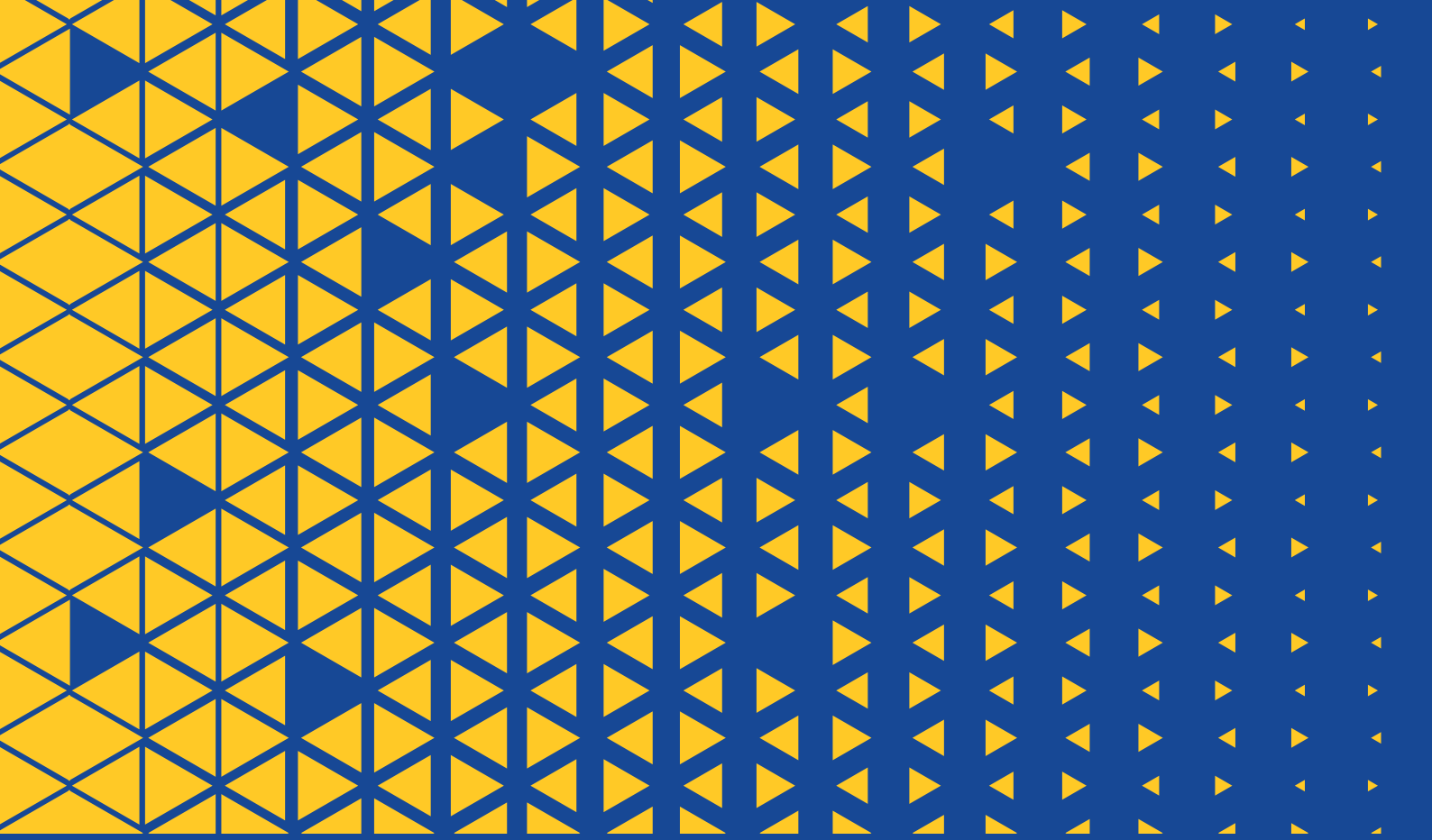




From Political Commitment to Structural Implementation: Operationalizing University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) as a Fourth Key Commitment of the Bologna Process

BFUG Position Paper

prepared by EU.ACE – *European University for Academic Continuing Education*

EU/ACE
European University
for Academic
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Disclaimer

This discussion paper has been prepared by the EU.ACE consortium as a contribution to policy dialogue on University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), Academic Continuing Education (ACE) and the future development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The views and proposals expressed in this document are those of the participating institutions within EU.ACE and should not be interpreted as representing official positions of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), EHEA member states, the European Commission or any other organization.

The paper is intended to inform discussion and support reflection on possible future developments of the Bologna Process. It does not constitute legal advice, binding recommendations or formal policy commitments.

Draft O, 11.06.2026

Executive Summary

This position paper, prepared by the EU.ACE (European University for Academic Continuing Education) consortium, examines how University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) can be strengthened within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna Process.

Lifelong learning has been part of the Bologna agenda since the Prague Communiqué (2001) and has been reaffirmed in subsequent ministerial communiqués, including Paris (2018), Rome (2020) and Tirana (2024). However, unlike the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition instruments, lifelong learning has not been accompanied by dedicated governance structures, indicators or monitoring mechanisms. As a result, implementation remains highly uneven across the EHEA.

Drawing on Bologna Process evidence, Eurostat and Cedefop data, international policy frameworks and comparative analysis across EU.ACE partner countries and beyond, the paper identifies substantial disparities in adult learner participation, recognition of prior learning, flexibility of provision, permeability between sectors and institutional capacity for lifelong learning.

The paper argues that University Lifelong Learning is already established as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA but lacks the implementation architecture that supports the other Bologna key commitments. It therefore proposes strengthening ULLL as a dedicated fourth key commitment of the Bologna Process alongside the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition instruments. The proposal does not seek to create a new Bologna architecture or impose harmonized solutions on national systems. Rather, it aims to strengthen the implementation capacity of existing Bologna commitments related to lifelong learning through improved governance, monitoring, policy coordination and peer learning.

To support this objective, the paper proposes exploring:

a dedicated BFUG working structure on ULLL during the 2027–2030 cycle

a gradual and pragmatic monitoring framework based on existing data sources

stronger support for recognition of prior learning, flexible pathways and stackable learning opportunities

improved permeability between higher education, vocational education and training, workplace learning and continuing education

sustainable funding approaches for lifelong learning provision

enhanced cooperation between universities, employers, public authorities and regional skills ecosystems

The paper concludes that the 2027 Ministerial Conference offers a historic opportunity to strengthen lifelong learning within the Bologna Process in a manner comparable to earlier Bologna reforms and invites the BFUG to explore the development of indicators, monitoring tools and implementation mechanisms supporting University Lifelong Learning as a dedicated fourth key commitment of the Bologna Process. By providing a common framework for transparency, quality, recognition and policy learning across the lifespan, the EHEA can better respond to demographic change, technological transformation, the green and digital transitions, and the growing need for continuous learning throughout life.

PART 1 - Strategic and Policy Foundations

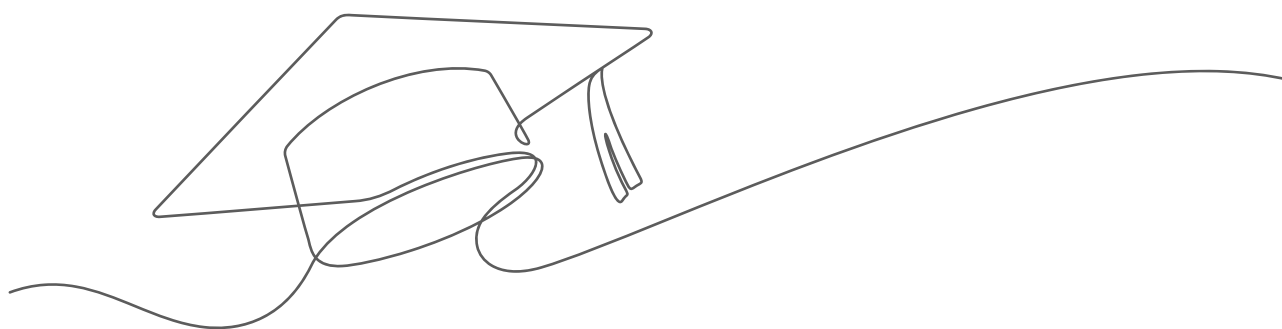
ULLL is an established Bologna commitment but lacks dedicated implementation architecture.

This first part of the paper establishes the strategic and conceptual foundations for strengthening University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) and Academic Continuing Education (ACE) within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It situates the proposal within the broader evolution of the Bologna Process, European education and skills policies, and international lifelong learning agendas. The section introduces the EUACE consortium, outlines why ULLL has become a strategic necessity for the future of the EHEA, and conceptualizes lifelong learning as an existing transversal political commitment of the Bologna Process that requires the same status (that of a key commitment) and dedicated structural implementation mechanisms comparable to those supporting the existing Bologna key commitments (the three-cycle degree system, quality assurance and recognition instruments).

It further clarifies the relationship between ULLL, ACE, lifelong learning ecosystems, and adjacent sectors such as vocational education and training (VET), thereby establishing the policy and conceptual basis for the proposals developed in the subsequent sections. While earlier internal working versions of this paper occasionally referred to ULLL as a potential “fourth Pillar” of the Bologna Process (a terminology sometimes used colloquially to refer to the existing three key commitments of the EHEA: the three-cycle degree system, quality assurance and recognition instruments), the present version aligns with consultations held with ministries and stakeholders across the EHEA and instead frames ULLL as an existing transversal strategic commitment whose implementation could be strengthened through its recognition as a fourth key commitment supported by dedicated indicators, monitoring mechanisms and policy coordination structures.

The paper focuses on addressing the current structural asymmetry between existing political commitments on lifelong learning and the limited structural governance mechanisms presently available within the EHEA. Particular attention is therefore given to possible future indicators and monitoring dimensions for ULLL, while acknowledging that the concrete development of such instruments could be carried out through a dedicated BFUG working structure during the 2027–2030 Bologna cycle.

While lifelong learning is also addressed within European labor-market and employment policies, the present proposal focuses specifically on the higher education governance dimension of lifelong learning within the EHEA. Issues such as qualifications frameworks, ECTS compatibility, recognition of prior learning (RPL), quality assurance, stackability, learner mobility and permeability between educational sectors fall directly within the competence and policy architecture of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area. The proposal therefore complements labor-market initiatives by focusing on the academic recognition, comparability and quality-assured implementation of lifelong learning pathways within European higher education systems. Last but not least, while recognizing the valuable and expanding lifelong learning ecosystems already in place across the EHEA, the paper argues that universities occupy a central role within these ecosystems because they combine research, qualification, recognition and quality assurance functions. Strengthening the role of universities in lifelong learning would contribute to widening access to higher education throughout life and support the objectives of the European Union's Union of Skills initiative.



1. Introduction to the EU.ACE Consortium



EU.ACE, the European University for Academic Continuing Education consortium, <https://euace.eu/>, brings together ten higher education institutions from ten European countries across diverse institutional, regional and lifelong learning contexts within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The consortium spans the full spectrum of lifelong learning implementation in higher education: from **long-established European frontrunners in University Lifelong Learning (ULLL)** and **Academic Continuing Education (ACE)**, such as the University for Continuing Education Krems (Austria) and the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (France), to institutions operating in regions where participation in lifelong learning remains comparatively low. This diversity gives the consortium a unique capacity to develop implementation approaches applicable across different national and institutional contexts of the EHEA. A more detailed description of the consortium and partner institutions is provided in Annex A.

The consortium was established in response to the growing societal, economic and democratic importance of lifelong learning within European higher education. EU.ACE is based on the shared understanding that universities increasingly need to complement their traditional role in initial degree education with flexible, research-based and inclusive lifelong learning provision throughout adulthood. In 2024, representatives of the European Commission invited EU.ACE to prepare a policy paper on strengthening the lifelong learning dimension of the European higher education policy agenda. The resulting living paper^[1] was presented to the Cabinet of Executive Vice-President Roxana Minzatu and subsequently discussed with ministries and stakeholders across the EHEA. These consultations confirmed both the political relevance of the proposal and the need to move from general political commitments on lifelong learning toward more structured implementation mechanisms within the Bologna Process.

[1] https://euace.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/EUACE_ULLL_ACE_Living-Paper_19-December-2025_26021_260210_123705-1.pdf, accessed on May 29, 2026.

2. Why University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) matters for the Future of the EHEA

European societies are undergoing profound transformation driven by demographic change, digitalization, ecological transition, geopolitical instability and rapidly evolving labor-market demands.^[1] These developments increasingly challenge the traditional understanding of higher education as a one-time phase completed during early adulthood. Instead, individuals must continuously update, broaden and renew their competences throughout their professional and personal lives. In this context, lifelong learning has become a strategic requirement for the resilience, competitiveness and democratic sustainability of Europe, generating benefits not only for learners and higher education institutions, but also for labor markets, regional development and society more broadly (see Annex D for Societal, institutional and learner-level benefits of ULLL). Universities are expected not only to educate initial degree-seeking students, but also to provide accessible and flexible learning opportunities for adult learners, working professionals, career changers, migrants, unemployed persons and ageing populations.^[2]

University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) is already an established policy commitment within the European Higher Education Area. Lifelong learning has formed part of the Bologna Process since the Prague Communiqué (2001), where ministers identified lifelong learning as “an essential element of the European Higher Education Area”.^[3] Subsequent ministerial communiqués, including Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009), Paris (2018), Rome (2020) and Tirana (2024), repeatedly reaffirmed commitments to flexible learning pathways, widening participation, recognition of prior learning (RPL), modular learning, employability and inclusive higher education systems.^[4]

[1] European Commission. *Union of Skills*. Brussels: European Commission, 2025; OECD. *OECD Skills Outlook 2023: Skills for a Resilient Green and Digital Transition*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023.

[2] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. *Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. *5th Global Report on Adult Learning and Education: Citizenship Education – Empowering Adults for Change*. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022.

[3] European Ministers in charge of Higher Education. *Towards the European Higher Education Area: Communiqué of the Meeting of European Ministers in Charge of Higher Education, Prague, 19 May 2001*. Prague: Bologna Process, 2001.

[4] Ministers Responsible for Higher Education. *The Bologna Process 2020 – The European Higher Education Area in the New Decade: Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009); Paris Communiqué (2018); Rome Ministerial Communiqué (2020); Tirana Communiqué (2024)*. Brussels: European Higher Education Area (EHEA)/Bologna Process.

However, while these commitments have existed for over two decades, implementation across the EHEA remains fragmented and uneven. Unlike the three-cycle degree system, quality assurance and recognition instruments, lifelong learning has not been supported by comparable implementation mechanisms such as dedicated indicators, systematic monitoring, scorecards, peer-learning structures or a permanent Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) working structure. As a result, ULLL remains a well-established political commitment of the Bologna Process, but one whose implementation continues to depend largely on national initiatives and voluntary institutional engagement.^[1]

The future relevance and responsiveness of the EHEA will therefore increasingly depend on its capacity to support learning throughout life. Strengthening University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) contributes to widening participation, improving permeability between education sectors, supporting social mobility and enabling individuals to navigate increasingly complex professional transitions.^[2] At the same time, ULLL serves broader societal functions beyond employability. Lifelong learning contributes to democratic participation, social cohesion, critical thinking, civic engagement and personal well-being. In an era characterized by disinformation, political polarization and declining trust in institutions, universities play an increasingly important role as providers of accessible, research-based learning opportunities for diverse populations throughout life.^[3]

These developments require a more systematic integration of lifelong learning within the structures and policy frameworks of the Bologna Process. Flexible learning pathways, recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials, workplace learning and modular study opportunities can no longer be treated as marginal or experimental instruments. They increasingly constitute essential components of a responsive and future-oriented European Higher Education Area.^[4] Strengthening University Lifelong Learning within the EHEA should therefore not be understood as introducing a new Bologna objective. Rather, it should be understood as completing the implementation architecture of existing Bologna commitments by providing the governance, monitoring and policy-learning mechanisms necessary to translate long-standing political commitments into more consistent practice across the EHEA.

[1] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. *The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report (2020) and Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024 (2024)*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

[2] European Students' Union. *Bologna with Student Eyes 2024*. Brussels: European Students' Union, 2024. BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension. *Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA*. 2024.

[3] Council of Europe. *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2018. and UNESCO 2022.

[4] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024.

3. Broader European and International Policy Context

The proposal to strengthen the lifelong learning dimension of the Bologna Process builds upon a rapidly evolving European and international policy landscape that increasingly positions lifelong learning as a structural requirement for resilient societies, sustainable economies and democratic participation. At European and international level, societies are undergoing profound transformation driven by demographic change, digitalization, ecological transition, geopolitical instability and rapidly evolving labor-market demands.^[1] In this context, lifelong learning is increasingly understood as a prerequisite for economic resilience, democratic stability, social inclusion and Europe's long-term competitiveness.

Within the European Union, lifelong learning has become a strategic priority across education, employment, industrial and social policy frameworks, including the European Skills Agenda, the European Education Area, the Council Recommendations on Individual Learning Accounts and Micro-credentials, and the recent Union of Skills initiative.^[2] These frameworks collectively position lifelong learning as essential for Europe's competitiveness, resilience and social cohesion.

At international level, UNESCO has consistently framed lifelong learning as a fundamental organizing principle for education systems. The UNESCO Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education^[3], the Marrakesh Framework for Action^[4], and the Futures of Education Report "Reimagining Our Futures Together"^[5] emphasize that learning must be understood as a lifelong, life-wide and society-wide process. UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning defines lifelong learning as a holistic principle encompassing formal, non-formal and informal learning throughout life.^[6] This understanding is closely aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),^[7] particularly SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all). At the same time, ULLL contributes directly to SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 16 (inclusive and democratic societies).

[1] European Commission. *Union of Skills*. Brussels: European Commission, 2025; OECD. *OECD Skills Outlook 2023: Skills for a Resilient Green and Digital Transition*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023.

[2] European Commission. *European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience*. Brussels: European Commission, 2020; European Commission. *European Education Area: Strategic Framework for Education and Training Cooperation*. Brussels: European Commission, 2020; Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts*, 2022/C 243/03. Brussels: Official Journal of the European Union, 2022; Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability*, 2022/C 243/02. Brussels: Official Journal of the European Union, 2022; European Commission. *Pact for Skills*. Brussels: European Commission, 2020; European Commission. *Net-Zero Industry Act*. Brussels: European Commission, 2023; European Commission. *Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027: Resetting Education and Training for the Digital Age*. Brussels: European Commission, 2020; European Commission. *Union of Skills*.

[3] UNESCO. *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education*. Paris: UNESCO, 2015.

[4] UNESCO. *The Marrakesh Framework for Action: Harnessing the Power and Potential of Adult Learning and Education for a Viable Future*. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022.

[5] UNESCO. *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*. Paris: UNESCO, 2021.

[6] UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality: A Handbook*. Hamburg: UIL, 2022.

[7] United Nations. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations, 2015.

4. From Political Commitment to Structural Implementation: University Lifelong Learning as a Dedicated Fourth Key Commitment of the Bologna Process

The purpose of this position paper is to operate at a policy level and to inform BFUG deliberations on the strategic question of how University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), already recognized as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA, can be strengthened through its designation as a dedicated fourth key commitment of the Bologna Process. The focus is on the systemic dimension rather than on institutional details, with the ultimate goal of embedding lifelong learning into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as a structural, system-wide function aligned with existing Bologna architecture, rather than as an additional or separate policy field.

This paper approaches the topic through policy analysis, comparative Bologna Process evidence and selected institutional examples from the EUACE consortium in order to illustrate broader structural developments across the EHEA. Rather than proposing a new thematic agenda, the paper focuses on the governance and implementation gap that currently exists between well-established political commitments to lifelong learning and the absence of corresponding structural instruments within the Bologna architecture. Drawing on Bologna Process communiqués, BFUG implementation reports and recent European policy initiatives such as the Union of Skills, the paper identifies key challenges related to flexibility, recognition, permeability, adult learner participation and stackable learning pathways. Particular attention is given to the absence of dedicated indicators, monitoring structures and coordinated implementation mechanisms for University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) within the EHEA. The analysis highlights the need for a more coherent governance framework capable of supporting measurable implementation of lifelong learning objectives across European higher education systems, while emphasizing the role of universities as central actors in delivering lifelong learning in a transparent, flexible and quality-assured manner.

The EU.ACE Consortium understands University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) as an existing transversal strategic commitment embedded across the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process. In earlier conceptual work, including the first EU.ACE Living Paper, the consortium referred to ULLL as a possible “fourth pillar” of the Bologna Process. Following consultations with ministries, BFUG stakeholders and partner institutions, the present paper further refines this approach and instead proposes designating ULLL as a dedicated fourth key commitment (alongside the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition instruments) in order to provide it with the same implementation architecture that supports the existing Bologna key commitments. ULLL is therefore not conceptualized as a separate policy field or an institutional structure parallel to existing Bologna mechanisms. Rather, it interacts dynamically with all core dimensions of the Bologna architecture, including study cycles, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), quality assurance (QA) and recognition frameworks, mobility, social inclusion and learner-centered education.^[1] From this perspective, University Lifelong Learning functions as a cross-cutting organizing principle that strengthens the permeability, flexibility and accessibility of higher education systems throughout individuals’ lives and careers.

Not a New Topic. A Missing Architecture.

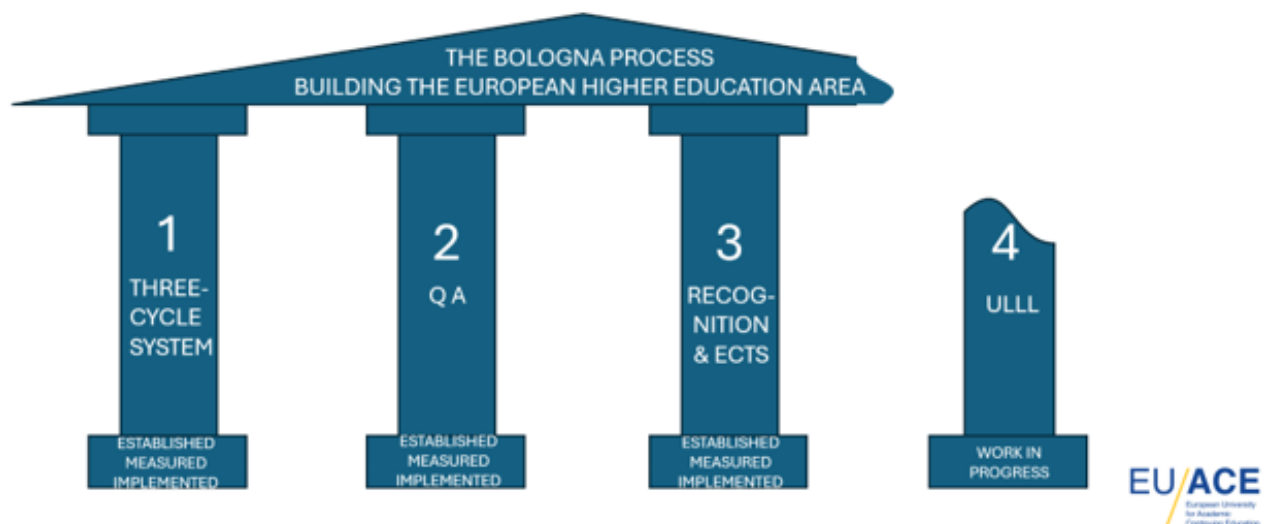


Figure 1. The existing and the proposed Bologna key commitments.

^[1] European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2024.

ULLL supports the Bologna architecture in multiple ways:

by enabling flexible entry and exit pathways within and between study cycles

by strengthening recognition and validation of prior, non-formal and workplace-based learning

by extending quality assurance approaches to continuing education and lifelong learning offered within universities

by supporting modular, stackable and micro-credential-based learning opportunities

by facilitating learner mobility across educational sectors, labor markets and national systems

by reinforcing the social dimension and inclusiveness objectives^[1] of the EHEA.

[1] In this regard, the latest Bologna Implementation Report 2024 and the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA (2020) have positioned ACE and LLL as a cornerstone topic under the broader umbrella of the Social Dimension, aimed at achieving an inclusive EHEA by 2030. This emerging dimension reframes higher education as a continuum that extends beyond initial qualification cycles, emphasizing inclusiveness, flexibility, and accessibility throughout the lifespan. As articulated in Principles 2 and 3 of the Social Dimension Guidelines, ACE and LLL policies are vital for fostering equity and enabling adult learners, delayed-transition students, and professionals seeking reskilling or upskilling to participate in higher education through flexible study modes and recognition of prior learning (RPL), in all of which workplace learning is a crucial component. Moreover, the inclusion of non-degree and micro-credential pathways underscores the EHEA's evolving commitment to lifelong and open learning systems (BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension, 2024; European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2024).

At the same time, the proposal responds to an important structural asymmetry within the Bologna Process itself: while lifelong learning has long been recognized politically, it has not benefited from the implementation architecture available to the existing key commitments. Existing Bologna key commitments, such as the three-cycle degree structure, quality assurance and recognition instruments, are supported by dedicated indicators, scoreboards, monitoring procedures, implementation reports and permanent governance structures within the BFUG framework.^[1] Lifelong learning, by contrast, despite being repeatedly referenced in Bologna communiqués since Prague (2001), remains largely dependent on dispersed qualitative reporting, uneven national implementation and fragmented institutional initiatives.^[2] The absence of dedicated indicators, monitoring mechanisms and governance structures has contributed to substantial implementation gaps across the EHEA, particularly regarding adult learners, flexible learning pathways, recognition of prior learning (RPL), stackability, workplace learning and transitions between vocational and higher education sectors.^[3]

The present proposal therefore aims to provide a dedicated implementation architecture for commitments that already exist politically but remain insufficiently supported through governance, monitoring and coordination mechanisms within the EHEA. In this sense, designating ULLL as a dedicated fourth key commitment primarily means extending to lifelong learning the same logic of measurable implementation, policy coordination, peer learning and monitoring that has contributed to the success of the existing Bologna key commitments. The indicators suggested in this paper should therefore be understood as exploratory and illustrative proposals intended to support future BFUG deliberations.

The proposal therefore positions ULLL not as an external addition to higher education systems or a new Bologna policy field, but as an existing strategic commitment whose implementation requires stronger structural support if the EHEA is to remain socially relevant, economically responsive and democratically sustainable in the 21st century. In this sense, embedding lifelong learning structurally into the Bologna Process provides a pathway for transforming the “Union of Skills” into reality. Providing lifelong learning with a dedicated implementation architecture within the Bologna Process would also support the implementation objectives of the European Union’s Union of Skills agenda, particularly regarding upskilling, reskilling and the development of transferable competences across the life course. This approach also reflects the broader evolution of the Bologna process itself. The Paris (2018), Rome (2020) and Tirana (2024) Communiqués increasingly emphasize lifelong learning, inclusiveness, flexibility, but also recognition of prior learning and student-centered learning as interconnected priorities for the future development of the European Higher Education Area.

[1] European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2024.

[2] European Ministers in Charge of Higher Education, 2001.

[3] European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2024.

5. ULLL, ACE and Lifelong Learning Ecosystems

Lifelong learning within Europe operates through complex ecosystems involving universities, vocational education and training providers, employers, public authorities, civil society organizations and regional actors.^[1] Within these ecosystems, University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) and Academic Continuing Education (ACE) represent the higher education dimension of lifelong learning and increasingly function as strategic interfaces between education, labor markets, innovation systems and regional development policies. As a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA, ULLL provides the framework through which universities contribute to lifelong learning across the life course.

ULLL primarily describes the strategic and systemic role of higher education institutions in enabling learning throughout life, whereas ACE more commonly refers to the concrete educational provision through which this mission is implemented. University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) refers to the strategic and institutional commitment of higher education institutions to support learning throughout life through flexible, inclusive and research-informed educational provision and, at EHEA level, constitutes a transversal strategic commitment underpinning flexibility, recognition, inclusion and learner-centered education. It encompasses institutional strategies, governance structures, recognition frameworks, partnerships and broader societal engagement.^[2] Academic Continuing Education (ACE), by contrast, more commonly refers to the concrete programs, formats and learning opportunities offered within this broader framework, including continuing professional education, executive education, micro-credentials, modular programs, short courses and professional development pathways.^[3] ULLL and ACE differ in important respects from lifelong learning approaches primarily associated with vocational education and training (VET). While both sectors play essential and complementary roles within lifelong learning ecosystems, ULLL is characterized by its integration within higher education institutions, its research-informed nature, its alignment with ECTS and qualifications frameworks, and its connection to the broader academic missions of universities in teaching, research and societal engagement.^[4]

At the same time, effective lifelong learning systems increasingly depend on stronger permeability between vocational and higher education sectors. The Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024 highlights that flexible pathways, recognition of prior learning (RPL), modular provision and improved transitions between sectors remain unevenly implemented across the EHEA.^[5] This is particularly relevant for adult learners, mature students and professionals seeking upskilling and reskilling opportunities throughout their lives. Flexible pathways, recognition of prior learning, stackable qualifications and collaborative regional skills ecosystems are increasingly necessary to support learners across changing educational and professional trajectories. The growing importance of micro-credentials, workplace learning and modular learning pathways further challenges traditional distinctions between initial education, continuing education and professional learning.^[6] Universities therefore should not operate in isolation, but as integral actors within regional, national and European lifelong learning ecosystems. Stronger cooperation between higher education institutions, vocational education providers, employers, public authorities and civil society organizations is essential for ensuring accessible, high-quality and socially responsive lifelong learning opportunities across Europe.^[7]

[1] European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2024.

[2] UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022.

[3] Peter Mayo, *Higher Education in a Globalising World: Community Engagement and Lifelong Learning*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.

[4] European University Association (EUA), *Universities Without Walls: A Vision for 2030*. Brussels: EUA, 2021.

[5] European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2024.

[6] Council of the European Union, 2022.

[7] European Commission, 2025.

Strengthening the implementation of ULLL within these ecosystems would contribute to greater coherence between education, skills, innovation and labor-market policies, while strengthening the long-term resilience and inclusiveness of the European Higher Education Area. In this context, the proposed designation of ULLL as a dedicated Fourth Key Commitment seeks not to create a new policy field within Bologna, University Lifelong Learning already exists as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA, but rather to strengthen its implementation through the governance, monitoring and coordination architecture necessary to support lifelong learning more coherently across the EHEA, similar to the implementation architecture supporting the existing Bologna key commitments. The challenge for the Bologna Process is therefore not to introduce lifelong learning as a new objective, but to provide an existing strategic commitment with the implementation architecture necessary to ensure transparency, comparability, quality and measurable progress across the EHEA.

a. Definitions and terminology

Within the Bologna Process and the EHEA policy framework, lifelong learning is understood as a cross-cutting principle covering formal, non-formal and informal learning throughout life.^[1] Recent Bologna Communiqués, particularly Paris (2018), Rome (2020) and Tirana (2024), increasingly connect lifelong learning with widening participation, flexible learning pathways, recognition of prior learning (RPL), micro-credentials and social inclusion.^[2]

In academic and policy discourse, the terms University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) and Academic Continuing Education (ACE) are sometimes used interchangeably, although they may also refer to different levels within the higher education lifelong learning architecture. ULLL generally denotes the strategic and institutional commitment of higher education institutions to lifelong learning, whereas ACE more commonly refers to the concrete educational provision implemented within this framework, including continuing professional education, executive education, modular provision and micro-credentials. The distinction is therefore primarily one of governance and strategy (ULLL) versus delivery and program level (ACE).^[3]

A widely used definition developed by the European University Continuing Education Network (eucen) describes ULLL as higher education provision that supports both individual development and the social, cultural and economic development of regions.^[4] It is research-based, learner-centered and frequently developed in cooperation with external stakeholders. UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning further defines lifelong learning as a continuous process that "covers learning from cradle to grave" and includes all forms of learning, formal, non-formal and informal, across all life domains.^[5] This reinforces the understanding that higher education systems should not be limited to initial qualification pathways but should increasingly function as recurring providers of learning opportunities throughout adulthood. For the purposes of this paper, ULLL is therefore understood as an existing transversal strategic commitment within the EHEA, closely connected to flexibility, permeability, social inclusion and the long-term objectives of the Bologna Process.

[1] This goes back to for example the European Commission and UNESCO definition of lifelong learning as "all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence." European Commission, *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*. Brussels: Commission of the European Communities, 2000, 3.

[2] Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2018, 2020 and 2024.

[3] European University Association. *European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning*. Brussels: European University Association, 2008; Schuetze, Hans G, and Maria Slowey, eds. *Global Perspectives on Higher Education and Lifelong Learners*. New York: Routledge, 2012; Wolter, Andr . "Higher Education and Lifelong Learning." In *International Encyclopedia of Education*, edited by Penelope Peterson, Eva Baker, and Barry McGaw, 548–553. Oxford: Elsevier, 2010; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022; Teichler, Ulrich, and Andr  Wolter. "The Intricate Relationship Between Higher Education and the Labour Market." In *Higher Education Looking Forward: Relations between Higher Education and Society*, 199–224. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2004.

[4] European University Continuing Education Network (eucen), *The Bologna process and university lifelong learning. The state of play and future directions*. Barcelona: EUCEN, 2007.

[5] UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022.

b. Distinctions between ULLL/ACE and VET Lifelong Learning

ULLL and ACE differ from VET lifelong learning in institutional embedding, academic orientation and qualification structures. ULLL is integrated into universities and strongly linked to research, critical thinking and innovation.^[1] It is aligned with EQF levels 5–8 and embedded in ECTS-based systems that enable credit accumulation, transfer and stackability across programs and institutions.^[2] As such, ULLL directly concerns Bologna instruments related to qualifications frameworks, recognition, credit transfer, quality assurance and learner mobility, which explains why its implementation falls naturally within the governance architecture of the Bologna Process. A key feature of ULLL is its academic recognition structure. Learning outcomes can be validated through ECTS, enabling formal integration into degrees and postgraduate qualifications. Beyond professional up- and reskilling, universities contribute to analytical, reflective and evidence-based competences relevant for innovation and democratic participation.

Academic recognition also distinguishes ULLL from many VET formats. Through ECTS, stackability and quality assurance mechanisms, learners can accumulate and transfer credits across institutions and programs. Micro-credentials play an increasingly important role by enabling flexible, modular and potentially stackable learning opportunities. Quality assurance is typically governed by ESG-based frameworks within the EHEA, ensuring comparability, transparency and trust in provision.

ULLL also differs in its stronger research dimension, which supports evidence-based learning and contributes to innovation capacity and societal development beyond immediate labor-market needs, it encourages analytical, interdisciplinary and reflective forms of learning beyond immediate occupational requirements. At the same time, VET systems remain more directly oriented towards occupational skills and immediate labor-market relevance, typically within lower to medium EQF levels, though increasingly with links to higher education.

Micro-credentials, recognition of prior learning, learning-outcomes orientation, stackability and permeability between systems are key bridging instruments between sectors and illustrate the practical implementation dimensions of ULLL as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA. They enable more flexible, learning pathways between VET and higher education systems. Two national examples are ANKOM Initiative (Germany)^[3] and Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE) (France),^[4] while for example Finland and Austria have established extensive RPL procedures within their universities of applied sciences.^[5]

[1] European University Association, *Universities Without Walls: A Vision for 2030*. Brussels: EUA, 2021.

[2] European Commission. *Explaining the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2008; European Higher Education Area (EHEA). *ECTS Users' Guide*. Brussels: European Commission, 2015; Cedefop. *Terminology of European Education and Training Policy: A Selection of 130 Key Terms*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014.

[3] <https://ankom.dzhw.eu/>, accessed on May 28, 2026.

[4] <https://vae.gouv.fr/>, accessed on May 28, 2026.

[5] Cedefop, *Skills Forecast: Trends and Challenges to 2035*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023; Cedefop. *Measuring Participation in Adult Learning: New Targets, Methods and Data*. Thessaloniki: Cedefop, 2024.

PART 2 - Evidence Base and Comparative Analysis

From Political Commitment to Measurable Implementation

This part of the paper provides the empirical and comparative evidence base underpinning the proposal to strengthen the implementation architecture of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) as an existing transversal strategic commitment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through dedicated governance, monitoring and implementation mechanisms comparable to those supporting the existing Bologna key commitments. Drawing on data from the EUACE consortium,^[1] Eurostat,^[2] Cedefop,^[3] Bologna Implementation Reports^[4] and national policy frameworks,^[5] the section analyses the current state of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The evidence demonstrates major disparities regarding participation, flexibility, recognition and permeability across EHEA systems.

Particular attention is given to the structural asymmetry between the indicators and monitoring systems supporting the existing Bologna key commitments and the comparatively limited implementation architecture currently available for ULLL as an existing transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA. The analysis therefore focuses especially on whether and how participation patterns, flexibility gaps, recognition of prior learning (RPL), mobility barriers, permeability between sectors are measured and monitored and the limited availability of comparable lifelong learning indicators across European higher education systems.

The section identifies major structural disparities, policy gaps and implementation challenges while also highlighting emerging practices and institutional innovations. The analysis aims to illustrate where measurable implementation mechanisms for lifelong learning are currently missing compared to other Bologna key commitments such as the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition, thereby highlighting the rationale for elevating ULLL into a dedicated fourth key commitment supported by comparable implementation structures.

[1] EUACE Consortium. Needs Analysis for the Development of University Lifelong Learning Structures in the EHEA. Unpublished consortium working paper, 2026.

[2] <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>, accessed on May 28, 2026.

[3] Cedefop, 2023.

[4] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020.

[5] While countries like Austria, France, Spain, Switzerland, and the Netherlands have established comprehensive strategies supported by legal frameworks, quality assurance, and strong university involvement, others, such as Romania, Bosnia and Hungary, still lack integrated systems and exhibit very low participation rates. Austria and Finland have made significant progress in regulating ULLL, yet implementation remains uneven. EUACE Consortium, 2026.

6. State of ULLL across the EHEA

a. Comparative overview of ULLL implementation patterns across EU.ACE countries

University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) across the EU.ACE countries remains highly heterogeneous.^[1] The comparative overview across EU.ACE countries, see Annex B for more details, demonstrates that implementation of lifelong learning within higher education systems remains highly uneven across the EHEA. Significant differences persist regarding participation, flexibility, recognition systems and institutional integration. These disparities illustrate that the existing Bologna commitment to lifelong learning is not yet supported by implementation mechanisms comparable to those accompanying the existing Bologna key commitments across the EHEA.

Country	Legal / strategic framework	Adult participation in lifelong learning	University involvement	Recognition of prior learning (RPL)	Main challenge
Austria	ULLL regulated under University Act; EQF 6–7 integration	Above EU average	Strong across HE sectors	Relatively advanced	Fragmented implementation
France	Strong national lifelong learning framework; CPF/VAE	High participation	Very strong	Strong VAE system	Complexity of governance
Germany	Bologna-aligned modular continuing education	Moderate	Strong but uneven regionally	Available but inconsistent	Scaling flexibility
Finland	Continuous Learning strategy; SECLE	High	Strong state coordination	Improving	Alignment with labor-market needs
Netherlands	Advanced national LLL strategy	High	Strong university-industry cooperation	Moderate	Inclusion gaps
Spain	LOSU + Royal Decree 822/2021	Moderate	Expanding rapidly	Improving	Regional fragmentation
Switzerland	WeBiG Act (2017)	High	Strong market-based provision	Strong	Funding and affordability
Hungary	Framework strategy exists	Below EU average	Limited implementation	Weak	Low participation
Romania	Fragmented	Very low	Limited	Weak	Digital and skills deficits
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Fragmented entity-based systems	Low	Uneven	Limited	Governance fragmentation

[1] Ibid.

b. Existing Bologna, Eurostat and BFUG evidence on Lifelong Learning

Existing Bologna Process monitoring and European statistical evidence further confirm the uneven implementation of lifelong learning across the EHEA, despite its longstanding recognition as a Bologna commitment and despite growth in the number of adult graduates between 2016 and 2021.^[1]

The Bologna Implementation Report 2024 indicates that:

- In 24 out of 49 EHEA systems,^[2] legal requirements covering assessment methods limit flexibility and individualization and, as such, implementation of flexible learning pathways and study modes suitable for lifelong learners.^[3] In many countries, students who seek to study flexibly and/or non-traditionally face regulatory barriers,^[4] higher education structures remaining primarily oriented towards traditional full-time degree pathways, limiting accessibility for adult learners, working professionals and non-traditional student groups.
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has formally expanded across the EHEA, yet implementation remains inconsistent. 35^[5] higher education systems allow some form of recognition or credit accumulation based on prior learning, professional experience or non-formal learning. However, focusing on the three-cycle system, restrictions concerning institutional discretion, program access and credit recognition continue to limit practical usability for learners.
- “Around one-third of EHEA systems also offer programmes outside the Bologna-degree structure”, whereby cross-country readability remains unsolved.^[6] These programs and microcredentials are aimed at developing specific (labor market) skills but do not fit the three-cycle system and as such “raise the question of compatibility with the Bologna Process”^[7] while they demonstrate that flexible and lifelong learning provision already exists extensively across the EHEA, but remains only partially integrated into Bologna governance and monitoring structures.
- Mobility data^[8] also demonstrates continuing structural limitations within the EHEA. The long-standing Bologna mobility benchmark aiming for at least 20% graduate mobility has not yet been reached across the European Higher Education Area. This reflects broader challenges concerning flexibility, portability of learning and permeability between education systems.

[1] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024, 36.

[2] Ibid, 171.

[3] Ibid, esp. 127.

[4] Ibid, 173.

[5] Ibid, 126.

[6] Ibid, 90.

[7] Ibid, 60.

[8] Ibid, 145–148.

Eurostat and Cedefop data additionally reveal significant disparities in adult participation in lifelong learning across Europe.^[1] Participation rates remain strongly correlated with educational attainment, employment status, age and digital skills levels, indicating that many lifelong learning systems continue to reproduce existing social inequalities rather than reduce them.

Importantly, these findings are only partially reflected in existing Bologna monitoring structures, revealing a significant difference between the political recognition of lifelong learning within the Bologna Process and the availability of implementation and monitoring instruments supporting it. While the Bologna architecture includes relatively advanced scorecards and benchmarking mechanisms for degree structures, quality assurance, recognition and mobility, lifelong learning is still monitored primarily through dispersed qualitative references and indirect indicators, i.e. “facilitating synergies for an inclusive lifelong learning”.^[2]

This structural asymmetry demonstrates that University Lifelong Learning is already established as a transversal strategic commitment within the Bologna Process but has not yet been supported by governance, monitoring and implementation instruments comparable to those accompanying the existing Bologna key commitments. The evidence therefore supports exploring the elevation of ULLL into a dedicated fourth key commitment, thereby providing the implementation architecture necessary to translate longstanding political commitments into more coherent and measurable action across the EHEA.

c. Participation patterns and target groups

Participation in lifelong learning across Europe remains highly uneven and strongly stratified across social groups. Eurostat, Cedefop and Bologna Process evidence consistently demonstrate that participation is significantly lower among low-qualified adults, older learners, migrants and refugees, employees in SMEs, rural populations and workers affected by the green and digital transitions.^[3]

These participation gaps illustrate that existing higher education systems continue to favor traditional student pathways and already highly educated groups, despite longstanding Bologna commitments to widening participation, flexible learning pathways and lifelong learning. They also demonstrate the need for more flexible learning pathways, modular provision, recognition of prior learning, stackable credentials and stronger permeability between vocational education, higher education and workplace learning.

[1] Cedefop, 2024; European Commission, Eurostat. Adult Learning Statistics. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024.

[2] Ibid, 131.

[3] See for example *ibid*, 26.

The Bologna Implementation Report 2024 explicitly highlights mature students, flexible pathways and continuing education as areas requiring stronger structural development across the EHEA, further illustrating the gap between political commitment and implementation capacity.

Target group	Main structural barriers	Potential ULLL response areas
Low-qualified adults	Limited flexibility; weak RPL; financial barriers	Modular learning; short-cycle HE; micro-credentials
Older learners	Time constraints; inflexible study structures	Hybrid learning; part-time pathways; workplace learning
Migrants and refugees	Qualification recognition; language barriers	RPL; bridging programs; flexible entry pathways
Workers in green/digital transition sectors	Rapid skills obsolescence	Stackable upskilling; challenge-based learning
SME employees	Limited training capacity	Regional learning ecosystems; modular ACE provision
Rural populations	Geographical and digital access barriers	Hybrid delivery; regional outreach structures

Detailed comparative analyses of participation patterns and target groups are provided in Annex C.

d. Mobility, RPL and flexibility gaps

Comparative evidence from the EUACE partner countries^[1] demonstrates that opportunities for adult learners remain unevenly distributed and insufficiently integrated into many higher education systems. Particularly significant disparities persist regarding flexibility, portability, cross-border recognition and stackability within lifelong learning provision across the EHEA.

While several EHEA systems have developed more flexible and modular forms of provision, these approaches remain unevenly implemented and insufficiently connected at European level. Countries such as Austria, France, Finland and the Netherlands have established comparatively advanced frameworks for modular learning, part-time studies, hybrid delivery and recognition of prior learning (RPL). National reforms increasingly support permeability between vocational education, higher education and workplace learning, particularly through ECTS-based modular provision and micro-credentials.

[1] EUACE Consortium, 2026.

At the same time, substantial barriers remain regarding portability and cross-border recognition of lifelong learning achievements. Short learning experiences, micro-credentials and workplace-based learning are still not consistently recognized across institutions and countries. In many systems, continuing education provision remains only weakly connected to mainstream degree structures, limiting opportunities for learners to accumulate, transfer and stack learning achievements across different educational contexts.

This challenge is particularly important in the context of increasingly multinational labor markets and growing demand for continuous upskilling and reskilling. While the Bologna Process has established comparatively strong recognition instruments for traditional degree mobility through ECTS, the Diploma Supplement and the Lisbon Recognition Convention, equivalent mechanisms for modular lifelong learning and stackable provision remain underdeveloped.

The Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024 additionally highlights the growing importance of programs outside the traditional Bologna degree structure, including micro-credentials and continuing professional education. At the same time, the report underlines the need to ensure compatibility, readability and comparability across countries. This demonstrates that flexible lifelong learning provision already exists extensively across the EHEA but remains only partially integrated into the governance, monitoring and implementation structures associated with the Bologna Process.

As a result, adult learners frequently encounter fragmented pathways, limited recognition of prior experiential learning and insufficient opportunities to move flexibly between institutions, sectors and countries. Elevating ULLL into a dedicated fourth key commitment supported by appropriate implementation mechanisms would therefore contribute to improving portability, transparency and comparability for learners participating in flexible and modular higher education pathways throughout Europe.

e. Structural asymmetries in Bologna monitoring and implementation

A central finding of this comparative analysis is that University Lifelong Learning is already established as a transversal strategic commitment within the Bologna Process but remains insufficiently supported by the governance, monitoring and implementation architecture of the EHEA. Existing Bologna key commitments have achieved comparatively strong implementation precisely because they are supported by measurable indicators, scorecards, benchmarking mechanisms, dedicated follow-up structures and permanent governance arrangements within the BFUG framework. This applies to the three-cycle degree system, quality assurance and to the recognition instruments.

The three-cycle structure is monitored through implementation scorecards and comparative reporting on degree structures, progression between cycles and alignment with qualifications frameworks. Quality assurance is supported through measurable ESG implementation, EQAR registration and benchmarking mechanisms. Recognition instruments are monitored through ECTS implementation, Diploma Supplement use and Lisbon Recognition Convention reporting. Mobility is accompanied by quantitative benchmarks, including the long-standing 20% graduate mobility target and associated statistical monitoring mechanisms.

Bologna area	Indicators	Monitoring
Three-cycle system	Degree implementation rates	Scorecards
QA	ESG/EQUAR compliance	Benchmarking
Recognition	ECTS/DS/LRC	Comparative reporting
Mobility	20%	Quantitative reporting
Governance	Dedicated BFUG structures and implementation mechanisms	Permanent follow-up groups and coordinated monitoring

By contrast, ULLL, despite being repeatedly reaffirmed in successive Bologna Communiqués, remains primarily governed through qualitative references and dispersed national reporting. Although successive Bologna Communiqués repeatedly emphasize flexible learning pathways, recognition of prior learning (RPL), widening participation and lifelong learning, there is still no comparable Bologna scoreboard or systematic monitoring framework dedicated to ULLL implementation across the EHEA.

This structural asymmetry helps explain why implementation of lifelong learning commitments remains highly uneven across countries. While existing Bologna key commitments benefit from measurable implementation tools and institutionalized follow-up structures, lifelong learning remains largely dependent on voluntary national interpretation, project-based initiatives and fragmented institutional uptake.

Several important lifelong learning dimensions are currently only partially monitored, focused on degree students or not monitored systematically at all:

ULLL Area	Indicators	Monitoring
Flexible learning pathways	Learning modes	Scorecard (part-time, blended and distance)
Adult learners	Access routes for “delayed transition students”	Scorecard on top-level measures, participation in part-time studies, degree attainment
RPL	QA, access and fulfillment	Country QA requirements to address RPL, access and fulfillment of first cycle
Stackability	Missing	No EHEA metrics
ULLL Governance	Missing	No permanent BFUG structure for coordination, benchmarking or implementation follow-up

The Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024 already points toward several possible areas for future indicator development. The report explicitly references mature students as an underrepresented target group within lifelong learning strategies and highlights the growing importance of programs outside traditional Bologna degree structures, including micro-credentials and continuing professional education. At the same time, the report underlines the need to ensure compatibility, readability and comparability across countries.^[1]

The purpose of proposing University Lifelong Learning as a dedicated fourth key commitment is therefore not to introduce a new topic into the Bologna Process. Rather, it is to provide an existing transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA with governance, monitoring and implementation mechanisms comparable to those supporting the other Bologna key commitments, thereby enabling more coherent, transparent and measurable implementation across the EHEA.

In this context, future BFUG work could explore the gradual development of measurable lifelong learning indicators linked to:

- *flexible learning pathways*
- *adult learner participation*
- *recognition of prior learning*
- *modular and stackable provision*
- *permeability between sectors*
- *and adult learner mobility*

Such indicators would not replace national autonomy in lifelong learning policy, but would provide a common European framework for transparency, comparability and policy learning, helping ULLL benefit from the same implementation architecture that has historically supported the success of the other Bologna key commitments.

[1] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024, 26, 60.

7. Selected Institutional Examples from EUACE Partner Institutions

While comparative evidence demonstrates significant disparities across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), selected institutions within the EUACE consortium illustrate that University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) can already be structurally embedded within higher education systems. These examples demonstrate that the present proposal does not introduce a new policy field into the Bologna Process, but rather seeks to provide an existing transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA with governance, monitoring and implementation mechanisms comparable to those supporting the existing Bologna key commitments.^[1] The institutional examples below therefore serve primarily as illustrative examples of different national and institutional approaches, while recognizing that future Bologna-level indicators and monitoring mechanisms would need to be further developed collectively within an appropriate BFUG structure.

a. Conservatoire national des arts et métiers, Paris

The Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (Le Cnam) is a public higher education institution operating under the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research and is uniquely dedicated to lifelong professional education, applied research and the dissemination of scientific and technical culture. Founded in 1794, it represents one of Europe's longest-standing institutional models of structurally embedded university lifelong learning.^[2]

Le Cnam annually serves a large adult learner population across Paris and regional centers, with an average learner age of approximately 30 years, demonstrating the large-scale integration of lifelong learners within higher education structures. The institution operates within the broader French lifelong learning framework, including:

- the *Validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE)* system for recognition of prior experiential learning
- modular and flexible learning pathways
- strong links between higher education and labor-market transitions
- nationally coordinated lifelong learning financing instruments such as the *Compte Personnel de Formation (CPF)*.^[3]

The French example demonstrates that recognition of prior learning, modular provision and adult participation can be integrated into national higher education systems through coherent governance, funding and quality-assurance structures.

b. University for Continuing Education Krems

The University for Continuing Education Krems is Austria's only public university dedicated exclusively to continuing education and lifelong learning. Since its integration into the Austrian Universities Act framework, it has operated as one of Austria's public universities fully embedded within the Bologna architecture.^[4] The institution serves a predominantly adult learner population with an average student age of approximately 39 years and demonstrates how lifelong learning provision can be integrated into ECTS-based higher education structures at EQF/NQF levels 6 and 7. Austrian reforms since 2021 have further strengthened the legal basis for lifelong learning provision across all higher education sectors, including public universities, universities of applied sciences and private higher education institutions.^[5]

The Austrian case also highlights an important structural issue for future Bologna monitoring: a substantial proportion of lifelong learners may remain statistically "invisible" because they participate in regular degree programs on a part-time basis while combining studies with employment. This illustrates the need for more differentiated EHEA indicators concerning adult learners, flexible study modes and delayed-transition students.

[1] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024.

[2] <https://www.cnam.eu/>, accessed May 29, 2026.

[3] <https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/>, accessed May 29, 2026.

[4] Republic of Austria, Universities Act 2002 (Universitätsgesetz 2002), Federal Law Gazette I No. 120/2002, as amended.

[5] Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (Austria), *Universitäre Weiterbildung und Life Long Learning in Österreich* (Vienna: BMBWF, 2023).

8. Structural Challenges for Implementing ULLL across the EHEA

a. Fragmentation and uneven national approaches

One of the main structural challenges within the EHEA is the highly uneven implementation of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), despite its longstanding recognition as a Bologna commitment, across national higher education systems. As has already been shown, while some countries have developed coherent legal frameworks, funding models and institutional strategies, others continue to rely on fragmented project-based provision or largely market-driven approaches.

A major issue is that in many EHEA systems lifelong learning remains insufficiently embedded within higher education governance structures and is not supported by implementation mechanisms comparable to those accompanying other Bologna key commitments. This is problematic because higher education institutions can serve as a key differentiator within the EHEA by providing publicly accountable, quality-assured and internationally recognizable lifelong learning provision within the Bologna architecture. Without stronger university involvement, lifelong learning risks becoming fragmented across private and non-formal markets with uneven transparency, recognition and quality assurance standards.^[1]

The absence of sufficiently coordinated implementation, monitoring and governance mechanisms across the EHEA increasingly limits comparability, permeability and trust between systems. Developing stronger national, regional and European lifelong learning ecosystems involving universities, VET providers, employers, public authorities and civil society actors should therefore become a strategic objective of the Bologna Process, supported by a more coherent implementation framework for ULLL across the EHEA. Beyond its systemic dimension, such an ecosystem-based approach carries a profound strategic significance for the sustainable development of higher education itself. Providing ULLL with implementation mechanisms comparable to those supporting the other Bologna key commitments would help universities widen access to flexible, quality-assured learning opportunities for citizens at all stages of life, diversify their learner base, strengthen their long-term societal relevance and consolidate their role as anchor institutions within the communities they serve. Universities would increasingly act not merely as providers of initial degrees, but as permanent civic infrastructures for upskilling, reskilling, social cohesion and democratic participation.

b. Funding, state aid and sustainability challenges

Implementing high-quality lifelong learning structures within higher education requires sustainable long-term investment in digital infrastructure, learner support systems, modular program development, recognition procedures, staff development and regional cooperation mechanisms. This challenge becomes increasingly important if ULLL is to evolve from a transversal strategic commitment into a dedicated Bologna key commitment supported by measurable implementation mechanisms. At the same time, funding approaches supporting the implementation of ULLL across Europe remain highly uneven. In many countries, continuing education is still financed predominantly through individual learner fees or short-term project funding, limiting accessibility and long-term institutional sustainability.

See Annex E for a more detailed discussion of funding models and state aid considerations for ULLL in the EHEA.

[1] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024.

This challenge is further complicated by the interaction between lifelong learning provision and European Union State Aid and competition rules. Public higher education institutions must distinguish between publicly funded educational missions and market-oriented economic activities, particularly where fee-based continuing education competes with private providers.^[1] The resulting legal and financial uncertainty may discourage universities from expanding flexible lifelong learning provision, particularly in areas such as micro-credentials, workplace learning and modular continuing education and particularly where lifelong learning provision is not clearly recognized as part of the public responsibility of higher education systems.

Providing ULLL with a dedicated implementation architecture within the Bologna Process could therefore contribute to greater policy coordination regarding sustainable public funding models, learner support mechanisms and compatible quality-assurance approaches for adult learning provision across the EHEA. Such coordination would not prescribe national funding models, but could support mutual learning, transparency and the exchange of good practices among EHEA members. As with the other Bologna key commitments, sustainable implementation ultimately depends not only on political commitment, but also on the existence of appropriate governance, monitoring and funding mechanisms capable of supporting implementation across diverse national contexts.

c. Recognition and permeability barriers

Despite increasing political attention to lifelong learning and recognition practices across Europe, the implementation of RPL remains uneven and fragmented within the European Higher Education Area. Existing systems are often characterized by complex procedures, fragmented responsibilities and limited integration into mainstream higher education structures.^[2] Recognition pathways for non-formal, informal and workplace learning remain underdeveloped in many countries, limiting permeability between vocational education, higher education and employment. Furthermore, access to RPL opportunities is frequently hindered by administrative burdens, insufficient institutional capacity, limited staff expertise and financial barriers for learners. Our study also shows that recognition systems often fail to reach disadvantaged and non-traditional learners effectively. As a result, RPL continues to operate below its potential for supporting lifelong learning, learner mobility, social inclusion and flexible participation in higher education.

Elevating ULLL from an existing transversal strategic commitment to a dedicated fourth key commitment within the Bologna Process could support greater coherence through common principles for recognition, improved transparency of procedures, stronger quality-assurance approaches and enhanced portability of learning outcomes across institutions and countries. It would also provide a framework for developing implementation mechanisms comparable to those supporting the other Bologna key commitments.

d. Institutional capacity and adult learner support

Many higher education institutions within the EHEA remain structurally oriented toward traditional full-time degree students and initial tertiary education pathways. As a result, adult learners frequently encounter institutional barriers that limit participation and successful completion. These barriers include:

- *rigid admission systems*
- *limited part-time and modular provision*
- *insufficient digital and blended learning structures*
- *quality-assurance procedures primarily designed for traditional full-degree provision*
- *limited learner-support services adapted to adults combining studies with employment or family responsibilities.*

[1] European Commission, Commission Notice on the Notion of State Aid as Referred to in Article 107(1) TFEU, OJ C262 (2016).

[2] Council of the European Union, Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, 2012/C 398/01.

The Bologna Process has successfully supported structural convergence in areas such as study cycles, recognition and quality assurance because these dimensions are accompanied by measurable implementation tools, scorecards, dedicated governance structures and comparative monitoring frameworks. Comparable implementation mechanisms for adult learner participation, flexible learning pathways, stackability and other lifelong learning dimensions remain largely absent, despite lifelong learning already being recognized as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA. Strengthening institutional capacity for lifelong learning therefore requires not only political commitment but also governance, monitoring and implementation mechanisms capable of supporting implementation across the EHEA, similar to those accompanying the existing Bologna key commitments.

e. Cooperation between Higher Education, VET and labor-market actors

Another critical challenge concerns the still limited permeability between higher education, vocational education and labor-market systems in many EHEA countries. Flexible pathways enabling learners to move between formal, non-formal and informal learning remain underdeveloped in several national systems.^[1]

At the same time, lifelong learning within higher education should not be understood solely as a labor-market instrument. Universities fulfil broader educational, democratic, scientific and societal functions that extend beyond short-term employability objectives.

This is precisely why University Lifelong Learning already constitutes a transversal strategic commitment within the Bologna Process and the EHEA governance framework. Unlike purely labor-market-oriented training policies, ULLL is linked to qualifications frameworks, ECTS, recognition systems, quality assurance, learner mobility, academic standards and the social dimension of higher education.

ULLL therefore connects employability and skills objectives with the broader missions of universities within the EHEA: academic quality, critical thinking, democratic participation, scientific literacy, social inclusion and lifelong personal development. Its cross-cutting nature explains why lifelong learning is already embedded across multiple Bologna priorities and why a dedicated key commitment could strengthen their implementation through a more coherent governance architecture. At the same time, stronger cooperation between higher education institutions, VET providers, employers, regional authorities and civil society organizations remains essential for supporting:

- *upskilling and reskilling*
- *green and digital transitions*
- *regional innovation ecosystems*
- *more inclusive lifelong learning opportunities across Europe.*

The comparative analysis demonstrates that lifelong learning is no longer a marginal or supplementary issue within European higher education. Rather, it has become a structural governance challenge directly linked to the future relevance, inclusiveness and resilience of the European Higher Education Area. While important progress has been achieved in several countries and institutions, major disparities persist regarding governance, funding, flexibility, recognition systems and institutional capacity.

These findings underline the need to provide University Lifelong Learning, already recognized as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA, with a more coherent implementation architecture within the Bologna Process. Elevating ULLL to a dedicated fourth key commitment would support the development of governance structures, monitoring mechanisms, measurable indicators and coordinated policy learning comparable to those that have contributed to the successful implementation of the existing Bologna key commitments.

[1] Cedefop, 2023.

PART 3 - Governance, Implementation and Monitoring

How to operationalize ULLL in Bologna.

Building on the conceptual foundations presented in Part 1 and the comparative evidence analyzed in Part 2, this section outlines possible governance approaches, implementation mechanisms and monitoring instruments for elevating University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) from an existing transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA to a dedicated fourth key commitment within the Bologna Process. The focus is not on creating a separate Bologna architecture, but on providing ULLL with governance, monitoring and implementation mechanisms comparable to those supporting the existing Bologna key commitments, thereby improving the operational capacity of existing commitments related to flexibility, permeability, inclusion and lifelong learning within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Particular attention is given to governance structures, monitoring approaches and implementation instruments that could support the gradual development of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) from an existing transversal strategic commitment into a dedicated fourth key commitment within the Bologna Process during the 2027–2030 cycle.

9. From Political Commitment to Structural Implementation

The last section argued that the existing key commitments, the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition instruments, function effectively within the Bologna Process not only because they are politically endorsed, but because they are accompanied by measurable indicators, comparative reporting mechanisms, dedicated BFUG structures and implementation monitoring. Lifelong learning, by contrast, despite its longstanding recognition within the Bologna Process, remains largely dependent on dispersed national approaches, voluntary implementation and fragmented qualitative reporting.

Providing ULLL with implementation mechanisms comparable to those supporting the existing Bologna key commitments has the potential to improve permeability, inclusiveness and flexibility across the EHEA and to make an already existing Bologna commitment more operational, measurable and visible. The proposal advanced in this paper consequently focuses on elevating ULLL into a dedicated fourth key commitment through more coherent governance, monitoring, implementation and coordination mechanisms.

In this context, the proposed “fourth key commitment” should not be understood as a completely new Bologna objective, but rather as the formal recognition of ULLL as a dedicated key commitment building on its existing status as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA and providing it with the implementation architecture available to the other Bologna key commitments.

The proposed elevation of ULLL to a dedicated fourth key commitment should be developed in coherence with the European Education Area (EEA), the European Research Area (ERA), the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Union’s Union of Skills agenda, ensuring interoperability across European education, research and skills policies.^[1]

[1] European Commission, 2025.

Potential implementation areas for future Bologna monitoring could include:

- *participation rates of adult and mature learners*
- *availability of flexible learning pathways (part-time, blended and distance learning)*
- *recognition of prior learning procedures and outcomes*
- *stackability and portability of micro-credentials and modular learning*
- *cross-sector permeability between VET and higher education*
- *governance structures dedicated to lifelong learning within national higher education systems.*

Beyond employability, ULLL contributes to democratic resilience, active citizenship and social cohesion. In an era characterized by disinformation, political polarization and declining trust in institutions, universities play an essential role in providing accessible, research-based learning opportunities throughout life. This aligns with the Council of Europe's emphasis on the democratic missions of higher education and UNESCO's conception of lifelong learning as a foundation for democratic participation.^[1]

At the same time, stronger lifelong learning structures also strengthen the strategic role of higher education institutions within regional innovation and skills ecosystems. Universities contribute not only to labor-market responsiveness, but also to research-informed competence development, critical thinking, civic participation and social cohesion. This distinguishes University Lifelong Learning from narrower labor-market training approaches and explains why the topic falls directly within the remit of the EHEA and Bologna governance structures. This also reflects the dual nature of lifelong learning within Europe, which requires coordination between skills and employment policies on the one hand and higher education governance, quality assurance and recognition structures on the other.

Several implementation challenges nevertheless remain relevant, including fragmented recognition practices, insufficient flexibility of higher education structures, limited portability of learning outcomes, uneven institutional capacities and insufficient permeability between higher education, vocational education and workplace learning. They help explain why existing political commitments on lifelong learning have not yet translated into comparable implementation outcomes across the EHEA. These challenges further reinforce the need for a dedicated governance, monitoring and implementation architecture for ULLL within the Bologna Process.

10. Proposal for ULLL as a Fourth Key Commitment of the Bologna Process

EUACE proposes elevating University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), already recognized as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA, into a dedicated fourth key commitment of the Bologna Process, embedded across the existing architecture of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The proposal builds on existing Bologna commitments related to lifelong learning, flexible learning pathways, recognition of prior learning, social inclusion and learner-centered education, while aiming to provide ULLL with governance, monitoring and implementation mechanisms comparable to those supporting the existing Bologna key commitments.

Rather than introducing a separate or parallel governance structure, the proposal seeks to transform an existing transversal strategic commitment into a dedicated key commitment capable of benefiting from the same implementation logic that has supported the success of the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition instruments. In contrast to the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition instruments, lifelong learning currently lacks dedicated monitoring structures, comparable indicators and permanent Bologna governance mechanisms. The proposed fourth key commitment would therefore support the gradual development of dedicated governance structures, indicators, monitoring mechanisms and policy-coordination approaches during the 2027–2030 Bologna cycle.

[1] UNESCO, 2021; Council of Europe, *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2018.

A dedicated fourth key commitment on ULLL could support:

- *the development of more flexible and inclusive higher education pathways*
- *stronger recognition and validation of prior learning*
- *improved permeability between vocational education, higher education and workplace learning*
- *greater transparency and portability of modular and micro-credential provision*
- *more systematic inclusion of adult learners within EHEA monitoring frameworks.*

Possible future monitoring areas could include adult learner participation, flexible study modes, recognition of prior learning procedures, stackability of learning opportunities, portability of credits and governance structures supporting lifelong learning within higher education systems. The concrete indicators and monitoring methodologies could, however, be further elaborated collectively within the Bologna Follow-Up Group framework. These areas correspond closely to existing Bologna priorities concerning flexibility, inclusion, learner-centered education and permeability across the EHEA.

Further discussion and operationalization of this proposal could take place within the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) during the 2027–2030 cycle, including possible cooperation with stakeholder organizations such as the European University Association (EUA), EURASHE, the European Students' Union (ESU), ENQA, EQAR, EUACE and other relevant actors. The proposal also aligns with broader European policy developments, including the European Education Area, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Commission's Union of Skills agenda, which emphasize the importance of lifelong upskilling and reskilling, flexible learning pathways and stronger links between education, skills and societal resilience. The following sections therefore outline possible governance approaches, implementation mechanisms and indicative monitoring areas that could support the transition of ULLL from an existing transversal strategic commitment to a dedicated fourth key commitment within the Bologna Process, equipped with governance, monitoring and implementation mechanisms comparable to those supporting the existing Bologna key commitments.

11. Proposal for a BFUG Working Structure on ULLL (2027 – 2030)

In order to strengthen the implementation dimension of lifelong learning within the Bologna Process, the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) could consider establishing a dedicated working structure on University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) and Academic Continuing Education (ACE) during the 2027–2030 cycle.

The purpose of such a structure would be to support the more coherent operationalization of existing Bologna commitments related to lifelong learning, flexible learning pathways, recognition of prior learning, inclusion and learner-centered education and to support the gradual development of the implementation architecture associated with a dedicated fourth Bologna key commitment on ULLL. This structure could coordinate peer learning, policy exchange, comparative mapping activities and exploratory work on future monitoring approaches related to lifelong learning within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It could further support the identification of possible indicators, governance approaches and implementation mechanisms that may contribute to more consistent monitoring of lifelong learning across the EHEA and bring ULLL closer to the implementation arrangements already supporting the other Bologna key commitments.

The working structure could also provide a platform for exchanging national experiences regarding:

- *adult learner participation*
- *flexible study provision*
- *recognition of prior learning (RPL)*
- *micro-credentials and stackability*
- *cross-sector permeability between VET and higher education*
- *quality assurance approaches for lifelong learning provision.*

Any future indicators or monitoring frameworks could be developed collectively within the BFUG process and in dialogue with ministries, higher education institutions and stakeholder organizations during the 2027–2030 period.

The working structure could involve representatives from ministries, higher education institutions, student organizations, social partners, quality assurance agencies and relevant European stakeholders. Possible participating organizations could include EUA, EURASHE, ESU, ENQA, EQAR, eucen, EUACE and representatives from relevant European Commission initiatives linked to skills and lifelong learning policies. Such a structure would contribute to strengthening coordination, transparency and mutual learning across the EHEA, while allowing the Bologna Process to progressively develop for ULLL an implementation architecture comparable to that already supporting the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition instruments.

See annex F for the draft terms of reference for a BFUG working structure on ULLL.

12. Funding ULLL and ACE as Public Responsibility and Enabling Right

Sustainable implementation of lifelong learning within the European Higher Education Area requires not only political commitment, but also adequate governance and funding frameworks. While Bologna implementation has traditionally focused on degree structures, quality assurance and mobility instruments, the expansion of flexible lifelong learning pathways also requires long-term institutional capacity, quality-assured provision and accessible learner support mechanisms.

International and European policy frameworks increasingly recognize lifelong learning as a public responsibility linked to democratic participation, social cohesion, resilience and sustainable development. UNESCO frames lifelong learning as a guiding principle for education systems across the lifespan, while Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for “inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.”^[1] Within the European context, Principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights establishes lifelong learning as a fundamental right connected to participation in society and labor-market transitions.^[2]

Within the Bologna Process context, this creates an important policy implication: if lifelong learning is to function as a dedicated fourth key commitment of the EHEA, building on its existing status as a transversal strategic commitment, universities require enabling conditions comparable to those supporting other Bologna key commitments. This includes not only funding, but also stable governance arrangements, institutional flexibility and recognition mechanisms supporting adult learners across the lifespan. Across the European Higher Education Area, funding for University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) and Academic Continuing Education (ACE) remains uneven and often insufficiently embedded within mainstream higher education funding structures. In many systems, continuing education provision relies heavily on project-based financing, tuition fees or temporary initiatives, while public funding remains primarily oriented towards traditional initial degree education.^[3]

At the same time, adult learners frequently face fragmented funding opportunities that are difficult to combine across sectors, institutions or countries. Existing instruments often remain linked to specific labor-market statuses, regional frameworks or short-term programs, limiting permeability and continuous participation in lifelong learning pathways. The challenge is therefore not solely financial, but structural. The absence of coherent governance frameworks for lifelong learning within higher education contributes to fragmented implementation capacities across the EHEA. This reinforces the broader imbalance identified throughout this paper: while other Bologna commitments are supported through established governance and monitoring mechanisms, lifelong learning remains comparatively weakly institutionalized despite its longstanding recognition as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA.

[1] UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2015.

[2] European Commission, European Pillar of Social Rights. Brussels: European Commission, 2017.

[3] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024.

A future BFUG working structure on ULLL could therefore examine possible approaches for sustainable implementation during the 2027–2030 Bologna cycle. This could include comparative mapping of funding approaches, analysis of state-aid implications, identification of good practices and exploration of instruments supporting flexible lifelong learning participation while respecting the diversity of national higher education systems.

Strengthening the lifelong learning dimension of the Bologna Process should therefore not be understood primarily as the creation of new funding obligations, but as the gradual development of enabling frameworks that allow higher education institutions to implement existing lifelong learning commitments more coherently, inclusively and sustainably across the EHEA through governance, monitoring and implementation arrangements comparable to those supporting the other Bologna key commitments. Such an approach would align the Bologna Process directly with the European Union's own headline ambitions for its citizens: the European Skills Agenda and the 2030 target that at least 60% (European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan – 2021) of adults participate in learning every year, the Digital Decade objectives, and the twin green and digital transitions, all of which presuppose accessible, trusted and quality-assured learning opportunities throughout life. In this perspective, empowering universities to act as the public backbone of lifelong learning is not an additional policy ambition but the most coherent and credible pathway through which the EHEA can contribute to the Union's vision of a fair, resilient and competitive Europe — one in which the right to lifelong learning, proclaimed as the very first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, becomes a lived reality for every citizen.

13. Towards a Bologna ULLL Indicator and Monitoring Framework

A stronger lifelong learning dimension of the Bologna Process requires not only political commitment, but also robust instruments to track progress and support policy learning across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). One of the defining characteristics of existing Bologna key commitments is that they are supported by comparatively clear monitoring structures, scorecards and implementation reporting mechanisms. The three-cycle degree structure, quality assurance frameworks, recognition instruments and mobility targets have all become operational partly because they are measurable and regularly monitored across the EHEA.^[1]

By contrast, lifelong learning remains only partially visible within the current Bologna architecture. Although references to flexible learning pathways, adult learners, recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials and modular learning have increased substantially in successive Bologna Communiqués and Implementation Reports, these elements are not yet supported through a coherent indicator framework or permanent monitoring structure^[2] comparable to those supporting the existing Bologna key commitments. Building on existing Bologna monitoring, Eurostat and Cedefop data collections, the Union of Skills initiative, and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), this paper therefore proposes the gradual development of a focused ULLL monitoring framework for the EHEA. The objective is not to create a separate reporting architecture, but to provide University Lifelong Learning, as an existing transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA, with the implementation architecture necessary for its future development as a dedicated fourth key commitment alongside the existing Bologna key commitments.

The indicators serve three main functions:

- to provide transparent and comparable evidence on how EHEA systems integrate lifelong learning within higher education structures
- to support Member States and higher education institutions in identifying implementation gaps and policy priorities
- to strengthen the visibility and measurable implementation of lifelong learning within future Bologna monitoring and BFUG work cycles.

The proposed framework is deliberately limited and pragmatic. Rather than introducing a comprehensive new scoreboard immediately, the approach could begin with a small number of strategically relevant headline indicators that can gradually be refined during the 2027–2030 Bologna cycle.

[1] Ibid.

[2] Ministers Responsible for Higher Education 2018, 2020, 2024.

The paper therefore proposes that a future BFUG working structure on ULLL further develop and operationalize indicators, definitions and reporting methodologies in cooperation with Member States, Eurostat, Cedefop, quality assurance agencies and higher education stakeholders^[1] as part of the implementation architecture supporting ULLL as a dedicated fourth key commitment.

Illustrative indicator domains that could be explored within a future BFUG process include:

- *participation and access of adults in higher education*
- *structural and governance arrangements for ULLL and ACE*
- *recognition of prior learning and flexible pathways*
- *quality assurance and transparency of ULLL provision*
- *contribution to the Union of Skills and labor-market relevance.*

Within each domain, we distinguish between system-level indicators (capturing national frameworks, legislation and funding) and institutional indicators (capturing the degree to which universities and other higher education institutions embed ULLL and ACE in their strategies, programs and partnerships). This dual perspective reflects the shared responsibility between governments and institutions that has characterized the Bologna Process from the outset.

Possible future indicators could include, for example:

- *the proportion of mature^[2] and part-time students within higher education systems*
- *the availability of flexible learning modes (part-time, blended and distance learning)*
- *the existence and implementation level of recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedures*
- *the integration of stackable and modular learning opportunities within ECTS-based structures*
- *the recognition and quality assurance of micro-credentials*
- *the existence of dedicated national or BFUG-level governance structures for lifelong learning*
- *the existence of national or institutional lifelong learning strategies and governance structures.^[3]*

Several of these dimensions are already indirectly referenced in the Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024, which repeatedly identifies gaps in adult learner participation, flexibility, recognition systems and permeability between sectors.^[4] The proposed framework would therefore not introduce entirely new priorities into the Bologna Process, provide measurable implementation instruments for commitments that already exist politically within the EHEA.

To minimize administrative burden, the framework builds as far as possible on existing Eurostat, Cedefop, OECD and Bologna Implementation Report data collections. Where new data is required, it could be integrated into existing BFUG questionnaires or periodic national reports, without establishing separate reporting cycles.

The EUACE consortium expresses its willingness to contribute to exploratory discussions, peer learning and possible pilot activities supporting the future development of such indicators within the EHEA context.

In line with the Union of Skills initiative, the indicator framework will also allow the EHEA to track its contribution to EU ambitions on adult learning, skills development and labor-market transitions. Over time, this will make it possible to link Bologna commitments more closely to EU-level targets on participation in lifelong learning, skills development for the green and digital transitions, and social inclusion. More importantly, it would establish the monitoring and implementation architecture necessary for ULLL to function as a dedicated fourth key commitment of the Bologna Process, comparable to the implementation arrangements supporting the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition instruments.

[1] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024.

[2] Defined by age and/or professional experience.

[3] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024; European Union, 2025.

[4] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024.

14. Proposed Strategic Actions

The following strategic actions illustrate possible areas for future cooperation and implementation within the Bologna Process framework. They are not intended as a fixed action plan, but as examples of themes that could be further explored by a future BFUG working structure on ULLL during the 2027–2030 period. To support implementation within the Bologna architecture, the following strategic actions could progressively be accompanied by measurable indicators and reporting mechanisms aligned with existing Bologna monitoring approaches. Similar to the existing Bologna key commitments, such as the three-cycle system, quality assurance and recognition instruments, the long-term effectiveness of the lifelong learning dimension will depend on the development of transparent indicators, comparable reporting structures and periodic peer-learning processes across the EHEA. The purpose is not to introduce lifelong learning as a new Bologna priority, but to provide the existing transversal ULLL commitment with an implementation architecture comparable to that of the other Bologna key commitments. The examples below illustrate how selected actions could be operationalized through pragmatic and measurable implementation instruments.

a. Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

To enable real cross-border circulation of skills, the EU could reinforce portability and automatic recognition of learning outcomes, especially those gained through non-formal, informal and workplace-based learning. Despite many RPL projects, national implementation remains weak, limiting learners' mobility and the usability of their skills. Elevating ULLL from an existing transversal strategic commitment to a dedicated fourth Bologna key commitment would strengthen the implementation architecture supporting RPL, helping to improve transparency, comparability, quality assurance and policy coordination across national systems.

Key actions:

- *strengthen transparency and comparability of RPL procedures across the EHEA*
- *support integration of RPL into national qualifications and quality assurance framework*
- *improve portability of learning outcomes between institutions, sectors and countries*
- *and explore approaches for recognizing micro-credentials, workplace learning and modular learning within ECTS-based structures.*

Possible implementation indicators could include:

- *existence of national RPL frameworks within higher education*
- *share of higher education institutions offering formal RPL procedures*
- *proportion of adult learners entering higher education through non-traditional access routes*
- *availability of ESG-compatible quality assurance procedures for RPL*
- *and cross-border recognition arrangements for micro-credentials and prior learning outcomes.*

Improving RPL systems would strengthen permeability between education sectors, reduce barriers for adult learners and support more flexible lifelong learning pathways across the EHEA.

b. Employability and learner tracking

The Bologna Process already monitors mobility, recognition and degree structures through comparative reporting mechanisms. As ULLL becomes a dedicated fourth key commitment, comparable implementation evidence would be needed for lifelong learning in the same way that existing Bologna commitments are supported by monitoring and reporting structures.

Possible future actions could therefore include:

- *developing comparable approaches for monitoring adult learner participation and progression*
- *improving evidence on transitions between education, work and further learning*
- *supporting exchange of good practices on graduate and lifelong learner tracking and exploring interoperable digital tools supporting recognition, portability and documentation of learning outcomes.*

Any future monitoring activities could build as far as possible on existing Bologna, Eurostat and national reporting structures in order to minimize administrative burden.

c. Permeability between academia, VET and industry

To ensure that European citizens acquire both specialized and transferable skills needed for resilience and long-term employability, stronger permeability between higher education, vocational education and training (VET), workplace learning and continuing education pathways are increasingly necessary. At the same time, universities play a distinct role within lifelong learning ecosystems. Unlike many company-specific training formats, higher education provision is embedded within publicly regulated and quality-assured frameworks linked to ECTS, qualifications frameworks and Bologna transparency instruments. This enables universities to contribute not only to immediate labor-market adaptation, but also to broader transferable competences, critical thinking and long-term societal resilience.

Policy directions:

- *support regional lifelong learning ecosystems connecting universities, VET providers, employers and public authorities*
- *strengthen quality-assured workplace learning within higher education*
- *improve permeability between vocational and higher education pathways*
- *support modular and stackable learning opportunities across sectors*
- *encourage innovative cross-sector learning environments linked to the green and digital transitions.*

As with other Bologna key commitments, these areas could progressively become subject to coordinated implementation support, peer learning and monitoring activities within the EHEA.

Possible monitoring dimensions could include:

- *number of joint higher education–VET pathways*
- *availability of stackable and modular programs*
- *integration of workplace learning into ECTS-based provision*
- *participation of SMEs in regional skills ecosystems*
- *portability of learning outcomes across sectors and borders.*

d. Professional doctorates

Several EHEA systems are increasingly exploring professional doctorate models combining research, advanced professional practice and innovation-oriented workplace learning.

Professional doctorates bridge the gap between academic rigor and practical application, strengthening Europe's knowledge economy and supporting talent retention in key strategic sectors.

Future Bologna peer learning activities could therefore examine how professional doctorates relate to qualifications frameworks, quality assurance arrangements and lifelong learning pathways within the EHEA. Such discussions would fit naturally within a fourth key commitment dedicated to the implementation of ULLL across the Bologna architecture.

e. Short-cycle higher education

The Short-cycle Higher Education Degree (EQF level 5), already established in several European countries, could be more fully integrated into the Bologna Process as a recognized qualification.

Embedding this degree into the European framework would create a flexible and accessible entry point into higher education and strengthen permeability between education and employment sectors. Short-cycle higher education can also support lifelong learning by enabling modular, professionally oriented and stackable learning pathways for adult learners and working professionals. Future cooperation within the Bologna framework could therefore explore how short-cycle qualifications contribute to flexibility, permeability and lifelong learning progression across the EHEA. This is particularly relevant because short-cycle qualifications exemplify the type of flexible learning pathways that an operationalized ULLL key commitment would seek to support and monitor more systematically.

Possible indicators may include:

- *existence of nationally recognized short-cycle higher education qualifications aligned with EQF level 5*
- *progression rates from short-cycle programs into bachelor programs*
- *adult learner participation in short-cycle higher education*
- *recognition arrangements between VET and higher education sectors.*

f. Regional skills ecosystems

To fully realize the potential of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) across Europe, the EU could strengthen regional skills ecosystems as the foundation for responsive, future-oriented learning.

Regional ecosystems, bringing together universities, companies, public authorities and civil society, ensure that learning provision matches local labor-market needs, supports inclusion, and enables individuals to upskill throughout their lives.

Within the Bologna context, such ecosystems can also strengthen the regional and social dimension of higher education and improve cooperation between education sectors, employers and public authorities. A dedicated fourth key commitment on ULLL could provide a framework for exchanging good practice, supporting peer learning and monitoring the contribution of such ecosystems to lifelong learning objectives across the EHEA.

g. Learning accounts and flexible funding mechanisms

Flexible lifelong learning pathways also require more flexible participation and funding mechanisms for adult learners.

Several European initiatives, including Individual Learning Accounts and modular funding approaches, illustrate possible instruments supporting access to lifelong learning opportunities across different life stages and employment situations. Future Bologna discussions could explore how such mechanisms may support participation in quality-assured higher education lifelong learning provision while respecting the diversity of national systems and funding models.

Potential monitoring indicators could include:

- *participation of adults aged 25+ in learning account schemes*
- *share of underrepresented learners benefiting from flexible funding instruments*
- *portability of funding rights across sectors and employment statuses*
- *participation in ESG-aligned higher education lifelong learning provision.*

More detailed implementation examples and possible funding approaches are included in Annex E. Overall, these strategic actions should be understood as illustrative examples of how an existing transversal ULLL commitment could be supported through the same types of implementation, monitoring, peer-learning and governance mechanisms that have contributed to the success of the other Bologna key commitments.

PART 4 - Towards the 2027 Ministerial Conference

15. Draft Language for the 2027 Bologna Communique

“

“We recognize Higher education Lifelong Learning as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA and invite the BFUG to introduce LLL as a dedicated fourth key commitment and develop indicators, monitoring tools and implementation mechanisms supporting flexible higher education lifelong learning pathways, recognition of prior learning and stackable higher education provision for adult learners and beyond.”

”

16. Conclusions and outlook

Integrating the implementation of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) into the Bologna Process through a dedicated fourth key commitment would have far-reaching implications for the European Higher Education Area. This proposal is firmly grounded in the evolutionary trajectory of the Bologna Process, as expressed in the Paris (2018), Rome (2020), and Tirana (2024) Communiqués, which collectively establish lifelong learning, inclusion, and flexibility as defining principles of the European Higher Education Area. The proposal therefore does not introduce lifelong learning as a new Bologna objective; rather, it seeks to equip an existing transversal strategic commitment with a dedicated implementation architecture comparable to that of the other Bologna key commitments.

One of the most significant benefits is improved permeability across higher education, vocational education and training (VET), continuing education and employment sectors. This includes easier recognition of prior learning (RPL) and work-based experience, enabling learners to transition more seamlessly between formal degree programs, workplace learning and continuing education opportunities. Such flexibility would also foster stronger mutual understanding and closer collaboration between academia and the professional world, while increasing mobility for learners who seek to combine academic and professional development throughout their lives.

Financial aspects represent another critical dimension. Providing ULLL with the same implementation architecture that supports the existing Bologna key commitments will require sustainable and transparent funding approaches that balance public responsibility, institutional autonomy and shared investment by learners, employers and public authorities. State support mechanisms, such as loans, grants, scholarships and regional funding instruments, must therefore increasingly accommodate flexible lifelong learning pathways and adult learner participation. Expanding access to public funding schemes for adult learners could significantly enhance participation, although differences between national higher education systems and funding models will continue to require flexible implementation approaches across the EHEA.

Finally, successful implementation depends on intensive collaboration with work-field partners, particularly at the regional level. Co-creation of programs with industry stakeholders will strengthen relevance and responsiveness to labor-market needs. Building regional learning ecosystems that connect universities, businesses, vocational education providers and public actors will be essential for creating sustainable, inclusive and future-oriented lifelong learning structures that support Europe's competitiveness, innovation capacity and social cohesion.

At the same time, University Lifelong Learning should not be reduced to a narrowly labor-market-oriented agenda. Universities contribute to lifelong learning not only through employability and upskilling, but also through research-based knowledge transfer, democratic participation, critical thinking, intercultural dialogue and social inclusion. This broader societal role explains why lifelong learning falls directly within the remit of the European Higher Education Area and Bologna governance structures, while also complementing wider European skills and employment policies.

The Bologna Process has succeeded historically because it anticipated structural change rather than reacting to it: the three-cycle structure, ECTS, quality assurance and recognition instruments were each, in their time, responses to a Europe whose realities had outgrown its educational architecture. Demographic change, accelerating technological transformation and the twin transitions now confront the EHEA with a challenge of comparable magnitude, and with the same choice between coordinated leadership and fragmented drift. By 2030, the majority of Europe's workforce will need to renew their skills within systems largely designed for school leavers; no member state can address this alone, and no actor other than higher education can guarantee provision that is publicly accountable, quality-assured and recognizable across 49 systems.

Elevating University Lifelong Learning from an existing transversal strategic commitment to a dedicated fourth key commitment of the Bologna Process would not create a new policy objective; it would provide an existing commitment with the implementation architecture that already supports the other key commitments. The three current key commitments ensure that degrees are structured, quality-assured and recognized. A fourth key commitment would extend comparable governance, monitoring, peer-learning and implementation mechanisms to lifelong learning, thereby strengthening the realization of commitments that Bologna ministers have repeatedly endorsed since 2001. This would require no harmonization of national systems and no new financial obligations, but only what the Bologna Process has always offered at its best: a shared direction, voluntary convergence and mutual accountability that makes commitments real. The cost of this step is modest; the cost of inaction (a lifelong learning landscape developing outside public higher education, beyond common quality and recognition frameworks, and unevenly accessible to Europe's citizens) would be borne for decades.

The ministers gathering in Chişinău and Iaşi in 2027 have the opportunity to do for lifelong learning what their predecessors in Bologna did for degree structures in 1999: to provide a long-standing Bologna commitment with the governance and implementation mechanisms necessary for its full realization across the EHEA. The EUACE consortium therefore calls upon the BFUG, EHEA member states and European institutions to initiate a structured exploratory process towards elevating University Lifelong Learning, already established as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA, into a dedicated fourth key commitment of the Bologna Process, supported by indicators, monitoring arrangements, peer-learning activities and governance structures comparable to those of the existing key commitments, during the 2027–2030 cycle.

17. Annexes

Annex A

EU.ACE Consortium partners and institutional profiles

A.1 – The EU.ACE Consortium as a European Laboratory for University Lifelong Learning

The European University Alliance for Continuing Education (EU.ACE) brings together ten higher education institutions from nine European countries representing a broad diversity of higher education traditions, governance systems and lifelong learning approaches across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The consortium combines specialized lifelong learning universities, comprehensive universities and universities of applied sciences from both public and non-state sectors. Together, the partners represent more than two centuries of experience in continuing education, flexible learning pathways, adult learner participation, recognition of prior learning, workplace learning and regional engagement.

Dimension	Coverage in EU.ACE	Details
Countries	10	Hungary, France, Spain, Switzerland, Finland, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Austria
10		Andrassy University Budapest, Conservatoire national des arts et metiers, CEU San Pablo University Foundation, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, Turku University of Applied Sciences, 1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia, University of Zenica, Ulm University, University for Continuing Education Krems
EU Member States	8	Hungary, France, Spain, Finland, Romania, Germany, Austria
Non-EU EHEA States	2	Switzerland, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Universities	7	
Universities of Applied Sciences	3	
Specialized Continuing Education Universities	2	
Research/comprehensive Universities	4	
Western Europe	1	France
Central Europe	4	Austria, Germany, Hungary, Switzerland
Eastern Europe	2	Finland, Romania
Western Balkans	1	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Southern/Southwestern Europe	1	Spain

This diversity constitutes one of the consortium's major strengths. EUACE combines institutions operating in highly developed lifelong learning systems with partners working in emerging and rapidly evolving higher education environments. The consortium therefore provides a unique comparative perspective on the opportunities and challenges of embedding University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) within the European Higher Education Area.

Through its activities, EUACE functions as a European laboratory for the development, testing and evaluation of innovative approaches to Academic Continuing Education (ACE), micro-credentials, flexible learning pathways, recognition of prior learning and lifelong learning governance. The alliance therefore provides a practical evidence base for the recommendations advanced in this paper.

A.2 – Consortium Overview

Institution	Country	Institutional Type	Distinctive Contribution to ULLL
Andrassy University Budapest (AUB)	Hungary	Specialized university	European integration, social sciences, transnational governance perspectives
Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (CNAM)	France	Specialized lifelong learning university	One of Europe's largest and oldest lifelong learning institutions
CEU San Pablo University Foundation	Spain	Comprehensive university	Lifelong learning across educational sectors and age groups
Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (HSLU)	Switzerland	University of Applied Sciences	Advanced continuing education system (CAS, DAS, MAS)
Utrecht University of Applied Sciences (HU)	Netherlands	University of Applied Sciences	Governance, citizen engagement and sustainability
Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS)	Finland	University of Applied Sciences	Innovation pedagogy and SME cooperation
1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia (UAB)	Romania	Comprehensive university	Distance learning and continuing education
University of Zenica (UNZE)	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Comprehensive university	Regional development and widening participation
Ulm University (UULm)	Germany	Research university	Modular learning, micro-credentials and blended learning
University for Continuing Education Krems (UWK)	Austria	Specialized continuing education university	Public university exclusively dedicated to continuing education
Institution	Country	Institutional Type	Distinctive Contribution to ULLL
Andrassy University Budapest (AUB)	Hungary	Specialized university	European integration, social sciences, transnational governance perspectives
Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (CNAM)	France	Specialized lifelong learning university	One of Europe's largest and oldest lifelong learning institutions

A.3 – Institutional Profiles

Andrassy University Budapest (Hungary)

Andrassy University Budapest is a unique German-language university in Central Europe specializing in humanities and social sciences. Supported by several European partner states and regions, the university contributes expertise in European integration, governance, public policy and transnational cooperation. Its focus on Central and Eastern Europe provides important perspectives on lifelong learning challenges in emerging higher education systems.

Conservatoire national des arts et métiers – CNAM (France)

Founded in 1794, CNAM is one of Europe's oldest and largest institutions dedicated to lifelong learning. Operating under the French Ministry of Higher Education, it serves tens of thousands of learners annually through flexible learning pathways, blended learning formats, professional education programs and the Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE) framework. CNAM represents a mature and highly institutionalized lifelong learning ecosystem.

CEU San Pablo University Foundation (Spain)

CEU contributes expertise in lifelong learning across educational sectors and generations. As part of a larger educational group spanning vocational education, higher education and education for older adults, CEU offers valuable experience regarding permeability, inclusion and lifelong learning as a continuum across the lifespan.

Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts – HSLU (Switzerland)

Continuing education forms one of HSLU's four statutory missions. The university operates one of the most developed continuing education systems in Europe through its structured portfolio of Certificates of Advanced Studies (CAS), Diplomas of Advanced Studies (DAS) and Master of Advanced Studies (MAS). HSLU contributes extensive experience regarding stackable qualifications, professional learning pathways and applied lifelong learning.

Utrecht University of Applied Sciences – HU (Netherlands)

HU contributes expertise in governance, stakeholder engagement and sustainable institutional development. The university is strongly embedded in regional innovation ecosystems and promotes collaborative learning approaches linking higher education, public engagement and professional practice.

Turku University of Applied Sciences – TUAS (Finland)

TUAS is recognized for innovation pedagogy, challenge-based learning and close cooperation with small and medium-sized enterprises. Its experience demonstrates how lifelong learning can be integrated into regional innovation systems and skills ecosystems supporting economic and societal development.

A.3 – Institutional Profiles

1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia – UAB (Romania)

UAB combines comprehensive academic provision with strong expertise in distance learning, teacher education and continuing education. The institution contributes perspectives from a rapidly evolving higher education environment and plays an important role in widening access to learning opportunities.

University of Zenica – UNZE (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

UNZE represents an important perspective from the Western Balkans and demonstrates the role of lifelong learning in regional development, employability and social cohesion. The university contributes practical experience in strengthening educational opportunities within fragmented governance environments.

Ulm University (Germany)

Ulm University combines research excellence with innovative continuing education provision through its School of Advanced Professional Studies. The university contributes expertise in modularization, micro-credentials, blended learning, digital education and lifelong learning pathways extending from short learning experiences to master-level programs.

University for Continuing Education Krems – UWK (Austria)

The University for Continuing Education Krems is Austria's only public university exclusively dedicated to continuing education. Fully integrated into the Bologna architecture, UWK combines research, policy development and lifelong learning practice. As coordinator of EUACE, UWK provides leadership on governance, quality assurance, monitoring and European policy dialogue concerning University Lifelong Learning.

A.4 – Associated and Supporting Partners

The EUACE consortium is embedded within a broader ecosystem of associated and supporting partners from higher education, industry, public administration and civil society.

Particularly important are partnerships with European University Alliances, regional authorities, employers and digital innovation actors. These collaborations strengthen the relevance, quality and scalability of lifelong learning provision and ensure that educational offers remain aligned with regional development priorities, labor-market needs and societal challenges.

Associated partners contribute expertise in areas including digital credentials, skills intelligence, workforce development, quality assurance and regional innovation. Together, they enable EUACE to function not only as a university alliance but also as a transnational lifelong learning ecosystem connecting higher education with society.

Annex B

Comparative country data

Lifelong learning (LLL) and academic continuing education (ACE) are increasingly recognized as strategic components of higher education systems, contributing to economic competitiveness, social inclusion, democratic participation and the green and digital transitions. However, evidence from Eurostat, Cedefop and the Bologna Process Implementation Report demonstrates substantial variation across EHEA countries regarding participation levels, legal frameworks, recognition arrangements and institutional capacities.^[1] While countries such as Austria, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland have developed relatively mature approaches to University Lifelong Learning, implementation remains uneven and significant gaps persist in parts of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.^[2]

B.1 – European Trends in Adult Learning Participation

Recent data from Eurostat and Cedefop indicate that participation in adult learning across Europe is improving but remains highly uneven across countries and population groups. According to Cedefop, 12.7% of adults aged 25–64 participated in formal or non-formal education and training during the four weeks preceding the survey in 2023, while participation measured over a twelve-month period reached 39.5% in 2022. Although these figures represent progress compared to previous years, they remain below the European Union targets of 47% participation by 2025 and 60% by 2030.^[3]

Significant disparities persist between countries and social groups. Participation rates are generally highest in Northern and Western European countries and considerably lower in many parts of Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. Adult participation is also strongly associated with educational attainment, employment status, age and place of residence. Older adults, low-qualified individuals, unemployed persons and residents of rural areas continue to participate in learning opportunities at substantially lower rates than highly educated, employed and urban populations.^[4] These disparities are also reflected within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024 highlights persistent differences between countries regarding flexible learning pathways, recognition of prior learning, adult learner participation and the availability of lifelong learning opportunities within higher education systems.^[5]

Within this context, universities are playing an increasingly important role as providers of lifelong learning. Across the EHEA, higher education institutions are expanding continuing education programs, micro-credentials, professional certificates, modular learning opportunities, flexible degree pathways and recognition of prior learning arrangements. These developments seek to improve access for adult learners, support upskilling and reskilling throughout life, and strengthen universities' contribution to workforce development, innovation capacity and societal resilience.^[6]

At the same time, many higher education systems continue to face structural challenges related to funding arrangements, quality assurance frameworks, recognition mechanisms, institutional incentives and governance structures. As demonstrated throughout this annex, substantial variation exists between countries regarding the extent to which lifelong learning is embedded within higher education policy and practice. This diversity illustrates both the opportunities and the challenges associated with strengthening University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) as a more visible and measurable dimension of the Bologna Process.^[7]

[1] European Commission, EACEA, and Eurydice, *Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024).

[2] Eurostat, "Participation Rate in Education and Training (Last 4 Weeks)," accessed May 2026; Cedefop, *Skills Forecast and Adult Learning Statistics*.

[3] Cedefop, *Adult Learning Statistics and Indicators* (Thessaloniki: European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2024); Eurostat, "Participation Rate in Education and Training (Last Four Weeks), Age Group 25–64," accessed May 2026.

[4] Cedefop, *Adult Learning Statistics and Indicators*; Eurostat, "Adult Participation in Learning by Educational Attainment, Employment Status and Degree of Urbanisation," accessed May 2026.

[5] European Commission, EACEA, and Eurydice, *The European Higher Education Area in 2024: Bologna Process Implementation Report* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024).

[6] European Commission, EACEA, and Eurydice, *Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024*; Cedefop, *Microcredentials for Labour Market Education and Training* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023).

[7] Eurostat, "Participation in Education and Training Statistics"; European Commission, EACEA, and Eurydice, *Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024*.

B.2 – Comparative Country Data^[1]

Austria

Austria represents one of the most advanced regulatory environments for University Lifelong Learning within the EHEA. Since the 2021 amendment of the Universities Act, lifelong learning programmes at EQF/NQF levels 6 and 7 have been fully integrated into the higher education framework. Public universities, universities of applied sciences and private universities may offer continuing education programmes under comparable quality requirements. Austria also demonstrates comparatively strong participation in adult learning and a well-developed higher education sector dedicated to lifelong learning.

France

France has one of Europe's most comprehensive lifelong learning systems, combining strong public regulation with extensive employer involvement. Key instruments include the Compte Personnel de Formation (CPF), the Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE) system and the national quality assurance framework Qualiopi. Institutions such as Le Cnam demonstrate the potential scale of University Lifelong Learning provision within a publicly supported framework.

Finland

Finland has positioned lifelong learning at the centre of its 'Continuous Learning' strategy. The establishment of the Service Centre for Continuous Learning and Employment (SECLE/JOTPA) in 2021 created a dedicated national mechanism linking labour-market needs, higher education provision and adult learning opportunities. Finland consistently records among the highest adult participation rates in Europe.

Netherlands

The Netherlands combines strong university-industry cooperation with a long-standing policy emphasis on lifelong development and professional education. Dutch higher education institutions increasingly integrate micro-credentials, flexible pathways and employer-oriented learning opportunities. Despite comparatively strong participation levels, challenges remain regarding equitable access for disadvantaged learner groups.

Spain

Recent reforms under the Organic Law of the University System (LOSU) and Royal Decree 822/2021 have strengthened the legal basis for lifelong learning, recognition of prior learning and micro-credentials within Spanish higher education. Nevertheless, implementation remains uneven across autonomous communities and institutions.

Switzerland

Switzerland demonstrates one of Europe's strongest continuing education traditions, supported by the Continuing Education and Training Act (WeBiG) and highly developed university continuing education structures. Institutions such as HSLU operate mature stackable qualification systems (CAS, DAS and MAS), illustrating advanced models of modular lifelong learning provision.

Germany

Germany has expanded continuing higher education through modular programs, micro-credentials and flexible delivery formats. While implementation is strong in some Länder and institutions, provision remains comparatively fragmented and recognition practices vary across regions and sectors.

Hungary

Hungary has adopted strategic lifelong learning objectives but participation rates remain below the EU average. Higher education involvement in continuing education remains relatively limited and recognition mechanisms are only partially developed.

Romania

Romania records one of the lowest adult participation rates in lifelong learning within the European Union. According to Eurostat data, adult participation remains substantially below the EU average, while digital skills deficits and limited employer investment in training continue to constrain workforce development. Universities increasingly engage in continuing education activities, but institutional capacity and systemic support remain limited.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina faces additional governance challenges arising from its highly decentralised higher education system. Lifelong learning policies and recognition practices vary significantly between entities and cantons, resulting in fragmented implementation and limited comparability across the country.

[1] EUACE Consortium. Needs Analysis for the Development of University Lifelong Learning Structures in the EHEA. Unpublished consortium working paper, 2026.

Country	National ULLL Strategy	Adult Participation in Learning	University Involvement	RPL/RVPL Framework	Main Challenge
Austria	Strong	Above EU average	Strong	Advanced	System coherence
France	Strong	High	Very strong	Advanced (VAE)	Governance complexity
Germany	Moderate	Moderate	Strong but uneven	Partial	Scaling flexibility
Finland	Strong	Very high	Strong	Improving	Labour-market alignment
Netherlands	Strong	High	Strong	Moderate	Inclusion gaps
Spain	Developing rapidly	Moderate	Growing	Improving	Regional variation
Switzerland	Strong	High	Strong	Advanced	Affordability
Hungary	Limited	Below average	Limited	Weak	Participation
Romania	Weak	Very low	Limited	Weak	Skills deficits
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Fragmented	Low	Uneven	Limited	Governance fragmentation

B.3 – Institutional Comparison

Institution	Total Students	ULLL Participants	Strategic Observation	Institution	Total Students
CNAM (France)	55,684	50,031	Dedicated lifelong learning institution operating at national scale	CNAM (France)	55,684
HSLU (Switzerland)	8,280	12,411	Mature stackable CAS/DAS/MAS system	HSLU (Switzerland)	8,280
UWK (Austria)	~6,500	~6,500	Entire institution dedicated to continuing education	UWK (Austria)	~6,500
Ulm University (Germany)	9,997	377	Strong research university with specialized continuing education structures	Ulm University (Germany)	9,997
UAB (Romania)	~8,500	<500	Emerging ULLL provision within developing national framework	UAB (Romania)	~8,500

Annex C

Comparative Overview of Participation Patterns

Participation in lifelong learning across Europe remains highly uneven and strongly stratified across social groups. Evidence from Eurostat, Cedefop and the Bologna Process Implementation Report demonstrates that participation is consistently higher among already highly educated adults, employees in large organizations and individuals with stronger digital skills, while lower-qualified adults, rural populations, migrants, older workers and unemployed persons remain underrepresented.^[1]

These participation patterns highlight the importance of strengthening inclusive University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) structures capable of supporting widening participation, social cohesion and labour-market resilience within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Although participation levels differ considerably between countries, many of the underlying barriers are remarkably similar across Europe. This annex therefore adopts a target-group perspective and illustrates how different EHEA systems represented within the EUACE consortium are addressing these challenges.

C.1 – Comparative Overview of Participation Patterns

Target Group	Countries where challenge is particularly visible	Main barriers	Potential ULLL responses
Low-qualified adults	Romania, Hungary, Germany	Limited access, financial barriers, weak recognition systems	RPL, micro-credentials, short-cycle HE, stackable learning
Older learners	Austria, Netherlands, Hungary	Time constraints, digital confidence, inflexible provision	Part-time studies, hybrid learning, workplace learning
Migrants and refugees	Austria, Germany, Netherlands	Qualification recognition, language barriers, administrative complexity	Bridging programs, RPL, language-integrated learning
Workers in green and digital transition sectors	Spain, Romania, Finland	Rapid skills change, technological transformation	ACE, micro-credentials, challenge-based learning
SME employees	Germany, Spain, Finland	Limited training capacity, resource constraints	Regional skills ecosystems, modular provision
Rural populations	Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina	Distance, weak infrastructure, limited access	Digital learning, outreach centers, hybrid provision

[1] European Commission, EACEA, and Eurydice. *The European Higher Education Area in 2024: Bologna Process Implementation Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024.

C.2 – Low-Qualified Adults

Adults with lower qualification levels remain among the least represented groups in lifelong learning participation across Europe. Eurostat and Cedefop data consistently demonstrate a strong positive relationship between prior educational attainment and participation in adult learning.^[1] As a result, those adults most in need of upskilling and reskilling frequently have the weakest access to learning opportunities.

Several countries represented in the EUACE consortium illustrate this challenge. In Germany, participation remains concentrated among highly educated employees and workers in larger enterprises, while lower-skilled workers participate considerably less frequently. Hungary continues to experience below-average participation among low-qualified adults, partly due to limited flexibility and weakly institutionalized recognition of prior learning (RPL). Romania faces particularly significant challenges, combining low participation rates with comparatively low digital skill levels among adults.^[2]

Structural barriers commonly include:

- limited flexible learning pathways
- financial constraints
- insufficient recognition of experiential learning
- lack of tailored guidance and support structures
- low confidence in returning to education.

Universities can address these barriers through modular and stackable learning opportunities, micro-credentials, short-cycle higher education qualifications, flexible admissions procedures and stronger RPL mechanisms. Strengthening ULLL within the Bologna Process could improve permeability between educational sectors and support wider participation among underrepresented learners.

C.3 – Older Learners

Demographic ageing across Europe increases the importance of lifelong learning for older adults and late-career professionals. Nevertheless, participation rates generally decline with age across most EHEA systems.^[3]

Austria, despite maintaining participation levels above the EU average, still reports participation gaps among older workers. Similar patterns are visible in the Netherlands and Hungary. In many systems, higher education structures remain primarily designed for younger full-time learners and do not adequately accommodate adults balancing employment, family responsibilities and learning.

Older learners frequently face:

- time constraints linked to employment and caregiving
- limited digital confidence
- insufficient financial incentives
- inflexible program structures.

At the same time, ageing societies increasingly require continuous competence development in areas such as healthcare, sustainability, digital transformation and civic participation. Universities therefore contribute not only to employability but also to active citizenship, social inclusion and personal fulfilment throughout later life.

Flexible study modes, workplace learning, hybrid delivery and recognition of professional experience represent particularly important instruments for improving participation among older learners.

[1] Eurostat. *Adult Participation in Learning Statistics*. Luxembourg: European Commission, latest available data.

[2] Cedefop. *Adult Learning and Continuing Vocational Training in Europe: Findings from Recent Data*. Thessaloniki: Cedefop, 2024.

[3] Cedefop. *Skills Forecast 2035: Trends and Challenges for Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

C.4 – Migrants and Refugees

Migrants and refugees frequently encounter significant barriers when accessing higher education and lifelong learning opportunities despite often possessing valuable professional experience and qualifications acquired abroad.

Austria identifies migrants as one of the groups still underrepresented in lifelong learning participation despite relatively strong overall participation rates. Similar challenges are reported across Germany, the Netherlands and several other EHEA systems.^[1]

Common barriers include:

- non-recognition of foreign qualifications
- fragmented validation procedures
- language barriers
- administrative complexity
- insufficient support services.

Universities can contribute significantly to inclusion and labor-market integration through bridging programs, language-integrated learning, recognition of prior learning mechanisms and flexible modular pathways into higher education. Existing Bologna commitments regarding fair recognition and social inclusion already provide an important foundation for further development in this area.

C.5 – Workers in Green and Digital Transition Sectors

The green and digital transitions are transforming labor markets across Europe and increasing demand for medium- and high-level qualifications. According to Cedefop forecasts, future labor-market growth will be concentrated in occupations requiring advanced digital, technical and sustainability-related competencies.^[2]

Spain identifies workers affected by digital and green transitions among the priority target groups for lifelong learning policies. Romania faces similar challenges due to comparatively low digital skill levels and ongoing technological transformation across several economic sectors. Finland's Continuous Learning strategy provides an example of a more systemic approach linking higher education provision with labor-market needs.

Universities are uniquely positioned to support these developments through research-based education, interdisciplinary learning environments and cooperation with employers and regional stakeholders.

Academic Continuing Education (ACE) and ULLL can support these transitions through:

- micro-credentials
- stackable certificates
- workplace-integrated learning
- challenge-based learning approaches
- short-cycle higher education pathways.

Strengthening the lifelong learning dimension of the Bologna Process would support broader European objectives linked to the Union of Skills, the European Green Deal, the Digital Education Action Plan and the Sustainable Development Goals.

[1] EUACE Consortium. *Needs Analysis for the Development of University Lifelong Learning Structures in the EHEA*. Unpublished consortium working paper, 2026.

[2] Cedefop.

C.6 – Employees in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

Employees in small and medium-sized enterprises participate less frequently in lifelong learning than workers employed in larger organizations. SMEs often lack the financial and organizational capacity to provide structured continuing education opportunities.^[1]

Germany illustrates this challenge particularly clearly, as participation remains concentrated among employees of larger enterprises. Spain similarly identifies workers in SMEs and regional economies as priority groups for upskilling and reskilling initiatives. Finland demonstrates how stronger cooperation between universities, municipalities and SMEs can support regional skills development.

Universities can support SME employees through:

- regional learning hubs
- modular continuing education provision
- applied research partnerships
- short targeted programs
- workplace-based learning models.

Regional lifelong learning ecosystems connecting universities, enterprises, vocational education providers and public authorities are particularly important for ensuring that SMEs can access high-quality skills development opportunities.

C.7 – Rural Populations

Rural and peripheral regions frequently experience lower participation rates in higher education and lifelong learning due to geographical distance, weaker institutional infrastructure, lower digital connectivity and reduced access to specialized educational provision.

Romania illustrates these territorial inequalities particularly strongly, with rural populations among the groups most affected by low participation rates and limited digital skills development opportunities. Bosnia and Herzegovina faces similar challenges due to fragmented governance arrangements and uneven implementation capacities across entities and cantons.

Universities therefore carry an important regional responsibility in providing accessible lifelong learning opportunities beyond metropolitan centers. Digital learning infrastructures, hybrid teaching models, regional outreach centers and flexible study arrangements can substantially improve participation among rural learners.

Strengthening ULLL within the Bologna Process would contribute to more balanced territorial development across the EHEA and reinforce the regional and social dimensions of higher education policy.

C.8 – Key Findings

The comparative analysis demonstrates that participation patterns in lifelong learning are shaped less by individual motivation than by structural conditions, including funding arrangements, institutional flexibility, recognition frameworks, digital infrastructure and learner support mechanisms. Across all countries represented within the EUACE consortium, the same groups repeatedly emerge as underrepresented: low-qualified adults, older learners, migrants and refugees, SME employees and rural populations.

These findings reinforce the argument advanced throughout this paper that lifelong learning should be addressed not only as a labor-market policy objective, but also as a structural and social dimension of the European Higher Education Area. Strengthening University Lifelong Learning as a transversal Bologna commitment could contribute significantly to widening participation, improving social inclusion and supporting more flexible and resilient learning pathways throughout life.

^[1] European Commission. Education and Training Monitor 2024 (country chapters for Austria, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Spain, and the Netherlands).

Annex D

Societal, Institutional and Learner-Level Benefits of University Lifelong Learning

D.1 – Introduction

University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) and Academic Continuing Education (ACE) generate benefits that extend far beyond labor-market outcomes. Contemporary European higher education policy increasingly recognizes lifelong learning as a strategic function of universities that contributes simultaneously to individual development, institutional transformation, economic competitiveness, social cohesion and democratic resilience.

The Bologna Process, the European Education Area, the European Pillar of Social Rights, UNESCO's lifelong learning framework and the European Union's Union of Skills agenda all emphasize that learning should no longer be understood as a one-time activity concentrated in early adulthood, but rather as a continuous process throughout the lifespan.^[1]

The benefits of ULLL can therefore be analyzed on three interconnected levels:

- learner-level benefits,
- institutional benefits,
- and societal and economic benefits.

Together, these demonstrate why lifelong learning should be regarded as a transversal strategic commitment within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

D.2 – Benefits for Learners

Widening Access and Social Equity

ULLL expands access to higher education by creating alternative entry and progression pathways for learners who do not follow traditional educational trajectories.

Mechanisms such as:

- recognition of prior learning (RPL),
- micro-credentials,
- short-cycle higher education,
- part-time studies,
- blended learning,
- distance learning,
- workplace learning,
- stackable learning pathways,
- allow individuals to enter, re-enter and progress through higher education throughout their lives.

These approaches support the social dimension of the Bologna Process by reducing barriers linked to socioeconomic background, age, family responsibilities, employment status and geographical location.^[2]

[1] UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality* (Hamburg: ULL, 2022); European Commission, *Union of Skills* (Brussels: European Commission, 2025).

[2] European Students' Union, *Bologna With Student Eyes 2024* (Brussels: ESU, 2024); OeAD, *National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education* (Vienna, 2021).

Personal Development and Lifelong Growth

Lifelong learning supports not only employability but also personal fulfilment, intellectual development and active citizenship.

Many adult learners participate in higher education to:

- pursue personal interests,
- contribute to their communities,
- engage in civic life,
- remain intellectually active,
- adapt to changing social environments.

This broader humanistic perspective is reflected in UNESCO's conception of lifelong learning as a foundation for individual flourishing and democratic participation.^[1]

Employability, Upskilling and Reskilling

Rapid technological, economic and societal change requires individuals to continuously update their knowledge and competences.

ULLL enables learners to:

- maintain employability,
- develop new professional competences,
- respond to digital and green transitions,
- change careers,
- adapt to evolving labor-market demands.

Universities contribute by providing research-informed, quality-assured learning opportunities that combine academic rigor with professional relevance.^[2]

Increased Learning Mobility

Flexible and modular lifelong learning pathways strengthen learner mobility within and across countries.

Recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials, ECTS-based modular provision and transparent qualifications frameworks improve the portability of learning achievements and support lifelong educational progression throughout Europe.^[3]

D.3 – Benefits for Higher Education Institutions

Strengthening the Third Mission of Universities

ULLL reinforces the societal engagement mission of higher education institutions.

Through continuing education activities, universities extend their impact beyond traditional teaching and research by:

- engaging with local communities,
- supporting regional development,
- collaborating with employers,
- contributing to social innovation,
- responding to societal challenges.

ULLL therefore serves as an important mechanism for translating research-based knowledge into societal benefit.^[4]

[1] UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality*.

[2] European Commission, *European Skills Agenda (Brussels, 2020)*; Fedeli et al, *The Future of Continuing Higher Education in Europe (2024)*.

[3] European Commission, *European Approach to Micro-Credentials (2022)*.

[4] European Commission, EACEA and Eurydice, *Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024*.

Institutional Innovation and Transformation

Across Europe, continuing education units frequently act as innovation laboratories within universities.

They often pioneer:

- micro-credentials,
- flexible curriculum models,
- digital and blended learning,
- workplace learning,
- challenge-based learning,
- cross-disciplinary educational formats.

Many innovations first developed within continuing education subsequently influence mainstream degree programs and institutional strategies.^[1]

Organizational Capacity Building

Developing ULLL requires institutions to strengthen:

- learner-centered approaches,
- flexible administrative systems,
- digital infrastructure,
- staff competences,
- inclusive support services.

As a result, universities become better equipped to serve increasingly diverse learner populations and to respond to rapidly changing societal demands.^[2]

Diversification and Institutional Resilience

Well-developed lifelong learning provision can also strengthen institutional resilience by:

- diversifying educational portfolios,
- expanding engagement with external stakeholders,
- increasing responsiveness to regional needs,
- generating complementary revenue streams.

At the same time, successful ULLL requires sustainable public support and should not become solely dependent on market-based funding mechanisms.^[3]

D.4 – Benefits for Labor Markets and Regional Development

Supporting Workforce Development

Labor markets increasingly require continuous competence development rather than one-time qualification acquisition.

ULLL supports:

- workforce adaptability,
- productivity growth,
- technological transformation,
- innovation capacity,
- labor-market mobility.

Particularly in sectors affected by digitalization, automation and sustainability transitions, universities play a crucial role in providing advanced upskilling and reskilling opportunities.^[4]

[1] Schultze-de Vos, "University Lifelong Learning as Institutional Innovation," 2024.

[2] European Commission, EACEA and Eurydice, *Towards Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education in Europe* (2022).

[3] EURASHE, *University Lifelong Learning and Sustainable Funding Models* (2022).

[4] Cedefop, *Skills Forecast 2035* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024).

Strengthening Regional Skills Ecosystems

Universities increasingly function as anchor institutions within regional skills ecosystems.

Through cooperation with:

- employers,
- vocational education providers,
- public authorities,
- innovation agencies,
- civil society organizations,

They contribute to the development of place-based learning ecosystems capable of addressing regional skills needs and supporting economic transformation.^[1]

Supporting Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

SMEs often lack the internal resources required for structured workforce development.

ULLL can support SMEs through:

- short targeted programs,
- modular learning offers,
- workplace learning arrangements,
- applied research cooperation,
- innovation partnerships.

This contributes to regional competitiveness while strengthening collaboration between higher education and industry.^[2]

D.5 – Benefits for Society and Democracy

Strengthening Social Cohesion

Broader participation in higher education contributes to more inclusive societies by reducing educational inequalities and expanding opportunities for underrepresented groups.

ULLL supports:

- social mobility,
- inclusion,
- participation,
- community engagement,
- intergenerational learning.

These objectives are closely aligned with the social dimension of the Bologna Process and the European Pillar of Social Rights.^[3]

Democratic Resilience and Active Citizenship

Democratic Resilience and Active Citizenship

Beyond labor-market outcomes, universities contribute to democratic societies by providing research-based learning opportunities that promote:

- critical thinking,
- media literacy,
- civic participation,
- intercultural dialogue,
- democratic engagement.

In an era characterized by disinformation, political polarization and declining trust in institutions, lifelong learning can strengthen democratic resilience and informed citizenship. This aligns with both UNESCO's lifelong learning framework and the Council of Europe's democratic mission of higher education.^[4]

[1] European Commission, Pact for Skills Annual Survey (2024).

[2] Cedefop, Learning in SMEs and Workplace Learning (2023).

[3] European Pillar of Social Rights, Principle 1 (2017).

[4] Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6 on the Public Responsibility for Higher Education and Research; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Making Lifelong Learning a Reality.

Addressing Major Societal Challenges

ULLL supports Europe's capacity to respond to:

- demographic ageing,
- digital transformation,
- climate change,
- social inequality,
- skills shortages,
- migration and integration challenges.

Universities therefore contribute not only to economic adaptation but also to long-term societal resilience and sustainable development.^[1]

D.6 – Key Challenges for Realizing the Benefits of ULLL

Despite its considerable potential, several barriers continue to limit the full contribution of ULLL across the EHEA.

Regulatory and Structural Barriers

Many higher education systems remain primarily designed for traditional full-time degree students.

Consequently:

- modular provision remains underdeveloped,
- non-degree learning is often marginalized,
- funding models favor initial education,
- institutional incentives for lifelong learning remain weak.^[2]

Recognition and Permeability Challenges

Recognition of prior learning remains unevenly implemented across Europe.

Persistent challenges include:

- lack of trust in validation procedures,
- inconsistent quality assurance,
- fragmented implementation,
- weak portability across systems and countries.^[3]

Funding and Sustainability Challenges

Many ULLL activities remain dependent on:

- project funding,
- tuition fees,
- temporary initiatives,
- fragmented support mechanisms.

Sustainable implementation requires stronger integration into higher education funding and governance frameworks.^[4]

Collaboration Across Boundaries

Effective lifelong learning requires cooperation across:

- higher education,
- vocational education and training (VET),
- employers,
- public authorities,
- civil society organizations.

Such cooperation remains uneven across Europe despite increasing policy emphasis on regional skills ecosystems and cross-sector partnerships.^[5]

[1] United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015).

[2] Gaebel and Zhang, *Trends in Lifelong Learning in European Universities* (2025).

[3] European Commission, EACEA and Eurydice, *Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024*.

[4] EURASHE, *Financing Lifelong Learning in Higher Education* (2022).

[5] European Commission, *Union of Skills* (2025).

D.7 – Concluding Reflection

The evidence presented throughout this paper demonstrates that University Lifelong Learning generates substantial benefits for learners, higher education institutions, labor markets and society as a whole. ULLL contributes simultaneously to employability, innovation, inclusion, democratic resilience and sustainable development.

For this reason, lifelong learning should not be regarded as a peripheral activity of higher education systems. Rather, it represents an increasingly important strategic function of universities and a necessary component of a modern European Higher Education Area. Strengthening the implementation, monitoring and governance of ULLL within the Bologna Process would therefore contribute directly to the long-term objectives of the EHEA, the European Education Area, the Union of Skills and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Annex E

Funding models and state aid considerations for ULLL in the EHEA

E.1 – Introduction

The successful implementation of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) and Academic Continuing Education (ACE) requires not only supportive governance frameworks, quality assurance mechanisms and recognition systems, but also sustainable funding arrangements. While initial higher education is generally embedded within established public financing structures across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), lifelong learning provision often remains dependent on fragmented and unstable funding sources.

As a result, universities frequently face difficulties in developing long-term continuing education strategies, scaling innovative provision, or ensuring equitable access for adult learners.^[1] These challenges are particularly significant because lifelong learning increasingly contributes to policy objectives extending beyond higher education itself, including labor-market resilience, social inclusion, regional development, digital transformation and democratic participation.

This annex reviews key funding challenges affecting ULLL across the EHEA, examines the relevance of EU state aid frameworks, and outlines possible approaches towards more sustainable funding models.

[1] UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality* (Hamburg: UIL, 2022); EURASHE, *University Lifelong Learning and Sustainable Funding Models* (Brussels: EURASHE, 2022).

E.2 – Funding Challenges Across the EHEA

Fragmented Funding Structures

Across Europe, ULLL and ACE are financed through a highly diverse mix of funding sources.

These typically include:

- institutional core budgets
- tuition and participation fees
- employer contributions
- regional funding programs
- national skills initiatives
- Erasmus+
- the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)
- and project-based innovation funding.

While this diversity can create flexibility, it often results in fragmented funding landscapes that make long-term strategic planning difficult for higher education institutions. Unlike degree education, continuing education frequently lacks stable baseline funding and therefore depends on temporary initiatives and short funding cycles.^[1]

Fee Dependency and Participation Risks

In many EHEA systems, adult and continuing education provision relies heavily on participant fees.

This model can create important barriers for:

- low-income learners
- low-qualified adults
- unemployed persons
- migrants and refugees
- older learners
- and workers in precarious employment.

Evidence from Eurostat and Cedefop consistently demonstrates that these groups already participate less frequently in lifelong learning than highly educated and securely employed adults. Excessive fee dependency therefore risks reinforcing existing participation inequalities rather than reducing them.^[2]

Uneven Public Support

Public investment in lifelong learning differs considerably across Europe.

Countries such as France, Austria, Finland and Switzerland have established comparatively strong frameworks supporting continuing education and adult learning, while other EHEA systems continue to rely largely on project funding or private provision.

This unevenness contributes to significant differences in institutional capacity. Some universities are able to develop comprehensive lifelong learning portfolios, while others struggle to maintain even basic continuing education provision.^[3]

Limited Portability of Funding Rights

Many adult learning funding instruments remain linked to:

- employment status
- specific economic sectors
- regional jurisdictions
- or national labor-market programs.

As a result, learning rights and funding entitlements are often difficult to transfer when individuals:

- change employers
- move between sectors
- become unemployed
- or relocate across borders.

Such limitations contradict the increasing mobility and flexibility expected within lifelong learning systems.^[4]

[1] OECD, *Financing Adult Learning and Lifelong Learning Systems* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023); EURASHE, *University Lifelong Learning and Sustainable Funding Models* (2022).

[2] Cedefop, *Adult Learning Statistics and Participation Patterns in Europe* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024); Eurostat, "Participation Rate in Education and Training (Last Four Weeks)," accessed May 2026.

[3] CESAER, *Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education in European Universities* (Leuven: CESAER, 2020); EUACE, *Position Paper on University Lifelong Learning in the EHEA* (Krems: EUACE, 2026).

[4] European Commission, *Individual Learning Accounts: Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022* (Brussels: European Commission, 2022).

E.3 – Comparative Funding Approaches within the EHEA

France

France operates one of Europe's most comprehensive lifelong learning funding systems.

Instruments such as the Compte Personnel de Formation (CPF) and Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE) create structured pathways through which individuals can finance continuing education and obtain formal recognition of prior learning.

Through institutions such as CNAM, continuing education is embedded as a core component of higher education provision.

Austria

Austria combines public higher education funding with institutional autonomy for continuing education programs.

The University for Continuing Education Krems (UWK) demonstrates a model in which lifelong learning forms the institution's primary mission, while other universities increasingly integrate continuing education within broader strategic frameworks.

Finland

Finland's Continuous Learning Strategy and the Service Centre for Continuous Learning and Employment (SECLE) represent a coordinated approach linking labor-market needs, higher education provision and public investment.

The Finnish model illustrates how lifelong learning funding can be integrated with broader skills and employment policies.

Switzerland

Swiss universities operate within a comparatively market-oriented continuing education environment.

Institutions such as the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (HSLU) have developed extensive continuing education portfolios, including Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS), Diploma of Advanced Studies (DAS) and Master of Advanced Studies (MAS) programs.

E.4 – State Aid Considerations

Discussions concerning public funding for ULLL frequently raise questions regarding EU state aid rules.

However, state aid frameworks should not be understood primarily as obstacles to lifelong learning investment.

European Union law explicitly recognizes that public support may be justified when it contributes to objectives of common European interest, including:

- education and training
- innovation
- research
- skills development
- regional development
- social inclusion
- and the green and digital transitions.
-

According to the European Commission's State Aid Scoreboard, EU Member States provided approximately EUR 186.8 billion in state aid in 2023, corresponding to around 1.09% of EU GDP.^[1]

The central policy question is therefore not whether public funding for ULLL is legally possible, but whether lifelong learning is sufficiently recognized as generating public value.^[2]

If ULLL is understood as contributing simultaneously to competitiveness, innovation, inclusion, democratic resilience and sustainable development, strong arguments exist for considering it a legitimate object of public investment.

[1] European Commission, State Aid Scoreboard 2024 (reporting 2023 expenditure data).

[2] European Commission, State Aid Modernisation Framework; European Commission, Union of Skills (2025).

E.5 – Towards Sustainable Funding Models

Future development of ULLL within the Bologna Process may benefit from a diversified funding approach based on shared responsibility among learners, employers, higher education institutions and public authorities.

Possible instruments include:

Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs)

Learning accounts can support learner autonomy by allowing individuals to accumulate funding entitlements over time and use them flexibly throughout their careers.^[1]

Co-Funding Models

Shared financing arrangements involving employers, public authorities and learners can increase sustainability while maintaining accessibility.

Employer Contributions

Given the growing importance of upskilling and reskilling, employers increasingly benefit from participation in lifelong learning ecosystems and may contribute to financing relevant provision.

Regional Skills Funding

Regional development funds and smart specialization strategies can support universities as anchor institutions within regional skills ecosystems.

Strategic Use of EU Funding

Erasmus+, ESF+, Horizon Europe and other European instruments can contribute to innovation, capacity building and cross-border cooperation in lifelong learning.

Public-Private Partnerships

Partnerships between higher education institutions, industry and public authorities may strengthen capacity and relevance, provided that academic standards, institutional autonomy and public-interest objectives remain safeguarded.^[2]

E.6 – Funding and the Future Bologna Agenda

If lifelong learning is to become a stronger and more visible dimension of the Bologna Process, implementation discussions cannot be separated from funding considerations.

The objective should not be the creation of a single European funding model. Rather, the Bologna Process can provide a framework for:

- comparative analysis
- peer learning
- exchange of good practices
- identification of enabling conditions
- and development of shared principles for sustainable ULLL financing.

A future BFUG working structure on ULLL could therefore include funding and financing arrangements among its areas of analysis, helping EHEA members identify approaches that strengthen participation, inclusion, quality and institutional sustainability while respecting the diversity of national higher education systems.

[1] Council of the European Union, *Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts* (2022); Cedefop, *Individual Learning Accounts: Design and Implementation Challenges* (2023).

[2] OECD, *Financing Adult Learning and Lifelong Learning Systems* (2023); UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality* (2022).

Annex F

Draft terms of reference for a BFUG working structure on ULLL

Disclaimer: The following Terms of Reference are presented solely as an illustrative example of how a BFUG working structure on ULLL could be designed. They do not constitute a formal proposal to establish such a structure. Their purpose is to support discussion on possible governance, implementation and monitoring arrangements should the BFUG decide to further explore the role of ULLL as a dedicated fourth key commitment within the Bologna Process.

F1 – Purpose

The purpose of the Working Structure (if established by the BFUG) is to support exploration of how the existing transversal strategic commitment to University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) could be further operationalized within the Bologna Process, including the possible development of a dedicated fourth key commitment supported by an implementation architecture comparable to that of the existing key commitments, by:

- facilitating peer learning and exchange of good practices
- supporting implementation of existing Bologna commitments related to lifelong learning
- improving transparency regarding national and institutional approaches to ULLL and ACE
- exploring possible monitoring and reporting approaches
- strengthening cooperation between ministries, higher education institutions and stakeholders
- supporting permeability between higher education, vocational education and training (VET), workplace learning and continuing education.

The Working Structure shall not create new obligations for EHEA members but support voluntary cooperation, policy learning and exploratory discussion regarding future governance and implementation approaches.

F2 – Objectives

The Working Structure should contribute to:

Objective 1

Strengthening the visibility of the existing lifelong learning commitment within Bologna implementation processes.

Objective 2

Supporting exchange of policies and practices regarding:

- adult learner participation,
- flexible study pathways
- recognition of prior learning (RPL)
- micro-credentials
- modular and stackable learning
- quality assurance of lifelong learning provision
- university–industry cooperation
- regional skills ecosystems.

Objective 3

Exploring possible indicators and monitoring approaches that could support a future implementation architecture for ULLL comparable to those supporting the existing Bologna key commitments.

Objective 4

Contributing to greater coherence between the EHEA and related European frameworks, including:

- the European Education Area (EEA)
- the European Research Area (ERA)
- the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
- the Union of Skills initiative,
- the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Objective 5

Supporting BFUG reflection on whether and how ULLL, already established as a transversal strategic commitment of the EHEA, could evolve into a dedicated fourth key commitment supported by appropriate governance, monitoring and implementation mechanisms.

F3 – Scope of Work

The Working Structure may organize activities related to:

A. Mapping and Comparative Analysis

- national lifelong learning policies
- governance arrangements
- funding approaches
- recognition systems
- participation patterns
- institutional strategies.

B. Peer Learning Activities

- thematic workshops
- peer-learning visits
- stakeholder consultations
- exchange of case studies and good practices.

C. Monitoring and Indicators

The Working Structure may explore possible indicators relating to:

Participation and Access

- *adult learner participation rates*
- *mature student participation*
- *participation of underrepresented groups*
- *participation in flexible study modes.*

Recognition and Permeability

- *existence of RPL frameworks*
- *use of recognition procedures*
- *transitions between VET and higher education*
- *stackability of learning pathways.*

Governance and Strategy

- *national lifelong learning strategies*
- *institutional ULLL strategies*
- *dedicated governance structures*
- *possible governance and implementation arrangements associated with a future fourth key commitment on ULLL.*

Quality Assurance

- integration of lifelong learning into QA frameworks
- recognition of micro-credentials
- transparency of learning outcomes.

Skills and Employability

- links with labor-market transitions
- university-industry cooperation
- regional skills ecosystem development.

F4 – Composition

The Working Structure should include representatives from:

- EHEA ministries;
- higher education institutions;
- student organizations;
- quality assurance agencies;
- social partners;
- labor-market stakeholders;
- European stakeholder organizations.

Participation may include representatives from:

- European University Association (EUA)
- EURASHE
- European Students' Union
- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
- European University Continuing Education Network
- EUACE
- relevant representatives of the European Commission.

F5 – Deliverables

2028

- Mapping Report on ULLL and ACE across the EHEA
- Inventory of national policy approaches
- Collection of institutional good practices
- Discussion paper on possible governance options for strengthening implementation of the existing ULLL commitment within the Bologna Process.

2029

- Draft indicator framework for discussion within the BFUG
- Comparative report on participation, recognition and flexibility
- Policy recommendations on implementation approaches
- Exploratory options paper regarding possible implementation architectures for a dedicated ULLL key commitment

2030

- Final report to the Ministerial Conference
- Recommendations regarding future monitoring arrangements
- Recommendations regarding future governance structures for ULLL within the EHEA
- Advice, if appropriate, on whether the conditions exist for elevating ULLL from a transversal strategic commitment to a dedicated fourth key commitment of the Bologna Process.

F.6 – Working Methods

The Working Structure may:

- *meet regularly online and in person*
- *organize thematic seminars*
- *cooperate with existing BFUG working structures*
- *collaborate with Eurostat, Cedefop and relevant European initiatives*
- *commission comparative studies where appropriate*
- *involve external experts and stakeholder organizations.*

The principle of proportionality should apply, avoiding unnecessary administrative burden and building wherever possible on existing Bologna reporting mechanisms.

F.7 – Expected Outcomes

By 2030, the Working Structure should contribute to:

- greater visibility of lifelong learning within the Bologna Process
- improved comparability of national approaches
- stronger policy learning among EHEA members
- enhanced permeability between educational sectors
- better evidence for future Bologna decision-making
- a more coherent framework for University Lifelong Learning and Academic Continuing Education across the EHEA
- greater clarity regarding possible governance, monitoring and implementation arrangements capable of supporting the existing ULLL commitment within the Bologna architecture
- an informed basis for future BFUG and ministerial discussions on the possible establishment of ULLL as a dedicated fourth key commitment.

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