

The Robin Hood Model of University Lifelong Learning. Why Universities Cannot Build Lifelong Learning Societies Under Knowledge-Economy Funding Models¹

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Abstract

Universities are increasingly expected to support lifelong learning in response to major societal challenges such as digital transformation, the green transition and demographic change. Yet university lifelong learning (ULLL) continue to be funded and evaluated primarily according to knowledge-economy and socially oriented lifelong learning initiatives often receive limited institutional recognition and financial support. Many universities therefore rely on a “Robin Hood Model”, in which revenue from commercially successful programmes subsidises initiatives that promote social inclusion and community learning. While this approach allows universities to sustain valuable activities, it remains fragile and reveals a deeper structural misalignment between the societal mission of lifelong learning and current higher education funding frameworks. Building truly inclusive lifelong learning societies will therefore require universities and policymakers to recognise lifelong learning as a core public function of higher education and to align funding and evaluation systems with its broader societal value.

The imperative: lifelong learning for all

Across Europe, lifelong learning (LLL) is increasingly recognised as essential for responding to the major challenges of the twenty-first century. Digital transformation, the green transition, demographic change, migration, and geopolitical instability all require citizens to continually update their knowledge and capabilities throughout life. European policy frameworks reflect this growing recognition. Initiatives such as the European Skills Agenda, the European Strategy for Universities, and the European Pillar of Social Rights emphasise the need to expand adult participation in learning and to create flexible pathways that allow individuals to enter, leave, and re-enter education across the lifespan.

Within this policy landscape, universities are expected to play a central role. They are called upon to support reskilling and upskilling, foster innovation and competitiveness, and contribute to social cohesion and democratic resilience. Universities therefore have a dual responsibility: to support economic development through skills development, and to serve as public institutions that extend learning opportunities to the whole population across the lifespan.

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In practice, university lifelong learning (ULLL) operates at the intersection of two missions: responding to labour-market needs while also extending learning opportunities to populations traditionally excluded from higher education (HE). Yet there is growing concern that ULLL is increasingly being reduced to a narrow skills agenda focused primarily on workforce development. If universities are to contribute meaningfully to LLL societies, this broader vision must be preserved.

The current landscape

Despite the strong policy emphasis on LLL, its implementation within HE remains uneven. Evidence across Europe suggests that while many universities recognise the importance of LLL, provision often remains fragmented and marginalised within institutional structures.

Several key challenges persist:

- *Narrow framing of university lifelong learning:* In many institutional strategies, ULLL is primarily associated with professional education, continuing professional development and micro-credentials linked to labour-market needs.
- *Persistent equity gaps:* Participation in adult education continues to reflect the Matthew Effect, whereby those who already possess higher levels of education are more likely to access further learning opportunities. Low-skilled adults, migrants, unemployed individuals and older learners remain under-represented.
- *Fragmented institutional structures:* ULLL provision is often dispersed across multiple units within universities, with varying governance arrangements and limited strategic coordination.
- *Financial vulnerability:* Many ULLL initiatives rely heavily on tuition fees or short-term project funding, making them vulnerable to changes in market demand or institutional priorities.

Together, these challenges reveal a deeper structural issue within HE systems. Universities are increasingly expected to operate as LLL institutions, yet they continue to be funded and evaluated primarily as knowledge-economy institutions. Institutional success is typically measured through research performance, degree enrolment and income generation rather than through the broader societal impact of learning.

The Robin Hood Model of university lifelong learning

In response to these structural constraints, many ULLL units have developed what might be described as the *Robin Hood Model*. In this model, income generated from commercially successful programmes - such as executive education, professional certificates and industry-focused micro-credentials - is used to subsidise programmes whose primary value lies in their social impact.

Revenue from market-oriented programmes therefore supports initiatives such as:

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- access programmes for disadvantaged learners
- community education initiatives
- programmes for migrants and refugees
- learning opportunities for older adults
- civic and cultural education programmes.

This internal cross-subsidisation reflects the commitment of ULLL professionals to maintaining the broader social mission of universities.

In effect, many ULLL units operate as hybrid organisations within universities, combining academic, entrepreneurial and civic roles. They must simultaneously function as providers of high-quality academic learning, as entrepreneurial units capable of generating income, and as public-facing institutions that extend educational opportunities to diverse communities.

However, the *Robin Hood Model* also highlights a deeper structural misalignment. The social value generated by many ULLL initiatives is rarely recognised within university funding and evaluation systems. Much of the societal impact of ULLL - such as widening participation, civic engagement, community development and personal transformation - is difficult to capture through traditional institutional performance indicators. As a result, programmes that support social inclusion and community engagement often rely on income generated by commercially viable educational activities.

While this model may allow universities to sustain socially valuable programmes in the short term, it is inherently fragile. When market demand fluctuates or institutional financial pressures increase, programmes that generate limited revenue, regardless of their societal impact, may be at risk. The *Robin Hood Model* therefore reveals a systemic challenge: the societal mission of LLL is often sustained through market-driven educational provision rather than through explicit policy support.

What universities need to do

While many of the structural challenges described above require policy and governance responses, professionals and leaders working in ULLL already play a crucial role in navigating these tensions in practice. In many institutions, they act as institutional connectors, working across academic departments, external partners and communities to design learning opportunities that respond simultaneously to labour-market needs and broader social goals. This work requires a distinctive set of professional capabilities, including curriculum innovation, partnership development with employers and communities, widening participation initiatives and the design of flexible learning pathways such as micro-credentials and validation of prior learning. At the same time, these professionals often operate under considerable pressure. They are expected to generate income, demonstrate institutional value and expand provision while also advancing inclusion, access and community engagement. Many therefore find themselves striving to deliver meaningful social impact while operating within funding and evaluation frameworks that prioritise financial sustainability and market demand. Their experience highlights both the creativity and resilience of the field, while also demonstrating the need for stronger

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institutional frameworks that recognise and support the full value of university lifelong learning. Universities must therefore strengthen their commitment to LLL as a core institutional mission and create institutional conditions that enable these professionals to succeed. Key priorities include:

- *Embedding lifelong learning in institutional strategy:* Universities should position LLL alongside teaching and research as a central pillar of their mission.
- *Expanding inclusive access pathways:* Institutions should develop flexible entry routes and support systems that enable diverse groups of learners to participate in HE across the lifespan.
- *Developing flexible learning ecosystems:* Micro-credentials, stackable programmes and validation of prior learning should be integrated into coherent learning pathways.
- *Strengthening community engagement:* Universities should deepen partnerships with local communities, civil society organisations and regional stakeholders to ensure ULLL responds to societal needs.
- *Measuring societal impact:* Institutions should develop evaluation frameworks that capture the broader social value generated through ULLL activities.

University leaders also have a crucial role to play in supporting the professionals who deliver ULLL in practice. This can include:

- committing to offer a number of socially oriented programmes each year on a cost-covering or reduced-fee basis
- providing targeted funding or scholarships for under-represented learners
- introducing transparent mechanisms to reinvest a portion of revenue from professional education into socially oriented ULLL initiatives
- recognising social impact within institutional performance frameworks.

Such measures can help ensure that economic sustainability and social impact are not treated as competing priorities but as complementary dimensions of the university's public mission.

What policymakers need to do

For universities to fulfil their LLL mission, policymakers must address structural barriers within HE systems. Key priorities include:

- *Sustainable funding models:* Dedicated funding streams for ULLL should reduce reliance on fee-based provision and support socially oriented programmes.
- *Recognition of lifelong learning within higher education policy:* National HE strategies should recognise ULLL as a core institutional function.
- *Inclusive participation policies:* Policies should prioritise access to learning opportunities for under-represented groups.
- *Coherent recognition frameworks:* Stronger frameworks for validation of prior learning and micro-credentials can enable flexible learning pathways.

- *Strengthening lifelong learning ecosystems*: Policies should support collaboration between universities, vocational education providers, employers and community organisations.

eucen's role

As the European network for ULLL, **eucen** plays a critical role in advancing this agenda. Through its policy advocacy, research projects and professional networks, **eucen** supports universities in embedding LLL within their institutional missions. **eucen** also plays an important role in supporting the professionals who lead and deliver ULLL. Through its activities, **eucen** provides opportunities for professional exchange, peer learning and capacity-building, enabling practitioners to share strategies for navigating the complex economic and social missions of university lifelong learning. **eucen** will continue to:

- advocate for stronger European policy frameworks supporting LLL
- provide tools and evidence to support institutional development
- facilitate exchange of practices among universities across Europe
- promote inclusive ULLL ecosystems that serve diverse learners

In doing so, **eucen** champions a vision of ULLL that extends beyond employability to encompass personal development, democratic participation and social inclusion.

Conclusion

The continued reliance on the *Robin Hood Model* raises an important question: can LLL societies truly be built upon a system in which the social mission of universities depends on the profitability of skills training for those already advantaged? As long as universities are expected to operate as LLL institutions while being funded and evaluated primarily as knowledge-economy institutions, this structural tension will persist. If universities are to fulfil their potential as LLL institutions, ULLL must be recognised as a core public function of HE. Moving beyond the Robin Hood Model will require funding frameworks, governance systems and policy environments that recognise the full value of learning across the lifespan - not only for economic competitiveness, but also for social inclusion, democratic participation and personal development. ULLL has the potential to be both an economic driver and an engine of social cohesion.

Realising this potential, however, requires institutional and policy frameworks that support universities in fulfilling both dimensions of this mission. Only by aligning institutional structures with this broader vision can universities fully realise their role in building inclusive LLL societies across Europe. Universities cannot become LLL institutions if the value of learning is measured only in economic terms.

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