

EDITORIAL UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE AGE OF AI

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Universities, Digital Transformation and Lifelong Learning

Universities are well aware of the ever-changing learning landscape to recognise the changes in the learning landscape; in fact, the sector is saturated with strategy documents, position papers and pilot projects that articulate the correct principles of lifelong learning, digital transformation and artificial intelligence (AI). Despite their ongoing awareness, however, universities are still struggling to modify the institutional structures that would help realise these good intentions for adult learners. Digital transformation and AI are certainly significant to this narrative, and act, as we argue, more as a magnifying glass that reveals and exacerbates the pre-existing institutional

From Peripheral Activity to Institutional Mission: The Most Urgent Shift

The most significant shift universities must make is to treat lifelong learning as a core institutional mission rather than a sole extension as continuing professional education. Although universities offer lifelong learning, they rarely integrate it into their institutional design. This gap is evident in a recent contribution to University World News, which describes lifelong learning as occupying the margins of political ambition despite European policy discourse increasingly placing it at the centre. Our experience across several European systems confirms this disconnect between rhetoric and structural reality.

This is not merely a matter of resourcing. The deeper problem is conceptual: lifelong learning is often reduced to a response to labour market volatility. As Bélanger (2016) reminds us, learning across the life course is not only lifelong but also life-wide and life-deep. It concerns the entire life course, multiple spheres of life and the meanings through which individuals make sense of change. Reframing lifelong learning in these terms has direct institutional consequences. It requires universities to redesign their relationship with learners

across time, creating more flexible and recurrent forms of engagement that allow individuals to enter, leave and re-enter higher education at different life stages. This can be achieved through modular provision, recognition of prior learning, flexible admission pathways and enhanced guidance services.

This argument also has a widening-participation dimension that contributors converge on from different perspectives. One frames it in terms of the parallel crises confronting European societies such as ecological breakdown, war and democratic backsliding, and argues that universities cannot claim social relevance while remaining structurally closed to those who are distant from higher education by nationality, gender, family background or prior educational trajectory. Another frames the same concern through the lens of intersectional equity, arguing that flexible entry pathways, recognition of prior learning and learner-centred support are not merely administrative conveniences but instruments of educational justice for individuals whose trajectories have been interrupted by disability, migration, caring responsibilities or gender inequality. In this reading, lifelong learning is not principally a mechanism for up-skilling, but a mechanism for expanding who is able to belong to the university.

This is precisely why the most urgent priority, in our shared view, is to resist the narrowing of lifelong learning to short-term employability and skills adaptation. Upskilling and reskilling are important and should not be dismissed. However, Biesta's (2006) long-standing warning remains highly relevant: lifelong learning has increasingly been framed as human capital formation and economic investment at the expense of the personal and democratic purposes that originally motivated the concept. A university lifelong learning agenda that speaks only the language of competitiveness and human capital will, over time, undermine precisely what makes universities distinctive: their capacity to cultivate critical thought, ethical judgement and democratic participation. Holding these dimensions together rather than choosing between them is the most urgent and challenging task ahead.

Digital Transformation and AI: Reshaping, not Replacing, the Relationship with Adult Learners

Only once this institutional and societal argument is established does it make sense to discuss digital tools. We believe that digital transformation and generative AI in particular are reshaping the relationship between universities and adult learners in ways that extend beyond convenience or efficiency. Learning has become ubiquitous and multifaceted through digitalisation; information is readily accessible via a smartphone and often difficult to verify. Generative AI has already been integrated into universities through texts and papers co-written with AI, literature reviews shaped by AI suggestions, and research questions developed in dialogue with AI systems. This is not some hypothetical future scenario – it is already the current operating environment of both students and staff.

For lifelong learners, this reality is particularly pertinent. Adults enrolled in university lifelong learning programmes typically work in environments where artificial intelligence is already embedded in everyday professional practice. The university's codified knowledge is now already available to these learners; its distinctive value, therefore, cannot be primarily disseminating knowledge, but instead needs to shift towards coaching learners in how to apply, judge and value knowledge critically. This has direct implications for assessment: universities have tended to respond to generative AI by tightening testing routines, breaking exams into smaller components and attempting to exclude AI as though the objective were to preserve a particular mode of testing rather than to determine what learning actually is and how it might be evidenced differently in an AI-saturated environment.

We believe there are two risks that higher education institutions are systematically underestimating. The first is the temptation to treat digital transformation primarily as a question of technology adoption rather than educational redesign. Recent postdigital scholarship has warned that much of the current discourse frames AI as a straightforward solution for enhancing personalisation and scale while paying insufficient attention to the pedagogical assumptions, social contexts, and commercial interests embedded in these technologies (Palenski et al., 2024). Universities need to become AI-literate not only as users of tools but as institutions capable of interrogating the assumptions built into them and rethinking how they educate and assess learning.

The second underestimated risk concerns the erosion of the human dimensions of learning. If universities rely on AI primarily to optimise content delivery or automate administrative and educational processes, they risk weakening precisely the forms of dialogue, critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational support that adult learners value most and that most clearly distinguish university learning from the transactional consumption of information. The question, in other words, is not whether universities will adopt digital transformation - they inevitably will - but whether they can do so in ways that reinforce human agency and preserve learning as a fundamentally social and critical process rather than producing more technologically sophisticated universities that are paradoxically less human-centred than before.

Taken together, these considerations suggest a shift that is both urgent and easily stated, but difficult to implement: digital transformation and artificial intelligence should not be treated as a separate technological agenda imposed upon lifelong learning provision but as forces that require universities to fundamentally rethink the nature of learning, its support and its recognition. Adult and professionally embedded learners present a particularly instructive test case for the entire institution.

Obstacles are Cultural before they are Technical: Governance for a Post-Traditional University

If digital transformation is not the central problem, then what is? We believe the issue is organisational and cultural rather than technological. Universities are governed by senior staff whose formative professional experience often dates to the 1980s and 1990s, operating under procedures and rules that in some cases originated decades earlier. More fundamentally, universities retain a near-monopoly on the awarding of degrees. This monopoly, alongside deeply conservative institutional routines, makes lifelong learning a service universities offer rather than a structural priority.

The clearest articulation of this structural mismatch concerns the figure of the 'traditional student' around whom most university structures such as governance, resource allocation, quality assurance and academic incentive systems remain organised. This model is characterised by an entry into higher education immediately after secondary school, full-time study, a linear pathway and graduation. Adult lifelong learners depart from this model at every point. They enter at different life stages, combine study with employment and caring responsibilities, and bring highly diverse prior experiences and aspirations. Responding to this reality requires more than simply expanding the educational offerings available to such learners; it demands a reorganisation of how universities function. This involves integrating recognition of prior learning, modular pathways and stronger collaboration across academic departments, professional services, and external partners into the basic institutional architecture rather than leaving them as isolated pilot projects dependent on individual commitment.

We believe there are two governance directions. The first concerns external accountability and incentives. Making lifelong learning and widening participation a mandatory component of university rankings and target and performance agreements between universities and ministries would provide institutions with a structural incentive to treat lifelong learning as seriously as they do research excellence. This would extend the logic to individual incentives by rewarding staff, both academic and administrative, for engagement with lifelong learning. This would correct a system in which lifelong learning work is often invisible in career progression.

The second direction concerns the competencies of those who govern. Just as many of the world's leading companies have already made AI literacy a part of senior performance reviews, universities should make AI literacy a mandatory competency for staff working in university governance, particularly for senior and top management. This is because governance decisions about assessment, curriculum and quality assurance in an AI-saturated environment cannot be entirely delegated to technical staff. Equally, cultural change of this kind requires leadership that actively engages with societal partners, public and private organisations, employers, and civil society to develop a shared understanding of how knowledge circulates and is used outside the university. This understanding should be incorporated into recognition and reward structures rather than treating external engagement as a marginal activity. Digital transformation, artificial intelligence and learning analytics can undoubtedly support more flexible and accessible learning opportunities, but only if they are embedded within governance models that prioritise educational purpose over technological adoption. This returns us to the initial argument: universities themselves need to become lifelong learning organisations capable of continuously learning and adapting in response to the evolving needs of learners and the societies they serve.

Redefining Success: From Counting Credentials to Cultivating Agency

Our reflections transform how universities should define 'success' in lifelong learning. We explicitly reject a definition of success primarily framed in labour market terms such as improving one's position in the job market or contributing to a competitive economy. This is not because these outcomes are not important, but because they capture only a fraction of what lifelong learning intends to achieve. Therefore, treating them as the primary metric risks reducing universities to training providers among many with no distinctive claim on adult learners' trust.

The proposed alternative is a shift towards learner agency, understood in overlapping, but distinct registers. This involves empowering learners to exercise active citizenship and contributing to their professional and personal agency, helping them become reflective practitioners with a broadened professional repertoire. Another perspective frames success as the university's capacity to support long-term learner agency across increasingly complex and uncertain lives. This involves helping individuals develop the knowledge, critical judgement, confidence, and learning capabilities necessary to navigate multiple personal, professional and civic transitions over time. This is evaluated not only in terms of economic returns but also in relation to social inclusion, democratic participation, personal fulfilment and wellbeing (Palenski et al., 2024).

This reframing has direct implications for the indicators universities should track. We propose the following non-exhaustive set of indicators, organised across four dimensions in conjunction with existing European and international frameworks (European Commission, 2019).

The first dimension concerns access and flexibility: multiple entry and exit points across the life course, modular provision and diverse study modes, AI-supported enrolment and accreditation processes, and the institutional recognition of prior learning rather than case-by-case negotiation. The second involves digital and AI literacy: digital and AI literacy offered as foundational modules for all learners, evidence that learners develop the confidence to use AI critically rather than rely on it and AI literacy established as a mandatory competency for governance and senior staff, not only for teaching staff. The third concerns institutional mainstreaming: lifelong learning integrated into target and performance agreements between universities and ministries, university lifelong learning and widening participation included as criteria in university rankings, and rewards for staff both academic and administrative for engagement with lifelong learning. The fourth addresses learner agency and societal outcomes: evidence of learners' active citizenship, reflective practice and broadened professional repertoire, social inclusion and reduced barriers for underrepresented groups, democratic participation, personal fulfilment and well-being, and a sense of belonging and meaningful interaction within digital environments.

These four dimensions are deliberately heterogeneous, combining structural features such as entry and exit points, and modular provision with process measures like the impact of digital environments on barriers and a sense of belonging, and outcome measures including democratic participation, well-being, and sustained engagement over time. This heterogeneity is intentional: a single number, however sophisticated, cannot capture the comprehensive nature of a university's service to learners across their entire life course. Ultimately, and this is perhaps the most compelling formulation to emerge from our contributions, the true success of digital transformation in university lifelong learning should not be judged by the sophistication of the technologies adopted but by the extent to which they expand learners' opportunities, capabilities and freedom to continue learning throughout their lives. Furthermore, universities themselves should demonstrate the capacity to learn, adapt and change in response.

Five Commitments for University Lifelong Learning

We conclude with five commitments that we believe should guide universities, funders and researchers working on lifelong learning over the next decade.

- First, institutionalise lifelong learning as a core mission embedded in strategy funding models and academic recognition rather than a project-based activity dependent on individual commitment.
- Second, treat digital transformation and generative AI as an opportunity for pedagogical redesign, not merely as a technology adoption; protect and reinforce the human relational and critical dimensions of learning that adult learners value most.
- Third, reform governance to align incentives with lifelong learning by integrating it into quality assurance, resource allocation, and rankings, and make AI literacy a mandatory competency for university leadership and governance staff.
- Fourth, redefine success around learner agency, capability and civic and personal flourishing using broader indicators than participation, completion and short-term employment outcomes alone.
- Fifth, build durable partnerships with employers, public institutions and civil society, recognising that lifelong learning ecosystems cannot be created by universities acting alone.

None of these commitments is novel in isolation; readers of this journal will recognise elements of each in the wider literature on lifelong learning and digital transformation in higher education. What this editorial aims to do is to contribute to the argument that they

must be pursued together as a single institutional project rather than as parallel initiatives that can proceed independently. Universities that treat AI adoption as separable from governance reform, or governance reform as separable from a genuine redefinition of success, are likely to accumulate pilot projects without ever becoming, in any structural sense, lifelong learning institutions. The learners deserve more than that.

Perspectives on University Lifelong Learning, Agency and AI

The four papers of this small but rich edition highlight several of our raised issues and try to address them in a comprehensive and future-oriented way. While the lenses and the perspectives vary, they all share a commitment to different forms, levels and dimensions of agency.

In their conceptual paper, *Sarah Frodsham* and *Julie Bourguignon* explore how GenAI shapes learner agency in higher education, drawing on Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach, they compare human and GenAI interpretations of Halfway Down through different perspectives. The study highlights the continuing importance of human interaction and collaborative reflection in sustaining learner agency.

In his innovative practice article, *Martin Mayr* shifts our focus to AI as augmentation rather than replacement of human educators. He presents an AI Tutor designed to support adult learners in specialised university training, outlining key design principles, implementation steps, and early practitioner observations through an iterative, design-based approach. The paper argues that the educational value of AI tutors in ULLL depends less on technical sophistication than on careful pedagogical curation, transparent design boundaries, and alignment with lifelong learning principles.

Jean Françoise Bodart, *Sandrine Bonnet* and *Giuseppina Lumia* widen our perspective to an institutional approach of dealing with AI. With the University of Lille's Charter of Good Pedagogical Practices for AI, they show how a higher education institution can respond to the disruptive effects of generative AI by embracing its lifelong learning mission. Framing AI as both a challenge and an opportunity for lifelong learning, they position their university as a hub for reskilling and critical digital literacy for diverse publics.

Iiris Kangasniemi and *Sanna Soppela* examine escape game pedagogy as an innovative practice for promoting inclusive learning in lifelong learning based on the pedagogical implementation developed at the University of Eastern Finland. They argue that from an inclusive learning perspective, educational escape games foster diverse modes of participation and knowledge construction and offer a flexible framework for designing collaborative and inclusive learning environments in lifelong learning contexts.

Finally, our Three Questions are posed by *Ester Cois* and answered by *Heather Haseley*, the inaugural Chief Lifelong Learning Officer at Imperial College London. Under the perspective of Building the Future of Learning in the Age of AI, Heather talks about personalisation and human relationships, about the responsible use of AI and conscious educational decisions, and about the issue of scaling, contextualisation and meaningful learning.

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