

# Position paper of **eucen** on University Lifelong Learning and the 2030 Headline Targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. The imperative of University Lifelong Learning for Europe's 2030 targets

**eucen** believes that University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) is indispensable for achieving the 2030 Headline Targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>3</sup>:

- *Employment*: 78% of people aged 20–64 in work
- *Adult learning*: 60% of adults in training annually
- *Social inclusion*: 15 million fewer people in poverty or exclusion

In the context of rapid digital and green transitions and Europe's growing geopolitical, social, and economic volatility, ULLL is not a supplementary activity. It is a strategic necessity for competitiveness, resilience, social cohesion, and active citizenship.

While debates around ULLL are not new, the 2020s present a qualitatively different context compared to the Lisbon and Bologna eras. Today's challenges - climate crisis, AI and digital transformation, demographic change, democratic fragility, and post-pandemic disruption - demand that universities reimagine LLL not as a peripheral skills agenda but as a core mission of resilience, equity, sustainability, and democratic renewal.

For universities, embedding ULLL means reaffirming their societal mission: extending the benefits of academic knowledge and high-quality learning to all adults, throughout life.

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<sup>1</sup> This position paper draws on discussions from the **eucen** Policy Talks 2025 which brought together representatives from the European Commission, OECD, UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, European Universities Association, LLL Platform and **eucen**.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan\\_en](https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en)

## 2. The current landscape

Despite recognition of its importance, ULLL remains marginalised and underfunded in many higher education systems. Evidence from recent surveys and projects highlights both opportunities and challenges:

- The Carrington Crisp survey (2023–24) shows learners value universities for credibility and personal growth, but cite cost, inflexibility, and lack of stackability as barriers. Employers often prefer private providers, seeing universities as too theoretical and slow to respond.
- The EUA Trends survey (2023–24)<sup>4</sup> found that two-thirds of universities identify ULLL as a strategic priority, yet delivery is still largely framed in terms of narrow “skills for the labour market.” Only a minority treat ULLL as part of their core academic mission.
- The SAMUELE project<sup>5</sup> confirms that while 70% of HEIs have implemented some ULLL policies, provision is often fragmented (centralised vs. decentralised), reliant on fees, and vulnerable to unsustainable funding models.
- Recognition of prior learning (RPL), stackability, and portability of micro-credentials remain weakly developed.
- Equity gaps persist: participation in ULLL remains concentrated among already well-educated, employed adults. Low-skilled adults, migrants, unemployed and older workers continue to face significant barriers.
- There is growing evidence of the value of ULLL in supporting physical and mental health and wellbeing throughout the life course, which will be increasingly significant for an ageing European population.

These findings have direct implications for the 2030 targets. Cost and inflexibility hinder progress toward the adult learning participation goal; fragmented provision and weak recognition frameworks undermine employment mobility; persistent equity gaps directly threaten the poverty reduction target.

At the same time, the emerging European Union of Skills has the potential to address some of these structural challenges by fostering greater coherence, portability, and cross-border recognition of learning. However, its impact will depend on the extent to which universities and ULLL providers are meaningfully included in its design and implementation. Without strong university engagement, the initiative risks reinforcing existing fragmentation rather than overcoming it. Universities risk being overtaken by faster, cheaper providers and failing to meet Europe’s skills and inclusion targets.

Unless addressed, Europe risks entrenching inequalities rather than overcoming them. Moreover, universities risk neglecting the broader motivations of lifelong learners - from personal enrichment to civic engagement and identity formation - if ULLL is reduced to employability alone.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.eua.eu/publications/reports/trends-2024.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://samuele.eucen.eu>

### 3. What universities need to do

To deliver on the European 2030 agenda, universities must:

- *Re-centre and ensure the continued prioritisation of ULLL in institutional culture:* Place lifelong learning alongside teaching and research as a core mission, with leadership commitment, staff recognition, incentives for engagement, and sufficient resourcing.
- *Develop flexible, modular pathways:* Expand the use of micro-credentials, stackable qualifications, and recognition of prior learning to support entry, progression, and re-entry into higher education throughout life.
- *Embrace digital transformation and digital credentialing:* Invest in modern digital infrastructures, learning environments, and secure credentialing systems that support micro-credentials, portability, and learner-owned records.
- *Ensure accessibility and inclusion:* Provide targeted outreach and tailored support (financial, digital, and guidance) for vulnerable groups, aligning ULLL with the poverty reduction and social rights agenda.
- *Strengthen partnerships and co-design:* Collaborate with employers, VET providers, SMEs, trade unions, and civil society to ensure programmes are relevant, applied, and responsive.
- *Build on quality and trust:* Leverage universities' unique position as trusted institutions with robust quality assurance, differentiating ULLL from less regulated private providers.
- *Invest in measurement and evidence:* Improve tracking of learner participation, outcomes, and impact, to demonstrate universities' contribution to the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Universities' value lies not only in robust quality assurance but also in their ability to connect research-based knowledge, interdisciplinarity, and civic engagement. This positions them uniquely to support learners' personal development and active citizenship - outcomes that private providers rarely prioritise.

ULLL should be framed not merely as skills provision but as a transformative experience that strengthens identity, belonging, and participation in democratic life. In times of turbulence, universities must cultivate dispositions of curiosity, adaptability, and resilience in their students and alumni, so that learning becomes a way of being rather than a one-off activity.

### 4. What policymakers need to do

For universities to succeed in this mission, policymakers at European and national level must:

- *Secure sustainable funding:* Create dedicated ULLL funding streams via the Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034), Erasmus+, and the European Competitiveness Fund, moving beyond fee-dependent models and supporting universities in their ULLL mission.

- *Simplify recognition frameworks*: Ensure coherent, transparent frameworks for micro-credentials, RPL, and cross-border portability, enabling seamless learning pathways.
- *Promote inclusion and equity*: Scale up Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs), implement basic skills action plans, and invest in community-based learning spaces to reach disadvantaged groups.
- *Policies must address digital divides and regional disparities*: Ensure that learners in rural and less-resourced areas have equal access to opportunities. ULLL should be treated as a right, not a privilege - embedded from the first student contact and extending across the life course.
- *Encourage ecosystems of learning*: Support systemic cooperation between universities, VET providers, SMEs, employment services, and local/regional authorities.
- *Enhance skills intelligence*: Consolidate fragmented data through a skills observatory to inform evidence-based policy and anticipate future needs. A European-level monitoring mechanism, aligned with the 2030 targets, is needed to systematically track universities' contribution to employment, adult learning, and social inclusion.

The development of the European Union of Skills provides a strategic opportunity to advance these objectives. To be effective, it must embed robust frameworks for micro-credentials, RPL, and cross-border portability, and position universities as central actors in building a coherent European learning space. Aligning the European Union of Skills with the 2030 Headline Targets would ensure that the initiative supports employment mobility, adult learning participation, and social inclusion across Member States.

## 5. eucen's role

As the European platform for University Lifelong Learning, [eucen](#) is uniquely positioned to help institutions and policymakers achieve these goals. Building on projects such as SAMUELE and activities such as the [eucen Policy Talks sessions](#)<sup>6</sup>, [eucen](#) will:

- Provide policy recommendations and advocacy based on robust evidence.
- Deliver tools for institutional self-assessment and strategy development.
- Facilitate exchange of practice and innovation through conferences, seminars, and networks.
- Act as a bridge between universities, policymakers, and civil society in shaping Europe's lifelong learning agenda.

In doing so, [eucen](#) champions a vision of ULLL that extends beyond employability, positioning universities as civic leaders and ecological institutions. ULLL must serve human flourishing, democratic participation, and resilience in the face of climate, technological, and social disruptions.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://eucen.eu/policy/policy-talks/>

## 6. Conclusions

The 2030 Headline Targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights represent both a challenge and an opportunity. For individuals, they signal the right to meaningful participation in learning and society at all stages of life; for universities, they demand a renewed commitment to their civic role in a turbulent world.

Universities cannot remain on the margins of lifelong learning. They must embrace ULLL as a core mission, equal to teaching and research, and supported by sustainable funding and systemic cooperation.

With commitment from both universities and policymakers, ULLL can be the cornerstone of Europe's response to demographic change, technological transformation, and social inequality - building a resilient, inclusive, and competitive Europe.

By placing learners' voices, aspirations, and identities at the heart of ULLL, Europe can ensure that progress towards its 2030 targets is not only measurable but also meaningful - strengthening democracy, sustainability, and the public good.