

Equipping Higher Education Institutions for the Future – The Role of University Lifelong Learning¹

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Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are strongly impacted nowadays in their research, teaching and their organisational procedures by current developments such as digitalisation (unexpectedly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic). Social phenomena such as the economic crisis (including high levels of unemployment) have forced HEIs to consider the integration of new modes of teaching and learning and the upskilling and reskilling of citizens into HE to prepare them for current and future labour market challenges. With that, the validation and certification of learning supported through micro-credentials or the recognition of competences is very much needed today. And finally, the climate change and the need for a green transition supported by green skills is another important influence to address.

HEIs are learning spaces of excellence. Their focus on analytical thinking and research, as well as their potential for innovation are crucial to tackle the current challenges and provide more just and sustainable paths for the future. University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) plays a key role in making use of this potential – both for researchers and practitioners in HEIs. With its aim of continued professional education, ULLL provides opportunities to reduce skills gaps and also supports the personal development of learners. ULLL creates an adaptable environment that allows flexibility within the usually rigid environment of HEIs, thereby opening spaces for critical thinking, inclusion and social responsibility.

eucen is the largest multidisciplinary association for university lifelong learning across Europe. It aims to contribute to the social, economic and cultural life in Europe through the promotion and advancement of lifelong learning (LLL) within HEIs. **eucen** also aims to foster universities' influence in the development of LLL knowledge and policies throughout Europe, by promoting a democratic model that takes into account societal needs and using ULLL as crucial element to equip HEIs for the future.

ULLL is being implemented across Europe at different levels. Whereas countries such as the Netherlands, France or Germany already make use of ULLL's great potential, other countries like Spain or Portugal are still finding ways to integrate

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ULLL approaches consistently. There are a number of factors that keep countries and HEIs from taking full advantage of ULLL.

1. A well-defined and supportive national legislation is crucial to promote and strengthen ULLL. Often ULLL is forgotten as a need and a reality. National regulations strongly influence policies and strategies for ULLL at institutional level.
2. The lack of national provision for ULLL also leads to a lack of funding opportunities. Under these conditions, the ULLL offer is based solely on the motivation of the HEI and the knowledge of HEI managers about the importance and benefits of ULLL.
3. HEIs not always manage to engage teachers in providing Adult and LLL activities. Lack of recognition and support for these tasks discourage many to get involved because of the additional effort of providing this type of education. These inconveniences lower the attractiveness of ULLL for HEI staff.
4. There is a new focus on Higher Vocational Education and Training (HVET), as well as flexible Vocational Education and Training (VET) to adapt to societal and labour market needs. While this is a positive development, a higher permeability between VET, HVET and HE is still needed to allow learners to follow their individual pathways according to their needs.
5. Adapting to societal and labour market needs, e.g., unemployment, has also led HEIs to implement ULLL activities that focus on employability and specific target groups that are closely related to the labour market, such as employees in need of up- or reskilling. However, social engagement and the inclusion of marginalised groups are also important aspects that can be enabled through ULLL. Groups like migrants and refugees or early school leavers, as adult learners, could benefit strongly from ULLL. This would have a high potential for society. Yet the lack of funding limits HEIs' ability to engage with a wider variety of target groups.
6. Due to the digital transformation, teaching and learning in HE is more and more technology-based and takes place in online environments. While there are advantages, such as being more suitable for many non-traditional adult learners, there are also barriers and limits. Moving teaching and learning to the online space requires specialised knowledge and good preparation of educators. In addition, ICT companies currently have a high influence on the future of education which is not being discussed.
7. In addition to digital skills, green skills are only starting to be addressed in HE. As they are key to tackle climate challenges, they need to be included on a wider scale and more intensively in ULLL.

CALL TO ACTION

ULLL is crucial to equip HEIs for the future. However, ULLL is not yet fully implemented and embraced by HEIs in Europe. Recent findings identify factors at

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national and institutional levels that could support HEIs to realise the potential of ULLL.

Based on the findings and trends mentioned, **eucen** calls on European and national policy makers to:

- Strengthen ULLL in national legislation.
- Allocate funding to universities offering ULLL.
- Make ULLL known and promote it as an important part of LLL.
- Allow and support flexible pathways, both at HE level and between VET and HE levels, and make upskilling and reskilling doable, affordable and attractive.
- Start and shape discussions about ethics in digital education and the influence of ICT companies.
- Include and foster green skills in all policy agendas, among them ULLL.
- Promote the dialogue on ULLL with associations and relevant stakeholders in the labour market.

eucen calls on Higher Education Institutions specifically to:

- Implement ULLL strategies not only at institutional, but also at departmental and faculty level.
- Enhance professional development of teacher, trainers and mentors, etc. in providing adult and lifelong education for learners engaged in programmes offered by universities/HEIs across Europe.
- Increase time, recognition and validation of teaching in ULLL. This could be done with academic merit and a better position of ULLL in working contracts.
- Address LLL for educators, not only for learners. In order to teach green and digital skills, educators need to have acquired the knowledge in the area first.
- Widen the target groups for ULLL to include marginalised groups of adult learners by making it part of a strategy for widening participation, inclusion and equal opportunities.
- Improve the access to short-cycle education with micro-credentials not only for the labour market but also for transversal and hence future skills.
- Further explore and develop pedagogies of online teaching and learning.
- Promote permeable pathways that are open to people entering and leaving higher education at various points in life.
- Initiate research, development and innovation in learning cities-regions and learning communities from the scope of intergenerational and intercultural learning.

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