

Responsive Universities for Lifelong Learning: Making Flexible Learning a reality to sustain current needs in Europe and beyond¹

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Universities across Europe face the huge challenge of simultaneously pursuing (a) research and innovation, (b) delivering high-quality education, and (c) fulfilling their “third mission”, that is, addressing broader societal, environmental and economic challenges.

Lifelong learning activities, which aim to make higher education accessible to a wider range of learners, have become an integral part of this third mission. However, against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive higher education environment, in which universities are under constant pressure to strengthen their positions, partnerships and prestige, lifelong learning has rarely been prioritised by universities.

A strong vision at the international level is not yet reflected nationally

Nevertheless, the potential of lifelong learning to respond to pressing economic demands, and to cater to the rapidly expanding share of “non-traditional learners” who do not fit the conventional profile of school leavers is being recognised increasingly. In fact, the wider policy environment has never seemed more favourable to the promotion of lifelong learning. At the international level, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), in its recently published Marrakech framework, advocates for a right to lifelong learning (UIL, 2022), and for greater recognition and transfer of qualifications of learners across the world to facilitate their access to higher education. Meanwhile, the ILO is calling for a universal entitlement to lifelong learning, stressing that lifelong learning has become an economic necessity, not least due to its crucial role in transitioning to a greener, more sustainable future. According to the ILO, education and training should thus focus on job-related, future-proof skills, but can also contribute to “personal development, access to culture and active citizenship” (ILO, 2021). Both the ILO and UIL highlight universities’ central role in creating opportunities for individuals to learn continuously throughout their life.

At the European level, the European pillar of social rights action plan, has set the target of engaging 60% of adults in training by 2030. More recently, the president of the European Commission declared 2023 as the “year of skills”, on the grounds

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that greater investments in upskilling and reskilling the labour force are necessary to address the labour shortages, especially among skilled workers, which have become more pronounced in some European countries. Despite this growing international interest in lifelong learning, its translation to the national level, and especially its application in the higher education sector, has remained sporadic. While some European countries have policies in place to support lifelong learning, such as the learning entitlement scheme for employees in France, and the recently introduced learning budget in the Netherlands (EC, 2021) national policies and legislation rarely identify lifelong learning as part of HEIs' mandate. However, as preliminary results from the UIL's upcoming publication on the contributions of higher education to lifelong learning suggest, well-developed national policies play an important role in paving the way for universities to develop their own institutional strategies for lifelong learning, not least by providing much-needed financial support.

Implementing and evaluating flexibility of learning offers

Such institutional strategies must, first and foremost, focus on increasing the flexibility of universities' learning offers, taking into account the different needs, prior experiences and lived realities of adult learners. While remote learning may have become much more commonplace since the Covid-19 pandemic, flexibility goes far beyond delivering previously in-person, full-time programmes in an online or part-time format, and should include hybrid learning options, evening and weekend classes, as well as the possibility for learners to take time off from studies. Moreover, certain infrastructures, including nurseries, social and psychological support services, not to mention financial support, are crucial to ensuring that learners working part-time or full-time, and learners with caring responsibilities, disabilities, or with limited prior experience of further education or previous qualifications are fully supported. These services should be complemented by tailored guidance and support for individual learners, especially those who have been outside formal education for a sustained period of time. These learners remain starkly underrepresented in higher education, yet are often dismissed as being "unmotivated" and therefore not worth targeting. It is crucial that they receive the information they need to select the pathway that matches their learning needs and that is at the right level. Thus, flexibility is just as much about HEIs adapting internally as well as reaching out externally. If implemented holistically, flexibility can not only benefit former graduates wanting to brush up on their skills after some years, and who remain an important target group of university lifelong learning, but can also serve as an important tool to achieve greater equity in higher education by making it more accessible to those previously marginalised.

Achieving this flexibility is a continuous and iterative process without a fixed endpoint. It is therefore important that this process is monitored, and that HEIs are held accountable for their commitment to increased flexibilization. While there has been a strong focus on increasing the number of graduates globally, and ensuring their quick integration into the labour market, it is important that universities,

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governments, and assessment agencies set targets that are specifically dedicated to increasing the diversity of graduates, and to ensuring access for all. One way to incentivise HEIs to invest in these areas is by establishing a global ranking system for university lifelong learning, which would rate universities based on their effort to become more inclusive and accessible to a broader range of students. Not dissimilar to the Knowledge Exchange Framework established by UK Research and Innovation, or the Times Higher Education Impact Ranking, but with a stronger focus on HEIs' contributions to continuing education and lifelong learning, it could measure and compare HEIs' industry connections, their contributions to local communities, and their partnerships with civil society. Such a ranking would serve to counterbalance the prestige that has been traditionally attached to universities' standing in research and academic excellence rankings.

Flexibilisation through innovation: the case of micro-credentials

A growing trend that is often invoked in relation to increased flexibility in higher education are micro-credentials, which provide proof of a learning outcome that an individual has achieved during a short learning experience (EC, 2020). However, introducing micro-credentials in higher education does not simply involve delivering conventional degree programmes in shorter, modularised units, but rather requires rethinking much of the content of traditional HE programmes, and the format through which they have previously been delivered. Micro-credentials lend themselves particularly well to skills training and work-based learning and could therefore provide an impetus for HEIs to seek out partnerships with VET providers, employers and other external stakeholders. However, much work still needs to be done, both at the national and international level, to enable these partnerships. By connecting micro-credentials to other tools, such as study credit systems, or the Europass, learners would be guaranteed that their learning outcomes are recognized not only within their own country or their field of work, but that they can be transferred across different professional and geographical contexts. While micro-credentials have so far primarily been associated with digital learning, and with employability related training, their potential to be applied in a range of contexts and disciplines should not be underestimated. This includes learning for active citizenship, life skills, and sustainable development.

Partnerships to maximise HE's unique contribution to lifelong learning

More broadly, it is crucial that lifelong learning, especially within HEIs, addresses the demand for work-related upskilling and reskilling and boosts students' employability, whilst also contributing to and enriching every aspect of life and society is recognized and fully realised. Here, HEIs' expertise and research excellence could be mobilised to engage a more diverse set of learners for a broader range of purposes. It is however equally important to keep in mind that HEIs are an important, but by no means the sole player in the growing and increasingly diverse lifelong learning and continuing education landscape. As such, there is little point in HEIs taking on the kind of educational activities that could be

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executed more effectively by community centres, VET institutions, or civil society organisations, with more direct links to the relevant target groups. What HEIs *can* uniquely contribute to lifelong learning is a high degree of criticality, and research-based knowledge and pedagogies, which should benefit everyone, and not just those who already hold post-secondary qualifications and are more likely to engage in lifelong learning. HEIs should also be recognised for their role in quality assurance. There is significant potential for HEIs to work with other organisations, and to grant them institutional legitimacy in order to maximise their impact.

As the integration of technology, diversification and flexibilization allow learning to become increasingly individualised, HEIs must ensure that this does not come at the cost of lower education quality. Rather, they must be at the forefront of this trend, by developing personalised pathways and learning contracts, rather than holding on to the traditional format of pre-set degree programmes. Here, too, HEIs can offer a unique contribution, as they not only have the expertise to provide learners with personalised guidance that a more individualised learning mode entails, but can also offer them a supportive and well-connected learning community, thus ensuring that the increased individualisation does not lead to the loss of a sense of belonging. This will also require rethinking the relationship between teachers and learners to become less hierarchical. One important implication of the notion of “university lifelong learning” is that university lecturers and academics are just as much engaged in learning as in teaching. Far from reproducing the traditional model of knowledge transfer from teacher to student, university lifelong learning puts all members of the university on equal footing, and creates opportunities for more transformative and empowering forms of learning.

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