

University Lifelong Learning: Embracing Challenges and Opportunities

In an era marked by rapid technological advancement, demographic shifts, climate change and uncertainty, the role of lifelong learning has become increasingly important: not only does it empower individuals to adapt to the constantly evolving demands of the economy, but it also serves as a fundamental driver for sustainable economic development, societal cohesion, and the strengthening of democratic values across Europe (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022).

As purveyors of up-to-date knowledge and in their pursuit of truth, universities have a central role to play in fostering lifelong learning. However, they face the challenge of developing their continuing education activities while continuing to advance cutting-edge research and ensure high-quality undergraduate education. The result is that lifelong learning is unfortunately not always given the emphasis it deserves within university agendas.

Strategy, Policies, and Organization

It is crucial for universities to integrate lifelong learning into their institutional strategy, avoiding relegating it to a secondary position in their list of priorities. Instead, they should position themselves as lifelong partners to learners, offering support from undergraduate studies through to their later years.

Developing the necessary policies and incentives to ensure that their faculty are fully committed to their mission of continuing education may entail, for example, integrating continuing education activities in teachers' job descriptions, recognize their continuing education activities in the context of their academic promotion or providing compensation if this activity is considered additional. Furthermore, universities should organize their activities in a manner that allows them to respond to the needs of individuals and

society in an agile and effective way. This would allow them to become lifelong learning universities, where there is no longer a differentiation between undergraduate studies and continuing education activities.

Access to University Lifelong Learning

It is imperative for universities to broaden access to their continuing education programs as part of their societal contribution. Rather than catering exclusively for an already well-educated demographic, their offerings should be more accessible for those who need them most, whether from professional or personal standpoints.

It is crucial that everyone, regardless of background, can access the resources and opportunities to acquire skills, enabling them to contribute positively to both the economy and society, thereby fostering a sense of purpose, pride, and achievement. This is particularly relevant given the demographic shifts in Europe, where a shrinking workforce underscores the significance of upskilling and reskilling efforts (Paschoud, El Amoud, Weait, 2023).

Innovation and Adaptation

As the demands of the workforce and society continually evolve, universities must adopt innovative approaches to certification and delivery, constantly adjusting their educational offerings. There is a growing need for flexible and personalized learning pathways which may include just-in-time, online and blended learning. In this context, microcredentials, which document the learning outcomes a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning, along with the recognition of prior learning, serve as invaluable tools. The concepts of stackability and transferability of microcredentials are also paramount.



Pascal Paschoud was elected President of eucen, the European University Continuing Education Network, in 2023.

Economic Challenges for University Lifelong Learning

There are significant financial constraints hindering the expansion and sustainability of lifelong learning at various levels, including states, businesses, individuals, and higher education institutions. The cost of courses remains the main barrier to participation in lifelong learning, compounded by time constraints and potential income loss incurred by taking time off. Addressing these challenges necessitates concerted action by various stakeholders including government, employers, education providers, and learners themselves, to explore funding solutions for participation. Individual learning accounts exemplify one measure aimed at overcoming these hurdles and ensuring that economic considerations do not hinder progress.

A modern university is deeply connected with various stakeholders.



The financing of lifelong learning activities varies across Europe, with universities increasingly reliant on self-funding. This can create tension with their societal mission, as they may struggle to generate sufficient income to cover costs.

Collaboration and Lifelong Learning Ecosystems

It has become increasingly unrealistic for universities to achieve their goal of offering timely and relevant lifelong learning programs without robust collaboration with each other and other stakeholders. The European Universities Initiative is an ambitious EU initiative which aims to establish alliances between higher institutions from across Europe for the benefit of their students, staff, and society.

The concept of lifelong learning ecosystems at regional or industrial sector level has become central, as seen in initiatives like the Catalyst scheme in the Netherlands, which aims to develop lifelong learning solutions through a process of co-creation involving stakeholders.

Another example is the concept of a Learning City, where collaboration among stakeholders at the city level ensures that all citizens can benefit from learning opportunities. Cities participating in initiatives like the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities promote lifelong learning and enable people of all ages and backgrounds to develop their skills and knowledge to adapt to changes in their environments. These cities empower individuals to become more independent, strengthen social ties, contribute to economic growth, and foster cultural wealth, innovation, and sustainable development (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2015).

Essentially, the modern university is one that is deeply connected with other stakeholders.

Initiatives at the Level of the European Union

The EU has set very ambitious objectives for the advancement of lifelong learning to address the need for upskilling (enhancing existing skills) and reskilling (acquiring new skills) across Europe. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan aims for at least 60% of all adults to participate in training annually by 2030 (European Commission, 2021). To achieve this, the EU has developed numerous initiatives to facilitate lifelong learning, most notably the European Skills

Agenda, which involves collaboration between member states, industry, and social partners. This initiative encompasses 15 actions, including a Pact for Skills to encourage cooperation between public and private sectors, the launch of the European Universities Initiative, the initiative on Individual Learning Accounts, the European approach to microcredentials, and the creation of the Euro-pass platform to assist individuals to manage their careers by describing their skills. A concerted effort is being made to develop green and digital skills.

in the *European Journal of University Lifelong Learning*, a peer-reviewed online research journal. One such project, SMILE, promoted inclusive learning by developing, testing, and implementing innovative tools to enhance diversity and social inclusion approaches within higher education institutions. It leveraged the expertise of civil society organizations and individuals, integrating their experience into SMILE tools. It addressed three main areas of inequality and disadvantage within higher education: migrant background, women's leadership, and low socio-economic status.

The Contribution of eucen to University Lifelong Learning

Founded in 1991, eucen is a unique network that unites international experts in lifelong learning and resources pertinent to key areas like lifelong learning policy, institutional organization of university lifelong learning, pedagogy, tools and delivery mechanisms, and social responsibility. This collaborative network enables university professionals to discuss their practices and how they are tackling the abovementioned challenges. Membership in eucen ensures that individuals are never isolated in their endeavors; rather they benefit from collective expertise of their peers to explore solutions to strategic, organizational, or research-related issues.

Recent position papers of eucen have addressed significant themes such as the pertinence of microcredentials for lifelong learning and employability, as well as equity, diversity, and inclusion in university lifelong learning. Over the next few months, eucen plans to publish several position papers on lifelong learning ecosystems, how universities can participate in the effort to build green skills, and the validation of prior learning within European universities.

Eucen contributes to policy development at the European level by engaging with relevant stakeholders in policymaking and collaborating with key international organizations that shape the development of lifelong learning in Europe. Through regular exchanges with several units of the European Commission such as DG Employment, eucen stays informed about new developments in the field and ensures that members are aware of new developments that may impact their activities in the short, medium, and long term.

Eucen is also actively involved in innovative research projects and supporting researchers in disseminating their findings through publications

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION NETWORK (EUCEN)

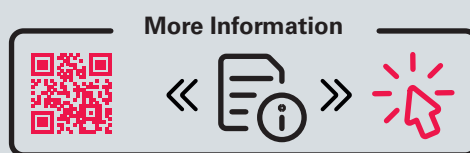
With 165 members across 33 countries, eucen is the largest multidisciplinary European association of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), boasting over 32 years of experience and extensive expertise in the field.

At eucen, we firmly believe that ULLL can contribute to creating positive social change through the provision of inclusive and flexible learning opportunities for all. We promote a flexible learner-centric approach which allows individuals to learn at their own pace, in their preferred environment, and according to their specific needs. Our overarching aim is to inspire University Lifelong Learning through fostering the development and dissemination of cutting-edge practice and research among our members, thereby creating transformational and equitable impact that contributes to sustainable development.

At eucen, we:

- lead a member-centered community of university leaders, policy makers, practitioners, and researchers, facilitating the exchange of ideas, experience, knowledge, and best practices;
- contribute to the field of ULLL through the development and dissemination of cutting-edge research;
- influence the development of ULLL policy at institutional, national, and European level;
- advocate and promote a European model of lifelong learning based on democracy, equal rights, and social justice.

Eucen annual conferences and seminars are unique opportunities for professionals to network and exchange ideas. <https://eucen.eu> for more information.





Universities face significant challenges in developing their activities in the field of lifelong learning.

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Conclusion

The current landscape presents unprecedented opportunities for the advancement of university lifelong learning, the importance of which is now acknowledged by governments, businesses, and civil society alike. However, universities face significant challenges in developing their activities in the field. To effectively navigate these challenges, universities must devise relevant and comprehensive strategies and policies, innovate, secure alternative funding sources, and foster new avenues of collaboration. Fortunately, universities can rely on eucen and its members for invaluable support in these endeavors.

Pascal Paschoud

PASCAL PASCHOUD

Pascal Paschoud brings with him over 25 years of international experience in leading and developing organizations and their personnel in the field of higher education. Elected as President of eucen in 2023 after serving on the Steering Committee for 4 years, he is a former President of Swissuni, the Swiss Network for University Continuing Education.

Currently, Pascal is the Executive Director of Formation Continue UNIL-EPFL, the joint continuing education foundation of the University of Lausanne and the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, which annually serves around 5,000 participants with its diverse course offerings. Additionally, he is a member of the Development Committee of the Lausanne Learning City project and chairing the Group of Experts on Lifelong Learning of the CIVIS European University.

Previously, Pascal served as Director of Projects at the London School of Economics (LSE), where he worked on the development of continuing education and consulting services. His academic credentials include an MSc Organizational Psychology from LSE, an MDP from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and an MSc International Management from HEC Lausanne.