

EDITORIAL

THE POWER OF CONNECTION

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It has been 15 years since the launch of the European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning (EUA, 2008) which marked the first public commitment to lifelong learning at European universities. And already one year before, in 2007, [eucen](#) launched its recommendations on University Lifelong Learning ([eucen](#), 2007). After all this time, however, offering continuing education is still not self-evident for universities – let alone “lifelong learning universities.” (ibid., 4) For a long time, universities primarily focussed on research, followed by education, and this often continues to be the case. Nevertheless, there are domains in which university continuing education (UCE) has a longer tradition. This is evident in professions that require academic training, in particular, such as the medical sector, education, and law. In these domains, UCE was and is mainly aimed at further training and for re- and up-skilling within the profession the participants were initially trained in. As recent international research by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and Shanghai Open University (2023) shows, universities have begun realising more and more that they have a responsibility not just to respond to the rapid and often disruptive developments in the labour market, but also to act upon them. And that is urgent, looking at the current landscape (World Economic Forum, 2023), as alumni and other professionals are confronted with new demands and with questions that require new knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For them and for others, learning does not stop after the initial bachelor's and master's degree. Universities must respond to their needs and discover what needs may arise due to new competencies that are required on the labour market. Ideally, universities respond in such a way that alumni and other professionals are involved in thinking with educators about the content and form of UCE, thereby developing new forms of co-creation of knowledge. But at the same time, the workload within universities is already high and there are sometimes still calls to leave this type of education entirely to others, for instance, to specialised and/or commercial providers. Overall, the discourse on the position of UCE is not without controversy.

The aim of UCE in general is to exert impact in at least three domains: To have impact on the *motivation and performance of professionals*; to have impact on *dealing with or even solving societal challenges* such as the global climate change; and to have an impact on *social cohesion, social engagement and active citizenship*.

For achieving impact in these domains, universities need to work together, to collaborate and to generate sustainable partnerships with public and private societal partners, with training institutions and with other knowledge-intensive organisations. Strengthening the connection between education and research within universities while also including partners is also of great importance. Thus, research universities as well as universities of applied sciences need to improve and develop a professional repertoire for establishing and maintaining these forms of collaboration.

The focus of the eucen conference 2023 in Utrecht was on collaboration and connection: How to jointly identify and articulate the need for expertise as well as the need for intelligible learning and professional development? How can we as universities address those needs with UCE? What does that mean for our current portfolio? How can we cooperatively develop new knowledge and gain wider insights? What connections should we develop or strengthen? And how can we organise cooperation and create participation and learning networks?

During the conference, the changing positioning of UCE in society and within educational institutions was discussed. Future horizons of UCE were explored: Futures that might be less about courses and degrees, and about teaching and learning hierarchies, but more about participatory, mutual learning, of becoming a knowledge partner in a learning network with several actors.

This volume of the European Journal for University Lifelong Learning (EJULL) includes a selection of papers that address the topic of the eucen 2023 conference from different angles. They focus on three themes under the umbrella of collaboration and connection: (a) cooperation and cocreation and how they jointly create impactful UCE, (b) modern workplace learning in relation to higher education developments and impactful UCE, and (c) embedding UCE within the core of the university.

The opening short paper by *Marian Thunnissen*, A stakeholder approach to Lifelong Learning, sets the context of lifelong learning in the host country of the eucen conference, the Netherlands. The author highlights recent developments in Europe and the Netherlands around the role and relevance of the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in lifelong learning for the LLL ecosystem.

The following four articles focus on *cooperation and co-creation* and how they jointly create impactful UCE.

The discussion paper by *Mauro Palumbo and Roberta Piazza* from the Italian Network of UCE (RUIAP) discusses the role of the network in supporting the university to strengthen the impact of LLL and UE activities. It hence shows the relevance on national UCE networks and the important role they play in supporting UCE on a policy level.

The innovative practice article by *Esther de Groot, Mathé Delissen, Debbie Vermond, Carmen Erkelens, Frans H. Rutten, and Dorien LM Zwart* focus on continuous professional education with and for healthcare professionals. The authors illustrate with two projects how they reach impact by building a network with stakeholders, therefore ensuring the participation of “busy professions”.

In the following innovative practice piece *Loes Meijer, Esther de Groot, Grainne P Kearney, François Schellevis, and Roger Damoiseaux* dive deeper into the effects of disruptive developments and the constant change in organisations. Also drawing their example from the healthcare domain, the authors reflect upon an approach that facilitates collaborative and continuous learning with change: the Change-Laboratory.

A research paper that examines the connections between theory and practice through a didactical lens concludes this first thematic lens. *Anita Mörth* presents a research-based model of didactical actions in UCE that helps to illustrate the actors and their manifold actions that are aimed at interconnecting theory and practice on multiple levels within and outside higher education institutions.

The next two articles address *modern workplace learning in relation to higher education developments* and impactful UCE.

The research paper by *Kelly Streekstra, Koen Wessels, Peter Pelzer, Jesse Hoffman, and Josie Chambers* on the potential of didactic mixing in lifelong learning critically engages in didactic mixing in two courses in sustainable education. By making use of action research and reflective practice, the authors show through the lens of teachers how didactic mixing can work in future-oriented didactic settings.

In the following research paper *Chryssa Themeli, Ruth Maloszek, and Carme Royo* present case studies from a European project that explored the possibilities of combining peer learning with Augmented Reality. The case studies seek to prove the efficacy of this approach that can be applied in all fields of education, from primary school to higher education and continuing education.

Embedding UCE within the core of the university is the focus of the last three articles of this volume.

Taking the route via the new and potential game changer within UCE, micro degrees, *Julia Reinman* shows in her short paper, how a university can come closer to becoming a lifelong learning university. They present and critically reflect on the case of designing flexible learning pathways through micro degree programmes at Tallin University.

In the following discussion paper, a more systemic perspective is taken. *Markus Weil* discusses the relations of higher education and UCE with the example of the Swiss educational system. He aims at systematising the concept of co-operation with a focus on structural and institutional perspectives including contextual preconditions.

The final innovative practice paper by *Clelia Paraluppi, Patricia Mancebo May, Ceyrine Pellikaan, and Naomi Wahls* presents the steps taken towards an enhanced quality assurance system at the TU Delft Extension School for Continuing Education through an organisational cultural change. The authors share the lessons learned on establishing an organisational quality culture, defining QA standards and processes, and showcase how the professionalisation of instructors plays a pivotal role in offering high-quality continuing education.

Our closing “*Three questions to...*” in this volume are posed by *Wieger Bakker*, and the answers are provided by *Joost Korte, Director-General of DG Employment, Social affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) in the European Commission*. Joost Korte emphasises the relevance of university continuing education for both the economic and social development of the European Union. In his view, it is upskilling and reskilling in shorter training courses, in particular, that universities can provide as key to lifelong employability.

This extra-large volume of the European Journal of Lifelong Learning is proof of high-quality developments regarding cooperation and connection in university continuing education, as well as of lively discussions on UCE between different stakeholders throughout Europe. The articles frame UCE in different geographic and political contexts, including perspectives from Belgium, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Switzerland and the Netherlands. We are proud of having ten articles in this volume: three research papers, five short papers and

innovative practice articles as well as two discussion papers. For this feat of strength, we would like to thank all authors for their submitted works and their energy for further developing and further improving their articles. Furthermore, a big thanks to all reviewers of this volume for their invaluable constructive and always appreciative feedback. Please stay with us in the New Year. And finally, to all readers: for their patience in waiting for this journal edition until the end of this year. We wish you insightful reading and a peaceful turn of the year.

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