

Governance of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) in Europe. Strengthening Institutional Capacity for Inclusive and Sustainable Lifelong Learning¹

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Introduction

University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) is essential to Europe's capacity to respond to the green and digital transitions, demographic change, labour market volatility, and the need for inclusive democratic societies. European universities are increasingly expected to serve learners across the life course, support upskilling and reskilling, and contribute to regional innovation ecosystems (OECD, 2024; European Commission JRC, 2024; European Commission, 2022).

Despite this recognition, ULLL remains unevenly embedded in national higher education systems and institutional governance structures, with many universities still organising lifelong learning activities through peripheral continuing education units rather than integrating them into core academic missions (e.g. Cendon, Kesli & Orr, 2023). Recent evidence gathered through the SAMUELE project² (18-country national survey and 102 HEIs across 20 countries) demonstrates that governance (not pedagogy alone) is now the critical factor determining whether ULLL can be sustainably implemented.

eucen argues that governance reform is central to transforming universities into genuine lifelong learning institutions.

This position paper aligns with key European policy frameworks, including the European Skills Agenda, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the European Education Area, the European Qualifications Framework, the Micro-Credentials Recommendation, and the New European Agenda for Adult Learning. Strengthening governance of University Lifelong Learning is essential to achieving the EU's 2030 targets for adult participation in learning and skills development.

The Governance Gap in European ULLL

The SAMUELE findings reveal a structural misalignment between policy ambition and governance reality:

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² SAMUELE, Self-Assessment Model for Universities Embracing LLL in Europe | <https://samuele.eucen.eu>

- Fewer than half of surveyed countries have a dedicated national ULLL strategy
- Funding mechanisms are fragmented and frequently insufficient
- ULLL activities in many HEIs are expected to be fully self-sustaining
- Governance responsibilities are often partially defined or dependent on individuals
- Leadership support exists but is not consistently translated into structural investment

This situation creates a governance gap: ULLL is widely promoted rhetorically but insufficiently embedded structurally.

Without formal governance frameworks, ULLL remains vulnerable and peripheral to institutional missions, unstable in funding, and dependent on short-term projects.

Governance as a Site of Innovation

eucen recognises that European universities are not passive actors. Across Europe, institutions are developing adaptive governance responses, including:

- Hybrid models combining central coordination units with faculty autonomy
- Dedicated lifelong learning or continuing education centres acting as institutional hubs
- Networked governance arrangements with employers, local authorities and civil society
- Project-based partnership architectures
- Internal coordination mechanisms to align strategy, quality assurance, and operations

These innovations demonstrate institutional commitment and creativity. However, they often remain fragile, under-resourced, and insufficiently recognised within formal governance systems.

ULLL governance should not rely on informal arrangements or personal leadership alone. It requires institutionalisation.

Key Governance Challenges

Based on the evidence gathered, eucen identifies five structural governance challenges:

a. Fragmented National Frameworks

Inconsistent legislation, definitions, funding streams, and quality assurance mechanisms create uncertainty for institutions.

b. Financial Sustainability Pressures

The expectation that ULLL must be self-financing risks narrowing provision to market-driven activities and undermining inclusion goals.

c. **Role Ambiguity and Organisational Complexity**

Responsibilities between central units and faculties are often unclear, creating inefficiencies and internal tensions.

d. **Limited Integration into Academic Career Systems**

ULLL work is insufficiently recognised in academic workload models, promotion criteria, and institutional performance systems.

e. **Weak Integration into Quality Assurance Systems**

Short courses, micro-credentials, and modular provision are not always fully embedded in national or European QA frameworks.

eucen Position: Principles for Effective ULLL Governance

eucen calls for a shift from project-based implementation to structurally embedded governance. Effective ULLL governance should be:

1. **Strategic** – Explicitly integrated into institutional missions and multiannual planning.
2. **Institutionalised** – Supported by formal roles, stable units, and clear responsibilities.
3. **Sustainably Funded** – Backed by diversified and predictable funding models.
4. **Inclusive** – Ensuring that financial pressures do not undermine social access.
5. **Networked** – Engaged with employers, regions, and civil society through structured partnership governance.
6. **Recognised** – Integrated into academic workload, career progression, and quality systems.

Policy Recommendations

i. **To European Policymakers and the European Commission**

- Embed ULLL governance explicitly within European Higher Education Area frameworks.
- Micro-credential policy should be grounded in existing institutional structures and practices
- Provide structural funding streams that support institutional capacity-building, not only pilot projects.
- Encourage governance reform within European University Alliances to include lifelong learning missions.
- Develop guidance on sustainable financial models for inclusive ULLL.

ii. **To National Governments**

- Adopt clear national strategies for ULLL integrated within higher education legislation.

- Ensure stable and diversified funding models that balance public support and private contribution.
- Integrate ULLL fully into national quality assurance systems.
- Incentivise institutional governance reform through performance-based funding mechanisms.

iii. To University Leadership

- Embed ULLL in institutional statutes, strategic plans, and governance structures.
- Clarify roles between central coordination units and faculties.
- Recognise ULLL engagement within academic career frameworks.
- Invest in professional staff capacity and partnership management.
- Develop long-term financial models that safeguard inclusion objectives.

Governance and the Future of European Universities

The transition from “lifelong learning *in* universities” to **lifelong learning universities**³ requires structural change.

ULLL governance is not a marginal administrative issue. It is a strategic transformation challenge. Without governance alignment, Europe risks:

- Increasing inequalities in access to lifelong learning
- Weak institutional engagement in reskilling agendas
- Fragmented implementation of micro-credentials
- Reduced capacity to respond to green and digital transitions

Conversely, strengthened governance frameworks can enable universities to become central actors in regional ecosystems, Learning Cities, and European innovation strategies.

Conclusion

eucen affirms that governance reform is a prerequisite for sustainable, inclusive, and high-quality University Lifelong Learning in Europe.

European universities are already experimenting with hybrid and adaptive governance models. Policymakers must now provide the structural conditions that allow these innovations to stabilise, scale, and endure.

ULLL is not a peripheral activity. It is a core mission for the future of European higher education.

³ See BeFlex Plus project, Executive Summary (page 3) for definition.

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