (Resolution of the Academic Senate dated 24.02.2023, item 32).

MIGRANT VOICES: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF EDUCATIONAL AND OCCUPATIONAL TRAJECTORIES

The qualitative research investigates 15 case studies with a migrant background (7 women and 8 men), who referred to the CAP of University of Bari during 2024, for one or more of the following purposes: recognition of academic qualifications; certification of skills for awarding ECTS credits in degree programmes; certification of skills to support labour market integration. The research aims to understand their specific needs and the reasons for the difficulties encountered in the academic integration process. Within this framework, the study specifically seeks to address two core research questions:

Q1: What barriers do migrants encounter in the processes of academic integration and access to the labour market?
Q2: In what ways do intersecting variables shape participants' experiences of integration?

[5] CIMEA (Information Centre on Mobility and Academic Equivalence) has promoted and established the National Coordination on the Evaluation of Refugees' Qualifications (CNVQR): an informal network of administrative experts working within higher education and training institutions who handle qualification recognition. This network aims to share evaluation practices, challenging cases, information sources and methodological approaches for assessing refugees' qualifications, even when documentation is missing or incomplete.

This study is preliminary and exploratory, serving as an initial step within a more complex research project that will also quantitatively investigate the interactions between the variables involved. The broader research project aimed at developing operational guidelines for public administrations, focused on fair, sustainable and inclusive recognition of the skills and qualifications of refugees and non-European immigrants.

The research adopts a biographical-narrative approach based on the principles of interpretative social research developed within the German tradition of qualitative sociology. The methodological framework integrates life story analysis following the theoretical perspective of Bertaux (1981) with biographical narrative interview methods developed by Fritz Schütze (1983) and later systematised by Gabriele Rosenthal (2004).

The choice of narrative life story interviews is grounded in its capacity to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of life experiences, while enabling participants to structure their narratives according to their own frameworks of meaning and relevance. This approach aligns with the interpretive and constructivist orientation of qualitative interviewing, as articulated by Kvale (1996), who conceives of interviews as intersubjective processes of meaning-making, and by Flick (2014), who emphasises the contextual sensitivity and flexibility inherent to qualitative inquiry.

Moreover, interactions with individuals from migrant backgrounds highlighted structural challenges: linguistic and cultural barriers in verbal communication and difficulties in narrating traumatic experiences related to the migration journey. Refugee accounts of forced displacement due to wars or systemic crises often reveal signs of underlying or deeply rooted trauma (Perulli, 2023)[6].

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed an integrated thematic-biographical approach that combines both inductive and deductive strategies. Transcripts were systematically coded to identify and categorise recurring themes and the relationships between them. On the one hand, a number of key areas of interest were defined in advance (Bichi, 2002); on the other, ample space was left for the emergence of new categories through grounded theory strategies.

Analysis was carried out using NVivo software to support coding, thematic grouping and the identification of recurring patterns and divergences across cases to ensure an in-depth analysis of narrative and biographical dimensions.

Specifically, the study focused on academic integration and the social and cultural inclusion of the participants, adopting an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989) and a realistic evaluation approach (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). By *intersectionalism* we refer to a theoretical framework that recognises how human experiences are shaped by the interaction of multiple identity factors, such as race, gender, class, sexuality and disability, that cannot be analysed in isolation. This integrated perspective is crucial for understanding the complex, multi-dimensional nature of discrimination and for transcending single-axis frameworks in the analysis of inequality. The aim is to explore whether and how recognition processes, when intersecting with variables such as gender and migrant background, may generate

[6] The Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Bari Aldo Moro has obtained the global "PM+" certification and will be the first university centre in Italy to deliver "Problem Management Plus," the training programme that leads to the digital certification of "Helpers". Developed by the World Health Organisation, promoted by UNHCR, and delivered by the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) network, the programme implements a protocol for managing emotional well-being and addressing everyday problems. As a certified body, the Centre will launch, through the role of the PM+ Expert, the first experimental training course for the preparation of future "Helpers" (assistants) supporting students from migrant backgrounds.

mechanisms of inferiority. This is also intended to contribute to the design of a tool that can fully align with the needs and expectations of this specific target group.

The sample includes participants from seven different nationalities: Afghanistan, Colombia, Cameroon, Libya, Yemen, Egypt and Iran. The most represented country of origin is Afghanistan. Participants range in age from 22 to 56 years old, with the majority falling between 27 and 32. Most of the interviewees enrolled in Italy in a degree programme similar to the one they had previously attended in their country of origin or in a master's programme aligned with their previously earned undergraduate degree.

***Figure 1**: Word cloud from 15 narrative interview transcripts*[7]

The word cloud was generated using NVivo 15, based on a Word Frequency Query of 15 narrative interview transcripts. The 20 most frequently occurring words were visualised, excluding common stop words. The visualisation aims to offer an illustrative overview of the key terms emerging from the participants' accounts. The word cloud in Figure X was generated from Italian-language transcripts; therefore, the words are displayed in the original language to preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives.

All participants experienced a forced "choice," having been driven to leave their countries due to life-threatening conditions: armed conflicts, dramatic political changes or persecution that made it impossible for them to remain in their homeland. In the case of Afghan women, all interviewees reported violent repression of fundamental rights as the primary reason for migration. Similarly, other women from different contexts identified gender-based discrimination and violence as key push factors behind their decision to migrate[8].
All interviewees faced long and difficult migration journeys, often involving transit through other countries, such as Pakistan, before arriving in Italy. Several participants arrived through humanitarian corridors, frequently facilitated by organisations such as the Community of Sant'Egidio; others arrived by sea or air.

[7] *Translation of key terms in the word cloud (listed in descending order of frequency): lavoro* = work; *lavorato* = worked; *Italia* = Italy; *scuola* = school; *paese* = country/home country; *corso* = course; *casa* = home; *studiare* = to study; *lingua* = language; *lavorare* = to work; *donne* = women; *studiato* = studied; *Afghanistan* = Afghanistan; *Bari* = Bari (city); *bambini* = children; *famiglia* = family; *italiano* = Italian; *difficile* = difficult; *laurea* = degree; *imparare* = to learn.

[8] S., 32 (Afghanistan): "*When you don't have freedom, you know what it means. Because I know what it means, I've never had freedom in Afghanistan*."
H., 30 (Afghanistan) "*In my country, women don't have a choice. They can't go to school, they can't go to university."*

The interviews also reveal the specific challenges faced by participants in their integration process within the host country. All interviewees identified language and communication difficulties, along with the struggle to find employment aligned with their academic backgrounds and prior professional experience, as the main barriers to integration.

Analysis of the collected narratives shows that all participants encountered significant obstacles in accessing the Italian labour market. These difficulties appear to be primarily linked to two factors: limited proficiency in the Italian language and the lack of effective institutional procedures for the recognition of academic qualifications and professional skills acquired in their countries of origin.

It is worth noting that the sample displays a high educational profile: most participants hold first- or second-level university degrees and possess substantial professional experience in their respective fields. Despite this human capital, the findings document a clear trend of professional downgrading: with only two exceptions, participants reported experiences of unemployment or, more frequently, employment in positions significantly below their level of qualification[9].

Refugee women face additional challenges in accessing both work and education. This phenomenon fits within the broader framework of "double discrimination" that characterises the experience of migrant women in Italy, where the disadvantage of being a woman intersects with that of being a foreigner. Many are engaged in childcare and domestic responsibilities, which limit their time and opportunities for further education or employment. Female participants consistently reported experiences of gender discrimination, especially in their countries of origin.

The Italian context is unanimously perceived by the female interviewees as an emancipatory environment. However, although the interviewees did not report explicit instances of gender-based discrimination in Italy, subtle references to difficulties that may have gendered dimensions or disproportionately affect women can be identified. Notably, there is a significant discrepancy between their perceived sense of newfound freedom and their actual position within the labour market. In fact, the investigation revealed a marked occupational segregation based on gender. In Italy, women are systematically channelled into domestic and caregiving roles (such as home care assistants, cleaners, domestic workers and waitresses), which neither reflect nor fully valorise their educational backgrounds and previously acquired professional skills[10]. While men are more frequently employed in sectors involving manual and physical labour (including agricultural work, construction, factory work, delivery services and positions in bakeries and pizzerias). This pattern reflects the persistence and reproduction of gender-based occupational structures even within the Italian labour market.

The formal recognition of foreign educational credentials is a recurring challenge, requiring the activation of complex procedures such as obtaining a comparability certificate through CIMEA or acquiring the EQPR. In many cases, this process involves a significant devaluation of prior educational capital, often requiring partial or full repetition of study cycles.
Despite the generally positive perception of the Italian university system, characterised by a liberal environment and support structures, limited language proficiency constitutes a

[9] Disparities in labour market participation persist between Italian nationals and foreign-born individuals. Non-European migrants remain at a significant disadvantage compared to both Italian citizens and migrants from other European countries. From a sectoral perspective, the highest concentration of foreign workers is found in personal and collective services, followed by agriculture, hospitality and tourism, and construction (Cesareo, 2024). This trend clearly reflects a labour market dynamic in which immigrants are predominantly employed in low-skilled positions, a pattern that becomes even more pronounced in the case of women.

[10] R., 28 (Iran): "*I'm ashamed of this job, I don't like it. It feels a bit heavy like this.*" S., 32 (Afghanistan): "*No, no, I'm fine here, I feel free. But when I work as a caregiver, as a cleaning lady, I feel a bit ashamed.*"

significant barrier to full participation in academic activities and interaction within the university community. In this context, the potential value of support figures such as dedicated tutors or mentors becomes evident.

Particularly challenging are situations in which forced displacement from the country of origin has prevented individuals from retrieving documentation certifying their academic qualifications. An example is the case of H., a woman in her thirties from Afghanistan, who has been unable to access her university degree certificates due to her gender identity[11].

The interview analysis reveals a strong desire among participants to continue or resume higher education paths previously pursued. Except for the youngest participants, many had to begin new study programmes, even though they already held academic qualifications, in order to re-enter the Italian labour market. Most interviewees enrolled in Italy in degree courses similar to those they had attended in their countries of origin or in master's programmes aligned with their previously earned bachelor's degrees.

The analysis highlights heterogeneity in the outcomes of credential recognition processes. While validation of secondary school diplomas is relatively accessible (with two exceptions requiring repetition of the last two years[12]), the situation regarding university qualifications is more complex. In six out of fifteen cases, the first-level degree was fully recognised, allowing direct access to master's degree courses. However, partial recognitions are more common, involving the conversion of previous studies into academic credits applicable to new degree programmes. None of the participants succeeded in obtaining recognition of their professional roles or experience.

A representative case is that of S., a 32-year-old Afghan woman, who acquired two university degrees in Nursing and Obstetrics in her home country and several years of professional experience in the field. Nevertheless, she was required to enrol in the third year of an Italian bachelor's degree. This may point to the existence of a "double standard" in the recognition process, indicating differential treatment based on migrants' geographic or cultural origin. For instance, the Article 34 of Law Decree 21/2022 allows Ukrainian citizens to practice healthcare professions in Italy, while no such provision exists for migrants from other countries.

A noteworthy outcome of the interview analysis is the capacity of some participants to evolve from being beneficiaries of support to becoming proactive agents of social change. The study highlights a high level of motivation, a strong sense of personal empowerment and strong resilience in redefining both personal and professional paths. In many cases, personal empowerment is expressed through commitment and support for others facing similar vulnerabilities, demonstrating forms of solidarity that could be described as transformative. Two participants played a key role in create associations and support networks aimed at improving access to university services, Italian language courses and job opportunities for other refugees, responding to existing gaps in institutional services. Other interviewees collaborated with international humanitarian organisations, sharing their experiences and professional skills and becoming actively involved in support systems.

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[11] H., 30 (Afghanistan): "*I always fully covered, only my hands were visible, and they didn't let me into the university. They told me I couldn't go in. I asked why, why not? I had studied there for six years, I was a student there. Why couldn't I enter? They said I wasn't a woman, because a real woman must cover her hands. 'You cannot enter.' I left crying, I went home because I couldn't get my documents, everything I had studied. And then… we simply fled".*

[12] K., 21 (Afghanistan): "*When the Taliban regime changed, I lost my diploma and moved here to Italy. We asked how I could enrol in university, but they told us that it was absolutely necessary to present my diploma. Because of this, I attended two years of high school and took the final exam, even though it was difficult because I didn't know Italian".*

Particularly significant is the case of several Afghan women, who stand out for their voluntary engagement in defending women's and children's rights in Afghanistan.

The analysis of the fifteen narrative interviews reveals a complex landscape of challenges, discrimination and resilience processes that call for critical examination through an intersectional lens. The findings offer valuable insights into the mechanisms of inferiority and the "double standards" that shape recognition processes within the Italian context.

The findings highlight how gender and migratory background operate as factors of discrimination, limiting self-determination in favour of the reproduction of stereotypical roles and power dynamics. One of the key factors contributing to this distortion is the persistent influence of gender stereotypes. Evaluators often approach gender as a binary and dichotomous category, reproducing gendered assumptions perceived as harmless, natural and neutral. This is a crucial issue, as assessment is not a neutral activity aimed solely at collecting data about candidates; rather, it represents a significant moment in which migrants' expectations and past experiences may be reshaped. This "redefinition" is shaped by a gendered understanding of society, education and the labour market, where men and women are assigned roles and responsibilities based on their sex. These gendered perceptions have cascading effects, influencing migrants' future learning pathways and employment trajectories (Bencivenga, 2019).

FINAL REMARKS

The aim of this research was to examine whether the processes of recognising prior qualifications and competencies truly ensure equity, in accordance with the principles of lifelong learning and educational continuity. The findings reveal the ambivalent nature of these processes: on one hand, recognition pathways can serve as effective tools to challenge "predetermined trajectories" (Bourdieu, Passeron, 1970) and offer migrants the opportunity to take on an active role within a transnational context. On the other hand, however, several difficulties and specific barriers emerge that these individuals must face, raising the risk that such procedures may be reduced to rigid administrative procedures, fragmented and, in some cases, potentially discriminatory.

The recognition of prior learning represents a realistic outcome of integration, a concrete and measurable indicator of migrants' ability to actively engage within the educational and labour systems. However, adopting an intersectional perspective leads us to observe that recognition is neither a neutral nor uniform process; rather, it is deeply influenced by multiple intersecting variables such as migration background, gender, legal status and previous level of education. When all these variables intersect negatively, the result is a downward mobility effect that tends to reproduce itself: migrants risk remaining trapped in conditions of marginalisation or experiencing a deterioration of their opportunities, even when they possess genuine skills.

Understanding the complex dynamics of intersectional identities is key to designing recognition systems for prior learning that do not impose rigid norms of "normality." Aligning the opportunity structures of host societies with individuals' needs, resources and preferences offers a strategic pathway to promote equity and inclusive participation in higher education. Therefore, the key question becomes: what can trigger a reversal of this trend? What is the turning point that can break the cycle of marginalisation and promote upward mobility? Reversing this negative dynamic requires interventions that go beyond bureaucratic procedures: inclusive policies, personalised support and a cultural shift within institutions capable of valuing skills and experiences in an integrated manner. Only in this way can recognition become a tool for empowerment and foster meaningful upward mobility, able to break the marginalising cycles generated by the negative intersection of social variables.

All the collected stories highlight the difficulty of redefining one's identity in the context of migration, as well as the need to find a sense of belonging within the new host environment. In this context, education and work are more than basic sources of income but become essential for asserting one's identity and gaining social recognition within the receiving community, thus supporting integration and personal growth (Scardigno, Manuti, Pastore, 2019, p. 62).

Through the activities of the CAP, participants were able to engage in a process of redefinition that aligns with their expectations and aspirations, valorising their educational resources not only in formal settings but also those acquired through non-formal and informal contexts. This approach fosters an active, rather than passive, process of social integration, encouraging agency and self-determination among individuals with a migrant background.

In conclusion, the primary research question remains central in guiding the future development of the project: how can we ensure recognition pathways for qualifications that are well structures, sustainable, fair and inclusive for students with a migrant background? And what challenges, obstacles and forms of discrimination limit their effective implementation?

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LATER-LIFE LEARNING AT UNIVERSITIES THREE QUESTIONS TO JANICK NAVETEUR

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Interview

The global issue of population ageing is most prevalent in Europe, where approximately 20% of the population is over 65 and where life expectancy has hit 81.7 years (Eurostat, 2024a, 2024b). The fact that more people are living to an advanced age is a success particularly attributable to better living conditions and developed healthcare systems. However, what some see as a positive development also gives rise to negative and pessimistic discourse among others. In addition to widespread individual anxiety about losing personal autonomy in later life, an ageing society is often considered to be the source of many economic problems, particularly those related to increased health and pension expenditures within the context of a reduced working-age population.

While this ageing society view focuses on changes in population structure, the less pessimistic perspective on a longevity society explores changes that occur during the lifespan and the exploitation of life-expectancy gain (Scott, 2021). Other interesting views consider that the economic challenge could be managed by decreasing the severity of diseases and disabilities linked to ageing (Manton, 1982) or by delaying their onset (Fries, 1980). A key point to emphasise in line with these approaches is the malleability of ageing, including through education.

In 18 EU27 countries, more than 25% of people aged 55 to 64 have completed tertiary education (Eurostat, 2024c), with an increase in this figure anticipated in the coming years. Given this trend, a few considerations deserve attention. Research findings show that "the more education people have, the more education they want, and the more they participate in further learning activities" (Cross, 1981: 15). Such a pattern of educational engagement is crucial, since later-life learning contributes to the compression of morbidity (i.e., the postponement of illness and disability into a shorter period at the end of life) by promoting mental and physical wellbeing and preventing cognitive decline (Narushima et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2025). Policymakers have taken into account the scientific evidence for this, shaping recommendations that are guided by these findings. Indeed, the United Nations Principle 4 for Older Persons (1991: 2) stipulates that they "should have access to appropriate educational and training programmes." The interpretation of "appropriate" is rendered multi-faceted by the heterogeneity of this population. Nevertheless, opportunities for post-secondary education for older learners are in line with this strategic direction and the large proportion of people now potentially receptive to such offers mitigates the concern of a "Matthew effect."

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Janick Naveteur is Emeritus Senior Lecturer at the University of Lille, where she co-directed a professional training programme for middle managers in gerontological coordination. With a biopsychosocial approach to ageing, she explored the challenges of education for older adults at the university level and led the Erasmus+ project "Active Ageing Academic Certificate (3AC): Towards a European university course dedicated to older learners." She is a member of the research unit Psychologie: Interactions, Temps, Emotions, Cognition.

Kathleen O'Connor is Senior Lecturer in English linguistics at the University of Lille and Vice-President for Europe and International Relations. In this context, she has overseen the development of a number of Erasmus+ projects, including 3AC. She also coordinates the university's participation in the NeurotechEU European University Alliance. She is a member of the research unit Savoirs, Textes, Langage.

Kathleen O'Connor: With reference to their threefold mission, how might universities mobilise their resources to serve older adults seeking educational opportunities and, building on this, what institutional forms can the admission of older learners to university take?

Janick Naveteur: In the context of later-life learning, the three missions of the universities are particularly intertwined. Driven by demographic shifts and policy interest, academic research on later-life learning is gaining momentum, across Europe and beyond. This dynamic field is inherently multidisciplinary — and often interdisciplinary — drawing on insights from education sciences, gerontology, neuroscience, psychology, sociology, public health, and even digital technology. This convergence not only enriches our theoretical understanding but also fosters the research-practice relationship.

As regards higher education for older learners (for a review, see Formosa, 2023), exploring disparities between countries would not go beyond the scope of this interview. To put it simply, three main options can be distinguished. The first one is the enrolment in standard university programmes as regular students or auditors; the name of guest student could be reserved for auditing on a space-available basis.

The second option is the Universities of the Third Age (UTAs; often called by another name to indicate openness to other audiences), of which the first was founded in France by Pierre Vellas in 1972. This academic model that offers non-formal non-vocational educational opportunities has undergone significant global development since then. While some UTAs are still fully integrated into higher-education institutions, as was the case at the beginning, others are autonomous, such as those based on the British model of peer-to-peer learning. Others have distanced themselves from their initial academic foundation, which is paradoxically the case in France, where the link with a traditional university often now boils down to a cooperation agreement. All these models aim to maintain high academic standards. However, in the absence or loss of the status of university programme, the educational offering tends to favour one-off lectures rather than structured courses. This can be explained by limited availability of human and logistical resources, but also by the objective of retaining members, which requires variety and continuous renewal of content.

The third option is in line with the so-called University Programs for Older People (UPOP; Villar et al., 2011), i.e., structured programs developed by conventional universities specifically for older learners. Teachers often deliver lessons in a similar way to their traditional service, but these are generally slightly simplified and adapted. The number of hours varies widely and accreditation can sometimes be issued. This format enhances the sustainability of the offering, allowing for optimisation of both content and form. Compared to the UTAs, the learners may feel more like they are truly studying at the university. By varying the time commitments necessary, the UPOP format can provide a scalable entry point for some universities to incorporate later-life learning within their lifelong learning strategies.

With respect to an older audience, the specific goals of such opportunities are ultimately to improve the lives of people and foster a human capital that is too often neglected. Such university initiatives around demographic ageing align with their Third Mission of serving society beyond academic boundaries. In this vein, the European Union has made it a priority to support the engagement of universities with their local communities and regions. As regards later-life learning, universities are a part of an ecosystem, and many demands of older citizens can be taken in charge by stakeholders, particularly lower-level learning or recreational learning. It should finally be emphasised that the development of university later-life learning is not a purely altruistic strategy. The strengthening of local contacts that it enables can bring indirect benefits, such as easier access to research fields or internship opportunities for young students. It can also stimulate participatory research, possibly with the older learners to whom the university has opened its doors for a teaching programme.

Kathleen O'Connor: Despite these opportunities, the proportion of older learners at university remains low. How do you explain this and what can be done to remedy it?

Janick Naveteur: You're right. Based in particular on Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, age discrimination in education is prohibited. However, just because many older people are thirsty for knowledge doesn't mean they'll find their place at university. Moreover, evidence for the societal benefits generated by later-life learning is obviously not a sufficient argument for universities to genuinely engage with these learners. To top it all off, this situation has already been criticised in publications dating back to the 1970s and 1980s, and yet obstacles still remain today, at both the societal and individual levels.

An economic rationale emerges from the misalignment between societal returns and institutional incentives. The broader social value is rarely reflected in the financial frameworks that govern university funding, and many have had to absorb a surge in the number of younger students. In this context, older learners are not a priority for institutions, and their increasing interest in higher education could even be seen more as an obstacle than a catalyst.

A certain illogic can also be pointed out in public policy. Although it advocates later-life learning, in practice it has virtually excluded it from lifelong learning. The extension of the education system to all stages of life became popular in the 1970s, largely due to the influence of Paul Lengrand and UNESCO. Faced with the obsolescence of the linear education model (initial training followed by professional life), universities were encouraged to open up to continuing education. Then, from the 1990s and 2000s up to the current vision of university alliances promoted by the European Parliament, lifelong learning has become fully integrated into their missions. However, again in line with the hierarchy of priorities, the main targets were inexorably linked to professional life (preparation, optimisation, reorientation). The economic benefit of training retirees has thus been relegated to the background, so that, at best, only the humanistic objectives of later-life learning have been considered. Furthermore, the shift from the concept of lifelong education to that of lifelong learning may have been counterproductive for senior citizens (Borg & Mayo, 2005). Arguing that older people's needs for acquiring knowledge and skills can be met in ways other than formal education, this view easily transfers responsibility for later-life learning from the state to the individuals, or to community-led or volunteer sector alternatives.

More prosaically, in line with the idea that retirement is a time for disengagement and rest, learning at this age is seen as nothing more than a leisure activity. It can thus be entrusted to people other than higher education teachers, whose missions are not to entertain an audience. Added to this is the idea that age-related cognitive decline prevents seniors from learning anything substantial. Of course, I am making a caricature. But who can honestly say they have never had even the slightest hint of such ageist thoughts? I can remember myself as a young teacher, going to give a presentation at the UTA, with an almost amused sense that I was just doing a good deed. The ageist stereotypes when they are directed inwards by older people often prevent them from functioning optimally (Levy, 2009), and some may then unfairly

consider that they do not have sufficient skills to pursue university education or simply that they no longer belong there.

We must therefore combat both exclusion and self-exclusion, a fight which cannot be left solely to the university and cannot be won with the wave of a magic wand. Nevertheless, it is likely that increasing demographic ageing and the empowerment of older citizens will ultimately bring about change, especially with unwavering support from international structures, such as the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, or the Age-Friendly University Global Network. Also, it is important to bear in mind that older learners can be rewarding for the teachers, but also very demanding. '*This is an audience you can't mess up with!*' said a colleague. It is therefore desirable to foster a mindset that optimises teachers' adaptation to later-life learning. In practical terms, it is possible to reinforce low-level actions with a favourable cost/benefit ratio. For example, it is essential to make it standard practice for universities to have a service capable of listening to and advising older students. Publicising these students' experiences in the media and encouraging exchanges between them, especially through dedicated meetings, can also have a significant impact. Unfortunately, the inclusion of such instruction in teachers' required teaching duties is also not always possible, which limits the commitment of some, when it is not simply a matter of volunteering, as is often the case for UTAs. Furthermore, although the literature provides several examples of university initiatives for older learners with undeniable benefits, project-based approaches may fail to continue once the project is completed due to a lack of subsequent funding. Local partners involved in these projects may become frustrated by this, which could ultimately undermine the Third Mission of the university. So, this answer ends as it began, with a question of money, but perhaps we are no longer talking about a political choice but rather an imperative...

Katheen O'Connor: According to your perspective, in which thematic area of later-life learning should universities invest as a matter of priority?

Janick Naveteur: As regards topics included in traditional university courses, older learners are often motivated by a desire to pursue personal interests — mostly in the humanities and for pleasure. In addition, they may seek knowledge and skills for practical purposes, such as legal information, finance, digital literacy, or even foreign languages. Depending on individual motivations, some topics may serve both purposes. Aside from occasional updates, teaching methods generally require little adaptation for this educated audience, especially when willing to make a significant learning investment. Andragogy, the science of adult learning, provides the overarching framework. However, in the case of instrumental learning in particular, the diversity of needs makes it difficult to offer general strategic orientation guidelines, except for the welcome qualities discussed above. Moreover, we also did not address the important challenges related to the extension of working lives. Higher education institutions must mobilise to be able to strengthen the competencies of people nearing retirement age, in ways that fully recognise their accumulated expertise.

Another set of courses looks at ageing itself, using a biopsychosocial approach to study it. It was first addressed in Wilma Donhue's pioneering initiative to welcome older learners to the University in 1948. It was also central to Pierre Vellas' thinking when he created the UTAs. The roots are therefore long-standing and have since inspired similar initiatives, but some were one-off actions despite positive impacts. In my opinion, this is the path universities must invest in as a priority. Thus, while preparing the future of younger students is one of their primary functions, they can also seek to optimise the future of older learners in this way, given that a greater knowledge of ageing improves life satisfaction and reduces ageing anxiety (Neikrug, 1998; Nuevo et al., 2009). As a corollary, benefits in economic terms are expected, especially via social engagement, which is protective against older adults' functional and cognitive decline (O'Neill et al., 2011). Goals of self-actualisation and empowerment of older learners can be reached in a framework of positive and preventive gerontology.

To meet learners' expectations, such courses must be firmly grounded in disciplinary and interdisciplinary ageing research, which is why universities are key actors. They must avoid anything that sounds like behavioural injunctions or the promotion of an idealised view of successful ageing. While there is no question of placing pathological ageing at the centre of the courses, it is difficult to never mention it, which requires a great deal of tact.

A specific gerontagogic challenge is also how to best combine scientific knowledge with learners' experiences of ageing. Effectiveness requires fine-grained strategies, including at the level of course content, which is rarely implemented in the publications to date. Thus, a phase of participatory action research is still required, as older learners are well positioned to identify good practices and provide guidance.

Securing adequate funding for such initiatives is imperative. However, since many factors can influence outcomes, including sociocultural factors, a proactive orchestration by an international organisational structure is essential. Transitioning from a coordinating function to a resource hub, this organisation could then provide valuable access to databases, assessment tools, and competency frameworks.

To return to your first question, the delivery context of these courses could vary. It could also encompass face-to-face, hybrid and online modalities, but opportunities for interaction between learners must be preserved, as the benefits of self-disclosure add to those associated with social bonding. The Erasmus+ 3AC project led by the University of Lille[1] is a good example that has highlighted all of this. In any case, it is imperative to emphasise the significance of maintaining a university label, thereby ensuring adherence to scientific advancements and the assurance of evolving in alignment with these developments.

Kathleen O'Connor: Thank you very much.

[1] https://www.3ac-universitycourse.eu/

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