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Institutional practices of implementing lifelong learning in higher education

Research report



Education 2030

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FOREWORD

Higher education institutions are key players in promoting lifelong learning. By offering a variety of educational programmes in different modalities, they address the diverse needs and interests of learners. By establishing flexible learning pathways, they help ensure continuity of learning throughout life. And by maintaining close interaction with the private sector and local communities, they contribute to socially relevant teaching and research, fulfilling an important social function.

This research report presents six case studies of universities in different regions of the world and offers insights into the practical implementation of lifelong learning in the higher education context. It examines regulations and strategic frameworks that support universities' commitment to lifelong learning, describes how they are responding to new learning demands, and provides examples of specific programmes and initiatives that promote lifelong learning. The report also discusses the challenges these institutions face and how they are addressing them.

The case studies were developed as part of a joint research project between the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and Shanghai Open University on the contribution of higher education institutions to lifelong learning. It is published concurrently with the results of an international survey on this topic (UIL and SOU, 2023) and supplements the quantitative survey data with relevant qualitative research.

This report constitutes a valuable resource for policy-makers, higher education leaders, educators and other stakeholders engaged in promoting lifelong learning. The findings presented in this report are conceived as a source of inspiration to further expand and enrich the contribution of higher education institutions to lifelong learning to better serve communities and learners.

David Atchoarena
Director, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

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The case studies report includes detailed accounts of how lifelong learning is understood and implemented within the context of higher education institutions. UIL would like to thank the universities that agreed to be part of this study, namely the Universidad Nacional del Litoral in Argentina, Université de Montréal in Canada, East China Normal University in China, University College Cork in Ireland, Saint Joseph University of Beirut in Lebanon and Ndejje University in Uganda.

A number of people contributed their expertise to the success of the research and were involved in the preparation of the report. Substantial contributions to the development of the case studies were made by Ms Ashley Stepanek Lockhart, Ms Clarisa Yerovi and Mr Abdeljalil Akkari, who were responsible for data collection and preparing first drafts of cases. In addition, the initial drafting process was supported by Ms Kirstin Sonne.

Lastly, we would like to thank Ms Margarita Guarello de Toro, Mr Balázs Németh, Mr Michael Osborne, Mr Johnny Sung and Ms Thérèse Zhang Pulkowski for taking the time to review and provide valued feedback to the draft report.

Project information and UIL team

This report is published as part of a wider research project on the contribution of higher education institutions to lifelong learning, which was conducted by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and Shanghai Open University from 2020 to 2022. Key components of the project included an extensive literature review, an international survey on higher education institutions' engagement in lifelong learning (LLL) and case studies on institutional approaches for LLL, as well as research on the promotion of LLL in open universities in the People's Republic of China. These activities are further complemented by three thematic studies, on (1) the role of universities in building learning cities, (2) universities addressing the needs of older learners, and (3) universities' social responsibility and community engagement. Based on the comprehensive sets of quantitative and qualitative data collected across all world regions, this research constitutes a major step forward in building an international knowledge base on the role of HEIs in establishing LLL opportunities for all.

The research project was overseen by UIL's Director, Mr David Atchoarena, coordinated by Team Leader Mr Raúl Valdés-Cotera, and conducted by Ms Edith Hammer, Ms Mo Wang and Ms Nora Lorenz.

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1 Introduction

In many countries, higher education is gaining prominence as a means for the general population to engage in lifelong learning (LLL), whether for personal or professional development, or to participate in broader societal change. In some cases, national governments have introduced policies or funding instruments that create incentives for higher education institutions (HEIs) to align their offerings more closely with changing labour market demands and societal needs, and to expand access for groups previously underrepresented in higher education. Key trends in the higher education sector and the associated global socio-economic transformations were discussed in detail in the international survey report, which was published as part of the research project on the contribution of higher education institutions to LLL (UIL and SOU, 2023).

This case study report moves from an international overview of the policies, structures and mechanisms that support LLL in higher education to the close study of institutional practices. It explores the interrelations between national policy environments and institutional strategies. It examines different approaches taken by universities to develop, implement and monitor LLL activities, and further provides practical examples of how universities engage with diverse groups of learners through their LLL mission. As such, this report's value lies in offering both general insights into the implementation of LLL in HEIs, and case-specific descriptions and analyses of institutional policies and practices.

1.1 Selection and overview of cases

The HEIs under investigation all took part in the international HEI-LLL survey conducted jointly by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), the International Association of Universities (IAU) and Shanghai Open University (SOU) in autumn 2020 and were selected based on a number of criteria. Most importantly, HEIs were required to demonstrate a strong commitment to LLL, and a track record of implementing it. Most of the selected institutions have a LLL strategy in place (or were in the process of developing one at the time of data collection) or have established a dedicated unit for LLL. The institutions' regional distribution was also factored into the selection process, and care was taken to ensure that the HEIs under investigation represented a mix of public and private, and campus-based and mixed-mode institutions. The HEIs that were included in the final selection – Universidad Nacional del Litoral (UNL) in Argentina, Université de Montréal (UdeM) in Canada, East China Normal University (ECNU) in the People's Republic of China, University College Cork (UCC) in Ireland, Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ) in Lebanon and Ndejje University in Uganda – thus not only reflect the regional and institutional diversity that was captured through the international HEI-LLL survey, but also illustrate six specific cases that stand out for their engagement with LLL in different contexts.

TABLE 1 Overview of institutions included in the case studies research

	Country	Established in	Funding	Mode of provision
Universidad Nacional del Litoral	Argentina	1919	Public[1]	Mixed-mode HEI[2]
Université de Montréal	Canada	1878	Public	Campus-based HEI[3]
East China Normal University	China	1951	Public	Campus-based HEI
University College Cork	Ireland	1845	Public, but generates significant private funds (more than 20 per cent)	Campus-based HEI
Saint Joseph University of Beirut	Lebanon	1875	Private, not for profit	Mixed-mode HEI
Ndejje University	Uganda	1992	Private, not for profit	Campus-based HEI

1 'Public HEI' refers to an institution with a large share (80 per cent or more) of public funding.
2 'Mixed-mode HEI' refers to an institution with at least 25 per cent of content delivered as distance education.
3 'Campus-based HEI' refers to an institution with at least 80 per cent of content delivered on campus.

Although all six HEIs under investigation have integrated LLL into their higher education provision, they are situated in very different national, and therefore also different socio-political, economic and cultural contexts and, between them, they cover all five world regions. Four of the six universities are campus-based, offering primarily in-person teaching – at least until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – while UNL and USJ already offered different modes of study (both on-campus and at a distance) prior to the pandemic. They also vary significantly in terms of their orientation towards research or teaching, size and age. The university with the largest student population is UdeM, with over 65,000 students enrolled in its various undergraduate and graduate programmes, while Ndejje University is the smallest, with around 8,000 full-time students. Ndejje University is also the youngest of the six universities, founded in 1992. By contrast, the oldest institution, USJ, dates back to 1839. While their founding years may be over 150 years apart, Ndejje University and USJ have in common that they are private, Christian institutions, affiliated with the Church of Uganda and the Jesuit Order, respectively, unlike the other institutions under investigation, which are publicly funded. This variety in student population, founding year and type of institution has implications for the universities' institutional agendas, the resources available to them (both financial and other), and the degree to which they may prioritize LLL and outreach activities. The conditions under which institutions implement LLL and their success in this area vary accordingly.

Université de Montréal (UdeM) stands out for its highly flexible provision, allowing adult learners (including those without traditional qualifications) to pursue both its mainstream programming as well as the more vocational, labour market-oriented courses offered by its Faculty of Continuing Education. Much of UdeM's provision is delivered as short courses leading to microcredentials, which can be 'mixed and matched' to suit learners' individual schedules and career development plans, reflecting the prioritization, at the provincial and national levels, of education and training for professional development.

Ireland places a similar emphasis on work-related learning. **University College Cork (UCC)** offers a notable example of an institution responding to the growing demand for upskilling and reskilling while maintaining its long-standing commitment to making higher education more accessible to traditionally underserved groups, realized primarily through its Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) centre, the oldest of its kind in the country. Well-established as the centre may be, the case study raises pertinent questions about the role, status, and financing sources of such a dedicated LLL unit.

By contrast, **Universidad Nacional del Litoral (UNL)** has no such unit, nor does it have an overarching institutional LLL policy document in place. The case study demonstrates how the principles of LLL nonetheless permeate the university's mission and activities, as evidenced by its free, highly accessible and community-oriented provision. Challenges in the implementation of these principles, however, remain, particularly in relation to learner retention rates and UNL's limited targeted provision for marginalized groups, prompting questions as to whether an explicit policy is needed in order to promote LLL more effectively and equitably.

In stark contrast with UNL, a large public university with a long history of providing higher and continuing education for free, all provision offered at **Ndejje University**, a relatively small, private institution, is fee-based. Publicly and privately funded scholarships do not come close to meeting demand, and financing the university's LLL programming – including its bridging course, which offers an important route into higher education for learners who do not meet the standard entry requirements – remains a significant challenge. Poor internet connectivity and limited availability of the digital tools necessary for online learning are additional obstacles faced by Ndejje University. Nonetheless, due to rapidly changing public attitudes towards higher education and LLL, the university finds itself well placed to mobilize existing links with the local community and businesses to make higher education more accessible, and to contribute to poverty eradication and social empowerment in its surrounding communities.

Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ) operates in a similarly challenging context, which continues to be marked by political and socio-economic crises, high unemployment and under-resourced public services. Most HEIs in Lebanon, including USJ, do not receive public funds, nor is there any government policy or legal framework in place to promote LLL in higher education. This grants HEIs considerable autonomy, allowing USJ, with its international outlook and long-standing reputation for academic excellence, to offer innovative, fee-based learning opportunities to learners in Lebanon and beyond, especially through its Professional Training Center (CFP). As the case study demonstrates, LLL has become an important source of income for the university, as well as enriching it through the links it establishes with the private sector and with other educational institutions, both locally and internationally, adding further value to its mainstream provision.

The benefits of integrating LLL into higher education have long been recognized at **East China Normal University (ECNU)**, originally a teacher training college and now a national leader in educational research and teaching. Several units at ECNU share responsibilities for delivering, evaluating and conducting research on LLL, often in collaboration with the Shanghai Municipal Government. Despite the high profile of ECNU's LLL activities (which include online learning platforms for the general public, flexible learning pathways and counselling services for adult learners) and the huge popularity they enjoy (with demand generally exceeding supply), ECNU

continues to face challenges in reaching out to certain target groups which are currently underrepresented in higher education.

1.2. Research framework and data collection

The six case studies were developed collaboratively by UIL and international consultants. To ensure a common standard across all cases, the development process was based on a research framework and a template for drafting the case studies, both of which defined the key topics to be covered, detailed questions to be addressed, and the structure of the case studies. The framework further defined the data collection method and provided guidance to researchers for conducting semi-structured interviews with HEI representatives. A list of interview partners is included in the appendix.

Relevant sources for developing the case studies included national policies, strategies and frameworks, as well as institutional documents (strategic papers, annual reports, web content, etc.), supplemented by academic literature on the topic, if available. In addition, semi-structured interviews (and in some cases additional written correspondence) with two or three representatives of the institutions served as a core source of information. All interviews were held virtually due to ongoing restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. After analysing the materials and writing up the case studies, each draft was shared with the focal point at the respective institution to allow for a fact check.

The case studies presented in this report are all structured in the same way and presented in detail in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the respective institutional strategies, governance and practices. Based on the common research framework, each case study comprises the following sections (**Table 2**):

TABLE 2 Overview of case study sections and content

Introduction	• Provides the rationale for selecting the institution for the case study. • Sets out the main characteristics of the institution's strategic approach to and implementation of LLL.
National context	• Gives an overview of the national higher education system. • Provides information on the legislation, policies, strategies, regulatory frameworks and national funding schemes relevant to HEIs' engagement in LLL and, within that context, explores enabling and hindering factors for promoting LLL.
Institutional context	• Describes the institutional policies and strategies in place for promoting LLL. • Explores priority areas (e.g. continuing education, community or civic engagement, sustainable development) and target groups (e.g. older learners, the unemployed, working professionals) as defined in institutional policies and strategies. • Examines governance structures and mechanisms for LLL (leadership, main stakeholders, roles and responsibilities across faculties and departments, degree of centralization) and explores the functions of the LLL unit (if such a unit exists). • Examines success factors and challenges of LLL within the institutional context.
Implementation	• Presents a detailed account of selected LLL activities that the institution has implemented. • Explores the availability of flexible learning pathways, flexible learning options – including online learning – and ways of fostering community engagement. • Considers the involvement of external stakeholders, such as public organizations, private companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), for LLL implementation. • Addresses the impact of LLL activities, including on socio-economic development in the wider region.
Main lessons learned	• Summarizes the key points of the case study. • Discusses good practices that have been established, as well as areas for further development and improvement.

Significant variations between the participating institutions make it difficult to draw parallels or conduct a comparative analysis between the different cases. Additional methodological limitations further detract from the generalizability of the findings. Like the international survey (UIL and SOU, 2023), which was based on information provided by the participating HEIs, the case studies draw heavily on interviews conducted with the institutions' representatives, and documents published by the institutions themselves; hence, a certain degree of self-reporting bias cannot be ruled out. As was the case with the HEI-LLL survey respondents, varying levels of awareness and differences in individual interpretations among interviewees may further limit the comparability of the individual cases. The purpose of this report is therefore not to offer a comparative analysis or evaluation of different institutions and their LLL practices, but rather to provide an insight into the underlying dynamics, structures and mechanisms shaping LLL in higher education institutions, as well as the interlinked contributions of various internal and external actors and stakeholders involved in its implementation.

2. UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DEL LITORAL, Argentina

Universidad Nacional del Litoral (UNL) is a public university in Argentina's Santa Fe province. As such, it is funded mainly by the national government. There are no tuition fees for regular undergraduate and graduate courses offered by the university, and access to undergraduate courses is guaranteed for everyone with a high school certificate. Outside the scope of regular undergraduate and graduate courses, the university's provision is fee-based but relatively affordable, and access to it varies depending on the subject and level in question. As a public university, and in line with Argentina's egalitarian higher education tradition, UNL conceives of education as a public social good, and a human and universal right.

UNL does not have a dedicated institutional LLL strategy in place. Nonetheless, the university has a significant and long-standing tradition of supporting both continuing education and community engagement. The university is an interesting LLL case study as it poses the question as to whether an informal strategy is sufficient for successful engagement with LLL in a national context where no dedicated LLL policy is in place, or whether a more formalized strategy is needed to ensure sustainability.

2.1 National context

Argentina has 112 universities and 19 university institutes (institutions focusing on a single discipline), approximately half of which are publicly funded (Ministerio de Educación, 2021). There are no admission restrictions or quotas in the public higher education system: Argentinians need only to have completed secondary education in order to access higher education (CINDA, 2011). By law, an exception is made for people over the age of 25 with the necessary preparation or job experience, who can access higher education through evaluations undertaken by the HEI.[4] A further characteristic of the Argentinian public higher education system is that undergraduate and graduate studies are free of charge for both Argentinians and international students, unlike other public systems in the region

4 Article 7 of the Higher Education Law (Honourable Congress of Argentina, 1995).



Quick facts about Universidad Nacional del Litoral

- UNL was established in 1919, making it the fifth oldest university in Argentina. It was founded as part of the 1918 university reform movement in Argentina, which called for the creation of democratic and self-governing institutions to provide free, open and public higher education.
- UNL consists of 10 faculties and two university centres that offer 225 career programmes, including undergraduate and degree courses, master's degrees, doctoral degrees and specializations (UNL, 2022).
- There are almost 57,000 students enrolled at UNL at undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate levels (ibid.).
- Staff at UNL comprises almost 3,500 university teachers, more than 2,100 researchers and 1,120 non-teaching personnel (ibid.).
- Based in Santa Fe, the capital of Santa Fe province, UNL has other academic facilities across the province, specifically in Esperanza, Reconquista and Gálvez.
- At the time of data collection, UNL was involved in more than 600 research projects. Furthermore, the university is carrying out 48 community service projects, which aim to strengthen democracy, identify problems and social needs, seek the active participation of social actors, and promote continuous training and the exchange of knowledge between various stakeholders (ibid.).

(e.g. Peru or Chile).[5] As a result, Argentina has one of the highest gross enrolment rates in tertiary education in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) (UNESCO, 2021). Around a third (33.5 per cent) of new students are aged 19 or younger and have progressed to higher education directly from secondary education, and 80 per cent of all enrolment is concentrated in the public system (Ministerio de Educación, 2021). However, retention, progression and completion rates remain a significant problem in Argentina's higher education system. Fewer than 30 per cent of students finish their studies on time (with a stark difference between public [25.7 per cent] and private [41.5 per cent] HEIs), and in 2018–2019, only 61.6 per cent continued their studies after the first year (Ministerio de Educación, 2021). Distance learning alternatives have to some extent addressed this problem: from 2010 to 2019, the number of distance learning graduates in the country increased by 190 per cent. However, the impact of distance learning remains limited, as only 5.7 per cent of undergraduate and graduate academic programmes, and 3.5 per cent of postgraduate programmes, are offered through distance learning.

Argentina's higher education system is based on the Higher Education Law – Law No. 24,521 (Honourable Congress of Argentina, 1995). The law establishes that the national government, provincial governments and Buenos Aires' city government are responsible for guaranteeing equal opportunities and conditions for learners' access to, retention in and graduation from the different available learning pathways, and that government support should be provided to anyone who needs it, in line with existing legal requirements.[6] The law also charges governments with the equitable provision, in public HEIs, of scholarships, adequate infrastructure and technological resources for those who are economically disadvantaged, as well as with the establishment of appropriate measures to ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities. As to LLL specifically, the National Education Law – Law 26,206 (Honourable Congress of Argentina, 2006) contains a chapter dedicated to 'permanent education for young people and adults', one of the country's eight modalities of education.[7] This modality guarantees the provision of literacy and basic general education up to the level of compulsory school education for those who were unable to complete it at the standard age, and establishes governments' responsibility for providing educational opportunities throughout life. This modality is thus the country's closest equivalent to a LLL policy. Both the regulations governing higher education and those pertaining to permanent education for young people and adults are implemented by designated offices within the Ministry of Education, although in different secretariats, which – as was pointed out in the interviews conducted with UNL – are not closely linked.

As a federal country, Argentina assigns most of the responsibilities related to education to the individual provinces; however, most universities fall within the remit of the national government. Nonetheless, the Higher Education Law establishes that all universities (public and private) have academic and institutional autonomy. In other words, universities define their own bylaws; choose their organizational structures; elect their authorities; establish their responsibilities; administrate their assets and resources; create curricula; formulate and develop study plans; undertake academic research; provide community engagement services; grant academic degrees and titles; and employ, promote and demote teaching and non-teaching staff, among other duties.

In general, the concept of LLL is not widespread either within the Argentinian higher education system or in wider Argentinian society. There is no national LLL policy in place, and no dedicated budget or funding scheme for HEIs' LLL initiatives. Without a national policy and the corresponding budget allocation, HEIs, including UNL, have not been incentivized to develop a specific strategy for LLL. However, because public universities are free for all and access to undergraduate programmes is open to everyone who has completed secondary education,

5 In Argentina, higher education levels are defined as follows: 1. Undergraduate: degrees are awarded once a study plan has been completed with a workload of no fewer than 1,600 hours over a period of two and a half academic years. 2. Graduate: degrees are awarded once a study plan has been completed with a minimum workload of 2,600 face-to-face hours (or equivalent) over a minimum of four academic years and a maximum of seven academic years. 3. Postgraduate: degrees require a previous graduate degree. The duration ranges from one to four years for specialty and master's degrees, and a maximum of seven years for doctoral degrees. Graduate degrees are not funded by the national government; hence, public universities general charge tuition fees for graduate degree programmes. However, the national government does award scholarships for doctoral degrees (Ministerio de Educación, 2021).

6 Derived from Article 2 of the Higher Education Law: 'Garantizar la igualdad de oportunidades y condiciones en el acceso, la permanencia, la graduación y el egreso en las distintas alternativas y trayectorias educativas del nivel para todos quienes lo requieran y reúnan las condiciones legales establecidas en esta ley'.

7 Article 17 of the National Education Law establishes the structure of the national education system, which comprises four levels and eight modalities. The four levels are: (1) initial education, (2) primary education, (3) secondary education and (4) higher education. The modalities pertain to organizational and/or curricular features of educational provision at one or more levels that seek to respond to specific training requirements and take account of permanent or temporary, personal and/or contextual particularities in order to guarantee equality as regards the right to education, and to comply with the legal, technical and pedagogical requirements of the various educational levels. The eight modalities comprise: (1) vocational and technical education, (2) arts education, (3) special education, (4) permanent education for young people and adults, (5) rural education, (6) bilingual intercultural education, (7) education in contexts pertaining to the deprivation of liberty and (8) home and hospital education.

public universities' budgets indirectly cover education for adults and online learning (in which more adult learners than school-leaving-aged students enrol), among others. As the following sections demonstrate, UNL has taken steps to incorporate a LLL approach into its provision despite the absence of a national or institutional framework.

2.2 Institutional context

UNL comprises 14 research and technology institutes or centres, two university centres in Reconquista and Gálvez (located in Santa Fe province), a campus in Rafaela, a language centre, two technical schools, a higher school of health, a higher institute of music, a business accelerator, a technology park, a radio station, a secondary school (serving 12–18-year-olds), an elementary school and a pre-school. UNL is one of the first universities to be founded after the 1918 university reform movement. This movement later spread throughout Latin America and advocated for universities' democratic self-governance based on the principles of student participation in the decision-making process; free tuition; open access to higher education; the promotion of science; academic freedom; secularism; and strong ties with society (Buchbinder, 2018; UNL, 2012). In line with this tradition, UNL has full normative, political, academic, administrative and financial autonomy. As per national legislation, UNL provides free access to undergraduate courses to anyone who has finished high school (including non-Argentinians). It provides scholarships to ethnic minorities and offers affordable courses and certifications for all (regardless of age, economic background, or education level), including flexible learning pathways (FLPs) to better facilitate access.

2.2.1 LLL across UNL

UNL does not have a strategy or other guiding document in place to define the university's objectives, governance structures and measures with respect to LLL. Moreover, there is no dedicated unit or position tasked with the university-wide coordination and implementation of LLL. Yet, despite the lack of a LLL strategy at the institutional level or a national policy to guide HEIs, UNL remains committed to promoting LLL, and has established a range of LLL programmes and projects, which are delivered by various units and institutes across the university. Most of them fall within the scope of community engagement and continuing education, and are coordinated and delivered primarily by the university's Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat and the Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat. The Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat is responsible for community engagement initiatives, working with more than 200 organizations and leading more than 100 ongoing outreach projects. It also runs a continuing education programme and, in 2019, offered 55 courses in which over a thousand students participated (UNL, 2020). In addition to their own LLL activities, the Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat and the Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat coordinate activities through their respective offices in each faculty. For example, in 2020, UNL's Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat had 471 active agreements with external organizations, trained more than 7,000 learners, developed projects with businesses in 32 cities, and operated ten active Innovation and Development Units within local governments (UNL, 2021a). Furthermore, other secretariats and faculties at UNL conduct their own LLL initiatives.

At UNL, continuing education comprises postgraduate programmes, professional training for graduates of the university, and training for learners who do not have the required level of education to access a degree programme. Continuing education programmes are run by the two secretariats mentioned above, as well as by other secretariats across the university. Additional continuing education programmes are offered within the faculties and coordinated by the Academic and Institutional Planning Secretariat. UNL also provides dedicated financial aid and general support to learners from underprivileged or underserved communities. These support services are administered by the Well-being, Health and Quality of Life Secretariat. This Secretariat also oversees the development of cultural activities for retired UNL staff and teachers. Finally, the Academic and Institutional Planning Secretariat coordinates all of the above initiatives and programmes. This Secretariat holds working sessions with offices offering comparable programmes or programmes with similar beneficiaries, in order to prevent programmes from overlapping, and to ensure that the overall provision at UNL is coherent. While there may not be a policy or framework regulating LLL activities at UNL, there is evidently a degree of coordination at the institutional level, albeit not yet formalized.

2.2.2 UNL's LLL engagement: Success factors and challenges

In view of its commitment to LLL and existing programmes, UNL has the potential to develop and implement an institutional LLL strategy. To achieve this, however, it needs to disseminate the concept of LLL within the university, thereby contributing to an institution-wide culture of LLL. Such a culture, or even a more general awareness, of LLL is currently lacking at UNL and across Argentina. While the present study may provide an impetus for the development and formalization of LLL as a concept at UNL, much more work remains to be done in this area. As indicated in correspondence with university representatives, it is envisioned that a specific LLL component will be included in UNL's next strategic plan, the development of which commenced in 2021. This would mark an important step towards a whole-institution approach to LLL, and could pave the way for better funding opportunities for LLL.

There are a number of factors that are conducive to the development of a LLL strategy at UNL. First, like all universities in Argentina, UNL's autonomy is guaranteed by the Higher Education Law. This would allow UNL to develop a LLL strategy without requiring a mandate or permission from the national government, in line with its own mission to provide access to lifelong and life-wide education for all. Another important element in the development of a LLL strategy is the support and cooperation of external stakeholders. Here, UNL can draw on its long tradition of maintaining strong relationships with the community (including the private sector, NGOs, local organizations and local government). There is a strong interest among businesses, local governments and organizations to work with UNL, and a huge demand among the general public for learning activities and training organized by the university, not least due to the prestige UNL enjoys across the region. This prestige could be mobilized to raise the profile of LLL at UNL.

Finally, the vast increase in online learning provision in response to the COVID-19 pandemic could also represent a new opportunity to further LLL initiatives, in particular the university's continuing education programmes and activities conducted with local organizations. As the following section demonstrates, online learning has already been applied effectively by UNL's various units and secretariats in order to save learners time and money (by eliminating travel costs), and to circumvent the problem of insufficient learning spaces at UNL. The university is therefore in a favourable position to take the next steps towards institutionalizing LLL and developing an institution-wide policy and structure to frame its engagement with LLL, which, as will be discussed in the following section, is already considerable.

2.3 Implementation

In addition to continuing education offerings and community engagement projects, UNL has also set up measures to enable FLPs and flexible learning provision, including online learning. It has a strong tradition of including adult learners in regular degree programmes. The participation of adult learners is higher in distance learning compared to on-campus learning, and the greater availability of online learning opportunities due to the COVID-19 pandemic has benefited adult learners who may otherwise have discontinued their studies. Prior to the pandemic, UNL already had several measures in place to facilitate access for older students, as well as for students from non-traditional backgrounds and with additional personal or professional commitments.

2.3.1 Widening access through flexible learning provision and pathways

In accordance with the National Higher Education Law, the university allows learners over the age of 25 to join a degree programme without a high school diploma (learners are assessed and admitted on a case-by-case basis) and, instead of having to pass an entrance exam, all students, regardless of their age, are required to complete an articulation course related to their prospective degree programme (unless they have already started an undergraduate or graduate degree in the past, in which case they are exempt). Cognizant of the fact that one-third of students are in employment (a proportion that is even higher among final-year students), many faculties, especially the larger ones, offer evening classes to better accommodate students, or grant them exemptions from mandatory attendance. Moreover, UNL allows students wishing to change their degree specialization to transfer their credits within and between faculties. Credit transfer from other HEIs is also possible, provided that the student's previous institution has an agreement with UNL. Otherwise, the student can request that their learning from their previous institution be accredited through UNL's Academic Secretariat, with the Academic Committee taking the final decision in the matter.

UNL's efforts to use digital technologies to make more flexible learning provision possible are well established and pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2004, the university set up its online learning platform, UNLVirtual, with the aim of expanding educational coverage and democratizing access to knowledge and university training (UNL, 2021b). It currently offers close to 60 programmes at undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate levels, and serves over 10,000 students nationwide. Courses are offered by different faculties and cover a range of topics, including more vocational subjects, such as public and health administration, landscape gardening and video game design. However, the faculties attracting the greatest number of online learners are the Faculty of Legal and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Health Sciences (UNL, 2020). Distance learning differs from on-campus learning not just by setting but also by curriculum structure, with modules organized sequentially in distance learning, meaning that students are required to complete courses one by one, rather than taking them in parallel in the same semester. Currently, only 14 per cent of all students opt to study remotely. However, this number is on the increase: according to UNL's 2019 report, 17 per cent of new students, most of them adult learners, chose to pursue a degree online. As with the rest of the university's provision, funding for undergraduate and graduate programmes is covered by the national government, and most of the remaining educational offerings are funded directly by students at a minimal cost.

In addition to offering degree programmes to all learners for free, the university has a range of scholarship schemes in place to provide additional financial support with living costs to those in need, for example students from remote areas whose transport costs are covered, while other scholarships assist with housing costs (UNL, 2021d). In 2019, 977 financial aid scholarships were awarded, benefiting less than 2 per cent of the

student population. UNL also has targeted provision in place for vulnerable and underrepresented groups: an accessibility programme for people with disabilities provides the materials and tools needed to support their learning, including specific software to help students, and training programmes for teachers on how to address the educational needs of people with disabilities. Moreover, UNL has introduced measures to promote the participation of regional Indigenous communities, primarily the Mocovi community, which counts over 22,000 members in Argentina, more than half of whom live in Santa Fe province (making up 0.4 per cent of its population). The Mocovi, like other Indigenous groups, remain underrepresented in higher education as they often do not finish high school. UNL provides financial aid and tutors for Mocovi students during their first years at UNL. Despite this, according to the interview, only 10 to 15 Mocovi students join the university each year. This points to a wider problem that not only UNL, but HEIs across Argentina face: the strong focus on equal, universal, free access risks drawing attention away from the specific needs of particularly vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as Indigenous communities and students with disabilities.

2.3.2 Continuing education and adult learners

Continuing education is a priority and one of the pillars of LLL at UNL. Due to UNL's reputation in the province, continuing education provision is in high demand and covers a wide range of topics, from specialized accounting to air conditioning installation. Unlike the degree programmes at UNL, most continuing education is fee-based. However, fees are generally very low and, according to interviewees, serve to ensure that learners who register remain committed to the course, given that high attrition rates are a major problem in higher education in Argentina in general. As one interviewee explained, the university does not run continuing education programmes in order to make a profit, but to make higher education more accessible. UNL also offers a number of free continuing education programmes, which are financed by the government or businesses. The revenue that the university generates from courses or training for private-sector partners are channelled into other LLL initiatives, such as community engagement projects. The university's continuing education programmes are mostly attended by adult learners.

Continuing education at UNL is divided into four categories. The first category comprises postgraduate courses and programmes for learners who already hold degrees, and courses for UNL graduates and other professionals working in relevant fields. The second category covers other professional training courses that are open to everyone (a higher education degree is not a prerequisite), such as the course, 'Communication during a pandemic', which was recently added to the programme catalogue. The third category covers general training. These courses are open to the community and are related to broad topics such as human rights, responsible citizenship, and so on. Finally, the fourth category comprises vocational courses, which are open to the general public but specifically target people who do not hold a higher education degree or a high school diploma. Furthermore, UNL offers language courses that are open to everyone in the community and require the payment of a minimal fee for students and retired people, a low fee for UNL staff and graduates, and a moderate fee for the general public. Vocational courses last at least four months, while the other types of courses have varying lengths, ranging from one month to one year. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, courses and programmes were offered both in person and online, with the exception of the vocational courses, which mostly require on-campus training. The popularity of specific courses varies depending on the demands of the labour market.

As outlined in the previous section, continuing education is delivered by various units across the university, including both academic faculties and specific secretariats. The vocational courses outlined above are administered by the Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat and run by the Higher Industrial School. The latter, formerly the Institute of Vocational Training, was established in the 1920s, demonstrating UNL's historic commitment to community outreach. The Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat also offers training programmes that address social problems and aim to provide citizens with the tools to resolve them. These training instances are held online and usually form part of the ongoing work of an outreach team (described in more detail below). For example, an outreach team working on environmental education would offer a course on this topic. Finally, the Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat also provides courses or workshops that specialize in arts for the community.

Another unit within UNL that is heavily involved in continuing education is the Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat. In 2020, it offered 76 training programmes, reaching more than 7,000 learners, which is close to the number of new graduate students UNL receives each year (UNL, 2021a). These training programmes are mostly business-oriented, and target both individual entrepreneurs and companies, covering topics such as digital commerce, entrepreneurship management, legislation, teleworking, financing, innovation and cryptocurrencies (UNL, 2021a). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretariat has recognized that online learning has allowed it to recruit more learners, especially professionals working full-time, who previously would have been unable to attend the university. Furthermore, the Secretariat has adapted its training to better suit an online setting. For example, in 2019, the Secretariat ran a programme in digital transformation for small businesses that required two full days of on-campus training. However, due to the pandemic, the programme was adapted to a 1.5-hour workshop, with additional,

short (partly asynchronous) workshops. This new programme is more attractive to entrepreneurs because it is easier to fit around their workload.

In addition to its own continuing education programme, UNL runs courses in collaboration with the public sector. Munigestión, for example, is a programme funded by the Secretariat of University Policy within the national government's Ministry of Education that trains public servants and political personnel from local communities in specific areas such as financial administration, government communications, public policy, education, health, legislation and urban planning (Munigestión, 2021).[8] According to its website, Munigestión includes 29 short online courses, as well as on-site workshops and an on-campus cycle of conferences. Interested members of the public can sign up for the courses at a very affordable price (around US $6). Moreover, UNL has specific agreements in place with the provincial government to provide training in public policy to its public servants, and even runs a master's course in public administration, which is funded by the provincial government for its employees. Similar schemes have been established with private companies and organizations. For instance, UNL works closely with Las Parejas, a conglomerate of regional industrial companies, which pays UNL to train its employees in areas such as digital transformation, entrepreneurship, water resources, agri-food, and information and communication technologies (ICTs). UNL runs these courses in the companies' facilities or on campus. In addition, UNL offers full degree programmes, known as 'carreras a término', in collaboration with the private sector. These degree programmes are offered for a fixed period and are usually funded by businesses. For example, Arcos, a large Argentine food company, commissioned UNL to deliver an undergraduate degree focusing on the food industry, hosted at the company's facilities. Because this degree exceeded the university's normal scope of operations, Arcor funded it for its employees.

8 'Munigestión' is managed by the Secretariat of Territorial Strengthening (within UNL) and the National University of Rosario (UNR).

2.3.3 Community engagement and the university's impact on socio-economic development

Another pillar of the university's implicit LLL strategy is community engagement. Since the 1918 university reform movement, strong relationships with the community have been part of UNL's mandate. This translates both into continuing education opportunities and into projects that empower local organizations and small businesses. These activities are implemented as part of UNL's mission to engage with wider society, but are also a way of 'giving back' to the community that funds the university through taxes. Community engagement is therefore not viewed as charity, but rather as a mutually beneficial relationship between the university and the community. Community engagement is mostly coordinated through the Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat and the Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat, which deliver community projects, training courses and training programmes to the community.

One of the pillars of Argentina's university reform movement and, by extension, one of the founding principles of UNL, is outreach. The university views outreach not just as a chance to give something back to the community through knowledge transfer, but also as an opportunity to co-create new knowledge in order to resolve complex social problems. Accordingly, the Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat works with more than 200 local and international NGOs, schools, neighbourhood associations and local governments to deliver a range of outreach activities, including training and capacity-building for communities, often in response to issues of local relevance. Hence, outreach projects constitute one of the Secretariat's main community engagement initiatives, and aim to develop communities' capacities and make them more resilient and self-reliant.

These outreach projects are conducted by an outreach team consisting of a group of students and faculty members, and led by one professor. The outreach team develops a project with the community in order to solve the latter's problems or address its needs. The university funds these projects, some of which are selected through an open call, while others form part of the university's curriculum. There are more than 100 active outreach teams at the university, despite the fact that professors are offered no incentive to lead an outreach team (i.e. they receive no bonus or promotion). One example of an outreach project is the sustainable tourism project developed with residents of La Boca, a traditional fishing neighbourhood in the city. With the advent of industrial fishing and the growing exploitation of natural resources, fishers found themselves in an increasingly vulnerable situation. To address this problem, a team from UNL developed a sustainable tourism project with the local community, with UNL providing technical support and the local community providing its knowledge of its customs for inclusion in the project.

In addition to these outreach projects, the Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat provides support to the community in different ways. For example, in response to the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple soup kitchens were set up, funded by UNL and coordinated by the Secretariat in Santa Fe. To respond to the COVID-19 health crisis, the Secretariat worked with local associations to develop information materials on COVID-19 safety measures in braille and in the Mocovi language, and provided online teacher training for local teachers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretariat moved its activities online as far as possible, using Moodle and Zoom in line with the rest of the university. However, one of the key differences for the Secretariat has been the way in which it communicates with local organizations, many of whose members do not have access to a stable internet connection or appropriate devices. While the Secretariat used to interact with local organizations on campus, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted it to shift its communication to WhatsApp, which functions well even with limited connectivity, making it perfect for communicating with the most vulnerable people in the province. For example, early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretariat realized that sending high-quality videos through WhatsApp was not feasible due to the connectivity problems experienced by some learners, and adapted its provision accordingly.

Another office that has a strong relationship with the community is the Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat. In 2020, this Secretariat had 471 active formal agreements in place with organizations outside of UNL – a number that was even higher (approximately 700 a year on average) before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.[9] Formal agreements are signed when a working relationship already exists between UNL and an organization, and are designed to develop that relationship further. However, some existing relationships have to date not been laid down in a formal agreement: for example, UNL has well-established ties with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which supported the creation of a platform that allows small businesses in the province to evaluate and improve their online presence.

In recent years, the Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat has furthermore placed a greater emphasis on its collaborations with smaller businesses and women entrepreneurs, in part through establishing business incubators. One of these, located in the university's technology park, is open to biotechnology and engineering businesses. Meanwhile, 'Expresiva' is an incubator designed specifically for start-ups in the cultural sector (Expresiva, 2021), which UNL actively supports through the provision of training and advice. Another incubator, 'Idear', located in the city of Esperanza, offers similar services to local manufacturing businesses. Through these incubators, UNL reaches entrepreneurs beyond those customarily linked to the university, thus deepening its ties with the business community.

Finally, the Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat runs 11 Territorial Innovation and Development Units in collaboration with local governments. Through these units, the university is involved in the local and strategic development of these communities, stimulating knowledge and technology transfer processes, entrepreneurial initiatives and innovation, and multisectoral cooperation, as well as expanding the education and training system (UNL, 2021c). The Secretariat, in collaboration with local governments, has set up videoconference rooms in municipalities to bring its workshops closer to the community. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretariat realized that students respond better to shorter online classes, and has therefore reduced the length of its workshops and courses, and is using tools such as YouTube, which allow it to cover content more comprehensively than before the pandemic. An additional benefit of moving provision online is that the Secretariat's offerings are no longer limited to the availability of rooms and infrastructure at the university.

Both Secretariats' activities are mutually beneficial for UNL and the external stakeholders involved. UNL students benefit greatly both from the outreach projects organized by the Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat, and from the industry and business partnerships established by the Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat, as they create opportunities for students to put their learning into practice, and often result in internships and jobs. Students also develop a stronger commitment to the local community, which in turn contributes to the university's good reputation and to the general esteem in which it is held by the local residents who fund the university through their taxes. In turn, the community, especially its more vulnerable members, benefits from affordable quality training and educational opportunities. Private-sector partnerships are an additional source of income for the university, which redirects this income in order to further develop community engagement programmes. However, because the university has no explicit institutional LLL strategy in place, its LLL initiatives are mostly implemented in a disjointed way. The various components of LLL are treated separately rather than as a part of a unified whole, and are not even recognized as LLL initiatives or as part of a wider LLL strategy. It is thus vital that an explicit LLL strategy be developed in order to help harmonize these separate initiatives and allow them to better integrate and communicate with each other.

9 Active formal agreements refer to those relationships that have been active in the past two years.

2.4 Main lessons learned

The UNL case study illustrates that LLL initiatives can be developed even if no LLL mission for HEIs has been defined at the national level. UNL does not have an institutional LLL strategy in place, nor is there a shared understanding of LLL across the university. As the interviews with UNL representatives showed, there is little awareness of the concept of LLL and interviewees did not necessarily frame the programmes and initiatives outlined above as LLL initiatives. Nevertheless, there are many initiatives at UNL (including continuing education, community engagement, flexible learning provision and pathways, and support for underrepresented groups) that clearly promote LLL. However, to achieve a more coordinated and targeted approach, the university would benefit from an official LLL strategy or framework. Its flexible learning pathways and flexible learning provision in particular could be strengthened through an institutional strategy. Low completion rates suggest that UNL's initiatives to support students in employment (which include classes offered at different times and attendance exemption) may not be enough to make degree programmes accessible, especially to adult learners. Further initiatives need to be implemented to support students who work (and who make up one-third of the student body), and to prevent them from dropping out.

If UNL decides to develop and implement a LLL strategy, it has the legal autonomy to do so. Its long-standing tradition of providing continuing education, and its well-established ties with the community are further key assets that would facilitate the development of a LLL strategy. UNL would have sufficient support from the community to do so. Thanks to its good reputation, there is a strong demand for LLL initiatives such as continuing education and community engagement projects. Finally, UNL views education as a right and has the mandate to leave no one behind, which aligns with the principles of LLL. However, there are challenges that hinder the institutionalization of LLL within the university's strategic plan. First, a change in culture would need to take place, and a shared understanding of LLL and its importance would need to be established across UNL, which in turn would make it easier to mobilize the necessary funds. However, unless the promotion of LLL in universities is enshrined in a LLL policy at the national level, securing sufficient financing will remain a challenge.

Another lesson from this study is that greater attention must be paid to underrepresented, vulnerable learners. UNL offers free or very affordable educational opportunities for all across a variety of disciplines, operating under the assumption that equal access means treating all (potential) students equally and ensuring that no one is left behind. Historically marginalized groups may, however, need more targeted support in order to enable their participation in higher education. Nonetheless, UNL demonstrates a number of good practices that could be implemented in other HEIs. First, charging a minimum fee for continuing education programmes has proven to be a successful means of ensuring that students are more committed to their studies. Second, LLL initiatives are financed by charging businesses for continuing education and other services that the university provides, and by using this revenue to fund more community-oriented LLL initiatives. Moreover, when shifting its continuing education and community engagement activities online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNL not only chose digital platforms that are supported by the connectivity and devices available to its students and external partner organizations, but also adapted content to the online setting, making some programmes more attractive than when they were held exclusively on campus.

UNL presents an interesting case of an institution that shows a high level of engagement in LLL without having a LLL strategy in place. Its long-standing tradition of continuing education and community engagement could, however, be realized more effectively through an explicit policy that would not only better serve the needs of students in employment, adult learners and traditionally marginalized and underrepresented groups, but also strengthen the university's links to NGOs, businesses, public institutions and the wider community.

3. UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL, Canada

Located in the Canadian province of Québec, Université de Montréal (UdeM) is a publicly funded university with a history of offering LLL opportunities. UdeM is noteworthy for the framework that it has in place to manage continuing education provision for adult learners. This management framework defines both the expectations of its Directorate of Continuing Education (DFC) with regard to supporting the development of provision for adult learners across the university's faculties, and the faculties' role and responsibilities in designing and implementing this provision. Notably, success factors include collaboration across UdeM's faculties to respond to emerging, specialized and interdisciplinary training.

UdeM has also succeeded in encouraging academic staff members to share their research findings with adult learners. There are multiple ways of accessing and participating in continuing education, and the university has a policy for recognizing prior learning. A variety of digital technologies is used to support online or blended learning programmes, including massive open online courses (MOOCs), which have become an important means of widening access and participation among adult learners. The university engages with the community through bespoke partnership models that bring together different stakeholders to foster economic development, and its professors offer free public lectures, among other learning opportunities.



Quick facts about Université de Montréal

- Université de Montréal (UdeM) was founded in 1878, at first as the urban branch of the Université Laval de Québec (UdeM n.d.-b). It started with 86 students and three faculties: theology, law and medicine (ibid.). In 1920, UdeM became autonomous and was no longer attached to the Université Laval de Québec.
- UdeM currently comprises 13 faculties, two affiliated schools – HEC Montréal (for business) and Polytechnique Montréal (for engineering) – and 465 research units (for a brief history of the university from 1985, see UdeM n.d.-c).
- UdeM has over 65,000 students across all faculties and affiliated schools (n.d.-d), 10,000 of whom are from other countries (ibid.). The university employs approximately 2,300 professors and researchers, 2,600 lecturers, 500 adjunct professors and 2,000 clinical professors (UdeM, n.d.-d).
- First established in the Latin Quarter of Montréal in 1943, UdeM moved to Mont Royal (a hill in the city), to a campus designed by the engineer and architect Ernest Cormier (ibid.). It is located on the northern slope and 'comprises more than 65 hectares of greenery, roads and paths' (UdeM n.d.-e).
- UdeM is currently striving to develop an ambitious strategy that will enable it to become more sustainable (n.d.-f). Developed by a dedicated unit, the strategy draws on two main frameworks: (1) the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education's Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARs), and (2) the UN Sustainable Development Goals (ibid.).

3.1 National context

In Canada, education is the responsibility of the provinces rather than the federal government. Consequently, provincial governments throughout the country create and implement laws and policies, and provide funding for their respective education systems. This section focuses on the ways in which LLL in higher education is supported at the provincial level, specifically in Québec. Higher education in the province of Québec comprises pre-university institutions and universities. Pre-university institutions are usually referred to as CÉGEPs ('Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel'), which are publicly or privately funded colleges that offer programmes of various types and lengths. These range from one- to three-year programmes in various technical, vocational and academic subjects, and allow students either to enter the workforce or to begin their undergraduate studies at one of the province's universities, which offer degree programmes at the undergraduate or bachelor's level (also referred to as the '1st cycle'), postgraduate or master's level ('2nd cycle'), and doctoral level ('3rd cycle').

A relevant policy document for promoting LLL in Québec is the 2002 Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training, which outlines the main objectives of LLL and aims to 'establish a culture of lifelong learning' (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002, p. V). It envisions LLL as a means of achieving social inclusion and cohesion, and building a shared Québecois culture. It further tackles wider demographic and economic issues, such as the ageing population, lower birth rates and the need to upskill and reskill the labour force (ibid.). Notably, the 2002 policy describes principles and guidelines for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and its role in increasing access to higher education. According to the policy, a lack of RPL particularly affects migrants' ability to find employment relevant to their qualifications and experience, and to integrate into society (ibid.). The policy further calls for the harmonization of RPL across higher education and other levels 'with respect to terms and conditions, services and recognition granted, and … among the different mechanisms … to facilitate reciprocity between the labour market and educational institutions' (ibid., p. 23). Yet, while outlining the main objectives of LLL, the policy does not propose clear measures for its implementation.

Labour market-oriented LLL in Québec is primarily regulated by the Act to Promote Workforce Skills Development and Recognition (Gouvernement du Québec, 2021). This law requires employers with an annual payroll of over two million Canadian dollars (approx. US$1.5 million) to spend one per cent of their payroll on training. The law aims to 'promote employment, labour adjustment, employment integration and workforce mobility' (ibid.). According to the interview with UdeM, much of the demand for continuing education comes from the professional orders that govern certain professions in Québec.[10] Members of these professional orders are required to complete a certain number of hours of training annually, and failure to do so can cost them their professional title. Professional orders furthermore conduct RPL exercises to determine the learning requirements of potential members, particularly non-Canadian workers, and to prescribe upskilling or further training if necessary. By offering continuing education to (potential) members of professional orders, universities not only reach out to a wider range of learners beyond traditional university students, but also participate in an exchange with professional communities.

Regarding the financing of higher education and LLL, universities in Québec receive government funding for their accredited programmes at undergraduate and graduate levels, which are not targeted at, but often include, adult learners. Funding options for students include loans, bursaries and scholarships for full-time study, loans for part-time study, a work/study programme, and an allowance for people with disabilities (Gouvernement du Québec, n.d.-d). Universities in Québec cannot allocate government funding earmarked for core activities to non-accredited programmes. Therefore, non-accredited LLL activities are tuition fee-based only.

Other financing mechanisms for adult learners reflect regional (economic) development priorities. Initiatives such as the Skills Recognition Assistance Programme (SRAP) offer financial assistance to projects that help migrants to obtain RPL and gain supplementary training (Gouvernement du Québec, n.d.-e). The 'Programme de Francisation' enables companies to receive support so that their employees can participate in not-for-credit training to learn French, the main language of the province. Under certain conditions, individuals may receive financial assistance for online full- or part-time French courses – an initiative that also targets migrants (Gouvernement du Québec, n.d.-b). Other, more recent sources of funding for LLL have emerged in response to ongoing technological and economic developments and challenges. SCALE AI – a co-investment and innovation hub on artificial intelligence (AI) located in Montreal – provides financial assistance to individuals and companies to fund training, in collaboration with HEIs, that makes 'AI adoption easier across industries to drive productivity and competitiveness of Canadian companies' (SCALE AI, n.d.-a). This hub is supported by 'a consortium

10 46 professional orders have been created under the Professional Code in Québec. They cover a variety of fields and specializations, ranging from lawyers, architects and engineers to dieticians, certified translators and guidance counsellors, among others (Gouvernement du Québec n.d.-a), and stipulate specific conditions and procedures (including training and continuing education) for admission to the respective professions.

of private entities, research centres, academia and high-potential startups' (ibid.) and, according to the interview with UdeM, receives funding at the federal and provincial levels. Selected adult learners receive 50 per cent fee waivers on an accredited course with a designated training partner, including universities (SCALE AI, n.d.-b).

In November 2020, Québec launched the Renewed Prosperity Through Greater Training Program (PARAF) aimed at assisting those who had become unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme helped them to gain access to training opportunities and upskill or requalify while receiving financial assistance in the form of income subsidies (Gouvernement du Québec, n.d.-c). According to the interview with UdeM, in order to be eligible, learners were required to be enrolled full-time on a university or CÉGEP course in one of three main areas of growth: IT, health and early childhood education. PARAF provides successful applicants with 500 Canadian dollars (approximately US $403) per week or – in the case of those already receiving benefits – increases existing benefits to 500 Canadian dollars per week. This amount is paid for the duration of their training (ibid.). Public funding schemes such as PARAF and SRAP, and private-public initiatives such as SCALE AI, reflect a strong prioritization at the provincial level of continuing education, training, reskilling and upskilling, aimed especially at the unemployed, migrants and workers with low qualifications. These measures incentivize HEIs in Québec to gear their provision towards labour market-oriented LLL.

3.2 Institutional context

UdeM has a history of promoting LLL, with a separate faculty dedicated to continuing education that offers 37 for-credit programmes, including access and bridging courses, microprogrammes, stackable courses leading to bachelor's degrees, qualifying programmes for immigrants, and the Diploma of Advanced Professional Studies (DEPA). In the last seven years, the university has expanded its LLL approach beyond the Faculty of Continuing Education, and other faculties have become involved in delivering LLL activities (see UdeM, n.d.-i). Over 14,000 learners are currently registered on the Faculty of Continuing Education's for-credit programmes, with an additional 23,852 adult learners enrolled in various not-for-credit courses (primarily short training courses and MOOCs) as of 2020–2021. Currently, there are 50 staff members working full- or part-time in continuing education across the different faculties, in addition to over 300 trainers who have been hired specifically to support this work.

3.2.1 Management framework for continuing education

While there is no official, institution-wide LLL policy in place at UdeM, the interview indicates that there is a common understanding of LLL and its importance across all faculties. This understanding is grounded in UdeM's management framework for continuing education (UdeM, 2018), which provides a set of guidelines for the LLL activities offered by the Faculty of Continuing Education, as well as those delivered by other academic faculties. The framework offers a rationale for the university to engage in LLL, highlighting UdeM's research capacity and its commitment to offering provision that is adapted to the needs of adult learners. The framework understands continuing education as an umbrella term for various structured/non-structured and for-credit/not-for-credit learning activities. In line with the Québec Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education, continuing education is designed to contribute to learners' professional and personal development. The management framework highlights the importance of making access and participation easier for adult learners, both in terms of intake and registration, and with regard to thematic content and teaching-learning methods (ibid.).

The management framework also details the roles and responsibilities of UdeM's faculties in relation to continuing education, suggesting extensive involvement. Besides designing and implementing different kinds of programmes and learning activities that match their target audiences' needs, faculties are responsible for managing their resources, and for logistics, budgeting and promotional activities (UdeM, 2018). They also develop a plan for continuing education, support their academic staff in engaging in these activities, and select a member of faculty to be responsible for facilitating cross-collaboration, sharing good practice and streamlining processes institutionally (ibid.). In addition to these duties, faculties are tasked with developing a sense of lifelong and life-wide learning among their mainstream students (ibid.), and with maintaining close ties with their graduates in order to address their current and future training needs. At the time of data collection, the university was furthermore in the process of developing short, interdisciplinary programmes (accredited and non-accredited) for mainstream students in degree programmes in order to support their entrepreneurship skills and as a first step towards LLL. The LLL activities offered by faculties are not centralized, and each faculty is responsive to its respective alumni and professional orders, as well as to the availability of its teaching staff. Hence, faculties' LLL provision varies significantly. Instead of perceiving these differences as a barrier, UdeM sees them as something to build on, and the management framework encourages faculties to exchange best practices and develop multi-faculty projects.

Significantly, the management framework for continuing education sets the same standard of quality for continuing education as for any other provision offered by the university, whether accredited or not (UdeM, 2018). It requires these activities to be evaluated regularly by UdeM's different faculties in order to ensure their relevance and competitiveness (ibid.). One important aspect of quality highlighted in the framework is the way in which continuing education should relate and respond to social issues (ibid.), extending beyond skills development and qualifying exercises. The interview with UdeM revealed that, while a quality assurance framework for not-for-credit programmes and activities has not yet been developed, faculties that offer such provision gather feedback from participants and modify their content accordingly. Some faculties also provide their stamp of approval for non-accredited courses developed by external organizations, depending on their area of expertise, by validating curricular content and teaching approaches. All credit-bearing programmes are evaluated every six to eight years based on the university's quality assurance framework.

3.2.2 Main actors responsible for continuing education and the recognition of prior learning

The management framework furthermore stipulates the structure and hierarchy within which continuing education provision is designed, managed and implemented. It defines the mandate of the university's Directorate of Continuing Education (DFC) – a dedicated administrative support unit that oversees all faculties and is overseen by the academic Vice-Rector. The interview revealed that the DFC employs five staff members, including the director and those working on business modelling and development (i.e. pursuing strategic opportunities to offer fee-based educational services by developing partnerships and identifying new markets for LLL activities), multifaculty projects, market research and future planning related to LLL, as well as administration and coordination. The DFC supports the faculties in developing and offering continuing education and LLL, represents them on university-wide matters, and facilitates the development and visibility of continuing education and LLL both internally and externally at all levels (locally, provincially, nationally and internationally) (UdeM, 2018). According to the interview with UdeM, the DFC prospects training opportunities and explores new markets with and for faculties in order to enable them to deliver successful activities. It also prepares a strategic plan for continuing education and LLL activities, helps to diversify offers and facilitate communities of practice of those responsible for LLL in the faculties, and pushes forward an agenda of cross-collaboration (ibid.). The latter also includes collaborating with faculties to develop a quality assurance framework, supporting them in their relevant strategic plans, and producing an annual report on the status of LLL at the university (ibid.).

The interview with UdeM showed that three committees are tasked with exploring diverse LLL issues, and strengthening interactions that advance this work. The first is an advisory committee populated by vice-deans and deans of faculties, which discusses the long-term development, mission and financial aspects of continuing education. The second committee is made up of vice-deans that take decisions and assume direct responsibility for developing continuing education and LLL across the faculties. The third committee is a community of practice, representing the operational level of coordinators and directors who, from within the faculties, implement continuing education for adult learners. One outcome of this committee's work has been the implementation of an online learning management system across the faculties, through which adult learners can search for activities by theme, access course descriptions, sign up and pay for courses, and print their proof of participation upon completion of the course.

In addition to the management framework for continuing education, a further key institutional policy at UdeM relates to RPL. It is closely aligned with Québec's 2002 Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training, and has three objectives: (1) to promote access to university studies, student retention and graduation, (2) to support the development and promotion of RPL within the university, and (3) to standardize practices for RPL in order to ensure equity of treatment and the maintenance of the quality of diplomas (UdeM, 2019, p. 2). UdeM's work on RPL is overseen by the Vice-Rector responsible for studies, and administered by one staff member working within the registrar's office. In addition, an institutional committee comprising many different stakeholders, including a graduate of the university and a representative from each accredited campus-wide student organization, is tasked with developing and sharing RPL expertise; agreeing to timelines for processing relevant applications; advising on RPL regulations and recommending improvements as needed; organizing staff training; implementing policy updates; and developing a registration and records system to facilitate the management and recognition of alternative forms of learning (ibid.).

3.2.3 UdeM's approach: Success factors and challenges

As regards the approach adopted by UdeM, the primary success factor is an increasing tendency for faculties to share their expertise and experiences with each other, and work together on their LLL activities. This collaborative spirit is strongly promoted in the management framework for continuing education, especially in response to specialized and emerging interdisciplinary training needs. A further success factor, as noted in interview, is the way in which the university encourages academic staff members to share their new research discoveries with different audiences, including adult learners, which in turn prompts their involvement in developing and delivering relevant provision.

However, financing is a key challenge: UdeM, like other universities in Québec, cannot use core funding to develop and offer non-accredited activities, since that funding is earmarked for mainstream programmes. As such, many non-accredited programmes and activities are currently just breaking even or operating at a minor loss. Despite these funding challenges, UdeM has succeeded in establishing a governance structure for the development and implementation of LLL activities. This will be explored in more detail in the following section.

3.3 Implementation

UdeM's LLL provision fulfils various purposes, including the training of (prospective) members of a professional order, and the organization of and support for individual career development and change. There are a variety of for-credit and not-for-credit options on offer, leading to different types and levels of university qualifications, and to certificates of participation, respectively (UdeM, n.d.-i). As the interview with UdeM revealed, all continuing education was provided online during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the exception of professional training, which included practical elements that could only be completed in person, and which were always conducted in accordance with health guidelines.

3.3.1 Different pathways to access and participation in continuing education

There are several ways of entering UdeM's LLL programmes and activities. Learners may sign up as independent students and choose to register on one or several of 800+ undergraduate courses and 300+ graduate courses offered by UdeM, many of which are delivered online (UdeM, n.d.-j). This option allows students to complete for-credit courses without signing up for a full degree programme, and is therefore especially suited to adult learners who would like to sample a subject or need to undertake training as part of their membership in a professional order. The Faculty of Continuing Education additionally offers 280 for-credit programmes at both undergraduate and graduate levels that aim to meet the LLL needs (specifically for upskilling and reskilling) of adult learners. These programmes comprise courses that are worth three academic credits each and are 45 hours in length. To better accommodate adult learners and working professionals, they are delivered in the evenings and at weekends through a blended learning approach or as intensive four-to-six-week summer courses. For example, summer courses on political science – including 'hot topics' in international affairs – that are aimed at master's students are also popular with adult learners who work in journalism and political settings. Adult learners can participate in these courses for a fee but not for credit or assessment, as their main objective is to enable learners to acquire knowledge that they can apply in their jobs, in part through peer learning and within a relatively short space of time.

UdeM offers various options for learners to link and combine different courses and programmes, allowing for flexible and personalized learning routes that are more accessible for adult learners and working professionals. For example, some faculties and departments offer for-credit microprogrammes, some of which are embedded in graduate-level programmes leading to a specialized graduate diploma, which in turn are embedded in master's programmes, thus allowing learners to progress from one level to the next. Similar pathways with stackable credits are available at the undergraduate level, which allow learners to graduate with the French 'baccalauréat avec appellation' (equivalent to a bachelor's degree) by obtaining various for-credit certificates. Through the 'baccalauréat par cumul', learners can – at different times – complete different courses that are not part of a pre-set degree programme, but that add up to a bachelor's degree when combined. These highly flexible learning options recognize that learners may be pursuing different academic trajectories, and allow them to explore their interest in different disciplines and study at a pace that suits them. In addition, the Faculty of Continuing Education runs an access programme targeting adults who have completed secondary school but not the two-year CÉGEP preparatory course required for entry to a bachelor's programme in Québec (see the section outlining the national context, above), and who have been out of school for at least four years. Once they complete this bridging programme, learners can progress to undergraduate programmes. As noted in the interview with UdeM, this programme further supports these students' access to learning opportunities by addressing their concerns, which can be quite different from those of mainstream students (e.g. scheduling issues; the need for flexibility in order to be able to fulfil other life commitments; doubts students may have about participating in university-level provision).

Learners who do not meet UdeM's standard entry requirements can enter degree programmes through RPL. As outlined in the previous section, RPL processes are coordinated by a dedicated staff member in the registrar's office, who is responsible for reviewing and evaluating learners' applications for RPL, passing them on to the relevant faculty and (if the applications are considered promising) helping the applicants prepare their files. The relevant faculty conducts the evaluation of prior learning, and may request that the learner provide different proofs of learning and assessment (e.g. portfolios, letters of recommendation, etc.) to determine the knowledge and skills that they have gained from previous work experience or non-formal/informal learning and training. The faculties may also review academic records of the learner's prior formal education in order to determine potential credit transfers. Importantly, UdeM's policy can also apply to candidates who only partly meet admission requirements for undergraduate and graduate programmes but can provide evidence of the knowledge and skills needed for their successful completion (ibid.). The programme unit of the faculty in question manages this process and takes the final decision as to whether a learner can be accepted to the programme.

3.3.2 Wider societal impact through external partnerships and alumni engagement

Through its LLL and, specifically, its continuing education provision, UdeM engages with external stakeholders. The ContinuUM project, for example, aims to encourage collaborations between different stakeholders in order to improve the labour force and better respond to the needs of local, highly specialized companies. Particularly in emerging fields, such as bioinformatics, biostatistics and computational biology, which merge data science with life sciences, there is a significant demand for skilled workers on the Québec labour market. The stakeholders involved in this project include CÉGEPs, the City of Montreal, UdeM and organizations specializing in employment and immigration. They started by codesigning a process of recruiting adult learners with relevant skills and qualifications (many of whom are migrants) and identifying companies who would be interested in hiring them. Once this relationship had been established, the teaching and learning evolved by interweaving relevant university provision with training provided by the respective companies through project learning.

In addition to the continuing (for-credit and not-for-credit) education and flexible learning provision outlined above, UdeM promotes LLL through various other activities, some of which target specific groups, such as older learners and UdeM alumni. For example, the university is currently planning to host a focus group with members of the Fédération de l'âge d'or du Québec, Canada's largest organization for older people (FADOQ, n.d.), in order to better identify older learners' learning needs. Drawing on the idea of LLL as a cycle, the university is furthermore planning to involve older alumni in the training and mentoring of future professionals. As part of this project, current medical professionals who studied at UdeM might, for example, provide practical guidance on setting up private clinics. The university hopes that this approach will encourage current students to take on similar mentoring responsibilities later on in their careers.

To fulfil its mission of serving wider society (UdeM, n.d.-a), the university also reported that its professors regularly offer free public lectures and educational programmes that promote different kinds of social development. The interview noted, for instance, that academics in the music faculty are currently offering a learning programme in local schools. Professors often go out into the community – e.g. to open-access centres or corporate headquarters – in order to engage with the general public on a range of issues, such as sustainable development, stress management, parenting practices and gang violence. These talks also take place online through live webinars and conferences on different subjects according to the respective professor's expertise.

3.3.3 UdeM's growing online LLL provision

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the non-formal learning activities offered by the university shifted online, including its lecture series, 'Les Belles Heures' (covering a range of topics from history to art, see UdeM, n.d.-o), and its language classes (both French and other languages) offered by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and the Faculty of Continuing Education (UdeM, n.d.-m; UdeM n.d.-n). More generally, UdeM's online and hybrid provision has grown to encompass both credit- and non-credit-bearing programmes, including webinars, short courses and more structured training programmes offered to adult learners online or through a blended format. Many of these are coordinated through the management system established by one of UdeM's continuing education committees (see the section detailing the main actors responsible for continuing education and RPL, above). Some of these online courses use a digital learning platform called StudiUM to grant learners access to learning materials (UdeM n.d.-k.). Provision can range from one-hour webinars to longer programmes with regular in-person interventions. These are delivered by different faculties – from nursing and pharmacy (see UdeM, n.d.-l) to the arts and humanities – often through their own dedicated centres and, in many cases, aimed at helping professionals further develop their skills (ibid).

Additional learning opportunities are available via the EduLIB portal, through which a variety of MOOCs are offered by UdeM and its affiliated schools, HEC Montréal and Polytechnique Montréal (UdeM, n.d.-j). The only pre-requisites for participation in these MOOCs are basic digital skills, and the courses are usually free of charge, unless learners wish to have their learning assessed and certified, which is optional. To maintain high-quality learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the university shifted entirely to online delivery for both its accredited and non-accredited provision, using a range of tools, e.g. synchronous and asynchronous online lectures, webinars and conferences. Two different versions of Moodle – for accredited and non-accredited courses, respectively – became the main platforms for programmes at UdeM. Cognizant of the technological challenges facing many adult learners, the university developed guidelines on using the Moodle platform to help them make the transition from offline to online learning. Indeed, as evidenced in interviews with university representatives, such was the success of this transition – with both students and staff adapting quickly to the new format – that UdeM plans to continue applying some of the digital tools it introduced during the pandemic, especially in the context of continuing education.

Online learning proved to be particularly popular and successful among adult learners due to its flexibility and efficiency, and could, according to the university, contribute significantly to widening their access and participation. UdeM outlined two examples of the ways in which digital technology had already improved access.

The first of these was a welcome event for migrants completing their training outside of Québec, enrolled in a UdeM programme that would normally be held in person, but which had transitioned online in response to the pandemic. Since shifting online, the event has attracted more than twice as many participants (increasing from 30 to 70–80 participants). Similarly, a webinar for dentists and other professionals in the field was attended by approximately 12,000 participants, up to 15 per cent of whom were not from Québec and were only able to attend because the event was held online. The university leadership has recognized the benefits of online learning, especially for adult learners, who may have other personal or professional commitments, or who may not live within easy commuting distance of the university, and would thus save a significant amount of time and money by undertaking their learning online. The university consequently expects to permanently shift at least some of its provision to an online or hybrid format, especially in the area of continuing education, demonstrating a strong commitment to flexible, learner-centred provision and innovation.

3.4 Main lessons learned

On review of the current case study, it is evident that UdeM engages in LLL in various ways, especially through its continuing education provision. This provision is designed, organized and implemented through UdeM's management framework for continuing education and the DFC, and is facilitated by the university's operational structure and RPL policy. In line with the province of Québec's 2002 policy on adult education and continuing education and training, UdeM strongly prioritizes making continuing education available to migrants; adults with a college or university degree; members of the professional orders and other external organizations (e.g. private companies); older learners; and the general public. It also offers flexible learning pathways for adults who have not completed their college degrees (the standard requirement for university entry in Québec), for example through the Faculty of Continuing Education's access programme. The faculty uses teaching methodologies designed for adult learners, which could potentially set an example for broader application in continuing education provision across the university's other faculties.

Despite the implementation of these good practices, there are still areas of UdeM's LLL provision that could be developed further. While the university already uses a number of alternative assessments (i.e. non-exam-based approaches), it does not employ specific tools and techniques for adult learners, and only recognizes prior learning to a limited extent. More could be done to enhance adult learners' participation and progression rates. Financing for continuing education and LLL is a further issue, not only within UdeM, but across Québec and Canada as a whole, and one which has been highlighted in two recent reports at the provincial and national levels. The latter, a 2021 report on university continuing education in Canada, recommends creating or reworking funding models for short programmes that produce microcredentials related to labour market demand, for example through vouchers, grants or student loans, to reduce financial barriers for adult learners (Universities Canada, CAUCE & ESDC, 2021). However, the emphasis in these reports reflects the broader national focus on skills development for the labour market (which is, for example, also evident in Québec's law requiring employers with an annual income in excess of two million Canadian dollars to spend one per cent of their payroll on training). UdeM's continuing education provision has been informed by this trend: the university has recognized that, given the choice between two potential employees – someone with a university degree and someone who has been awarded professional badges – an employer is likely to choose the latter because their implied training outcomes would be considered more relevant to hiring needs. While degree programmes may support higher levels of critical thinking, which are equally crucial for work and life, and for addressing social issues, the demand for more labour market-oriented short courses is undoubtedly on the increase. The UdeM leadership has recognized that universities have to evolve to adapt to this new reality, and that their provision needs to align itself more with the increased need for professional skills development.

While the focus at the national and provincial levels may be shifting towards more labour market-oriented learning and professional training, the role that LLL can play in social development and integration is recognized by the province of Québec, and is entrenched in its 2002 Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training. Going forward, UdeM should not lose sight of this dimension of LLL, committing more fully to its own mandate to serve society (UdeM, n.d.-a), particularly by targeting underrepresented and vulnerable groups of adult learners, and by initiating more community engagement projects (UdeM, n.d.-h). Promisingly, the university already seems to be taking steps in this direction. UdeM is currently in the process of designing an overall strategic plan, one of whose main principles is a broad view of society (UdeM, n.d.-g). This planning process presents an ideal opportunity to incorporate the social inclusion, equity and diversity of adult learners into the university's learning provision to a far wider extent. It is furthermore in line with UdeM's sustainability strategy, which is guided by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UdeM, n.d.-f), and through which the university commits itself, in line with SDG 4, to the provision of inclusive quality education throughout life. Balancing these two sides of LLL – labour market-oriented continuing education and training, and social engagement for greater equity and inclusion – will be one of the main challenges for the university's implementation of LLL going forward.

4. EAST CHINA NORMAL UNIVERSITY, People's Republic of China

Publicly funded and located in Shanghai, East China Normal University (ECNU) specializes in research, teacher training and school leadership development (i.e. school principals), while also offering a wide variety of other subjects. It has a history of providing training for the Ministry of Education since soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China, and also supports the training of adult education researchers for Shanghai municipality. LLL is a priority throughout ECNU, from senior leadership down to faculties and departments, as is manifested in the various learning pathways and opportunities on offer. Institutional stakeholders work on LLL from different angles: for example, the university has a department of basic education, and schools of open learning and education for older people, among others. The Shanghai Municipal Institute of Lifelong Education (SMILE) is ECNU's dedicated research centre in this regard; the first of its kind in the country, with the additional responsibility of contributing to citywide initiatives and supporting Shanghai's membership in the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC). In terms of provision, adults can participate in full- or part-time study, either in person (through blended learning) or at a distance (e.g. fully online), qualifying them for diplomas, degrees and other accredited awards at various educational levels, as well as non-accredited programmes, workshops and training. ECNU widens access and participation through tools such as credit transfer and exemption, RPL and alternative assessments. To widen exposure to LLL, ECNU engages the community through cultural activities, public lectures and seminars.

4.1 National context

LLL in higher education is not explicitly mentioned in China's national legislation, nor is LLL explicitly mentioned in the Higher Education Law, ratified in 1998.[11] However, since 2010, when the State Council issued the Outline of China's National Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2010), LLL has moved up the national agenda (Wu, 2020), and has been recognized as a key driver of social and economic development.

11 According to China's higher education law, HEIs include 'universities, independent colleges, and specialized higher education schools, including higher vocational schools and higher education schools for adults' (People's Republic of China 1998, Article 68).



Quick facts about East China Normal University

- Located in Shanghai, East China Normal University (ECNU) is a public institution with the motto, 'Seek truth, foster originality, and live up to the name of a teacher'. Founded in 1951, it is internationally recognized for its research, and is a leading institution for teacher training in China.
- ECNU has over 16,000 full-time undergraduates, almost 19,000 graduate students and over 1,500 international students (ECNU, 2021a). The university prioritizes internationalization, and participates in exchanges and cooperative partnerships with over 300 renowned universities and academic institutions worldwide (ECNU, 2021b).
- ECNU covers many disciplines across four faculties, 30 schools and four colleges, eight advanced research institutes, one college of further education, and one national training centre for secondary school principals (ECNU, 2021a). It has 58 departments that offer 85 undergraduate programmes, 35 master's programmes, 21 professional master's programmes, 30 doctoral programmes, one professional doctoral programme, and 26 post-doctoral mobile research stations (ibid.).
- ECNU spans two main campuses in Shanghai, and in Minhang and Putuo districts, covering 207 acres and earning it the name of a 'garden university' (ECNU, 2021a). It sponsors or supervises nearly 30 academic journals and periodicals, with a library collection exceeding 4.8 million volumes (ibid.).

According to the State Council's Outline, 'a basic framework for lifelong education' is important 'so that everyone can be taught what they want to learn, excel at what they learn, and put what they have learned into use' (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2010, p. 9).

Higher education is furthermore one of the key areas prioritized in China's Education Modernization Plan Towards 2035, which calls for the improvement of quality standards of higher education, the creation of a monitoring and evaluation system, and the development of scientific research and innovation capabilities of colleges and universities (CCCPC and the State Council, 2019). One of the plan's 10 strategic tasks is to build LLL systems. This involves, on the one hand, developing community education resources and education for older citizens and, on the other hand, streamlining the pathway for talent growth; improving enrolment mechanisms; offering flexible learning and continuing education, and transfer between education streams; establishing a national qualifications framework; and establishing a national credit bank system (ibid.).

4.1.1 Policies and schemes supporting flexible learning provision and wider access to higher education

This commitment to flexible learning pathways was renewed in the government's latest plan for national development – its 14th Five-Year Plan for the period 2021–2025 (CCCPC and the State Council, 2021) – which indicates ways in which higher education institutions should become more oriented towards providing LLL to a greater variety of people. The measures for education reform outlined in the five-year plan include encouraging top-notch universities to provide open access to their educational resources, providing opportunities for registered learning and flexible learning, and smoothing the channels of mutual recognition and conversion of different types of learning achievements. Some progress has been made on the last point, as there are multiple ways for adults to gain access to degree programmes. For example, if learners achieve a bachelor's degree through the self-study exam, they can, under certain conditions, apply for full-time study on a master's programme. The self-study exam is a way of achieving a bachelor's degree without participating in coursework, and China's Higher Education Law stipulates that universities must offer this option (People's Republic of China, 1998, Article 22). Other pathways allow learners to transfer from a vocational education and training programme to higher education, or from an open university programme to an independent study option.

As discussed above, while the current Higher Education Law does not mention the concept of LLL, it is nonetheless aligned with its principles, and supports HEIs in becoming more oriented towards LLL (ibid., Article 9). The law encourages relevant academic and non-academic institutions to work together to diversify, complement and strengthen each other's activities in order to improve the use of resources, and to encourage different types of collaboration and investment (from businesses, other institutions, civil society organizations [CSOs], etc.) (ibid., Article 35; ibid., Article 60). The law grants HEIs autonomy in how they address social needs and deliver continuing education (ibid., Article 23). It furthermore 'supports higher education conducted through radio, television, correspondence and other long-distance means' (ibid., Article 15) and encourages HEIs to widen access to qualification opportunities at different levels for adult learners (ibid., Article 21) through specific examination arrangements (such as the self-study exam) and equivalency systems. So far, no national quality assurance system has been established to monitor and evaluate LLL in higher education. However, the Ministry of Education collects information on this topic, and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC) and the State Council have, in part through their recent plan for deepening the reform of education evaluation, demonstrated an interest in developing a framework to quality assure LLL in higher education (CCCP and the State Council, n.d.).

Significant progress in developing better LLL systems has also been made at the provincial, regional and municipal levels, specifically in developing provision for older learners. Twenty-nine provinces have issued planning documents, and a number of provinces and cities are in the process of legislating in this area. The Anhui Provincial Regulations on Education for the Elderly (2020), for example, encourage colleges and universities to offer high-quality learning opportunities to older people, including through a digital learning platform. To promote community education, 27 provinces have issued a related policy that is linked to higher education and, according to an interview with ECNU, as of 2020, there are 28 province-level community education guidance centres and more than 280 prefecture-level community education guidance centres nationwide.

4.1.2 Municipal-level policies and initiatives to promote LLL in higher education

The municipality of Shanghai, where ECNU is located, is at the forefront of China's broader reform and development process in the field of LLL and higher education. Shanghai's ageing population has led to a focus on education for older people, prompting the government to encourage all universities to offer learning opportunities for this age group. There are now nine schools linked to universities that specifically target older learners in Shanghai, with more to be developed in coming years in response to growing demand. In addition to higher education for older people, broader public initiatives include the building of learning villages. Moreover, to offset learning disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic, various digital learning opportunities – such as the 'Classroom in the Air', an online platform comprising more than 200 courses – have been launched.

4.1.3 Additional factors contributing to LLL in Chinese HEIs, and directions for future development

Creating a conducive environment for implementing LLL in HEIs involves ensuring the availability of financial resources. As indicated in the interview with ECNU, LLL activities in higher education can draw on core funding from the state, and most are financed by different levels of government (national, provincial and/or municipal). This core funding has been increased in recent years to enhance the quality of programmes on offer, to widen educational access, and to promote community development, for example by training adults for public service roles, e.g. to become teachers or school principals within a municipality. Adult learners' eligibility for financial support from the government or the university usually depends on their income. Further scholarships are available for full-time students with an excellent academic record; these are generally either offered by the state or by the university. The national government also awards prize money to high-performing students, or those working while studying, depending on subject and programme type. While these funding schemes have benefited learners who may not have otherwise have been able to access higher education, certain target groups remain underrepresented. According to the interview, efforts should be directed specifically towards migrant workers from China's rural areas. More work is needed to research and develop frameworks, structures and teaching-learning processes that connect this group with learning opportunities and improve their learning outcomes. Given that migrant workers make up over a third of Shanghai's population, this target group is particularly relevant to the municipality and to ECNU. This group is also highly diverse, and it was noted during the interview that some migrants may have significantly more opportunities if they work for well-regarded factories compared to those who are engaged in very low-level work. Some universities already work with migrants on family learning, and encourage their increased participation in the community. Nonetheless, reaching this group remains a challenge for national government and the higher education sector in general.

Another area for further development, as identified in the interview with ECNU, is quality assurance for LLL provision. So far, there are few policies in place related to quality assurance for LLL and higher education at the national level; a state of affairs that may change over the coming years as the country is working to establish a quality assurance framework for universities, schools and individuals. At the national level, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC) and the State Council have shown interest in developing such a system. Further involved stakeholders include the Ministry of Education, universities, researchers, students, non-profit organizations and community members, among others. There is thus a strong commitment to LLL, both among policy-makers and the wider public, which has positively impacted management and teaching staff across HEIs. In the meantime, the government is conducting research on creating specific legislation on LLL to build on the existing higher education legislation, and to improve policy for continuing education. Such legislation would also provide an important framework for the development of LLL policies and strategies at the municipal and institutional levels.

4.2 Institutional context

Since ECNU is a public university, it is mainly funded by the state. It was the first 'normal university' in China, meaning that it focuses on teacher training and school leadership development (ECNU, 2021a).[12] LLL is understood and valued across the university, according to the interview, including among senior leadership, which has a ripple effect on other faculties and departments. The latter promote LLL in a decentralized manner through research and through their provision for adult learners and other projects, which, according to ECNU, always involve an expert responsible for ensuring a LLL perspective. This holistic approach is reflected in the university's founding values of 'creativity, character and community' (ECNU, 2021c), and finds expression in ECNU's goal to inspire originality and moral ethics in people both within and beyond the university's walls. Moreover, ECNU's charter emphasizes LLL through linkages between 'teaching, scientific research and social service activities', continuing education provision, and 'various forms of cooperation with the government, enterprise, institutions, social groups', in line with China's Higher Education Law and broader development plans.

The interview with ECNU indicates that the university has three main priorities for LLL. The first is continuing education, specifically for the development of human resources in schools, with a focus on upskilling and capacity-building for teachers and school principals. The second is community involvement, which became a focus three years ago when the university's chancellor put forward policies to support local development in Shanghai in order to meet the expectations for a public university set by China's Higher Education Law and national government plans. Since then, as noted in the interview, interest in serving the needs of the local community – particularly the older people and migrant workers – and in supporting community culture has increased. The third of ECNU's priorities is sustainable development, which is based on Shanghai's 14th five-year plan (2021–2025) (CCCPC and the State Council, 2021), and the city's commitment to achieving the UN's SDGs through community involvement and environmental action.

12 A 'normal' university in China is akin to a teachers college, though it typically also has other departments that offer different programmes and may have a strong research function (China.org.cn, 2011).

4.2.1 ECNU's decentralized, multistakeholder approach to LLL provision

There are a number of key institutional stakeholders working on LLL from different angles, and in an open and collaborative manner. The main actors are ECNU's Basic Education and Lifelong Education Department, the Shanghai Municipal Institute for Lifelong Education (SMILE), and the Office of the Committee on Ageing. SMILE is the university's dedicated research centre on LLL – the first of its kind in China, according to information provided by ECNU – and has the additional responsibility of working for the Shanghai municipality, e.g. by supporting its membership in the GNLC. SMILE is supported by the Ministry of Education, with funding from ECNU and the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, and works with institutional partners to build an institutional knowledge base, foster the principles and practices of LLL, and inform decision-making on relevant policy and planning at the national level. For example, SMILE conducts research on different aspects of education for older people (particularly with respect to their learning needs), as well as on teaching and school leadership, drawing on ECNU's expertise in educational research and innovation.[13] SMILE also works with other university stakeholders to conduct interdisciplinary research on the culture and psychology of older adult learners. In addition to research, SMILE mainly focuses on the provision of education programmes and training, and on the promotion of knowledge networks through fellowships and exchanges with others HEIs. According to ECNU, the university combines local experiences of designing and implementing adult learning activities in Shanghai with the international community's work in this area. SMILE is staffed by ECNU's faculty and is made up of three full-time researchers, nine distinguished professors, six part-time researchers and seven international consultants. It has autonomy in specific research projects and in training Shanghai's adult education research corps. Information provided by ECNU indicates that the university has trained more than 200 master's and doctoral students specializing in adult education, community education, education for older people, and corporate education.

4.2.2 Financing and quality assurance mechanisms to support and regulate ECNU's LLL provision

To incentivize members of its 4,000-strong faculty to participate in LLL provision, the university offers bonuses, academic merits (supporting career progression), and a reduction of core responsibilities (e.g. sabbaticals, reduced teaching and administrative loads). The LLL activities offered by ECNU are funded through tuition fees, dedicated public funding from different levels of government (core funding can be used, as noted above), and on-demand services (i.e. corporate training, consultancies and other income-generating activities). If needed, adult learners tend to fund their learning provision through a mix of personal resources, public funding schemes offered by different levels of government and the university, and private funding (supported by industry and employers).

As regards quality assurance, ECNU has implemented various mechanisms for LLL, which typically involve collecting information on provision in order to improve its offer, for example by tracking adult learner assessments/completion rates and academic staff performance. The university conducts self-monitoring through the Department of Basic Education and Lifelong Education Development, which – in line with China's Higher Education Law – reviews the delivery of provision through other relevant departments. As indicated in the interview with ECNU, provision is reviewed every year, with the designated department evaluating the programme's quality and making adjustments if necessary.

In addition to these institution-wide mechanisms, several procedures for quality assurance have been established at the departmental or faculty level. In departments, a group leader is normally responsible for projects and quality assurance, which, according to ECNU, plays an important role in maintaining funding, supporting the university's reputation, and retaining its focus on sustainable development. Other well-established means of checking and ensuring quality provision include interviews and surveys involving learners who have completed training; and group leaders' self-reporting. Alternatively, feedback is collected from the community – an approach taken, for instance, by ECNU's national training centre. In addition, every director and departmental leader is responsible for maintaining and developing quality, based on which the university chancellor can assess system quality . According to the interview, there is a strong sense of personal responsibility among ECNU faculty members and leadership for delivering quality provision, including in the area of LLL.

13 The interview indicated that older people's motivation to engage in learning is influenced by the desire to meet other people and engage in a learning challenge. Typical subjects include cultural learning, health, global issues, and ways of contributing to the local community.

4.2.3 Challenges and next steps to improve LLL design, delivery and research

As indicated in the interview with ECNU, a number of challenges and areas for improvement remain regarding the institutional context of LLL at ECNU, particularly in relation to research and financing for better educational inclusion. Limited information is available on the provision of effective learning opportunities for certain target groups, particularly migrant workers. Offering them relevant, quality provision to bolster their knowledge and skills – and, by extension, their life choices and outcomes – is crucial to inclusive, equitable and diverse development for all, as stipulated by the SDGs, and this group is prioritized in the university's approach to LLL, as discussed earlier in this section. In line with the results of the international HEI-LLL survey (UIL and SOU, forthcoming), many vulnerable groups remain inadequately targeted for LLL by ECNU, including early school leavers, unemployed persons and people with disabilities. The university representative interviewed for this case study further reported that more and better research is needed to identify the needs and learning styles of different adults, and to improve the overall quality of adult education delivered across the university. Securing funding to enable more people to access LLL opportunities is a further challenge raised in the interview: although the state provides a stable base, demand currently outpaces the resources available, and existing funding needs to be supplemented by other sources. The university has witnessed a surge in interest in participation in higher education, be it for the sake of personal development, or to facilitate career progression and social mobility. Meeting this increased demand requires well-developed institutional policies and practices, including sustainable funding mechanisms and quality assurance procedures. In the case of ECNU, a strong LLL culture across the institution is evident and could pave the way for such developments.

4.3 Implementation

At ECNU, adult learners can participate in full- or part-time provision either in person, through blended learning, or at a distance (e.g. fully online), and can obtain diplomas and degrees at bachelor's, master's or doctoral levels. The university furthermore offers opportunities for non-accredited programmes, workshops and training that result in certificates of completion if learning objectives are achieved. Given ECNU's strong background in this area, it is not surprising that most programmes offered to adult learners focus on teacher training and school leadership development. Adult learners' participation has generally increased in recent years, especially in academically oriented programmes. One possible reason for this, ECNU suggests, is the increased attention that this area has received in recent years at the government policy level, in addition to the more flexible study options that have been made available through online and digital learning modalities. As discussed in the previous section, demand for adult learning opportunities linked to higher education is growing. While the university benefits from these increases economically and in terms of increased research opportunities and social capital (i.e. providing educational services to the community helps to enhance ECNU's reputation), it also faces the challenges of guaranteeing the quality of learning across its growing, increasingly flexible provision, and of undertaking evaluations that maintain consistent standards.

4.3.1 ECNU School of Open Learning and Education's programmes for adult learners

To make learning opportunities and pathways more flexible and accessible to more people, ECNU opened the School of Open Learning and Education in 2013. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the school played a crucial role in ensuring that all professors, tutors and students were able to transition to online learning, thus avoiding or reducing learning disruption caused by lockdowns and social distancing. The school offers a range of programmes that target adult learners, and specializes in teacher training and adult education (ECNU, 2021d). The school also features a centre that promotes international education: it focuses on teaching English, particularly in relation to business management and international trade. It is possible to participate in these programmes through different modalities. For example, teacher training can be undertaken in person or remotely, and many of the other programmes can either be completed online, through evening classes or by taking the self-study exam. The school also comprises a Faculty of Teacher Development, and its work is further supported by several research centres, including the Professional Development Center for Teachers, the Research Center for Distance Education Research, and the Research Center for ICT-Enabled Systemic Changes and Innovations. It also hosts a secretariat for a national project on enhancing the digital skills of primary and secondary school teachers. Experts affiliated with the project have developed tools that include IT usage standards for teachers, training curriculum standards and evaluation mechanisms, among others (ECNU, 2021d).

4.3.2 Widening access and participation through flexible learning pathways and provision

The university's School of Open Learning and Education plays a crucial role in widening and diversifying access to ECNU's programmes. At ECNU, there are a number of established flexible learning pathways, including credit transfer and exemption, RPL and alternative assessments. For example, adult learners can achieve a bachelor's or higher degree by taking the self-study exam. Alternatively, learners can be accepted to degree programmes if they demonstrate a specific ability, i.e. they can prove that they have undertaken learning in the same subject area as that of the academic qualification required to enter the programme in question. For example, if a person wishes

to enrol in a master's or doctoral programme without a bachelor's degree in the respective field, ECNU's Postgraduate Admission Regulations will allow them to do so provided that they fulfil specific entry criteria. For example, they can demonstrate that they have worked for six years in the field of study (from the date of obtaining a bachelor's degree to the date of admission to a doctoral programme) or that they have published two academic papers (as first author) in core journals in or related to the field of study. According to the university, inter-institutional credit transfers based on agreements between certain HEIs and other education and training providers, such as Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Tongji University, are also possible. However, maintaining the same standard of learning across different institutions locally and at the national level to ensure credit equivalencies remains a challenge.

Further, the university uses alternative assessments to facilitate the inclusion of adults in lifelong learning. For example, the university's school for older learners may ask for evidence of learning in the form of calligraphy or Chinese painting, or a musical performance at the end of a course. Similarly, some online courses offered by the School of Open Learning and Education may require group project work and presentations. However, while these types of assessments are used in non-academic programmes or as formative assessments during an academic course, they are not used to register overall learning achievements or as a summative assessment. To help adult learners find, understand and engage in ECNU's LLL options, the university offers guidance on relevant programmes and counselling. Its Counselling and Psychological Services deliver lectures and offer consultations to promote adult learners' health and well-being on request. There is also a comprehensive service platform for teachers and adult learners to share information, resources and experiences. ECNU sees these services as a way of enabling adult learners' holistic development, based on an integrated view of LLL that extends far beyond the classroom. In addition, ECNU emphasizes the importance of adult learners taking the initiative and being autonomous in their selection and pursuit of flexible learning pathways and provision within the university.

4.3.3 Digitalization, technology-enhanced learning and other innovations

ECNU provides different options for adult learners to participate in online learning, with an emphasis on blended learning, which the university has found to provide a good balance of capitalizing on adult learners' in-person interactions, while also accommodating their other personal or professional commitments. ECNU runs synchronous and asynchronous online lectures, but also uses mobile technology and social media to support communication relating to relevant activities; to circulate feedback; and to facilitate group discussions. As discussed earlier, these technologies allowed a rapid transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, which in turn prompted ECNU to develop further provision of this kind. This, together with a more innovative approach and improved blended learning approaches, has made it possible to pursue a broader range of learning styles and programme objectives. For example, the School of Open Learning and Education may now combine intensive offline lectures and classroom teaching with regular online lectures, as well as applied studies (e.g. an internship). According to ECNU, they may adopt a flipped classroom strategy, which entails centring a session on teacher-guided problem-solving through written exercises, enriched through peer learning. Learners then engage with readings, lectures and other material inputs to the learning process in their own time. Cognizant of the difficulties of developing a mutual learning environment online, and the potential impact on a programme's quality and effectiveness, the ECNU leadership has also made efforts to ensure that certain programmes are offered offline.

According to ECNU, students and academic staff universally adopted online learning in response to COVID-19, and responded particularly well to 'networked learning', a popular approach in open education, which fosters peer learning and knowledge exchange. Building on this, the university plans to research further ways of making online interactions among adult learners and teachers more effective in order to create an environment that promotes more and better mutual learning. ECNU would like to further improve its approach to blended learning, having recently hosted roundtable meetings and conferences on this subject. Moreover, the university is conducting research into online learning for older people, along with a study on education and artificial intelligence. Findings on the latter were not available prior to the publication of this research report, and findings on the former suggest that, while online learning presents a flexible learning option for adult learners – enabling them to study from home, and providing access to more diverse course options – they may not have the IT and digital literacy skills to benefit fully. Moreover, the issue of equity of access and participation has yet to be fully resolved, as vulnerable older people are likely to require additional support (e.g. by being provided with digital tools and reliable internet access). To address the latter point and explore new ideas, methods and providers for this type of learning, ECNU has jointly established the Shanghai Smart Education Research Institute with the Municipal Education Commission.

4.3.4 Community engagement and the university's impact on broader socio-economic development

In addition to implementing the approaches to widening access and participation for adult learners described above, ECNU also organizes a range of public events to widen exposure to LLL. These include cultural activities, and public lectures and seminars led by the university's professors, scholars and experts. According to ECNU,

lecture content varies depending on the interests of the specific target groups. For example, lectures intended for older learners mostly focus on topics of health, culture and entertainment, whereas those aimed at a younger audience aim to make science, philosophy and cultural practices more accessible. ECNU faculty members have also delivered lectures and hosted seminars in local schools and community centres. In addition, ECNU supports Shanghai Municipality's membership in UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities, which is marked each year by a 'LLL Week', hosted in collaboration with China's Ministry of Education. The university contributes to this event by organizing a wide range of online and offline lectures, training opportunities and discussion forums, among other activities. According to the ECNU leadership, these collaborative efforts, which involving a variety of stakeholders, demonstrate the city and university's mutual commitment to the construction of a learning society.

Other, less structured community engagement initiatives have included cultural activities, public lectures and seminars for the people of Shanghai. ECNU has indicated that there are a number of benefits to these different kinds of community involvement. For one, they present opportunities to research the processes involved in constructing a learning society, including family-community-school cooperations. They also allow more university students to participate in such activities at the local level; increase the role that the community plays in education and its leverage; and enhance the university's influence in the wider community. Community involvement and private-sector collaborations have also resulted in co-designed research projects, the recruitment of working professionals into teaching activities, and the development of training programmes for employees, from which more than 4,500 workers have benefited in the past eight years. This has significantly expanded and improved the local labour force, and has contributed to regional economic development. The benefits of ECNU's LLL provision are already apparent – within the university, across the municipality of Shanghai, and even further afield – and its decentralized approach to designing and delivering LLL, and highly community-oriented implementation, can serve as a model for other universities.

4.4 Main lessons learned

Although LLL is not explicitly mentioned in China's national legislation, policies and planning processes are strongly geared towards LLL at national, provincial and municipal levels as well as within ECNU.

One of the challenges faced is the lack of system-level mechanisms primarily a national qualification framework, which, if put in place, could standardize the various flexible learning pathways offered by ECNU, in particular by ensuring that current credit transfer/exemption and RPL practices lead to standardized equivalencies. Such a framework could also serve to consolidate links between higher education and vocational education and training programmes, which may be better positioned to support specific groups, such as migrant workers. These groups have not benefited from LLL to the same extent as, for example, the older population, which, as this case study highlights, have been targeted through a range of activities. By introducing such a framework, ECNU's continuing education provision, which is one of the university's main areas of focus within LLL, could be strengthened and extended to reach a wider range of learners.

Pathways for vulnerable groups have already been established, one of the most popular being the self-study exam. Another example is the 'special entrance ability' process, whereby candidates demonstrate an equivalent level of learning through various means. However, vulnerable and marginalized individuals with limited educational backgrounds or insufficient access to relevant professional opportunities, academic courses or language programmes in their desired field of study may struggle to meet the requirements for this pathway. That said, the RPL practices currently in place have the potential to achieve a greater impact; alternative assessments in particular constitute a means of making access more equitable by capturing evidence of prior achievements in order to award qualifications. Furthermore, financing is key to successfully implementing such strategies especially in light of the growing demand for LLL provision. As to guidance and counselling services for adult learners, these represent one of ECNU's particular strengths and could serve as a model for other institutions. However, they would need to be expanded still further in order to accommodate other categories of previously underserved learners who may have different support needs. Instead of prioritizing the rather specific goal of making adult learners more autonomous in their selection and pursuit of flexible learning pathways within the university, a more comprehensive approach could additionally involve supporting marginalized groups, such as migrant learners, in becoming both more self-reliant and more integrated into their respective environments. A LLL approach to higher education would thus go beyond the classroom and contribute towards empowering individuals and communities more broadly.

5. UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK, Ireland

University College Cork (UCC) is a public university located in south-western Ireland with a long history of providing LLL opportunities to adult learners in the local community. UCC is an interesting case study for a number of reasons, in particular due to the dynamic work carried out by its dedicated institute on LLL, the Adult Continuing Education (ACE) centre. ACE is linked to the national skills agenda and related incentives, and takes a broad view of widening access to higher education for different groups, especially underrepresented and vulnerable ones, to achieve educational inclusion and social equity. Through the ACE centre, UCC offers a variety of flexible learning pathways and types of provision, including online learning, through its departments and faculties, as well as in partnership with a number of civil society organizations and the private sector (see UCC, n.d.-b and n.d.-c). The centre's approach to quality assurance is robust and in line with UCC's academic standards and processes, also incorporating the adult learner's view and those of external examiners for critical insights. The ACE centre is furthermore relatively autonomous as regards the development and piloting of programmes and mechanisms for widening access to its LLL provision, notably through RPL innovations and alternative assessments. Moreover, it prioritizes making LLL available to the local community through the Learning Neighbourhoods Programme, and by supporting Cork as a UNESCO learning city.



Quick facts about University College Cork

- University College Cork (UCC) – or Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh in the Irish language – was originally named Queen's College Cork and established by Royal Charter under the 1845 Queen's Colleges (Ireland) Act. It changed its name in 1908 under the Irish Universities Act (UCC n.d.-a; Government of Ireland, 1908). It started out with 115 students and a vision of training youth for which the local community had long campaigned.
- Today, UCC sits on 42 acres close to Cork city centre, and has approximately 21,000 students (2017) across four colleges.
- According to its Strategic Plan 2017–2022, UCC is in the top 2 per cent of universities globally, with programmes across the arts, humanities, social sciences, business, law, engineering, architecture, physical and life sciences, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing and the clinical therapies.
- In 2010, UCC was the first university to receive the Green Campus award from the Foundation for Environmental Education, demonstrating its commitment to environmental protection.
- UCC prioritizes regional and community partnerships with strong social and environmental benefits. For example, it collaborates with the Munster Technological University (MTU) and the Irish Naval Service to conduct marine and energy research in the local harbour (UCC 2017). In 2015, the university helped to establish the South West Regional Skills Forum, in collaboration with the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) and the Institute of Technology, Tralee (which merged to form MTU in 2021), the Education and Training Boards, and employer organizations (ibid.).

5.1 National context

Higher education in Ireland is legally and politically oriented towards supporting LLL and offering provision for adult learners. According to the country's overarching national development policy, Project Ireland 2040, LLL is a key enabler to 'personal fulfilment, a fair society and a successful nation' that both sustains a robust economy and contributes to 'building strong communities' (Government of Ireland, 2019, p. 89). A commitment to LLL provision in higher education is also evident in the country's Universities Act 1997, which recognizes public universities' institutional autonomy and aims to 'facilitate LLL through the provision of adult and continuing education' (Government of Ireland, 1997, Part III, Chapter I, Article 12, Point j). According to the Universities Act, university charters may include 'policy in respect of adult and continuing education and the arrangements in place for the provision of that education, including part-time and evening courses' (ibid., Part III, Chapter VI, Article 31, Point g). Setting standards and regulations for this process is the responsibility of Ireland's Higher Education Authority (HEA), established by law in 1971 (Government of Ireland, 1971) to develop the higher education sector, coordinate investment and, as relates to LLL, make the system more structurally democratic and equally accessible.

5.1.1 National policies and frameworks promoting different aspects of LLL

Ireland does not have a dedicated national policy on LLL, the closest approximation to it being the White Paper on Adult Education (Department of Education and Science, 2000), released over 20 years ago. According to the interview conducted with UCC representatives, the white paper's definition of LLL aligns with the United Nations' vision of community development, and personal learning and enrichment (UIL, 2016). However, Irish national policy and higher education strategies have translated this into a focus on upskilling or reskilling the country's workforce. For example, one of the targets set in the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018–2020 is to offer all students work-based opportunities as part of their programme provision (Higher Education Authority, 2018). Similarly, the National Skills Strategy 2025 underlines the need to enhance skills development through relevant, high-quality teaching and learning as a means of 'support[ing] economic and social prosperity' (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p. 16), and identifies adult learners aiming for career enrichment, transition and progression as its main target group. This national strategy cites mechanisms designed to monitor whether university education is responding to skills demands. Such mechanisms include the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE), which collects information on graduates' employment and educational outcomes (ibid.). The national strategy further refers to the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, a system-level infrastructure to promote quality teaching and learning in higher education. In combination, these tools ensure that university programme provision is relevant to the needs of learners, society and the economy (ibid.).

Further policy documents reflect a national concern for widening access to LLL opportunities in higher education. For example, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's Statement of Strategy 2021–2023 emphasizes the need to accommodate a variety of adult learners by creating different entry routes into higher education (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2021). Underrepresented groups identified in Ireland's National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019 comprise 'entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education, first-time mature entrants, students with disabilities, part-time/flexible learners, further education award holders, and Irish Travellers' (Higher Education Authority, 2015, p. 34). The HEA's ultimate aim is to make student bodies more reflective of Ireland's diverse populations (ibid.), and to benefit from their unique perspectives and experiences. In interview, UCC's Interim President highlighted the major contribution that migrants make to Irish society, and emphasized that policies need to be reimagined in order to better embrace and promote their knowledge. The White Paper on Adult Education adopts a similar stance, arguing in favour of LLL opportunities that accommodate broader swathes of society, and calling for a greater alignment of the education and training sectors in order to 'ensure that learners can move progressively and incrementally within an overarching coordinated and learner-centred framework' (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 12).

To support widening access and participation in LLL in Irish university settings, higher education stakeholders have started collaborating on a national framework for recognizing prior learning (RPL). Funded under the Irish Government's Human Capital Initiative (HCI) Pillar 3 (Innovation and agility), the project – a collaboration between Ireland's universities, technological universities and institutes of technology – aims to streamline and strengthen RPL across all HEIs, and develop a national framework through which RPL will become an integral part of Ireland's higher education system (THEA, n.d.).

5.1.2 Funding mechanisms supporting access to LLL opportunities in HEIs

Several funding schemes drive LLL in university settings, with a focus on skills development to meet employer demand. One of the largest is Springboard+, which is funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Social Fund. As of June 2020, it offered over 11,000 free or subsidized places on 332 courses leading to certificate, degree and postgraduate awards related to ICT, manufacturing and international financial services

(Higher Education Authority, n.d.). The majority of places are offered on a part-time basis lasting up to 12 months, which allows participants to continue receiving social welfare benefits (ibid.). Another funding scheme that was developed recently in response to rising unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic is the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) Pillar 1, which offers 5,891 places on 93 graduate conversion courses over a period of three years (ibid.).[14] Study is full-time, lasting between 12 and 18 months depending on the course, and leads to bachelor's degrees and postgraduate diplomas (ibid.). The HCI programme offers funding for advanced technical areas of study, including artificial intelligence, smart factory technology, sustainable energy, medical device technology and cybersecurity (ibid.). The long-term unemployed represent one major target group of these funding schemes, in particular Springboard+. This presents certain challenges: according to the interview with the ACE centre, some skills areas and programme types and levels preferred by employers are beyond the reach of this particular group because its members may not have the necessary foundational skills (including literacy and numeracy) to complete the programme. It was further noted during the interview that the timetable and learning objectives of these schemes are also unrealistic for many adult learners, particularly those who have had a negative experience of formal education.

Apart from national funding schemes for skills development and limited funding for which universities compete, core financing options from universities or the state are generally lacking. This constitutes a major barrier to widening access to LLL in higher education in Ireland. As noted in the interview, this results in a reliance on tuition fees, which in turn places the motivation to offer this kind of provision at cross-purposes with the principles of LLL, because the long-term unemployed and other vulnerable groups are less able to pay such fees. In addition, a tuition-based financing structure means that staff may need to prioritize income-generating tasks (such as running programmes for adult learners) over conducting research and pilot studies to capture best practices and develop more innovative, scalable approaches to LLL. According to a UCC representative, cofunding through partnerships might offer a way to free up funds to help vulnerable groups participate in LLL provision. In brief, even if their access is a policy priority, many LLL activities and pathways are out of reach for vulnerable groups, either because they do not meet minimum qualification or work experience standards, or due to a lack of government funding.

14 Conversion courses are aimed at preparing students for postgraduate study in a different field than their first degree.

5.2 Institutional context

UCC began offering courses for adult learners more than 70 years ago, with the first diploma in Social and Economic Science awarded to 24 participants in 1948. This offer expanded, becoming more structured and consolidated before culminating in the establishment of a dedicated LLL unit through the Adult Continuing Education (ACE) centre – the oldest of its kind in Ireland. Its mission is to provide learning opportunities for all adults irrespective of age and previous educational achievements; to accommodate all learners based on their individual needs; and to promote community development. The centre embraces a broad vision of LLL that both includes and goes beyond skills development alone (UCC, n.d.-a, b, c, d).

5.2.1 The ACE centre's structure, responsibilities and impact across the university

Today, UCC serves over 20,000 students, 3,000 of whom are adult learners across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, continuing education and training initiatives, and short courses offered through the ACE centre. In line with legal guidelines, this provision is all part-time – a crucial design feature and success factor that enables adults to study while balancing work and life commitments (UCC, n.d.-b). Provision is offered through a variety of modalities, from face-to-face (on campus and in outreach venues all over Ireland) and blended learning to a block approach (i.e. compressing single-subject learning into a short, intense period) and online (UCC-ACE, 2019). The ACE centre views community outreach as an essential means of providing marginalized individuals and groups around the country with opportunities to access higher education. Aligning its target groups with those defined in the national higher education policy discussed in the previous section, UCC's provision is aimed at working people who require upskilling; higher education staff; women; minorities; migrants and refugees; older people; those with disabilities; the unemployed; early school leavers; persons living in remote or deprived area; and prisoners and former inmates. ACE offers 175 programmes (UCC, n.d.-c), many of which are delivered in collaboration with departments and faculties in UCC's four colleges and with external organizations around the country.

The ACE centre forms part of the Office of the Vice-President of Learning and Teaching (OVPLT) (UCC-ACE, 2019). The centre is deeply embedded in UCC's standard operations and complies with its policies and procedures. For example, it applies the same assessment standards, e.g. for examination boards and external examiners (ibid.). As the ACE centre is classified as an administrative rather than an academic unit, its staff focuses its efforts on the design and implementation of adult learning provision, though research is also conducted and published when possible. The centre employs 29 staff members.

According to the interview with UCC's Interim President, LLL approaches are championed across the university and accepted by all the main stakeholders, including the office for career development as a means of enhancing employability. The heads of UCC's four colleges support LLL. Within the university as a whole, meanwhile, LLL is viewed as a tool to connect UCC's work to industry, the health sector and the community. Moreover, an awareness of LLL has contributed to the diversification of the student body, and – as noted in the interview – prompted the university to improve its support for students' mental health and well-being. The ACE's work has furthermore enabled the university to participate in key international activities related to LLL, for example by liaising with the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) LLL Hub, among others.

The ACE's activities are already beginning to have an effect across the university's mainstream provision. ACE's sample reports on assessment, quality assurance programmes and committee meetings have enabled peer learning by introducing other academic departments to alternative teaching and learning processes (leading, for example, to the university's grading policy reform, which shifted from numerical to level-based grading in order to accommodate a greater range and variety of learners). Indeed, as stated in the interview with the Interim president, LLL will feature more heavily in the next revision of UCC's overall academic strategy. A number of issues remain to be resolved, among them how to break traditional three- or four-year degrees down into shorter, more attainable blocks of qualified learning that can be integrated into more flexible pathways and RVA processes.

5.2.2 Funding sources and financing mechanisms for adult learners at the ACE centre

UCC is a public university and thus receives government funding. As noted in the university's strategic plan, it also generates a significant amount of private funding. However, neither UCC's core funding nor its private funding is allocated to the ACE centre, and the centre receives no direct support from the state. Hence, the centre is primarily self-funded through tuition fees, though the university does not charge for overheads (UCC-ACE, 2019). On-demand services (e.g. for corporate training and consultancies), and private-sector funding (i.e. from industry and employers) further supplement the centre's income. According to a self-reported quality review conducted in 2019, the ACE centre's director is in charge of its budget while the management team oversees income and expenditure (UCC-ACE, 2019). All staff members comply with UCC's purchasing policies and procedures (ibid.). Notably, programmes for adult learners cannot be launched until they have been deemed economically viable.

Whilst a reliance on tuition fees means that the ACE centre has no fixed budget to work with, its revenue has nonetheless increased significantly in recent years (by over 123 per cent over the past eight years) (UCC-ACE, 2019). The centre has seen growth in all areas of activity, but most particularly with regard to Springboard+ and its industry-oriented programming, which represent approximately one-third of its total fee-based income. The centre transfers income to UCC colleges and departments as per a standing agreement. This pays for teaching and content development, and access to career services in order to supplement many of UCC's departmental budgets and doctoral scholarships (ibid.). In addition to Springboard+ and the HCI initiative, the ACE centre offers Sanctuary Scholarships for asylum seekers and refugees whose legal status in Ireland is undetermined and who are not eligible for traditional social welfare benefits (UCC, n.d.-e). These scholarships fully cover their tuition fees for part-time programmes. Furthermore, in 2018, UCC launched a fund for part-time students under the auspices of the Student Assistance Fund supported by the Irish government and the European Social Fund, which has been awarded to adult learners in the ACE centre (UCC-ACE, 2019), specifically to learners enrolled in part-time programmes who are facing financial difficulties. This fund only covers students' living costs, and not their tuition fees.

5.2.3 Quality assurance mechanisms ensuring academic rigour in the ACE centre's provision

The ACE centre draws on four quality assurance mechanisms to maintain the academic rigour of its LLL provision (UCC-ACE, 2019). The first is the Academic Standards Board (ASB), whose terms of reference apply to all of the centre's curricula, and which convenes approximately six times per year. As noted in the interview, ASB members are academics from across the university's four colleges, and their appraisal and positive feedback on the ACE centre's practices have helped to raise the centre's profile across the university. The ASB approves all new programme proposals and changes to existing programing, which must then meet the standards of UCC's Office of Academic Programmes and Regulations (APAR) (UCC-ACE, 2019). Once approved, the ACE centre's programmes are quality assured through various mechanisms: (1) ASB sub-committees that monitor designated programmes in order to ensure the quality of teaching, learning, assessments and student experience; (2) instructors who provide constructive feedback to adult learners no later than three weeks after assessment (timely feedback is considered especially important for learners who have been out of education for prolonged periods of time); (3) a module evaluation tool for participants to share their views on programme delivery, which inform programme development and planning; and (4) annual composite reports that draw together comments and recommendations from the external examination process and ASB sub-committees (ibid.).

5.2.4 UCC's approach: Success factors and challenges

Despite its progress in delivering LLL provision, not least through its rigorous quality assurance procedures, the ACE centre faces challenges that reflect those identified at the national level. Underrepresented and vulnerable groups can rarely afford tuition fees, and they may not meet the funding schemes' requirements as regards basic skills and experience. Even when RPL is applied and funding is provided, members of vulnerable groups may struggle to complete a programme. Email correspondence with the ACE centre indicates that learners often drop out due to insufficient funds, family care-giving responsibilities (particularly if learners are single parents), and physical and mental health issues (especially in the case of learners with disabilities). These challenges particularly affect ACE's Sanctuary Scholars, despite the centre's attempts to source additional funds to cover costs related to transportation, study materials and child care.

A further concern is the centre's income base, which is not diverse enough to withstand sudden changes to funding schemes, which may be brought about by changing government agendas or private-sector demands (UCC-ACE, 2019). Provision offered through the university is also subject to change, as departments can discontinue programming unilaterally. As a result, two strategic priorities have emerged: (1) the establishment of a stability clause in consultation with university management that only 'allows for withdrawal of programmes by mutual agreement' (ibid., p. 5), thus guaranteeing the ACE centre time and space for negotiation and preparation; and (2) the extension of online programme development, which was determined as a strong potential growth area based on a benchmarking exercise with the Department of Continuing Education at the University of Oxford (ibid.). However, the biggest concern emerging from the interview is the categorization of the ACE centre as an administrative unit, which limits its capacity to conduct research and share new knowledge on its LLL programme designs, innovations (i.e. quality assurance mechanisms and tools, RPL approaches and alternative assessments) and pilot studies. Until the centre is classified as an academic unit within UCC, its work in this area will remains marginal, limiting progress on LLL research that would not only inform the centre's own practice, but also allow other faculties and units across the university to incorporate adult learning theories and practices into their mainstream provision, much to the benefit of their full-time students.

UCC's Interim President has proposed a number of potential solutions to these challenges. First, the profile of the ACE centre, and LLL in general, could be raised by adding continuing education programmes for UCC staff to ACE's portfolio. Second, the urgent need for research in the area of LLL in higher education could be addressed by merging the ACE centre with UCC's Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CITRL), creating an academic unit that would combine the ACE centre's expertise in pedagogy and learning with the CITRL's research capacities.

5.3 Implementation

The ACE centre offers a variety of flexible learning pathways for adults to progress into and through their course of study at UCC and beyond. Since 2001, the ACE centre has supported almost 17,000 adult learners in obtaining UCC qualifications, 10 per cent of whom have progressed to degree programmes (UCC-ACE, 2019). UCC alumni constitute an important target group for the centre: over the past two decades 1,200 former UCC students have gained qualifications through the centre (ibid.). The centre offers 50 accredited programmes in partnership with UCC's four colleges, from Irish NQF levels 6 to 9, awarding qualifications ranging from certificates and diplomas at undergraduate and graduate levels to master's programmes at postgraduate level (ibid.; QQI, n.d.).

5.3.1 Flexible learning pathways promoting LLL and community engagement

The ACE centre's flexible learning pathways offer different routes into UCC's degree programmes. For example, adult learners who attain the part-time undergraduate diploma in Social Studies can enter the second year of UCC's full-time bachelor's degree in the same subject (UCC-ACE, 2019). Upon accumulating an additional 120 credits over two years, adult learners are awarded an undergraduate degree (Level 8 of the NQF). Other, similar access routes have been modelled on this pathway. For instance, the centre is also in the process of mapping its undergraduate diploma in Youth & Community Outreach to the bachelor's degree in Youth and Community Work. These programmes are interdisciplinary, introducing adult learners to key concepts in sociology, psychology, economics and philosophy, and developing critical analysis skills to better understand and navigate contemporary society (ibid.). The undergraduate diploma in Social Studies is delivered in partnership with the Cork College of Commerce, a local further education college, and classes are held there and on UCC's campus. As stated in the interview, the ACE centre's partnership approach has proven successful in delivering LLL provision that responds to community needs, interests and demands, which is central to the university's funding mission.

Another example of a flexible learning pathway is a certificate programme in Social Farming at Irish NQF Level 6 (Special Purpose Award), which provides education and training opportunities to adult learners working on farms that support people with disabilities (UCC-ACE, 2019). This programme provides adult learners with the skills and understanding they need in order to become support workers and coaches on farms and

in the community, thus contributing to wider social development, especially in rural areas (ibid.). The part-time programme lasts one academic year and is delivered through a blended learning approach that includes lectures at both UCC and outreach venues, and field visits to farms and organizations designed to explore different models and practices of social farming. The content is inter- and multidisciplinary, incorporating content from the fields of law, policy, the environment and mental health, as well as themes related to communication skills and disability. Social farming emphasizes principles of equality, social inclusion and community development, which is reflected in the programme's learner-centred approach – a main pillar of LLL and crucial to the ACE centre's provision. According to the interview, learners on this programme may not have completed formal schooling; hence, it is important to create a safe space and provide support for them to pursue this learning experience with confidence.

5.3.2 Accommodating adult learners through alternative entry requirements and assessments

To make its flexible learning pathways accessible to a wider range of learners, the ACE centre applies RPL principles and practices to learners from non-traditional backgrounds. For example, a pilot study carried out by the centre resulted in 17 farmers from south-western Ireland completing an undergraduate diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy (UCC-ACE, 2019). RPL was used to capture these farmers' relevant formal and non-formal prior learning related to sustainable practices, and convert them to the equivalent academic course requirements. ACE staff started with a 'traffic light system' to quickly identify farmers' prior knowledge. When they subsequently refined their research, it became evident that there was a significant overlap between the programme curriculum and farmers' established knowledge, which was deemed equivalent to a 40-credit exemption (out of 60 credits in total). As a result of the pilot study, the centre developed a five-step methodology, which it also applies to other programmes. The involvement of external examiners is key to this ongoing process: their diverse perspectives enrich the centre's research findings and ensure that they meet university standards. This is especially important since outcomes are communicated to UCC's Academic Standards and Development Committee (ADSC), which is tasked with reviewing RPL policy (UCC-ACE, 2019). According to the ACE centre, the requirements for passing a module are much higher for non-traditional learners using RPL procedures than for regular students. This discrepancy between the standards defined for RPL procedures and those that apply to mainstream provision make the quality of RPL mapping even more important, as it requires striking a balance between the high standards of the university and the educational backgrounds and prior experiences of the adult learners.

The ACE centre designs and uses alternative forms of assessment across its LLL provision to engage and retain adult learners, in particular vulnerable groups. For example, the ACE centre offers provision to Irish Traveller women, who are highly underrepresented in the higher education system.[15] This group sometimes experiences challenges related to literacy, but they have a strong tradition of oral storytelling, which the ACE centre has capitalized on as a means of assessing their learning and to encourage their participation (and retention) in lieu of traditional essays and exams. Alternative assessments include reflective journaling; group work for collaborative learning and developing academic posters (UCC-ACE, 2019); role-playing exercises to simulate pro bono work (ibid.); and the creation of portfolios and other materials, websites, videos and podcasts for digital storytelling.

In addition to these activities, the ACE represents UCC within a national network that promotes policy development in this area, and is developing the national RPL framework mentioned in the previous section.

5.3.3 Continuing education and training offered in collaboration with external partners

Continuing professional development and upskilling are offered through the ACE centre's partnerships with industry representatives and professional bodies, and cover themes relating to health and safety, management, coaching and pharmaceutical manufacturing (UCC-ACE, 2019). More than 10 continuous education programmes are delivered on a part-time basis with partners that include the Institute of Occupational Safety (IOSH), the Irish Institute of Training and Development (IITD), Velopi, the WAVE Trauma Centre and IDDea Consulting (ibid.). According to the 2019 self-reported quality review, more than 250 adult learners took part in these training programmes (ibid.). The Springboard+ scheme, which funds many of the students enrolled on the centre's skills development courses, has been implemented successfully by the ACE centre, with employment outcomes from 2011 to 2018 showing that over three-quarters of its graduates secured employment, which is 9 per cent higher than the national average achieved by all Springboard+ providers (ibid.).

15 Irish Travellers are a minority group, representing less than 1 per cent of the population in Ireland, and are commonly characterized by their nomadic lifestyle (ITM n.d.). Historically, this group has been socially excluded and discriminated against, and it continues to 'experience extreme disadvantage in terms of employment, housing and health' (ESRI 2017, p. vii). Average life expectancy for Irish Traveller women is 12 years lower than for the female population of Ireland as a whole (ITM n.d.), and 92 per cent of them leave secondary school before finishing (ESRI 2017). Until the 1990s, Irish Travellers were often segregated in school and had lower learning outcomes, including low levels of literacy and numeracy.

Two further examples of continuous professional development programming that the centre has launched in recent years are a graduate diploma in Trauma Studies and an undergraduate diploma in Management Practice (ibid.). The former was developed in partnership with UCC's Department of Sociology and Criminology, and the WAVE Trauma Centre in Northern Ireland. It is an exclusively online course and the first of its kind in the country. As explained in the interview with the ACE centre, the programme focuses on the social implications of trauma at the individual and societal levels, engaging learners based on their own experiences of survival (ibid.) and creating a warm and empathetic learning environment. The centre also collaborates with relevant UCC departments to design specific training programmes with industry clients around the country, for example Pfizer and Allianz Worldwide Care. These are typically delivered on-site, with participants recruited internally and fees typically sponsored by the employers, although, according to the ACE centre, some of these programmes receive financial support from the Skillnet initiative, a government agency that helps businesses develop their workforce through 'enterprise training and workforce learning' (Skillnet Ireland, n.d.). The latter type of training often focuses on management, team development and leadership, and is aligned with NFQ levels 7 and 8 (ibid.).

The ACE centre moreover provides many non-accredited short courses for adult learners, including local retirees. These courses cover a wide range of topics of general interest, and attract about 1,000 learners per year (UCC-ACE, 2019). Depending on the subject, courses are delivered by current and retired academic staff and external experts, on campus and/or in outreach venues, both during the day and in the evening. They usually run for six, eight or ten weeks (ibid.) and fees vary depending on the course duration. Fees range from 170 to 250 EUR (approx. US$168–248), and are covered by participants. The ACE centre endeavours to keep these fees as low as possible, and email correspondence indicates that discounts are offered to UCC staff and adult learners who have attended the ACE centre in the past. These courses are a significant component of UCC's engagement with LLL for the city, and 'enhance the general culture and educational landscape in Cork' (UCC-ACE, 2019, p. 13). Collaborating partners include the city council, the Cork Arts Theatre, a number of galleries and the Irish Heritage Trust. Participants who complete a course receive a certificate of attendance. According to the interview with the ACE centre, while many people attend these courses for fun, others may undertake them in order to gauge how they would fare on a full degree programme.

5.3.4 Shifting the ACE centre's provision towards an online or blended format

As discussed earlier, the ACE centre has long made online learning a strategic priority and developed a dedicated business plan to this end. However, this plan was put on hold following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of which all programmes quickly shifted online to prevent learning disruption. To better understand the challenges and benefits of this rapid transition, a survey was conducted with students and lecturers. At the time of data collection, the ACE centre planned to carry out a full review of all LLL provision in order to establish a post-COVID plan, and many programmes will likely continue to be delivered in a hybrid format. During the pandemic, it became evident that many adult learners want online learning to involve opportunities for real-time engagement with their lecturers and peers rather than comprise exclusively self-directed courses. Indeed, the interview with the ACE centre reveals that the number of adult learners has increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which the centre attributes to its online offerings.

The ACE centre currently offers four programmes that are entirely online, according to email correspondence: the undergraduate diploma in Autism Studies, the graduate certificate in Trauma Studies, the diploma in Trauma Studies and the undergraduate certificate in Safety, Health and Welfare at Work. Other programmes are mostly online but supplemented with some in-person teaching, such as the undergraduate diploma in Environment, Sustainability and Climate, which requires two days of fieldwork per year. Programmes in Personal and Management Coaching and in Mindfulness-based Well-being require five classroom days during the first year and are fully online during the second year. The ACE centre reports that the success of its fully online programmes is measured through positive feedback from adult learners, annual increases in student numbers, students' academic success, and positive reports from external examiners and programme committees. However, challenges in the implementation of these programmes remain, and pertain to the promotion of peer-to-peer learning and engagement, the provision of IT support for adult learners and lecturers outside of business hours, and measures to ensure that video content remains relevant through continuous updates.

It is also worth noting that the ACE centre was the lead UCC partner in the creation of a set of animated videos for learning city development within the context of the UNESCO GNLC, and has further contributed to the development of an online course for learning cities aimed at high-ranking officials (UCC-ACE, 2019).

5.3.5 Promoting a broader version of LLL through community engagement

To make LLL more accessible to underrepresented groups of learners, ACE has established partnerships with community, neighbourhood and volunteer organizations (see e.g. UCC, n.d.-d). For example, ACE works closely with the Cork Education and Training Board (CETB) to deliver funded programmes, including short courses and accredited provision in Cork Prison, on subjects such as mental health. It has also delivered Women's

Studies courses in learning centres in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (UCC-ACE, 2019).

The ACE centre not only promotes community engagement through its own provision, but is also deeply involved in various external initiatives. It coordinates the Cork Learning Neighbourhoods Programme, which addresses local educational disadvantage and is guided by principles of co-creation, sustainability, equality and inclusion (UCC-ACE, 2019). When a neighbourhood decides to join the initiative, it is asked to appoint a coordinating group consisting of residents and representatives of local organizations, such as schools, youth groups, community education providers and businesses, who then develop a learning plan to promote diverse learning activities and events all year long (ibid.). So far, activities have included an art sale, a community exhibition, a lecture series, workshops, outreach programmes and visits by UCC. As a founding partner of this initiative, the ACE centre is the anchor for Cork Learning Neighbourhoods in cooperation with the CETB, Munster Technological University and the city council. After piloting the approach in two local neighbourhoods in 2015–2016, the initiative has grown to include other neighbourhoods across Cork.

The Learning Neighbourhoods project forms part of a larger collective effort to promote LLL throughout Cork, supporting it as a UNESCO learning city. The ACE centre sits on the steering committee for this initiative and, in addition to implementing Cork Learning Neighbourhoods, contributes to the city's annual LLL festival. It also participates in related conferences around the world and, in 2017, helped to host the UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities (UCC, 2017). As noted during the interview, this work has led to a greater awareness of LLL across the university, and a greater understanding of its importance. UCC and the ACE centre's contributions to the UNESCO learning city project have also raised the university's visibility further afield, a development that the university is particularly proud of, according to the UCC's Interim President. UCC's engagement with LLL, primarily through its dedicated ACE centre, has not only shaped approaches to learning and teaching within the university, but has also significantly impacted how the university interacts with external partners, the local community and wider society.

5.4 Main lessons learned

UCC's well-established ACE centre, the range of flexible learning pathways it offers to adult learners, and its engagement with local and international initiatives make UCC a rich, comprehensive example of an HEI that is implementing LLL. As this case study demonstrates, the ACE centre has already taken important steps towards widening access, participation and retention in LLL in higher education for a significant number of adults who would otherwise struggle to (re-)enter higher education.

While the centre aligns its activities with the national skills development agenda, it also takes advantage of the institutional autonomy granted to universities in order to embrace a broader vision of LLL as a way of achieving better social inclusion, equity and development for many people, especially vulnerable groups. This approach is in line with the United Nations' view of LLL, as stipulated in SDG 4, and is supported by ACE's involvement in community initiatives and its active role in international networks. In this way, the centre sets a useful example for other universities. Moreover, the centre's work has resulted in UCC incorporating the principles and practices of LLL to a greater extent into its mainstream provision. While further innovation and research is constrained by the centre's classification as an administrative unit and by its limited financial resources, the ACE centre nonetheless succeeds in producing new knowledge based on its pilot studies and innovations, thus contributing to and advancing the field of LLL as a subject of study.

Regarding future developments, two main issues emerge that merit further consideration. The first pertains to the ways in which UCC might further capitalize on and support ACE's work, not only in terms of promoting research, but also by embedding the principles and practices of LLL into its mainstream provision. Such support and integration would help to build an institutional culture of LLL and fill a gap in research on higher education in Ireland. The proposed merger with UCC's Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning would be one way of resolving this issue. Such a merger would improve the ACE centre's academic standing and access to research funding. It would also potentially grant adult learners more access to UCC's central services, including counselling. However, a merger of this kind could limit the ACE centre's autonomy and agility, on which it depends in order to design innovative provision that responds to the needs of adult learners, especially vulnerable groups, and the wider community. A second issue relates to the ways in which the centre might build on its success and remain a beacon of LLL, while simultaneously becoming more embedded in university structures.

Overcoming these issues will entail drawing on the ACE centre's provision and the community initiatives it supports in order to develop a better understanding of the social, economic and environmental impact of LLL. As this case study makes evident, based on interviews and correspondence with the ACE centre, adult learners are benefiting from its provision in very important ways, offering positive feedback and sharing stories of the professional or academic learning journeys they first embarked on through their engagement with the ACE centre years after they have completed their programmes. To date, however, these stories have remained anecdotal. What is needed is a broader research methodology that can capture the impacts of LLL in a structured way over time. If well organized and communicated publicly, the evidence gathered could demonstrate why widening

access to LLL is essential for addressing social issues and contributing to the policy goals of 'a fair society' and 'strong communities' laid down in Ireland's Project Ireland 2040 (Government of Ireland, 2019, p. 89). This evidence would also strengthen the case for reviewing the design of educational funding mechanisms and pathways in order to make them more accessible to vulnerable groups (a similar demand has already been included in the Statement of Strategy 2021–2023 mentioned in the national context section, above). A research project of this kind would be a huge undertaking, requiring sufficient funds, expertise and human resources. Closer collaboration between the ACE centre and UCC, with the involvement of other partners and stakeholders, could potentially pave the way for such a research project, which would undoubtedly benefit not only the country, but international research on LLL and the LLL community more broadly.

6. SAINT JOSEPH UNIVERSITY, Lebanon

Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ) is a private Catholic research university located in Lebanon. It serves as a good example for the integration of LLL into higher education in the Arab region. The country has one of the most internationalized higher education sectors in the Arab world, and is very open to international influences and trends such as LLL. USJ is one of the oldest higher education institutions in the Middle East and has, over the years, established partnerships both with the public and private sectors, and with Lebanese civil society.

The ongoing political and socio-economic crisis in Lebanon has impacted Lebanese universities, including their ability to implement institutional strategies for LLL. While USJ, as a private university, has significant autonomy and flexibility, it does not receive direct public funds. The lack of public funding for private higher education and the decline in the buying power of the Lebanese population are obstacles for USJ. At the same time, this state of affairs encourages innovation, and LLL is viewed as a means of developing new initiatives and programmes and thereby diversifying funding. The present case study shows that USJ, despite not having implemented a formal LLL strategy, has found effective ways of responding to the LLL needs of people in Lebanon and across the region.

6.1 National context

In recent years, Lebanon has experienced three mega-crises simultaneously: an economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the aftermath of the 2020 explosion in the Port of Beirut. Along with ongoing political instability, these have had devastating effects on people's lives and livelihoods, plunging around 74 per cent of the population into poverty. The impact on education has been particularly severe at all levels. The cost of education, including higher education, is mostly covered by individuals and families. Private spending on education is high and significantly exceeds public spending: household spending on education surpasses 10 per cent of households' total expenditure (Abdul-Hamid & Yassine, 2020). The private higher education sector is well developed and significant in Lebanon, representing more than 60 per cent of the total student enrolment. There is no direct public funding of private universities in Lebanon.

The Lebanese higher education system is highly centralized, and all HEIs are regulated by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education's Directorate General

Quick facts about Saint Joseph University

- Initially founded as a Jesuit school in 1839, USJ was granted university status in 1875 and comprises 13 faculties, 14 institutes and seven schools, with almost 12,000 students enrolled in undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral programmes, and 2,000 teaching staff (USJ, 2022a).
- The university operates in Beirut and has established regional centres in Tripoli, Sidon and Zahlé.
- USJ is primarily a teaching institution, whilst also being strongly committed to research, and to its third mission, 'using knowledge in the service of society' (USJ, 2022b, para. 5). The university defines itself as an academic institution that favours biculturalism (both Arab and French cultures) and trilingualism (Arabic, English and French).
- Through the 'Opération 7e jour' (or 'Day 7 Operation'), USJ's volunteer programme, students can participate in community engagement projects that cover various areas, such as health and human development, citizenship and human rights, and dialogue and mediation.
- USJ has a highly international outlook, operating under the ECTS system, and having established 440 agreements with foreign universities (USJ, 2022a).

of Higher Education (DGHE). This includes private HEIs, despite the fact that these institutions receive no public funding. However, according to USJ's Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, it is worth noting that private universities (such as the American Lebanese University and USJ) have only been monitored by the government for the past three decades, i.e. since the Lebanese civil war.

DGHE administers higher education provision, including technical tertiary education, and supervises all private and public higher education providers. It also regulates the transition of students enrolled in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) into tertiary education. TVET students have the option of enrolling in academic programmes or continuing with technical education at tertiary level (in higher vocational institutes). Universities may set their own admission requirements for TVET graduates, which, in the case of some universities, may prove too restrictive for TVET graduates, who often perform poorly in entrance exams, particularly in languages (Minister of Education and Higher Education, 2018; UNESCO, 2019).

6.1.1 Relevant national legislation framing LLL in higher education

Higher education in Lebanon has to date been regulated through two laws. The first, law number 75/1967, applies to the country's only public university, the Lebanese University, which is autonomous and maintains its own system of governance. The second is law number 285/2014, which governs general provisions for higher education and the organization of private higher education and contains three articles relating specifically to LLL: Articles 3, 6 and 9 (MERIC-Net, 2019). Article 3 states that higher education is a public service provided by HEIs, both public and private, which should cater to the needs of society by building its members' capacities and contributing to individual and societal development through scientific research. It furthermore tasks higher education with promoting the fundamental freedoms of individuals and groups, as defined by international conventions, especially academic freedoms. It provides a framework for LLL by calling for the 'provision of education for all those who would like to pursue their education and have the capacity to continue learning at this level of education, including people with special needs'. Article 2 similarly states that 'providing continuous learning and fostering critical thinking are among the most important missions of the university'. Articles 6 and 9 of law no. 285/2014, meanwhile, further highlight the importance of LLL. Article 6 gives universities the right to 'create specialized training programmes of theoretical, practical, or vocational nature in the licensed fields; these programmes lead to special certificates', while Article 9 addresses the issue of 'specialized training programmes' promoted by HEIs (Lebanese Parliament, 2014).

It should be noted that there are very few legislative texts framing higher education in Lebanon, and that they were ratified only recently. The freedom and independence of Lebanese higher education has traditionally been protected by the country's Constitution. However, HEIs' autonomy has been questioned in light of the significant increase in the number of private universities in recent decades. The majority of the 52 higher education institutions currently in operation in Lebanon were established in the late 1990s when the private sector suddenly flourished following the civil war in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990. Given how much HEIs vary in terms of their history, size, resources and quality of teaching and research, some observers have called for a strengthening of the legislation and the institutional framework governing higher education. In response, a new law for the creation of a national agency for quality assurance in HE has been approved by the government. However, the proposed agency has been awaiting ratification by Parliament since 2012 (MERIC-Net, 2019).

6.1.2 Factors contributing to LLL in the Lebanese HE context, and ongoing challenges

The Lebanese higher education sector has always been open to international and market influences. Foreign HEIs have been operating in Lebanon for decades. This includes the French Conservatoire national des arts et des métiers (National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts – CNAM), which in 1968 established its Institut supérieur des sciences appliquées et économiques (Higher Institute of Applied and Economic Sciences – ISSAE) in Beirut and offers courses which are accredited in France and recognized in Lebanon. Another example is the Arab Open University, which was founded in Kuwait in 2000 and has since opened a branch in Beirut (MERIC-Net, 2019). These two institutions are particularly relevant for LLL due to their intensive use of distance learning.

Currently, a national debate is emerging on the need to make training trajectories more permeable and flexible. In the TVET sector, the elaboration of the National Strategic Framework for Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Lebanon (2018–2022) may be considered as a first step. The recommendations of a report on qualifications (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2018) stated the need to establish a more flexible system that is supportive of LLL and which offers open pathways between general education and TVET, and between jobs and training. The report further identified the need to expand access to further educational opportunities for young graduates based on qualifications, paving the way for LLL (ibid.).

The analysis of the context of higher education in Lebanon shows that it is not particularly favourable to the development of a national LLL strategy or legal framework. Currently, LLL is only addressed in general terms in the national law governing higher education, and given the country's state of crisis, the absence of

a stable government and the consequences that this has on political decision-making, it is unlikely that a relevant policy or strategy will be formulated soon. The development of online and distance teaching and learning in higher education has, despite its increased prevalence during the COVID-19 pandemic, not led to any change in relevant HE policy or regulations, including with regard to the policy, which stipulates that only up to 30 per cent of total credits of a degree programme can be obtained through online learning. This illustrates how stagnant the policy-making process is, and the degree to which 'many of the laws and regulations that govern this sector are dated and holding back universities in Lebanon from keeping up with the demands of a twenty-first century university education' (Al-Chaer, 2020, p. 246). In addition, private universities do not receive any public funding that might otherwise guide and support their LLL promotion strategies. Meanwhile, the gap between educational and academic outcomes and the demands of the labour market suggests that there is an urgent need to equip graduates not only with the relevant twenty-first-century skills, but with an increased ability for LLL (Abdul-Hamid & Yassine, 2020).

6.2 Institutional context

Given its status as one of the country's oldest private universities, USJ has historically enjoyed relative autonomy in setting out its strategic plan, organizational structure and academic provision. While it currently does not have an explicit LLL policy or institutional strategy in place, principles of LLL can be traced in its charter. Moreover, the university's engagement with LLL has been institutionalized through the university's Professional Training Center (CFP), which offers a range of internal and external programmes for USJ staff, organizations, institutions and private companies, and the general public. Some of these programmes provide pathways into full bachelor's or master's degrees. In the absence of public funding, programmes are primarily financed through tuition and consultation fees, as well as through international partnerships and networks.

6.2.1 LLL principles embedded in USJ's institutional strategy

USJ's Vision, Mission and Values statement, published in 2015, outlines the university's Jesuit founders' vision at the establishment of the university in 1875, which was to 'form leaders of social and national transformation, armed with values of probity and excellence, in civil and religious disciplines' (USJ, 2015, p. 13). In light of current challenges, both within the institution and at the national and international levels, including socio-economic and environmental crises, the statement stresses the importance of USJ becoming an institution which is open to all: to all social classes; to all Lebanese people, whatever their religious affiliation; and to all students across the region and the entire world (ibid., p.18).

The statement notes that opening up the university in this manner requires, on the one hand, the promotion of English language programmes (to reach international target groups), and, on the other, the expansion of continuous training that is relevant to local students. Moreover, the statement notes the importance of 'developing continuous training for all its former students and the actors of the Lebanese society and that of the region' as part of USJ's mission (USJ, 2015, p. 18).

Although LLL, in the form of continuous education, is thus implicitly embedded in the university's mission statement, this has not led to the development of a formal policy or strategy, nor is it reflected in any broader administrative structure within the university. This was confirmed both by a review of relevant institutional documents, and by the interviews conducted as part of this case study. While all activities in HEIs across Lebanon are, in theory, governed by the 2014 national higher education law no. 285/2014 on higher education, the internal process that USJ has implemented in order to ensure that all courses comply with this new law has been impeded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the country's enduring political and socio-economic crises. Despite these wider institutional and national contexts being far from conducive to innovation and the development of LLL, USJ has developed several strategies and tools to promote LLL, including a dedicated unit responsible for continuous training.

6.2.2 The Professional Training Center (CFP) as USJ's main LLL unit

The main unit responsible for the implementation of LLL at USJ is the Professional Training Center. Established in 2017 as the Office of Regional Development and External Programs (DRPE), it has set up training programmes for the wider public, local and regional businesses, and educational institutions in parallel with internal training initiatives for USJ staff, students and alumni. In 2018, following the success of its initial projects and collaborations with other academic faculties and institutes at USJ, the office became the Professional Training Center (CFP, or 'Centre de formation professionnelle', in French). CFP manages all continuing education programmes and has a special status as an institute, forming part of the Rectorate of the University, and reporting directly to the Rector. Three staff members are responsible for the governance and administration of the centre: the Director of the Centre (who is also the Delegate of the Rector for Regional Development and External Programmes, and for Continuing Education), the Coordinator of the centre, and the Business Development and Communications Officer. Additionally, most faculties, institutes and schools across USJ (including its regional campuses) have a representative who acts as an intermediary between their department and CFP.

The continuous education programmes offered by CFP and by the academic faculties lead to different types of certificates (discussed in more detail below) and, in some cases, credits obtained in these programmes can also count towards a bachelor or master's degree at USJ. Other types of flexible pathways available at the university include transfers from a different institution. In these cases, learners can graduate with a USJ diploma on condition that they have obtained at least half of the credits from one of USJ's faculties. According to the interviews, the university has also implemented an internal RPL process for professionals who are following initial or continuing training programmes at USJ.

6.2.3 Funding sources for USJ's LLL activities

The method of financing continuous education is specific to the type of programme in question, and varies depending on the audience and whether CFP or other faculties are delivering it. Although precise data on the investments and income generated by LLL is not available, USJ appears to dedicate more resources to LLL than most other Arab universities. HEIs in this region, especially public universities, earmark up to 90 per cent of their budget for teacher and staff salaries, leaving limited financial resources for the development of infrastructure, further training or continuing education (UNESCO, 2018). By contrast, at USJ, internal training is fully financed from the university's own resources, while courses leading to a university degree and external training are tuition-fee-based. Other funding sources include USJ's collaborations with external stakeholders. USJ has diversified its strategy in the field of LLL, and now works with different actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from Lebanese civil society, international organizations and other partners. In these cases, the university generally establishes a framework agreement that defines the responsibilities of each partner and the methods of financing the training courses in question.

The economic crisis and the drop in income linked to the devaluation of the national currency have created a highly competitive higher education sector, with institutions vying for the limited funds available. This has prompted institutions to view continuing education as a promising market and a potential source of income. USJ has been able to capitalize on its long-standing reputation, the safeguarding of which requires a culture of evaluation and quality assurance. In the case of continuing education programmes, evaluation and quality assurance occur internally at three levels: through the dean and programme managers, through learners and trainers, and (in the case of tailor-made external training programmes) through the companies or organizations that commissioned the training. USJ has historically also benefited from a high degree of internationalization, maintaining strong relations with French-speaking universities and foreign universities managed by the Jesuits. These international ties have generated an additional source of funding, both for internal (i.e. for USJ staff) and external continuing education programmes (for individual learners, and public and private institutions).

6.2.4 USJ's approach: Success factors and challenges

The university's internationalization and partnership network has been conducive to promoting professional education and LLL at USJ. Currently, USJ has 440 agreements with foreign universities spread across 42 countries around the world, including Francophone, Jesuit and Arab institutions. The university is also a member of numerous international networks such as the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (Association of Francophone Universities – AUF), the International Association of Universities (IAU), the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), the European Federation of Catholic Universities (FUCE), the Association of Jesuit Institutions of Higher Education in Europe and Lebanon (ASJEL), the Association of Arab Universities (AAU), the Euro-Mediterranean Universities Network TETHYS, the Permanent Forum of European Universities (EPUF), the Anna Lindh Foundation, and the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities. USJ's international outlook has helped the university to adopt the concept of LLL as advocated by UNESCO and the United Nations system, and informed the foundation of the Professional Training Center. The centre's Director has also played an important role in representing Lebanese higher education internationally, taking on the role of Lebanese delegate for the UNESCO Chair in Global Education and Health, as well as that of holder of the Fondation Diane's Chair in Education for Eco-citizenship and Sustainable Development.

USJ's status as a private university allowed it to respond quickly and flexibly to the COVID-19 pandemic by establishing an emergency plan and making available the technical means, human resources and educational devices to enable learners to follow all university programmes remotely. However, the lack of public funding also creates challenges. In particular, the dwindling income of learners puts new pressure on the university's finances. Since many tools necessary for the proper functioning of USJ's training programmes (such as licences for distance education platforms, subscriptions to scientific journals, laboratory equipment, etc.) are paid for in foreign currencies, the devaluation of the national currency has had a significant impact on the university's finances and its ability to deliver high-quality provision, including continuing education. However, it is not only a lack of funding that negatively affects USJ's LLL provision. At the national level, the absence of legislation on RPL, including professional experience and informal learning, prevents adult learners from accessing and participating in higher education. Lebanese higher education legislation is also restrictive with regard to online learning, stipulating that only 30 per cent of the credits of an academic programme can be obtained online if it is to be legally recognized, thereby

significantly limiting the potential of online and blended learning as a means of increasing and widening access to higher education.

Finally, the shift towards learner-centred provision that is associated with the LLL approach and continuing education does not sit easily with what the Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs described in interview as USJ's reputation as a 'traditional, knowledge-centred institution', raising the question of how USJ may need to reinvent itself in order to address current challenges and transform into a LLL institution. However, as the university's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, USJ is an innovative, forward-looking institution and, according to interviewees, a return to the situation that prevailed before COVID-19 is not an option. Whilst a LLL policy that would formalize and institutionalize this approach has not yet been developed, the interviewees made it clear that many strategic discussions are currently taking place at the university leadership level in order to prepare the institution for future challenges.

6.3 Implementation

As outlined in the previous section, the Professional Training Center (CFP) is the main hub for USJ's LLL activities, in particular its continuing education provision. CFP undertakes internal and external activities. Internally, the centre runs continuing education programmes for the entire USJ community, including staff and alumni. Within the framework of the Ignatian Leadership and Spirituality programme, these courses focus on professional skills development and address themes such as mindfulness, conflict mediation and citizenship. As a Jesuit university, USJ also offers courses on spirituality and, as indicated in the interview with the Director of CFP, developing learners' spirituality and knowledge of religions is an overarching goal of its continuing education programme.

6.3.1 CFP's engagement with other faculties, private organizations, and the general public

Other continuing education programmes, which are part of the centre's external operations, are open to the wider public. They cover a range of academic disciplines and subjects, including the arts and humanities, social sciences, business studies, and medicine and health. The centre also offers technical and professional courses on topics such as artificial intelligence, big data and ethical hacking, as well as courses covering 'soft skills', such as leadership, communication and critical thinking. While some of these courses are open to individual learners from the general public, others are tailor-made for specific organizations, institutes or companies in both the private and public sectors, mainly in the fields of health and education. In addition, the centre offers consultancy, project design and management services, drawing on its expertise to analyse market needs, carry out impact studies, develop degree programmes and training courses, and contribute to organizational development. CFP thus also plays an important role in connecting the university with external stakeholders, and in establishing partnerships.

Beyond its own activities and programmes, CFP also manages a number of continuing education programmes delivered by other faculties. These include programmes that are either funded externally or, as the Director of CFP stated in interview, are part of framework agreements signed at the central university level. As the Director went on to explain, CFP has demonstrated its added value to the faculties through these activities, which has led to faculties turning to the Professional Training Center in order to launch new training courses and benefit from the administrative support, professional recruitment of participants and quality assurance of online training systems that CFP can provide. Part of the revenue (20 to 30 per cent) generated from training provided to faculties by CFP goes to the rectorate. In response to faculties' resistance to this policy, the USJ leadership decided that not all continuing education programmes must be managed by CFP, and that faculties are still authorized to run continuing education programmes that fall within their main academic disciplines. Delivering continuing education at these two separate levels is made possible through the flexibility of USJ's administrative structure: since the Director of CFP also occupies the role of Rector's Delegate for Continuing Education, continuing education at USJ is managed and delivered both in a centralized and in a decentralized manner.

6.3.2 Different learning modes and pathways offered by CFP

There are several types of programmes delivered both by CFP and USJ's academic faculties, leading to three different types of certification (USJ, 2022c):

- certificates of participation (short term, approx. three weeks/12 hours of teaching): these training sessions do not culminate in a final examination;
- university certificates (three–six months): several modules are offered and all require learners to pass a final examination; and
- university degrees (more than six months): a full degree programme allowing the development of professional and academic skills, but not equivalent to a bachelor's or master's degree (only possible by law in Lebanon as initial training).

At USJ, links are possible between credits obtained in continuing education and initial academic training. For example, a student who has taken credits as part of a continuing education module can request that these credits be counted towards a full master's or bachelor's degree at USJ. As the CFP Director explained in interview, the university has also implemented an internal RPL/RVA process whereby professionals who follow an initial or continuing education or training programme can

request to be awarded credits that are equivalent to their acquired experience in the field (mainly vocational experience). The validation process culminates in an examination by administrative staff in the Rector's office, and it is the rectorate that makes the final decision, taking into account educational and national legislation. As indicated in one of the interviews, this cautious approach to internal RPL/RVA must be understood in the context of higher education in Lebanon, where numerous scandals have arisen in connection with the low quality of recently founded and recognized universities. Flexible learning pathways and RVA are areas in which USJ can be seen to be innovating, serving as a pioneer in the evolution of the HE sector in the Arab region, which has only recently begun to embrace the concept of flexible learning provision (Badran, 2020).

6.3.3 Increasing digitalization and new initiatives

In the interviews, digitalization emerges as USJ's main strategy for making learning trajectories more flexible. The COVID-19 crisis prompted a massive digitalization of regular courses as well as continuing education programmes. At the onset of the pandemic, the university responded very quickly to the new reality of social distancing and, within a week, IT specialists, academic and administrative staff had joined forces to make distance learning possible, thus living up to the goal set out in the University Vision, Mission and Values statement that 'the teacher-researcher shall know how to enhance his pedagogical approaches, both classical and digital, and how to become a promoter of the creation of knowledge' (USJ, 2015, p. 3). However, the difficulties learners faced in accessing the internet (due to the lack of infrastructure, or high costs) and adequate digital equipment, remained barriers to participation in digital learning. To address this, USJ distributed around 300–400 computers to students with the support of Jesuit universities around the world. Despite these efforts, energy cuts and growing poverty in the Lebanese social context continue to hamper the university's transition to digitalization and distance learning.

These challenges notwithstanding, the context of crisis has, according to the two interviewees from USJ, encouraged a wave of creativity and innovation in USJ's approach to LLL. Specifically, increased digitalization has allowed USJ to further diversify and internationalize its provision, reaching out to potential learners outside of Lebanon, and especially to Lebanese living abroad. For example, as part of a new initiative that does not fall within USJ's traditional academic provision, the university is collaborating with the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is aiming to build an ambitious programme to encourage Lebanese living abroad to attend online continuous training at Lebanese universities, specifically on topics of national relevance such as Islamic-Christian dialogue, culinary cultures, the history of Lebanon and Lebanese music, as outlined in the interview with the CFP Director. Another programme specifically targeting the Lebanese diaspora addresses Lebanese living in the Gulf States. These expatriates are active in various professional fields and positions (primarily in human resources, management, finance, hospitality, etc.) but often they lack the university degree needed to extend their employment contracts or for professional advancement. USJ is offering continuing education programmes that are relevant to their professional development at lower costs than comparable universities in the Gulf States, and is tapping into an increasing demand for such programmes among the Lebanese diaspora.

6.3.4 Collaborative and community-oriented LLL provision

Due to the ongoing crises, USJ has received external funding for training focused on stress management, mental health and well-being. In addition, the university has participated in several international calls for tenders (mainly ERASMUS programmes) to set up internal or external training programmes, and engages in various collaborative projects, through which USJ has worked closely with different actors such as NGOs from Lebanese civil society, international organizations and other partners. For example, USJ has developed a new training session for United Nations employees in Lebanon to introduce them to the characteristics of political governance in Lebanon and the challenges it poses. USJ's University for All initiative, meanwhile, offers courses to adult learners on a wide variety of subjects (USJ, 2022d). The mission of University for All is to bring about wider societal change by opening up access to diverse types of knowledge that are valued by the university. It is linked to the university's vocation as laid down in Article 4 of its Charter, namely to 'promote a spirit of personal liberty and openness to spiritual life' (USJ, 1975, p. 13). University for All runs arts and crafts workshops (painting, ceramics and sculpture), which are normally held in the morning or afternoon, as well as more academic courses on a range of topics, such as music, dance, human rights, health and history, which are delivered at flexible times during the daytime and in the evening. In addition, the centre organizes public lectures, roundtables and other events that are open to the public and address various locally relevant topics.

6.3.5 Challenges in implementing LLL

USJ faces many challenges in conducting its LLL activities. The main challenge relates to academic staff, which comprises three categories: (1) full-time staff; (2) part-time staff with a 50 per cent workload; and (3) staff paid hourly to deliver training programmes. Originally, the USJ management's intention was not to pay full-time academic staff when they engage in continuing education, but to instead include this activity in their regular teaching duties. However, to avoid losing their engagement, expertise and experience in LLL, it was decided to compensate them for delivering continuing education according to their academic rank. In order to

develop ambitious continuing education programmes, it is also important to increase the proportion of full-time teaching staff at USJ. In the interview with the CFP Director, it was reported that an evaluation carried out by a German accreditation agency recommended that the proportion of teachers with a doctorate must be increased, both in initial and continuing academic programmes. However, given the 'brain drain' that is prevalent in Lebanon, with many qualified and talented young people leaving the country to find better employment opportunities elsewhere, recruiting qualified academic staff is a significant challenge for USJ. Engaging academic staff in LLL activities could give young academics the opportunity to build professional relationships within the socio-economic, cultural and institutional environment of the university. This would not only benefit the students professionally, but strengthen the university's standing in the relevant professional fields and industries, and help it to establish links with the private and public sectors. In addition, in the post-pandemic context, USJ must find additional, holistic approaches to reconnect with society at a local, national and international level. This requires integrating a LLL approach into its core missions of teaching, research and service.

6.4 Main lessons learned

The higher education landscape in Lebanon is dominated by private universities and characterized by weak national higher education governance. No formal strategy for promoting LLL has been established at either the national or the institutional level. In practice, however, a LLL approach has emerged within USJ that is centred around a newly created Professional Training Center (CFP), but also includes other initiatives and faculty projects. CFP is part of a faculty but its director reports directly to the rector. This flexible administrative arrangement has facilitated the development of university programmes focusing on LLL. According to the interviews conducted for this case study, two interconnected phenomena have spurred LLL at USJ. On the one hand, the national political, economic and social crisis is impacting the university's finances and encouraging senior management to find a new and important source of income diversification within the LLL strategy. On the other hand, the crisis linked to COVID-19, and the successful shift to distance education has created new perspectives and opportunities for LLL.

Promising factors for the development of LLL at USJ relate to its status as a private university with great flexibility in governance and administration. In addition, the technological success of the transition from face-to-face to distance education has allowed the university to develop new markets and address new audiences, such as expatriates in the Arab Gulf States or the Lebanese diaspora across the world. In terms of implementation, the commitment and professionalism of its academic and administrative staff, combined with independent internal procedures have made it possible for USJ to circumvent the lack of national leadership in the governance of higher education, for example by establishing transfer pathways between formal academic programmes and continuing education. Likewise, the university recognizes learners' prior skills and knowledge by granting them course credits based on their professional experience.

However, there are many factors that hinder the successful implementation of LLL at USJ. In particular, the lack of official recognition for fully remote training, and the legal ambiguity that continues to surround the recognition of remote exams currently limit the university's vision and scope with regard to LLL. Furthermore, USJ would benefit from a written LLL strategy that specifies the administrative structures of the university responsible for implementing LLL activities, as well as securing their funding. This raises the question as to what a LLL implementation roadmap for USJ should include. It is important to develop a structure of LLL in close cooperation with internal and external stakeholders. It is also crucial to develop a more systematic approach to RPL in order to increase public participation in continuing education programmes. In sum, while research on Arab countries and data collected in this case study indicate that universities are willing to develop and implement LLL policies, it is clear that a lack of funding, national frameworks and strategies currently undermines these actions (UNESCO, 2020; Chaib, 2013).

7. NDEJJE UNIVERSITY, Uganda

This case study features Ndejje University, a privately owned, Christian higher education institution in Uganda that offers LLL opportunities for a variety of people of different ages and backgrounds, including working adults. There are several reasons why Ndejje University and its approach to strategizing and implementing LLL were selected for this study. First, the university is characterized by its flexible programming across different education levels, offering programmes that are quality assured, lead to different types of awards and are available through different modalities to cover digital learning, continuous learning and professional development. Second, as part of its LLL agenda, Ndejje University engages and supports local community development, which it views as central to its mandate for societal transformation. It pursues a range of informal activities to this end, among them: student participation in applied learning initiatives with organizations and in the field; research, public demonstrations and debates; and the drafting of position papers to influence national policy-making.



Quick facts about Ndejje University

- Ndejje University was founded in 1992 by the Anglican Diocese of Luweero, and received a university charter in 2009 that accredited all awards and courses offered. It is also a member of the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) and the Association of African Universities (AAU).
- The university has seven faculties providing science, engineering, education and business programmes. It offers certificate programmes across four faculties, undergraduate diploma and degree programmes across all faculties, and many postgraduate diplomas and master's degrees.
- According to the latest data, Ndejje University has a full-time student body comprising 8,000 undergraduates, graduates and postgraduates. This number has increased significantly since 2005, when a total of 1,477 students were enrolled (Ndejje University, 2018). Students are supported by almost 500 academic, support, administrative and technical staff, 40 per cent of whom are employed full-time.
- Ndejje University comprises three campuses, with the main campus in Ndejje, a community that was ravaged by war from 1981 to 1985 and is located approximately 34 kilometres north of the country's capital, Kampala.
- The main campus is strategically located to support the university's work on LLL through community outreach, engagement and development with the local population, which was severely affected by the war.
- According to its strategic plan, and based on its Christian philosophy, Ndejje University supports the 'promotion of sharing openly for social justice and reconciliation among people', and advocates 'facilitating and enhancing the spirit of cooperation within the community and the outside world' (Ndejje University, 2018, p. 3).

7.1 National context

Uganda has no specific legislation or dedicated national policy in place to support LLL in higher education. However, the principles of LLL – especially those of accessibility and equality – are ingrained in the country's foundational legislation, starting with the Constitution, which establishes education as a universal right (Republic of Uganda, 1995). The National Council of Higher Education (NCHE) guidelines specify that universities must offer youth and adults a range of education levels and awards. It further stipulates that programming be offered at different times so that people, particularly working adults and students in blended learning programmes, can choose when they participate. More broadly speaking, labour market orientation underpins higher education and LLL in Uganda, and the country's Second National Development Plan (NDPII 2016–2020), states that widening participation and access is central to innovation and economic development (National Planning Authority, 2020). Similarly, Uganda's Third National Development Plan (NDPIII 2020/2021–2024/2025) envisages higher education as critical to skills development that is quality assured and relevant to the needs of industry (ibid.).

7.1.1 Relevant policy and quality assurance mechanisms regulating LLL in HEIs

At the national level, the Ministry of Education and the NCHE are primarily responsible for LLL in HEIs. Two important documents guide LLL implementation in higher education in Uganda. The first is the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (UOTIA) (Republic of Uganda, 2001, amended in 2003 and 2006), a regulatory framework that provides guidelines on how HEIs in the country function and establishes the NCHE's founding mandate (Ndejje University, 2018; Republic of Uganda 2001). The NCHE's duties generally include regulating and guiding the establishment, management and quality of HEIs in Uganda, as well as ensuring consistency across qualifications and advising the government on issues relating to higher education (NCHE, 2014). The regulatory components of the quality assurance framework for HEIs include: (1) institutional and individual programme accreditation; (2) merit-based admissions; (3) teaching quality; (4) examination regulations and standards for academic awards; (5) student assessment of academic staff; (6) institutional infrastructure; and (7) collaboration with professional bodies (ibid.). This regulatory approach also covers LLL schemes in higher education.

The second policy document serving as a reference point for Ndejje University's non-formal programming is the country's National Action Plan for Adult Literacy (NAPAL) (2011/12–2015/16) (Republic of Uganda, 2011). This action plan is primarily targeted at working adults. It emphasizes universal access to basic education as a fundamental right that can enable individual and community development, and is therefore essential for eradicating poverty. Through community-responsive adult literacy services and greater collaboration among stakeholders, NAPAL aims to improve the country's functional literacy rates, which – despite free universal primary and secondary education – remain very low, at around 74 per cent among Ugandans aged 10 and above (National Planning Authority, 2020).

7.1.2 Public and private funding mechanisms for LLL in higher education

There are various funding mechanisms in Uganda to help students of different ages, education levels and backgrounds to participate in higher education. Higher education used to be free, with government funds covering tuition fees and even living expenses; however, the steep increase in enrolment rates in recent years meant that the government was no longer able to sustain this funding model, and instead sought a way of financing the most promising candidates, especially those from low-income households (Republic of Uganda, Ministry of Education and Sports, 2012). In 2014, it passed the Higher Education Students Financing Act, which established a loan scheme (ibid.). According to the interview conducted with the Ndejje University representative, this loan scheme benefits many people, especially those who pursue a degree in science. Eligibility criteria include admission to an accredited programme or course from a recognized HEI, and proof that the applicant cannot afford tuition. To determine eligibility, the board considers regional balance, gender and socio-economic status (Higher Education Students Financing Board, n.d.). These loans are currently available for students on undergraduate diploma and degree programmes, and there are plans to introduce loans to finance postgraduate and doctoral studies in future (ibid.). Notably, as confirmed in the interview, this loan scheme is not tied to age, making it accessible to adult learners.

The private and third sectors also support learners across university settings in Uganda. For example, as noted in the interview, Umoja is a company that sponsors students and provides them with resources, such as scholastic materials and equipment. A number of major funders earmark support for science students, such as Roko Construction, also a privately-owned company. The Madhvani Foundation, a charitable trust linked to the Madhvani Group of Companies, focuses on promoting scientific and technical university education for the most disadvantaged. Since 2003, the foundation has offered full scholarships worth a total of 700 million Ugandan shillings (approx. US$200,000). Other regional and international sources of funding are available; however, these are relatively limited in scale and, according to the interview, mostly available to postgraduate students.

Regardless of their source, scholarships are awarded based on the specific criteria of the programme and faculty in question, along with criteria set forth by the funder, which may have an equity and inclusion dimension in addition to requirements for academic merit. For example, the interview revealed that there are

specific funding opportunities in place for people with disabilities or from rural communities, whom Ndejje University prioritizes due to the university's location and the negative effects of the 1981–1985 war on these particular groups. The university especially targets women for short-form vocational opportunities, regardless of their age and, according to the interview, there is additional nationwide funding for adult learners in higher education, which aims to establish a balance in participation across the country. In line with Ndejje University's religious orientation and mission to support the spiritual life of people in the area, it also provides scholarships to members of the clergy. Nonetheless, financing mechanisms are limited and funding remains one of the main barriers preventing learners from engaging in LLL activities. This is the case both at the national level (linked to the lack of national legislation or policy for LLL in higher education) and at the institutional level, not least in the case of Ndejje University, as will be explored in more detail in the following sections.

7.2 Institutional context

Ndejje University was founded almost 30 years ago as a private, Christian institution with the aim of developing the local community through the provision of higher education and LLL, in addition to promoting knowledge exchange across society and improving social services. It focuses on offering 'holistic education based on moral and ethical values' (Ndejje University, 2018, p. i) for societal transformation through its foundational principles of learner-centredness and innovation. Ndejje University is led by a consortium, headed by the Church of Uganda Diocese in the Buganda Region, which owns the university and appoints its senior leadership (Ndejje University, n.d.-a).

In line with NCHE guidelines, Ndejje University offers educational programmes and awards that can be pursued through full- or part-time study, leading to certificates, diplomas or degrees at bachelor's and master's levels, as well as opportunities for continuous learning and professional development. According to the interview, learners participate through different modalities, whether on campus, through blended learning scenarios, online or at a distance. In-person courses are typically held during the day, in the evening and at the weekend. Ndejje University has a Department of Distance Learning that cuts across faculty programmes and mainly uses face-to-face sessions and print-based modules, though e-learning is increasingly being incorporated into its delivery strategy (Ndejje University, n.d.-b). It was noted in interview that these approaches are supported by the university's Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) system, which has been ramped up in recent years and played a critical role in enabling learning to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.2.1 Integration of LLL through the university's strategic plan and quality assurance mechanisms

As mentioned above, LLL is embedded in the university's foundational principles and manifests itself in the university's focus on flexible learning pathways, continuing professional development for staff, and efforts to promote knowledge networks and enhance graduate employability. Other main drivers of LLL at the university are meeting business and industry demand, enhancing access for minorities and underrepresented groups, generating financial revenue, and gaining peer esteem and recognition by other HEIs.

Ndejje University does not have a dedicated LLL policy or unit. However, its strategic plan describes a number of objectives that are pursued through and contribute to LLL, notably its goal to 'develop and deliver market-responsive academic programmes' (Ndejje University, 2018, p. vi) through extramural education (i.e. short courses on skills development for adult learners) and in-service training. Other relevant objectives established in its strategic plan are the 'expansion and maintenance of infrastructure and ICT capacity', and the development of 'strategic partnerships and collaborations' (ibid.). The cost of implementing this plan is estimated at approximately US $102.8 million, which is distributed across departments and units in phases to ensure alignment across the institution, and is further underpinned by regular M&E exercises. As the interview makes clear, the university's strategic plan illustrates how the national approach to integrating LLL and higher education is embedded in Ndejje University's educational programming and activities, and how LLL can be viewed as a collective effort on the part of all actors of the university. This high level of acceptance of LLL internally (among governance groups) and externally (among government bodies and employers) provides a solid foundation for the development and implementation of an institutional LLL strategy in Ndejje University.

Developing and maintaining academic standards, rules and regulations for all programmes, including LLL provision, is the responsibility of Ndejje University's academic council, the Senate (Ndejje University, n.d.-c). In addition, the faculties' activities are overseen by three quality assurance directorates (Ndejje University, 2018). In addition to backstopping teaching practice and providing resources for students, these directorates advise university leadership and management on setting and improving performance standards and system functionality, and ensure the validation of academic programmes (Ndejje University, n.d.-d). Their work includes coordinating internal and external university evaluations, such as student evaluations of staff and programming (ibid.). Although these evaluations are designed to take place every semester, it was noted in interview that they are often conducted no more than once a year due to a lack of resources. The directorates also develop policy and procedures for monitoring

student progression through exams, pass rates, drop-out rates, and labour market perceptions of academic programmes and graduates, and they communicate with external actors, in particular from professional and regulatory bodies, as well as employers. Lastly, the directorates review reports and advice from academic and non-academic departments, coordinate staff training in response to needs assessments, and conduct tracer studies. These quality assurance procedures are in line with Ndejje University's own policies and guidelines, the NCHE quality assurance framework, IUCEA and the East African Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN).

7.2.2 Two institutional policies promoting wider participation in LLL

Ndejje University has two separate policies relating to flexible learning pathways and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) systems that encourage LLL by widening participation in higher education for youth and adult learners. The university's primary flexible learning pathway is a bridging course for admission to either undergraduate programmes in business, social sciences and information technology, or to diploma courses in the same fields, depending on the grades that learners achieve (Ndejje University, n.d.-e). Ndejje University's CAT policy – more specifically, its Exemption and Credit Transfer Policy – allows learners to seek university admission after obtaining certificates at varying levels from different recognized institutions, which can then be transferred and count towards a degree (Ndejje University, 2011). Most students who enter Ndejje University through this route study during the evening and at weekends, with a few enrolled in daytime courses (ibid.). According to the interview, these learners follow this route because they had been unable to obtain enough points to start a degree programme or did not have adequate funds at the time they might normally have enrolled. The interview further noted that this policy is particularly geared towards addressing past gender inequalities in higher education, as many female students were only able to enrol following the liberalization of education. It also offers a pathway for those wishing to transfer from other universities.

Ndejje University's CAT policy ensures that adults who have already invested in their learning can more easily build on what they have achieved in their previous studies (Ndejje University, 2011). The policy consequently establishes admission criteria for certificate, degree and diploma programmes, and details exemption criteria for promotion from one level to the next. While the policy states that 'minimum working experience of 2 years after completion of the course in a relevant field, e.g. Engineering, Forestry and Agriculture, would be an added advantage' for learners applying through this route (Ndejje University, 2011, p. 9), it does not specify how previous work or life experience might be factored into this process. There is thus potential to further operationalize RVA by establishing equivalencies through alternative forms of assessment. There are some restrictions listed in the CAT policy, presumably to comply with NCHE regulations and the standards set by professional bodies. One example is the stipulated limit to the number of course credits that can lead to exemptions. Moreover, exemptions do not apply to students studying education (no reason is provided for this), and applications for exemptions entail certain fees that may be cost-prohibitive for some learners.

7.2.3 Ndejje University's approach: Success factors and challenges

In its strategic plan, Ndejje University identifies several barriers hindering adults' participation in LLL. One primary concern is financing, as the university depends heavily on a relatively inflexible tuition fee model (Ndejje University, 2018). While the interview revealed that fees can more easily be collected since the transition to electronic operations, there are not enough funds available to support all learners interested in pursuing their studies at the university, even with the support of the government loan scheme and scholarships. Indeed, issues related to fees and 'the high cost of borrowing and exchange rate fluctuations' (ibid., p. 19), exacerbated by inflation, often lead students to drop out or default on what they may owe (ibid.). While the university is committed to strengthening its digital infrastructure in order to offer more e-learning options and e-resources, technology is rapidly changing, and maintaining or enhancing these services is cost-intensive. As noted in the university's strategic plan, both students and staff are often unaware of the correct tuition fees, resulting in students not being charged the correct amount, and the annual budget not being achieved as a result. Variations in projected student numbers further exacerbate the university's difficulties in planning ahead accurately (ibid., pp. 19–20).

The university's plan also cites quality issues that could negatively affect the implementation of LLL if not addressed, highlighting as areas of concern the low standards of teaching and the 'inadequate assessment mechanisms that are largely biased towards examination and testing rather than progressive/continuous assessment' (Ndejje University, 2018, p. 21). Both are particularly worrisome for LLL since adult learners require a specialized kind of teaching that incorporates and builds on their experiences and viewpoints, with a variety of learning and assessment activities to demonstrate and expand what they have learned. Academic supervision of coursework and interaction between lecturers and students are also inadequate, which the plan attributes to lecturers being employed on a part-time basis (ibid.). Additionally, not all academic staff are immediately receptive to the transition to the ODeL system and have required capacity-building in order to use this technology effectively.

The institution's organizational culture may also affect how well LLL is delivered. Ndejje University's strategic plan cites areas in need of improvement, including the more 'timely resolution of conflicts, minimising the degree of informality, and improving communication across the entire university in order to boost levels of mutual trust' (Ndejje University, 2018, p. 22). While the professionalization of staff is ongoing, rapid staff turnover raises concerns about commitment to the university. Moreover, there is a need to review the university's leadership structure in order to improve the pace of decision-making and performance, which affects the timely support needed by management to achieve university objectives (ibid.). Yet despite these challenges, including the lack of an explicit LLL policy at the institutional level, Ndejje University has engaged in LLL in a number of ways, and to the benefit not only of its students, but also – as outlined in the following sections – of the local community and wider society.

7.3 Implementation

In addition to its mainstream programming, Ndejje University puts LLL into practice through two main types of provision for adult learners, as noted above: short, extramural education courses (Ndejje University, n.d.-f) and in-service training. Other courses, such as a short course in computer skills, are specifically aimed at high school students. The interview revealed that organizations often commission the university to develop short-term vocational skills courses, in areas such as book-keeping, entrepreneurship, record management and customer care. These programmes are organized at the faculty level, and the curriculum is prepared based on the respective organization's needs and in conjunction with professional bodies, where relevant, as in the case of accounting and information technology. The university also develops short courses for government ministries, which set their own guidelines.

7.3.1 Continuing education: Extramural education and in-service training

Ndejje University's continuing education provision consists primarily of extramural education and in-service training. Extramural education refers to market-responsive, two-week courses provided by professional facilitators for working people, including university graduates, to update and upgrade their knowledge and skills in support of their career development (ibid.). These on-campus courses are delivered on a flexible schedule, and primarily take place during university holidays (ibid.). In-service training programmes, meanwhile, are aimed at working professionals, most of whom are teachers from across the country following part-time certificate, diploma and degree programmes during school holidays. According to the interview, it usually takes teachers three to five years to complete a master's degree through this route, though it is also possible to complete the course in two years, since the research project starts at the end of the first year. Pursuing a blended learning approach, learners initially attend a face-to-face meeting at the start of the in-service training, during which they are allocated assignments and learning materials to work on independently. Learners can complete these assignments and upload them online for marking, or they can bring them with them to their next face-to-face meeting. These meetings act like bookends to the degree programme, with a final exam held during the last meeting. As stated during the interview, this kind of flexible learning is offered across departments and faculties, depending on the availability of the degree programme at the university, and can include evening and weekend study. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and curfew restrictions, Ndejje University has stopped offering the evening option for the time being, reallocating affected learners to daytime, weekend or online provision.

7.3.2 Ndejje University's bridging programme: A flexible learning pathway for youth and adults

Ndejje University's bridging programme constitutes its primary flexible learning pathway. It is intended for people who finish upper secondary school without achieving the points required to enter university, and serves as an alternative to retaking their studies. It is offered to youth and adults aged 18 and above, although technically no age limit is stipulated. This preparatory programme is aimed specifically at learners who did not achieve two principal passes at A-level (the upper secondary school exams qualifying students for entry to university degree programmes), but who obtained at least one principal pass or two subsidiary passes (one of which must have been obtained from a principal subject) (Ndejje University, n.d.-e). Participants complete a year-long programme divided into three study terms, each lasting three months. The programme starts in March, enabling students to in a degree or diploma programme in January of the following year. Learners who achieve high grades progress to degree programmes, while others have the option to study towards a diploma.

As noted in the interview, the Ministry of Education and the NCHE encouraged universities throughout Uganda to create this bridging course for learners who did not complete their upper secondary school education. As per the interview, a demanding curriculum and inflexible teaching cause many to fail their A-level exams; the purpose of the bridging programme is thus to re-engage these learners and provide them with a second chance to continue their education. Annual participation rates in the bridging course fluctuate between 50 to 150 learners, which includes students from other countries, such as neighbouring Kenya, whose education system differs slightly from that of Uganda and finishes after completion of Form 4. The percentage of older learners attending this bridging course is typically very small – between two and five per cent – although it is growing. According to the interview, this reflects a change in attitudes across

Ugandan society towards higher education, which people are increasingly taking seriously as a route towards self-improvement and personal development.

The funding opportunities available to learners contribute to the appeal of Ndejje University's bridging course. As noted in the interview, scholarships in Uganda are not always programme-specific; rather, they are awarded according to the funders' criteria, or to members of a specific group that funders wish to support. Government scholarships, such as the State House Scholarship, are also available to students on Ndejje University's bridging course. Scholarships are merit-based, and all funders monitor the academic progress of the students whom they fund. If learners' performance drops, they may lose their funding for the following term. It is worth noting, however, that the interview made it clear that only between two and five per cent of students on the bridging course currently receive funding, while the remainder self-funds. However, government financing is estimated to increase by up to 20 per cent once a new science bridging programme is launched.

7.3.3 Digitalization and technology-related innovations within the context of LLL

As part of its LLL provision, Ndejje University has improved students' and academic staff's internet access and their participation in technology-enhanced learning. In interview, it was noted that Ndejje University was offering both e-learning and distance learning options prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the health crisis not only prompted the university to further develop its provision, but also marked a change in people's mindsets, which previously associated higher education with on-campus study. As stated in the interview, an increase in participation in LLL programmes is closely linked to stronger online and distance provision.
To improve internet connectivity, the university has collaborated with MTN Uganda, the country's largest telecom provider, to set up hotspots on the main campus (Ndejje University, 2018). It has also installed an overhead fibre optic network measuring eight kilometres to link Bombo Town to the main campus; used a donation from the Research and Education Network of Uganda (RENU) to increase internet connectivity on the Kampala campus; and extended wireless connectivity to all campuses (ibid.). In addition, the interview indicates that the university has arrangements in place with telecommunications companies that initially subsidize and subsequently give all students free access to the university's learning system. Beyond campus, a number of efforts have been made, by both the private and public sectors, to improve internet access. Access to digital learning devices such as laptops and smartphones is also increasing, especially among young people, who make up the majority of Uganda's population. This has been accelerated by government initiatives, among them a recent project to offer free, solar-powered iPads to low-income families. Moreover, Ndejje University is working to establish partnerships that will provide students with laptops at a subsidized rate. Its strategic plan states that the current ratio of students to computers is 22:1 (Ndejje University, 2018).

The use of the university's ODeL system has become more widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic, both for the university's continuing learning programmes and to provide a more flexible way of studying, especially for adults. Distance and online learning mainly target learners who cannot study on campus, the majority of whom are working professionals. According to the interview, these programmes attract fewer adult learners who are not in employment, as they struggle to afford tuition and face additional technological constraints. The ODeL system provides continuous opportunities for engagement with the instructor and other learners without in-person contact; however, exams are still held in person, due to the online system not yet being sufficiently developed to administer exams online. The system currently uses the BigBlueButton software because it enables lecturers to interact directly and in real time with students, with Zoom serving as a back-up option. In addition to live online lectures and seminars, Ndejje University's ODeL system includes pre-recorded audio- and video-lectures. The system is accessible through mobile technology, and allows students to create e-portfolios and use open educational resources (OERs). Through the ODeL system, learners who have paid their tuition fees can also 'access 50,000 e-books and over 25,000 e-journals' (Ndejje University, 2018, p. 6). It was furthermore noted during the interview that plans are in place to develop MOOCs; however, this will require additional capacity that has yet to be developed. The university recently hired a Director for ICT, one of whose responsibilities is to facilitate communication overall by creating a role for ICT personnel in every faculty and major department, so that the latter can, for example, easily report connectivity issues to the service centre.

According to the interview, students have generally adapted well both to the ODeL system and to the blended learning approach. Some learners have even requested that their courses be moved fully online; however, this is not possible due to admission requirements stipulating that students must attend courses in person. The interviewed representative further clarified that face-to-face learning still enjoys greater popularity among adult learners. The ODeL system has also been well received among staff, with the exception of some staff members who requested further capacity-building workshops in order to facilitate their transition to online teaching. Nonetheless, broader challenges persist in relation to technology-enhanced learning in higher education across the country. Most Ugandans do not have reliable internet access, and the cost of data remains very high, with minimal public provision to subsidize it. The government provides internet service, but only within a very limited area and not in rural settings. Moreover, laptops and smartphones that are of sufficient quality to be used for online learning are still prohibitively

expensive for many people, as are other tools that are needed to facilitate online learning, such as writing pads – for example to demonstrate a maths equation – and higher-resolution cameras to record lectures in better quality.

7.3.4 Community engagement and wider impact on socio-economic development and national policy-making

Ndejje University mainly engages the community in LLL through its student placement scheme, through which students spend two months participating in informal, applied learning outside of the classroom in collaboration with external organizations. The interview revealed that these placements are implemented in different ways by the university's individual faculties and departments and are referred to variously as fieldwork, internships or quality school practice. All second- and third-year students are required to complete one of these placements, which usually take place throughout Uganda, although it is possible for students to undertake them further afield, in the African region or beyond. During the placement, the student's manager assesses his or her performance, and reports back to the designated professor at Ndejje University. As a result, students gain hands-on experience of applying and testing out their academic learning in real-world settings, and share knowledge, skills and innovations with the community (e.g. relating to bio-waste recycling and sanitation-smart agriculture). This in turn equips them to identify issues and opportunities in the community that they can then discuss and explore further at university, and to pinpoint curricular gaps or differences between what is taught (theory) compared to what is needed in a real-life context (practice).

Promoted and coordinated by Ndejje University's Center for Community Outreach and Partnership (CCOP), these two-month placements enable students and the community to interact, tap into their respective knowledge, and learn from each other organically. Intended placement outcomes include valuing and upholding local and Indigenous knowledge systems, strengthening one's own culture while remaining open to other views (Ndejje University, n.d.-g). According to the interview, as part of the university's wider contribution to LLL, the centre also organizes research on topics that are important to members of the community, and shares its research findings and results with them. In addition, the centre coordinates numerous other activities that promote LLL among students and the community (e.g. farming demonstrations that are open to the public), as well as activities relating to topics of relevance to the community (e.g. focusing on renewable energy and entrepreneurship). As noted in the interview, many of these activities are highly practical. For example, first-year students are required to learn hands-on skills, such as making cakes or oils, which they can use after graduation as a potential source of income.

Ndejje University's Faculty of Social Sciences furthermore regularly organizes public debates to discuss community issues. It was noted in the interview that these debates create wide-reaching, informal LLL opportunities through interactions between students, adult learners, academics, members of the community and the government, among other stakeholders. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these debates were hosted once per semester. They helped to open up dialogue between groups with different perspectives, and identified areas for further research that the university might consider pursuing. Such debates also have an impact at the level of national government, as they are covered by the media and the issues they raise are taken up for discussion in parliament. Moreover, the university typically drafts a related position paper, which is research-based and often involves the collaboration of different faculties as well as the wider community. This is then shared with parliament and provides valuable input on policy action points. Ndejje University's engagement in LLL consequently reaches far beyond its classroom walls, and involves not only the local community, but Ugandan society – both the public and private sectors – at large. The university thus demonstrates how HEIs can contribute to their country's development and social empowerment through LLL.

7.4 Main lessons learned

An analysis of the present case study and the interview conducted with the Ndejje University representative indicates that, while LLL may be embedded in Uganda's overall approach to education, specific and as-yet unformulated national legislation and policy would help to anchor, structure and further its status in higher education across the country. New nationwide measures and, in particular, a specific budget for universities' LLL activities, would enable HEIs to be more autonomous and mobilize funds more effectively for LLL provision. They would also allow universities to respond more directly and flexibly to demand. As the university representative pointed out in interview, in the absence of a national policy, Ndejje University should learn from peer institutions and capitalize on the high level of acceptance of LLL, both among the university governance groups and external stakeholders, in order to establish an independent unit for LLL within the university. This, the university representative argued, would constitute an important first step towards strengthening the system of LLL as a whole. A dedicated unit of this kind would operationalize the university's commitment to LLL and widen access by developing clearer, more practicable policies. For example, the university's CAT policy could be expanded to clarify how the university recognizes the previous work and life experiences of adults, including their tacit knowledge, through alternative assessments that are tied to both institutional standards and Uganda's national qualifications framework. A well-developed RVA process is essential in the Ugandan context given that the majority of the country's labour force is employed in the

informal economy and agriculture, a fact that should also be taken into account when reviewing the university's bridging course provision. In addition, a dedicated LLL unit would serve to guide adult learners through their programmes at Ndejje University.

While flexible learning provision (e.g. weekend, evening and remote study options) is crucial to the university's delivery of LLL, particularly with regard to the accessibility of it programmes (including continuing education and training) to adult learners, this flexibility comes at a significant cost and represents one of the major barriers to the implementation of LLL. Due to the wide range of delivery options on offer, there can be as few as five students in one class, yet the costs for rent and teachers' salaries are the same as those incurred when serving larger groups. As a result, the university often cuts classes in which too few students are enrolled. Yet if it is to commit to widening access to higher education for more people, the university will need to develop a viable long-term strategy, which includes diversifying from a tuition fee model to other sources of large-scale funding and, as pointed out in interview, creating a better mechanism for fee collection. This strategy should not only address LLL organization and funding, but also teaching quality, assessment types (especially the issue of conducting assessments online), and staffing matters. Such a policy would have a significant impact on the quality, flexibility and sustainability of LLL provision at Ndejje University.

As discussed in the previous section, Ndejje University's community engagement has the potential to have far-reaching and long-term effects both within the local community and across the wider region. However, in order to fully realize this potential, documented evidence of the feedback loops between academics, students, the community, the government and other stakeholders is needed. This would help identify the tangible results achieved by Ndejje University's community engagement activities, including conducting and sharing research, organizing public demonstrations and debates, and publishing position papers. Evidence of this kind – evidence that documents how specific interventions impact the community, which stakeholders are involved, how these interventions support LLL, and what next steps are required – could help to secure additional funding and raise the profile of Ndejje University's community engagement initiatives. As per the interview, Ndejje University's mission consists in part in recruiting more students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and increasing their participation in higher education. This is a highly commendable remit, and goes straight to the heart of LLL as a means of poverty eradication, social empowerment and capacity-building for the most vulnerable by creating targeted, flexible and accelerated pathways and provision. However, if this remit is to be implemented successfully, stronger political commitment is needed from national, institutional and external partners to support this group of learners, and to address broader societal issues, such as 'worsening corruption and a high disease burden in Uganda communities' (Ndejje University, 2018, p. 24). As this case study demonstrates, Ndejje University has the potential to help develop solutions to these challenges, not least through its LLL provision. The university's progress should be monitored closely in order to see how it continues to evolve, and to identify approaches and strategies that could provide valuable examples for HEIs globally.

8. Summary and conclusion

The concluding section of this report will highlight a number of key findings from the case studies and identify some general trends in LLL in higher education that can be derived from these findings. As with the individual case studies, the summary comprises three main sections covering national contexts, institutional contexts and the implementation of LLL. The six universities are listed again below, including the abbreviations used in the report:

- Universidad Nacional del Litoral, Argentina (UNL)
- Université de Montréal, Canada (UdeM)
- East China Normal University, People's Republic of China (ECNU)
- University College Cork, Ireland (UCC)
- Saint Joseph University of Beirut, Lebanon (USJ)
- Ndejje University, Uganda

8.1 National contexts

While this report aims to highlight institutional policies and practices, such an analysis must be placed within the wider national and international contexts in which these institutions are situated. Over the past decades, a number of international frameworks have been developed, which promote LLL in higher education and call on governments to support this development with appropriate policies and funding. The international HEI-LLL survey (UIL & SOU, 2023) showed that about two-thirds of participating institutions indicated that national legislation defines LLL as part of their mission.[16] The case studies included in this report offer a more detailed picture of the laws, policies and support mechanisms available at the national, provincial and municipal levels. In general, these case studies reveal a lack of comprehensive policies, and indicate that continuing education and flexible learning pathways are the most developed areas. A comprehensive policy framework would contribute to greater consistency across institutions and to consolidate the involvement of government agencies and other stakeholders.

16 The global survey findings on definitions of LLL as a mission of HEIs in national legislation are available at: bit.ly/UIL_HEI-LLL_fig1.

Lack of supportive national policy environments promoting LLL in higher education

Higher education typically falls under the purview of national governments. However, in some cases, provincial governments are responsible for higher education (e.g. UdeM in Québec) and, in others, universities actively respond to the LLL agenda of municipal governments (in the case of ECNU in Shanghai), while also operating under national regulations. In some countries, national legislation on LLL (or continuing education) is in place that does not task HEIs specifically with its delivery, but nonetheless impacts universities' provision (see, for example, Québec's Act to Promote Workforce Skills Development and Recognition). Finally, in a number of countries, higher education legislation tasks HEIs with the provision of continuing education and/or with diversifying access to higher education (including through flexible provision, see, for example, the People's Republic of China's Five-Year Development Plan 2021–2025), but neither makes public funding contingent upon such provision, nor provides a concrete plan for its implementation (as is the case, for example, in Uganda and, to a lesser extent, in Lebanon).

One policy area that appears to be relatively well developed is recognition of prior learning (RPL). It is addressed in Québec's 2002 higher education policy and is central to a new national framework being developed in Ireland (THEA, n.d.). Although these initiatives are a promising sign for adult learners who do not meet the standard entry qualifications for higher education, the case studies call for the further development of national RPL policies to harmonize and strengthen practices across institutions. The case studies also show that more work needs to be done to develop national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in order to enhance the potential impact and outreach of HEIs' own flexible learning pathways, RPL mechanisms, and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) systems.

Funding schemes primarily focused on labour market-oriented learning and training

According to the case studies, national policies for LLL are needed to secure the provision of public funding for the range of LLL activities in which HEIs engage. Current public funding schemes tend to focus on skills development programmes and other labour-market-oriented provision. The continuing education programmes offered by UdeM in Québec and the Irish Springboard+ programme, which subsidizes thousands

of places on training courses for skills in great demand, are illustrations of this trend. Other funding schemes are aimed at specific target groups. The Québécois French language and skills recognition programmes target migrant workers seeking employment in the province, while, in Ireland, certain publicly funded continuing education programmes are intended to benefit the unemployed. Older learners constitute a further important group for whom public funding is sometimes earmarked: the Shanghai municipal government, for example, has been especially proactive in expanding provision for this group.

In addition to government funding granted to institutions for delivering certain programmes or recruiting specific learners, other public schemes have been established to offer direct financial support to learners. The case studies on ECNU and Ndejje University identify a number of scholarship schemes and individual awards for adult learners who are not in employment or are from a disadvantaged background. Moreover, Uganda has recently introduced a public loan scheme for adult learners. Students at Ndejje University can also apply for scholarships financed by private organizations. While some of these schemes have a social or equity dimension and target certain minority groups or disadvantaged learners, they generally prioritize skills development, focusing on the priorities of the respective funding organization.

Private funds for LLL activities represent an important source of funding for HEIs, especially for private institutions that do not receive government funding. USJ, for example, recognizes fee-based continuing education programmes as a relevant source of income, and even public universities such as UNL strategically redirect revenue earned by delivering programmes to private companies and industries to community-oriented LLL programmes. In Argentina, Ireland and Canada, government funding is allocated exclusively to accredited programmes; funding for non-accredited programmes (i.e. continuing education) must be sourced through other means. Even when core funding for LLL is provided by government, as is the case with ECNU, available resources remain insufficient to meet the fast-growing demand for learning (e.g. the growing influx of learners in Shanghai).

A number of institutions call for a broadening of the policy agenda, and of corresponding funding schemes, to allow them to offer courses that contributes to community development and social empowerment, including a focus on previously underrepresented and marginalized groups.

8.2 Institutional contexts of LLL

To assess the strategic priority given to LLL at the institutional level, the international HEI-LLL survey asked respondents to indicate how LLL is referenced in their institutions' mission statement,[17] and to state whether their institution has established a LLL policy/strategy.[18] Of the six participating institutions for which a case study was carried out, five stated that LLL is of medium priority in their mission statement and one that it is of high priority. Moreover, five institutions have implemented a LLL policy/strategy and one is in the process of developing it. The case studies reveal that, in most instances, such a strategy does not exist as a policy document but is, rather, reflected in a variety of texts that refer to LLL, and materialized through a series of more or less coordinated measures. Ndejje University's strategic plan, USJ's constitution and ECNU's charter, for example, all include references to LLL principles such as a commitment to market-responsive continuing education, community development and wider societal impact.

Organizational structure and coordination for implementing LLL

Of the six case studies, the only HEI with a separate, dedicated institutional policy relating directly to LLL is UdeM. Its management framework for continuing education is aligned with Québec's provincial government policy in that it considers continuing education to be crucial to personal and professional development, and tasks the university with the provision of relevant and accessible learning opportunities for adult learners. Other HEIs place a similar emphasis on continuing education within their LLL strategies (even if this is not formalized to the same extent as at UdeM), to the point where 'continuing education' is used synonymously with 'LLL' by most of the HEIs examined in this report. This is also reflected in the universities' organizational structures in relation to LLL. If universities have a dedicated LLL unit, its main responsibility is usually the coordination and delivery of continuing education. This generally encompasses non-degree programmes which may or may not be accredited, and which may be more academic or more vocational in nature. These continuing education departments, for example, the Adult and Continuing Education centre at UCC and the Faculty of Continuing Education at UdeM, often deliver programmes in collaboration with external stakeholders or other academic faculties across the university. In some HEIs, a dedicated staff member in each academic faculty liaises between the faculty and the continuing education unit, thus ensuring the consolidation of continuing education provision across the institution.

17 The global survey findings on the links between national legislation and the prioritization of LLL in HEIs' mission statements are available at: bit.ly/UIL_HEI-LLL_fig2.

18 The global survey findings on the existence of LLL strategies in HEIs are available at: bit.ly/UIL_HEI-LLL_table3.

At USJ, this collaboration has recently been put to the test, as academic faculties have reclaimed some of their autonomy in delivering continuing education programmes in order to avoid ceding a proportion of the revenue they generate to the university's Professional Training Center. The often cross-departmental nature of continuing education can thus further complicate its financial management.

Not all HEIs under investigation have a dedicated LLL or continuing education unit and, as a result, provision in these universities is less centralized.[19] At Ndejje University, the Department of Distance Learning is involved in the delivery of online and correspondence learning programmes, but the university's continuing education provision, made up mostly of employment-oriented 'extramural education' and in-service teaching for teachers, is otherwise delivered directly by the relevant faculties. At UNL, provision is even more dispersed, with the Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat delivering primarily employability-related programmes, while the Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat's activities are more community-oriented and often designed and delivered alongside community outreach programmes. UNL's academic faculties, as well as its Well-being, Health and Quality of Life Secretariat, and Academic and Institutional Planning Secretariat, are also involved in coordinating and delivering LLL programmes. Similarly, ECNU does not have a single unit responsible for continuing education and/or LLL. Its School of Open Learning and Education, the Basic Education and Lifelong Education Department and the Office of the Committee on Aging are all involved in different aspects of ECNU's LLL provision. In the case of ECNU, this range of actors is proof of an institution-wide commitment to LLL and contributes to the diversification of funding sources. Meanwhile, the case study on UNL argues that, given the wide distribution of LLL activities among different units and departments across the university, an institutional LLL strategy would be particularly important to harmonize these activities.

In addition to continuing education, flexible learning pathways (FLPs) are an important dimension of most HEIs' LLL provision, as was also evident in the international HEI-LLL survey.[20] At Ndejje University, flexible learning pathways are administered through an institutional policy and mechanisms that are independent of its continuing education department, as are its RPL procedures, which follow guidelines set by the Ugandan National Council for Higher Education. Separate, institutional RPL policies or strategies have also been established at USJ, while at UCC, recognition and validation processes fall within the remit of the ACE centre. In the case of UNL, there is no such formal strategy or designated unit: this can be explained in part through the admission policy followed by Argentinian public universities, which grants access to anyone who has completed secondary education (a requirement from which learners aged over 25 are moreover exempt). The underlying goal of UNL's approach is to provide universal access to higher education, whereas in the cases of other HEIs, specific groups are targeted through their FLPs. Depending on the national and institutional contexts, these groups can include women, the unemployed and learners from migrant or minority ethnic backgrounds.

While continuing education and FLPs have helped previously underserved learners to access higher education, some case studies indicate that many programmes are too difficult for them, requiring knowledge or skills that they do not have. In addition, provision for certain target groups is still lacking, contributing to their continuing marginalization. This may be explained in part by the absence of national policy or funding (discussed in the previous section), as well as a tendency among HEIs to prioritize their academic excellence over a more balanced vision that recognizes community-oriented provision.

Quality assurance for LLL activities: Processes and challenges

Insofar as they are all committed to LLL, the six HEIs examined in this report illustrate a range of strategic approaches with regard to the quality assurance mechanisms used to monitor and evaluate their LLL programmes. In the case of some HEIs, these processes may even vary within the institution depending on the programme type in question. At UdeM, for example, only credit-bearing continuing education is subjected to the same institutional evaluation procedures as mainstream provision. Non-credit bearing programmes are also evaluated regularly, but through less formal means, such as participants' feedback. Other institutions, including UCC, Ndejje University and ECNU, have comparable measures in place to assess their continuing education programmes. At ECNU, the evaluation and monitoring of LLL provision are managed by the Department of Basic Education and Lifelong Education Development, which reviews its own delivery, based on which it publishes annual reports. As the ECNU case study highlights, there is a well-established culture of self-monitoring at all levels of the institution, including among its teaching staff. As such, there is little involvement from external actors in the monitoring and evaluation of its LLL provision. In other cases, quality assurance mechanisms are prescribed by regulatory bodies at the national or even

19 In the international HEI-LLL survey, 53.6 per cent of responding HEIs reported that they had implemented a dedicated LLL unit, covering a variety of functions. The global survey findings on the functions of HEIs' lifelong learning units are available at: bit.ly/UIL_HEI-LLL_fig6.

20 In the international HEI-LLL survey, 66.4 per cent of participating institutions indicated that they had implemented policies to support flexible learning pathways. The global survey findings on the types of policies in place to support flexible learning pathways are available at: bit.ly/UIL_HEI-LLL_fig17.

international level, as is the case with Ndejje University, where processes are overseen by the Ugandan National Council of Higher Education, the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) and the East African Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN). At USJ, too, all provision is, in theory, regulated by Lebanon's most recent higher education law, ratified in 2014. In practice, however, the necessary institutional procedures have (partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic) not yet been established. The case study on Ndejje University similarly reveals that the necessary resources to regularly undertake evaluation and monitoring are not always available, highlighting how funding and staffing limitations affect HEIs' delivery of LLL programmes at all levels.

Research and innovation integrated into HEIs' LLL provision

While much of the LLL provision discussed in the case studies (especially continuing education and related activities) is closely related to HEIs' teaching programmes, some institutions engage in LLL through research. At ECNU, research on LLL is a strategic priority. This is reflected in the institution's organizational structure, which includes the Shanghai Municipal Institute for Lifelong Education (SMILE). Research produced by the academics and consultants employed at the institute inform both ECNU's continuing education provision and LLL practices, as well as LLL and education policy at the municipal and national levels. Having a dedicated LLL research unit, ECNU is unique among the HEIs examined in this report. Yet, other case studies also highlight different approaches to foster innovation in LLL. For example, while UdeM's management framework for continuing education tasks individual faculties with developing and delivering their own continuing education provision, it also facilitates dialogue and the sharing of good practices among faculties and has resulted in the development of interdisciplinary LLL projects. At UCC, the ACE centre's work has resulted in the institution-wide integration of teaching and learning methods informed by LLL and adult education, even prompting the reform of the institution's grading system to better accommodate alternative assessment types.

8.3 Implementation of LLL

Providing continuing education that addresses a range of goals and target groups

Continuing education is a priority area of LLL in most of the HEIs featured in this report. In most cases, provision focuses on work-related education and training, reflecting a priority at the national or provincial level. At UdeM, for example, the Faculty of Continuing Education provides training and professional development programmes to members of Québec's professional orders. To better accommodate these learners, who in most cases work full-time, many of UdeM's programmes have been modularized, leading to certificates or other microcredentials, and are delivered in the evening or at weekends, and often online. They can be completed either as standalone courses or integrated into full degree programmes. At UCC, too, the links between continuing education and degree programmes are well established, and a comparable orientation towards the labour market can be observed in the courses offered by its Adult and Continuing Education centre, which include skills development programmes financed by the Irish government.

Operating on a smaller scale and without the support of large-scale public funding schemes, USJ's Professional Training Center has nonetheless established itself as a leading continuing education and training provider. It hosts a range of courses open to the general public, including accredited programmes through which learners can access USJ's mainstream provision. The centre offers programmes to USJ staff internally, but is also commissioned to develop tailor-made programmes by other faculties within the university, by private companies and by external partners. The centre's services often extend beyond simple programme delivery, and include market research, consultancy, administrative support and impact assessment. As a private institution, Ndejje University similarly draws on continuing education as a source of income, especially through on-demand programmes designed and delivered by the relevant faculties for employees of private companies and government institutions. The university also specializes in in-service teacher training, which it delivers in a blended format to accommodate learners' busy schedules.

At ECNU, too, there is a focus on professional development courses for education professionals, reflecting the university's strong background in pedagogy and education research. Multiple units across the institution deliver continuing education activities and offer counselling services aimed specifically at adult learners. UNL's provision is similarly wide-ranging and reaches thousands of students annually through the different institutional actors involved in its delivery. Programmes vary in type, length, target groups and delivery mode, and include vocational courses for the general public, tailor-made courses for public and private sector employees, and community development education provision linked to UNL's outreach projects. Continuing education is not covered by the national higher education budget and is thus not free. However, the university leadership is dedicated to keeping fees low so that its provision remains accessible and, according to the case study, has found that charging learners both increases their commitment and boosts completion rates.

Widening access through flexible learning pathways: Success stories and challenges

In several of the case studies (UdeM, USJ and UCC), continuing education offers a pathway into institutions' mainstream provision (i.e. their full degree programmes). In these cases, successful completion of the continuing education course is considered a valid alternative to the standard entry requirements or may even grant students direct access to the second year of a degree programme. This is the case at UCC, where an increasing number of relevant diploma courses aim to engage a broader range of local students in subjects such as Youth and Community Outreach and Social Studies. Ndejje University's bridging programme, meanwhile, provides learners who did not achieve the required results at secondary school with a route into a degree or diploma programme, depending on their performance on the course. UdeM's access programme similarly targets learners who did not complete the obligatory Québécois pre-university programme. In the case of both Ndejje University and UdeM, the institution is working to support students who have 'fallen through the cracks' in their respective education systems. At UNL, by comparison, an articulation course (mandatory for all students commencing their undergraduate studies) and a comprehensive policy allowing learners over the age of 25 to be admitted to the university without completing secondary school ensure broad, if not universal, access to its undergraduate degree programmes.

This contrasts with USJ's recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) procedures for learners who do not meet standard entry requirements: here, applicants must pass an exam and obtain approval from the rectorate before being admitted. The USJ case study indicates that university leadership introduced these regulations in order to distinguish the university from the many recently established HEIs in Lebanon with low admission requirements. At ECNU, too, the provision of alternative access pathways is balanced against efforts to maintain the university's high academic standards, arguably to the detriment of learners from traditionally underrepresented groups. While there are options for learners to gain access to courses, for example by sitting a self-study exam, these are not easily accessible to learners from certain disadvantaged backgrounds who may have limited capabilities and resources for self-guided study. Moreover, the ECNU case study emphasizes that, in the absence of an NQF to formalize and regulate RVA and credit accumulation and transfer processes and policies, links between vocational and higher education need to be further developed to overcome the disadvantages faced by underrepresented groups, such as migrants.

Leveraging the potential of online learning for LLL provision

The case studies demonstrate how efforts to widen access to education by making provision more flexible have developed in tandem with digitalization. This trend towards technology-enhanced learning options was also evident in the findings of the international HEI-LLL survey.[21] The case studies in the present report illustrate how universities have integrated innovative digital tools into their LLL provision. They also point to some of challenges they face. Several of the HEIs, especially UdeM, UCC and UNL, report that both staff and learners responded well to the shift to online learning and a significant increase in the uptake of continuing education. However, the case studies also emphasize that not all learners were equally inclined, or indeed able, to participate through this new modality. Both at Ndejje University and USJ, online provision has primarily benefited working professionals. While both case studies point to publicly and privately funded initiatives to provide learners with laptops and other learning tools, and to improve connectivity both on and off campus, the 'digital divide' continues to pose a challenge, including in countries with a relatively advanced digital infrastructure. In Ireland, for example, at UCC's ACE centre, online learning fostered the participation of certain disadvantaged groups, such as learners with caring responsibilities or disabilities, but remained out of reach for women from the Irish Traveller community, whose lifestyles were incompatible with online learning.

Older adults are considered to require additional support in navigating IT and online tools. At ECNU, efforts to increase provision for this target group have included conducting research on their participation in education. Together with Shanghai's Municipal Education Commission, ECNU established a dedicated research institute exploring, for example, how to integrate AI more effectively into teaching and learning technologies. At UdeM, too, LLL and technological innovation go hand in hand. The university's online learning management system was established on the initiative of a committee dedicated to LLL, which significantly facilitated the entire institution's transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. UdeM's Faculty of Continuing Education found that many of the activities that were previously held in person attracted more participants online, especially adult learners living or working outside the city of Montreal. At UNL, online learning also helped the university to increase participation among learners living in remote areas. To address the problem of learners' limited internet access, video-conferencing rooms were set up in municipalities, and the majority of programme delivery and communication was moved to online applications that also function in areas with low connectivity.

21 The global survey findings on the use of technology-enhanced learning in LLL provision are available at: bit.ly/UIL_HEI-LLL_fig21.

Other HEIs have treated the shift towards digital platforms as an opportunity to expand their programmes, both at national and international levels. By developing programmes for the Lebanese diaspora, USJ has been able to capitalize on a growing demand for continuing education. However, for degree programmes, national legislation restricts the possibility of completing them entirely online, as no more than 30 per cent of the total credits can be earned through online learning. At Ndejje University, in-person attendance remains a requirement for much of its provision. Nonetheless, as the case study points out, both learners and university leadership are becoming more receptive to online learning, a trend that could be observed across all HEIs. Overall, however, the case studies show that learners continue to value in-person interactions, which has prompted several of the HEIs under investigation to explore options for hybrid learning.

Increasing HEIs' community engagement and societal impact through LLL

Many of the initiatives discussed above also contribute to HEIs' overall commitment to community development and wider societal engagement. As the international HEI-LLL survey showed, there is a high level of collaborations among HEIs with stakeholders from the community, with 98 per cent of all survey participants indicating that they engage with their communities in at least some form.[22] The case studies presented in this report provide examples of such initiatives, most of them related to continuing education and research activities. For example, UCC's ACE centre runs several diploma courses in fields such as Youth and Community Outreach and Social Farming, which not only address the needs of local communities, but also allow learners with limited prior education to professionalize and contribute actively to community development. UdeM similarly helps to boost social inclusion through its continuing education provision, much of which is targeted at migrant learners, and aims to increase their prospects in the Québécois labour market. At UNL, community development is a priority area and the primary mandate of its Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat. The Secretariat runs outreach projects through which a group of students and academics support local communities in resolving an issue of local relevance, often within a sustainable development framework and coupled with continuing education programmes available to local communities. Students at Ndejje University are similarly directly involved in community engagement; they are required to complete community placements as part of their degree course. These placements are not intended merely as a learning experience for students, but as a mutually beneficial knowledge exchange between the university, businesses and the wider community.

Ndejje University also involves the wider community in knowledge production through public debates. These address topics of national interest, receive national media attention, and normally result in the publication of a position paper (co-authored by academics and community representatives), which is used for consultation in parliament. ECNU provides another example of HEIs involving local communities in their research. Here, collaborations with schools, private organizations and local communities have led to a number of codesigned research projects. ECNU's community engagement is strengthened by its close ties with the Shanghai municipality and, more particularly, by its involvement in Shanghai's membership in the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC). Similarly, UCC plays an important role in coordinating Cork's Learning Neighbourhoods network, introducing opportunities for LLL to more disadvantaged areas within the city. Meanwhile, USJ demonstrates wider societal engagement both at the national and international levels. Its University for All programme offers courses on a range of subjects, with a strong emphasis on the creative arts and the humanities. Meanwhile, its internal continuing education programme, offered to USJ staff, addresses topics such as mental health and well-being, acting as a trailblazer in this area in the HE sector in Lebanon and the wider region.

8.4 Way forward

Following on from the findings of the international survey on the contribution of higher education institutions to LLL (UIL & SOU, 2023), this report provides a detailed account of the different contexts and concrete ways in which LLL is implemented in selected universities around the world. This exploration of institutions' experiences provides insights on LLL practices in universities. The findings cover a broad spectrum of items related to national and institutional policy, funding and governance, and to multiple areas of LLL engagement, including continuing education, FLPs, flexible and technology-enhanced learning provision and community engagement. Among the reviewed institutions, continuing education emerges as the most developed form of LLL engagement, reflecting a focus on reskilling and upskilling.

While labour market dynamics, including digitalization, skills gaps, ageing and migration will continue to constitute a driving force for the provision of LLL in higher education, other considerations, such as citizenship, health and well-being, and sustainability, are expected to grow in importance in the coming years.

22 The global survey findings on HEIs' engagement with their communities are available at: bit.ly/UIL_HEI-LLL_fig24.

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Appendix

List of interview partners

	Interview partners	Period
Universidad Nacional del Litoral	• Linkage and Technology Transfer Secretariat • Cultural and Social Extension Secretariat • Planning and Articulation Director	March/April 2021
Université de Montréal	• Assistant Vice-President for Undergraduate Studies and Continuing Education • Director of the Directorate of Continuing Education, Vice-Rectorate for Student Affairs and Studies	May 2021
East China Normal University	• Deputy Director for Institutional Partnerships • Professor and Doctorial Tutor in the Department of Education Science	May 2021
University College Cork	• Interim University President • Director of the ACE centre • Assistant Director of the ACE centre • Two Senior Programme Coordinators from the ACE centre	April/May 2021
Saint Joseph University of Beirut	• Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs • Director of the Professional Training Center	April 2021
Ndejje University	• Dean of the Faculty of Education and Arts • Lecturer/Examination Coordinator, Faculty of Arts • Administrative Assistant, Faculty of Education	March 2021


4
QUALITY EDUCATION
Sustainable Development Goals