

Expanding Educational Frontiers: *Lifelong Learning in Europe and the UK*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this thinkpiece, Dr Maísa Edwards (LEI) and Lise Moawad (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) explore European and British perspectives on lifelong learning. They emphasise key points adopted by European and British governments and institutions and highlight the need for lifelong learning pathways to be introduced consistently across Europe and the UK so as to encourage continuous learning across various fields such as health, engineering, and languages. It concludes with reflections and recommendations on how to maintain and incentivise lifelong learning effectively.

Recommendations

1. Establish dedicated funds within UK and EU member states' national education budgets exclusively targeting the development of lifelong learning programmes funded via a minimum % of annual government spending. This should promote regional autonomy and empowerment over education and skills policy.
2. Enhance collaboration frameworks between the UK and European nations in the field of education to facilitate knowledge exchange, cultural understanding, and skills development across borders. This should include cross-border sector or subject specific networks and partnerships and an Erasmus+ style year abroad for learners across the further and higher education spectrum.
3. Prioritise digital literacy education and training programmes as integral elements of UK and EU education strategies to ensure that citizens are equipped with the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape by fostering innovation and addressing challenges related to digital transformation effectively.
4. Encourage EU-based partnerships, modelled on British Regional Skills Improvement Partnerships, between educational institutions, government bodies, and private sector entities to co-create learning opportunities tailored to the evolving needs of industries and society, promoting innovation and competitiveness.
5. Invest further in the development of flexible learning pathways, including via microcredentials, short courses, remote or hybrid learning platforms, specifically adapted for apprenticeships and vocational training to enable individuals to acquire new skills and adapt to changing job markets.
6. Expand measures to mandate national or supranational standards for education providers to eliminate barriers to education and ensure equitable access for disadvantaged and underrepresented communities, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, minorities, and individuals with disabilities.
7. Encourage employers to invest in the continuous professional development (CPD) of their workforce by offering training opportunities, upskilling programmes, and career advancement support, thereby enhancing productivity and retaining talent. They

should set a minimum training level for every worker to take at least 1 week of upskilling per year, and 30 days per year on average, as part of all future job contracts.

8. Support the technical implementation of standardised tools, modelled on the Europass, for recognising prior learning experiences, both formal, and informal, such as work-based learning and volunteering. This would internationally validate skills and competencies acquired outside traditional educational settings.
9. Create a Skills Entitlement Framework across the UK and Europe, dedicated to advancing lifelong learning, which guarantees the acquisition of a set of core competencies and skills (e.g. oracy, literacy, numeracy, interpersonal and professional development). This will also feed into further development of core specialisations for priority sectors such as health and social care and education.
10. Implement monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness and impact of lifelong learning policies and initiatives. These should be under the core remit of an established Skills England or Institute for British Productivity in the UK and, in the EU, an explicit task for the Economic and Social Council.

1 INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning is a policy strategy that has gained increasing importance in political discourses and should be addressed globally. It is a subject which is emerging as a cornerstone of educational policy and practice in Europe and the United Kingdom, reflecting a recognition of the imperative for individuals to continually adapt and acquire new skills in response to evolving societal, technological, and economic changes. This shift towards lifelong learning is driven by the understanding that traditional models of education are insufficient to meet the demands of the rapidly changing 21st-century world. Consequently, countries across Europe, including key leaders like France, Norway, and Germany, have increasingly prioritised the development and implementation of lifelong learning strategies to equip their citizens with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities necessary to thrive in an era of constant change.

Lifelong learning strategies are essential for fostering economic competitiveness, social cohesion, and individual well-being in Europe and the UK. In today's knowledge-based economy, where technological advancements and globalisation are reshaping industries and job markets, people must continuously update their skills and knowledge to remain employable and contribute meaningfully to society. Lifelong learning strategies therefore provide the framework and support necessary for people to engage in ongoing education and skills development throughout their lives, ensuring their continued relevance in the workforce and broader society. They are also integral to promoting social inclusion and reducing inequalities. By providing equitable access to educational opportunities across the lifespan, lifelong learning strategies can empower individuals from diverse backgrounds to fulfil their potential and participate more fully in society. This is particularly relevant when efforts to promote lifelong learning have been coupled with initiatives to address disparities in educational attainment and enhance opportunities for marginalised populations.

This thinkpiece will therefore explore the European and British perspectives on lifelong learning and current education policies on this topic. In the following pages, Dr Maísa Edwards (LEI) and Lise Moawad (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) examine the significance of lifelong learning in both an education and professional setting in the UK and Europe. Their analysis has the principal objective of highlighting the need for greater and mutual lesson learning from both sides of the Channel, especially following the European Parliament elections in June 2024, the UK General Election and French Legislative elections in July 2024. It concludes with key reflections and recommendations on how lifelong learning pathways should be introduced to maintain and consistently incentivise continuous learning i.e., in areas such as health, engineering, or languages.

2 EUROPEAN APPROACHES TO LIFELONG LEARNING

This section provides an overview of lifelong learning as a policy strategy that has gained increasing importance in European discourses over the last decade. After a brief review of the status of lifelong learning in the European Union, three national cases will be examined in greater detail: France, Germany, and Norway.

[Current Legislation on Legislation on Lifelong Learning](#)

The European Union (EU) promotes lifelong learning by coordinating collaboration between Member States, even though the organisation and substance of education remain the exclusive domain of those states. Since 2009, the EU has coordinated cooperation between Member States to support the concept. This was first done through a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020) supported by Erasmus+. The idea of establishing a European Education Area by 2025 was then launched, where recognition of study periods and diplomas would be automatic within the Union. In 2023, the Council of Europe adopted an Education Strategy (2024 - 2030) that recognises education and lifelong learning as essential for democratic societies.

[Key Steps and Policies](#)

The meeting of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000 is considered a launch point for a comprehensive strategy for implementing lifelong learning at individual and institutional levels. To strengthen employment, economic reform, and social cohesion as part of a knowledge-based economy, the Union set itself a new strategic goal for the next decade: to 'become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'. The Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000) takes up this mandate to deliver six messages for opening a debate on how to put lifelong learning into practice, namely: new basic skills for all; more investment in human resources; innovation in teaching and learning; valuing learning; rethinking guidance and counselling; and bringing learning closer to home.

Based on this meeting, the Education and Training 2010 (ET2010) work programme (2001-2002) strives for three goals: improving the quality and effectiveness of education and the measurement of progress through agreed instruments and training systems in the EU, facilitating the access of all to education and training systems, and opening-up education and training systems to the wider world. Following up on this, the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020), was adopted by the Council in May 2009. It set out four strategic objectives: making

lifelong learning and mobility a reality; improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equality, social cohesion, and active citizenship; and enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

Figure 1: Five Key European Steps in the Implementation of Lifelong Learning Policies

Key European Steps in the Implementation of Lifelong Learning Policies	
2000-2002	Council Conclusions (2000) and subsequent Commission Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000) confirming that ‘the move towards lifelong learning must accompany a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society’. In the context of the Education and Training 2010 work programme (ET2010) urging additional action to ‘improve the mastery of basic skills’ and to fortify the educational presence of Europe, Commission Communication ‘Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a reality’ (2001) and subsequent Council Resolution for LLL (2002).
2005-2007	Commission Communication “Working together for growth and jobs. A new start for the Lisbon strategy” (2005) and subsequent Decisions of the European Parliament and of the Council (both 2006) establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning to contribute to the development of the European Community as ‘an advanced knowledge-based society, with sustainable economic development, more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’.
2009-2011	Council Conclusions (2009) on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (referred to as ET2020) supported by Erasmus+ intending to ‘help every citizen realise their full potential and to create sustainable economic prosperity in Europe’ and Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for LLL adult learning (2011) with new policies to be developed over the Horizon 2020 programme.
2015-2017	Commission Communication ‘A new skills Agenda for Europe’ (2016) aiming to encourage member states to provide citizens with mechanisms to validate the skills and learning acquired in informal and non-formal settings,

	followed by the Council Recommendation ‘Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults’ (2016), highlighting the necessity to ‘help adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or acquire a broader set of skills’.
2020-2022	Commission Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (2000) and subsequent Council Conclusions (2021) on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) building on the ET2010 and ET2020 programmes.

European Union

The EU institutions have acknowledged the ongoing issues with the quality of education, including the lack of basic skills among students and the difficulty graduates face in finding suitable employment. Additionally, there are concerns regarding accessibility to non-formal and informal learning opportunities, as well as socio-economic discrimination that results in unequal access to quality education across different regions and populations. Through transnational studies based on peer learning activities and peer counselling bringing together experienced experts from national administrations, European institutions have formulated concrete proposals to overcome these difficulties. These include, for instance, the recognition of micro-credentials and the improvement of digital skills, such as individual learner accounts and secure online professional portfolios (for instance Europass), as shown in the 2022 Council recommendations. Finally, the last European Education Area strategic framework aims to achieve, by 2025, at least 47% of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning during the last 12 months.

France

France has more than 50 years of experience with continuing education and training, since 1971 when the law made continuing vocational training a ‘national obligation’, both for employers and employees. Two ministerial departments are particularly involved in lifelong learning: the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Integration and the Ministry of National Education, in partnership with the French governmental work agency, the employers, and public and private training bodies. Since partial decentralisation in 1983, the regions in France have been responsible for vocational training for young people and adults. In a country where professional hierarchy is very strongly based on degrees, a legal framework is both a necessity and a challenge.

In 2002, the French government passed a law on VAE - Validation of Acquired Experience requiring the recognition by universities of prior informal and work-based learning and other professional qualifications, through the award of a professional certificate. In 2004, another law on Individual Right to Training granted individuals the right to lifelong learning entitling all employees with at least one year's length of service in the company to benefit from 20 hours of personal training per year, with a maximum of a maximum of 120 hours of training/educational sessions over 6 years. This right is financed entirely by the employer, 1% of the budget is obligatory, and the individuals are not taxed on this benefit, as the cost of the learning is not considered part of the salary. Its portability, guaranteed since 2009, allows employees to use their training entitlements even after having left the company.

Giving everyone the right to validate learning acquired in an informal context should not only improve the economic stand of the country but is also considered to be a way to reduce social inequalities and contribute to the country's cultural development and social promotion. For instance, the seven UNESCO learning cities in France came together in June 2023 to establish the Committee of French Learning Cities, to 'promote accessible public services for all citizens and foster inclusivity in [their] cities' as they are catalysts for lifelong learning at the local level, with concrete policies and programmes that bring this concept to life.

Germany

The German education system has a long tradition of lifelong learning. For example, the folk high schools are widespread in Germany with at least two structural specificities that are worth recalling here. First, its cultural federalism: the German system is completely a-centralised, with the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (KMK) being the place where most aspects of education policies are coordinated. The Federal Government has a prohibition on intervention enshrined in the constitution; only in certain very limited cases, it may intervene to allow the injection of financial resources to support the local authorities. Second, a traditionally very early streaming of schoolchildren (at around 10 years old) according to their results, either to an apprenticeship, a vocational training, or a general education stream. Although the two first streams are less discredited in Germany than in some of its neighbouring countries, this early assignment makes it difficult to reorientate during schooling - despite all the improvements made in recent years.

Since the early 2000s, lifelong learning has been seen in Germany as a way of strengthening cohesion in society and avoiding marginalisation, whether to combat illiteracy or to encourage political education. The ProfilPASS project was developed in 2002 as part of the federal-state feasibility study 'Continuing Education Passport with Certification of Informal Learning'. This system was thought to assess personal

competencies (with the help of qualified counselling) that can have been acquired formally, non-formally, or informally in all areas and at each stage of life. The development and implementation of the German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, co-signed by the Federal Government and the Länder in 2013, intended to render all qualifications accessible via various educational pathways.

As part of the EU 2030 strategy, Germany has set itself the goal of increasing participation in continuing education to 65%. In this line, the German National Continuing Education and Training Strategy (NWS) addresses digital, demographic, and ecological change, to offer development opportunities, guarantee individual chances, and secure skilled labour. Examples of this funding strategy are the 'InnoVET' and 'Innovet Plus' flagship initiatives, which aim to develop and test innovative and high-quality qualification programmes for vocational education and training. The 17 collaborative projects launched in autumn 2020, with a total of 89 partners will run for a maximum of 2 years, for a total funding volume for the competition of 74 million euros. At the end of the funding period, some project results can be implemented in the vocational training system.

Norway

Norway is placed among the top countries in terms of adult participation in lifelong learning, with a share that is 13 percentage points above the EU average (2016). It has a long tradition of adult education through folk high schools, study associations (e.g. the Norwegian Association for Adult Learning), correspondence courses (e.g. through Flexible Education Norway, which organises 70 Norwegian providers of flexible education), or evening courses provided by universities and university colleges. In Norway, the field of adult education and training is divided among several public actors (the Ministry of Education and Research having the primary responsibility, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation), with a strong willingness for cooperation not only between the public and the private sectors but also with social partners.

The valorisation of every individual's potential to develop and upgrade their skills and competencies has been on the political agenda in Norway for many years. Following the Competence Reform (1998–2003), skill centres (centres of formal adult education) were established in Norwegian municipalities and counties to document and assess formal, non-formal, and informal skills. Since the 2000s, the emphasis has been on equal access to education for all through a humanist theory and practice of adult learning, whether through free tuition for immigrants or measures to train employees with low basic skills such as the 'SkillsPlus' programme first endorsed by the government in 2006, before being taken over by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in 2015.

Since 2001, all employees already have had the right to take up to three years leave of absence for educational purposes. In the next decades, several Norwegian Government White Papers (2016 and 2020) focus on upskilling and reskilling the workforce to prevent exclusion from working life. The first main objective is the right to update one's skills, especially as careers lengthen and professional skills become obsolete. The second main objective is to eliminate skills gaps, namely the difference between the skills required by working life and the skills actually used by workers. Admission priority to those schemes is also granted to certain groups, including people with disabilities, youth, long-term recipients of social assistance, and immigrants from countries outside the European Economic Area.

3 BRITISH APPROACHES TO LIFELONG LEARNING

This section presents an overview of lifelong learning as a policy approach that has garnered growing significance in the UK in recent years. It includes a deeper analysis of key steps and policies implemented across the UK and in its devolved nations, England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

[Current Legislation on Lifelong Learning](#)

The UK's dedication to education, and the nation's steps towards strengthening its position regarding lifelong learning can be demonstrated in a clear range of initiatives. These are designed to empower people of all ages to seek knowledge and learn new skills throughout their lifetimes. From developing new and innovative programmes within their formal education system to community-based projects, the UK's approach to lifelong learning can be seen across the four devolved nations.

One notable example is the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), representing a transformative approach to student finance aimed at facilitating access to education and training throughout individuals' working lives. Through the LLE, individuals are provided with financial support to pursue full courses or modules at various levels, including degrees, technical qualifications, and high-value technical courses. This initiative exemplifies the UK government's current commitment towards enabling lifelong learning and empowering individuals to develop new skills and qualifications at their discretion.

[Key Steps and Policies](#)

The impending introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) marks a significant progression in England's post-18 student finance structure. Scheduled to launch in September 2025, it denotes the establishment of a unified funding system designed to streamline access to college or university programmes. It also aims to encourage adaptable training, retraining, and skill enhancement opportunities over individuals' professional journeys. This endeavour is seeking to empower people to develop new competencies and obtain certifications according to their preferences. Whether learners choose full-time degree programmes, individual modules, or pursue alternative paths, such as higher technical qualifications (HTQs), the LLE is trying to cater to a wider array of learning pathways and career goals.

Envisaged to be implemented from the 2025 - 2026 academic session, the LLE loan would be accessible for various educational pursuits, encompassing full courses spanning Levels 4 to 6, and including degrees and technical qualifications. Additionally, it would extend financial assistance to high-value technical course

modules at Levels 4 to 5. Eligible learners under the LLE framework will gain access to a tuition fees loan, with newly enrolled individuals eligible for a maximum entitlement of £37,000. This is seen as equivalent to four years of study based on prevailing fee structures. Furthermore, a maintenance loan can be provided to manage living expenses, thereby ensuring greater financial stability throughout the learning journey.

Inclusivity for learners is also being incorporated in the LLE, exemplified by targeted maintenance grants tailored to specific underrepresented demographics, such as learners with disabilities or those in need of childcare assistance. Moreover, certain circumstances may warrant additional entitlement, such as for priority subjects, such as healthcare or engineering, or extended courses like medicine. To facilitate informed decision-making, learners will have access to their loan balance through their designated LLE personal account. This transparency empowers individuals to navigate available educational opportunities effectively, fostering a proactive stance towards education and skill enhancement.

England

England has implemented a range of initiatives aimed at promoting lifelong learning and education, thus reflecting a commitment to improving personal development, social mobility, and economic prosperity. These initiatives span various sectors, including formal education, vocational training, adult education, and digital learning, helping to ensure that individuals of all ages have access to opportunities for growth and advancement. At the forefront of England's lifelong learning strategy is the Department for Education, which oversees policies and programmes aimed at improving educational outcomes across the country. Through initiatives such as the Education and Skills Funding Agency and the National Careers Service, the government is working to provide funding, guidance, and support to schools, colleges, and training providers to deliver high-quality learning experiences that meet the needs of learners and employers.

In addition to formal education settings, England's lifelong learning landscape includes an array of adult education programmes, community-based initiatives, and vocational training schemes. Organisations such as the Open University and the Workers' Educational Association offer flexible learning opportunities, including part-time courses, distance learning programmes, and skills development workshops. These are among the pathways being developed to help adults enhance their skills, pursue professional and personal interests, and achieve their educational aspirations. Moreover, England is embracing digital technologies to expand access to education and training through online learning platforms, digital resources, and e-learning tools. Initiatives such as the National Tutoring Programme and the Oak National Academy provide educators and learners with access to interactive learning materials, virtual

classrooms, and personalised support. These help to enhance the flexibility and effectiveness of lifelong learning opportunities across the country.

England is therefore in the process of developing a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning which reflects a commitment to individual empowerment, social inclusion, and economic resilience. By investing in education and training initiatives that prioritise accessibility, quality, and innovation, England aims to equip its citizens with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to succeed in an increasingly competitive and interconnected world.

Scotland

One of the cornerstones of Scottish lifelong learning initiatives is the concept of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). Introduced in 2004, CfE represents a well-rounded approach to education, emphasising the development of knowledge, skills, and essential attributes needed for learning, life, and work. It promotes interdisciplinary learning, encourages active engagement, and fosters a deep curiosity among students. By providing a flexible framework that values diverse learning experiences, CfE aims to prepare individuals to thrive and adapt in our ever-changing world.

Universities and colleges are central to Scotland's lifelong learning landscape, playing an important role in expanding educational access. Through key initiatives, such as widening participation schemes and creating flexible learning pathways, Scottish institutions are working to break down barriers to education and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to fulfil their potential. For example, the Open University in Scotland offers a range of distance learning programmes tailored to the needs of adult learners, enabling them to study at their own pace while balancing other commitments. Beyond the formal education sector, Scotland also possesses a network of adult learning centres, community organisations, and social enterprises dedicated to lifelong learning. These include its Community Learning and Development programmes and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations. They provide a range of opportunities designed for both personal and professional development, from basic literacy and numeracy classes to vocational training and creative workshops. Scottish Union Learning, for instance, collaborates with trade unions to deliver innovative workplace-based learning initiatives, and helps employees to enhance their skills and progress in their careers.

The Scottish Government has likewise made significant investments in lifelong learning through its targeted funding programmes and policy initiatives. The Scottish Funding Council allocates resources to support new initiatives directed towards increasing access to education and improving outcomes for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, the Scottish Government's Skills Development Scotland agency provides career guidance, skills development, and apprenticeship

opportunities to help individuals navigate their educational and professional journeys. Scotland's commitment to lifelong learning also extends beyond its borders through international partnerships and collaborations. Its universities participate in numerous exchange programmes, research collaborations, and capacity-building initiatives around the world. This is integral to sharing expertise and resources to support global efforts in promoting education and development.

Additionally, organisations such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority provide assessment and certification services internationally, thus allowing individuals to gain recognition for their skills and qualifications on a global scale. In recent years, digital technologies have also played an increasingly significant role in Scotland's lifelong learning ecosystem. Online platforms, digital resources, and e-learning tools have expanded access to education and training, allowing individuals to engage in learning activities anytime, anywhere. Initiatives such as the Digital Participation Charter Fund support projects aimed at improving digital skills and literacy, ensuring that everyone can benefit from the opportunities offered by this current digital age.

Wales

Wales is working to distinguish itself through new and innovative initiatives that prioritise lifelong learning and education, fostering a culture of continuous personal and professional development across communities. These initiatives encompass various sectors, from formal education settings to community-based programmes, ensuring that individuals of all ages have access to opportunities for growth and advancement. Wales' lifelong learning strategy is centred on its Learning and Skills sector, which encompasses further education colleges, adult community learning providers, and work-based learning programmes. These institutions offer a range of courses and qualifications tailored to the needs of adult learners including vocational training, adult literacy and numeracy programmes as well as skills development workshops.

Wales' commitments to lifelong learning are further exemplified by the Welsh Government's Lifelong Learning Programmes. These provide funding and support for initiatives aimed at widening access to education and promoting social inclusion. These programmes target disadvantaged groups, including individuals with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and those facing economic barriers, to ensure that everyone has the chance to participate fully in learning and society. Furthermore, Wales has embraced digital technologies to expand its citizens' access to education and training through online learning platforms, digital resources, and using e-learning tools. The National Digital Learning Council and the Hwb digital learning platform also facilitate collaboration and resource-sharing among educators and learners, helping individuals to actively engage in learning activities.

Overall, Wales' current approach to lifelong learning reflects a commitment to equity, inclusion, and personal empowerment. Through collaborative partnerships and targeted interventions, Wales seeks to incentivise individuals to embrace lifelong learning as a pathway to personal fulfilment and societal advancement.

Northern Ireland

Central to Northern Ireland's approach to lifelong learning is the Department of Education's Education and Training Inspectorate, which oversees the quality and effectiveness of educational provision across the region. Through rigorous inspection processes and performance evaluations, the Inspectorate ensures that schools, colleges, and training providers deliver high-quality learning experiences that meet the needs of learners and society. In addition to formal education settings, Northern Ireland's lifelong learning landscape includes a diverse array of community-based initiatives and adult education programmes. Organisations such as the Workers' Educational Association and the Open University in Ireland offer adult learning courses, workshops, and support services to help individuals enhance their skills, pursue personal interests, and achieve their educational goals.

Northern Ireland's commitment to lifelong learning is further demonstrated through its targeted funding programmes and policy initiatives aimed at widening access to education and training. For example, the Department for the Economy's Skills Strategy and Apprenticeship Strategy prioritises investment in skills development and vocational education to support economic growth and workforce development. Moreover, Northern Ireland also employs digital technologies to expand access to education and training through online learning platforms and digital resources. Initiatives such as the Northern Ireland Digital Learning Programme and the C2k Learning Platform provide educators and learners with access to interactive learning materials, virtual classrooms, and collaborative tools, enhancing the flexibility and effectiveness of lifelong learning opportunities across the region.

Northern Ireland is developing a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning reflects a commitment to individual empowerment, social inclusion, and economic prosperity. By investing in education and training initiatives that prioritise accessibility, quality, and innovation, Northern Ireland aims to equip its citizens with the knowledge, skills, and resilience needed to thrive in an ever-changing world.

4 LIFELONG LEARNING PATHWAYS

This section details how educational and societal success are key to developing new lifelong learning pathways. These should be introduced to maintain and consistently incentivise continuous learning i.e., in areas such as health, engineering, or languages.

Key Benefits of Lifelong Learning Success

Lifelong learning practices should serve as a keystone for both societal advancement and educational excellence. Embracing the ethos of continuous education offers numerous key benefits that extend beyond individual growth to positively impact the broader fabric of society. Lifelong learning fosters adaptability, equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the ever-changing landscape of the modern world. Moreover, it enhances employability by ensuring that individuals remain competitive in the dynamic job market, thereby contributing to economic prosperity and social mobility.

Additionally, lifelong learning promotes greater inclusivity by providing equitable access to educational opportunities, nurturing social cohesion, and reducing inequalities. In the educational sphere, lifelong learning practices cultivate a culture of curiosity, critical thinking, and innovation among students, preparing them to become active contributors to society. By recognising the inherent value of lifelong learning, the UK stands poised to harness its transformative potential for the betterment of individuals and society as a whole.

Figure 2: Lifelong Learning Benefits for British and European Societies

Key benefits of lifelong learning	
Adaptability to Changing Workforce Needs	Lifelong learning in the UK and Europe enables individuals to continually update their skills and knowledge, ensuring they remain relevant and competitive in a rapidly evolving job market. This adaptability leads to educational success by facilitating smooth transitions between different career paths and industries.
Enhanced Employability	Lifelong learning equips individuals with a diverse set of skills and qualifications, making them more attractive to employers. Continuous learning enhances employability by demonstrating a commitment to personal and professional

	development, thereby increasing opportunities for career advancement and economic prosperity.
Personal and Professional Development	Lifelong learning fosters personal growth and development by providing opportunities for individuals to pursue their interests, passions, and career goals. Continuous education enables individuals to expand their horizons, fulfil their potential, and achieve success both academically and professionally.
Access to Higher Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lifelong learning initiatives, such as the upcoming Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) in the UK, will help remove barriers to accessing higher education and lifelong learning opportunities. This increased access to education enables individuals from diverse backgrounds to pursue further education and training, leading to educational success and improved social mobility. ▪ In Europe, the updated agenda for the modernisation of higher education (2017) includes lifelong learning as a key means of achieving it. Addressing skills mismatches, advancing efforts to make higher education institutions more linked and inclusive, enabling higher education institutions to contribute to innovation, and assisting effective and efficient higher education systems are top priorities for all types of education and training infrastructures.
Promotion of Lifelong Learning Culture	Lifelong learning initiatives in the UK and Europe promote a culture of learning and self-improvement, encouraging individuals to value education as a lifelong pursuit. This cultural shift towards lifelong learning fosters a society where continuous education is seen as integral to personal and societal success, leading to higher levels of educational attainment and achievement.

Educational Success

Education success plays a key role in stimulating lifelong learning within British and European societies, serving as the foundation upon which individuals cultivate a thirst for knowledge, adaptability, and personal growth throughout their lives. The importance of education success in this regard cannot be overstated, as it not only equips individuals with essential skills and knowledge but also instills a mindset conducive to continuous learning and development. Firstly, education success lays the groundwork for critical thinking and problem-solving skills, essential attributes for engaging in lifelong learning. Through formal education, individuals learn how to analyse information, evaluate evidence, and draw reasoned conclusions, skills that are invaluable in navigating the complexities of an ever-changing world. This ability to think critically enables individuals to seek out new information, challenge assumptions, and remain open to alternative perspectives, all of which are fundamental to lifelong learning.

Educational success also fosters a sense of curiosity and intellectual curiosity, driving individuals to seek out new challenges and opportunities for growth. A strong educational foundation provides individuals with the confidence to explore unfamiliar subjects, pursue new interests, and expand their horizons beyond their initial areas of expertise. This sense of intellectual curiosity fuels a lifelong passion for learning, motivating individuals to continuously seek out new knowledge and experiences throughout their lives. Education success enhances individuals' capacity for self-directed learning, empowering them to take control of their own educational journeys. By developing key skills such as time management, self-discipline, and goal setting, education equips individuals with the tools they need to pursue independent study and skill development. This autonomy is essential for lifelong learning, as it enables individuals to tailor their learning experiences to their own needs, interests, and aspirations.

Societal Success

Lifelong learning should be viewed as a fundamental element of personal growth, societal advancement, and economic well-being in both the UK and Europe. Its significance is one that extends beyond individual ambitions, impacting the resilience of industries, the pace of innovation, and the ability of societies to navigate evolving circumstances. At its core, lifelong learning embodies the understanding that education goes further than just conventional schooling, representing an ongoing journey throughout one's lifetime. In an era marked by swift technological progress, globalisation, and dynamic economic environments, the need for continuous learning is particularly pronounced.

In practical terms, lifelong learning also enables individuals to stay relevant and agile in the face of evolving job markets and technological disruptions. The acquisition of new skills and knowledge allows workers to adapt to emerging industries and occupations, mitigating the risk of unemployment and enhancing employability. Furthermore, lifelong learning fosters innovation and entrepreneurship by nurturing a workforce capable of driving progress and competitiveness across various sectors. From a societal perspective, lifelong learning promotes social inclusion and cohesion by providing individuals from diverse backgrounds with opportunities for personal growth and advancement. It serves as an incentive for social mobility, helping to break down barriers to education and inspire individuals to fulfil their potential regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances. By promoting a learning culture that is accessible to all, the UK and Europe can create more equitable societies where talent is recognised and nurtured irrespective of background.

Furthermore, lifelong learning plays a crucial role in addressing pressing societal challenges, such as climate change, healthcare, and digital inequality. Equipping citizens with the knowledge and skills needed to tackle these issues will enable communities to become more resilient and responsive. For instance, promoting education in sustainability and environmental sciences can empower individuals to adopt more sustainable lifestyles and contribute to the transition towards a greener economy. In the context of Europe, lifelong learning is not only instrumental in fostering individual and societal prosperity but also in advancing the goals of European integration and cooperation. Through initiatives such as the Erasmus+ programme and the European Qualifications Framework, the EU promotes lifelong learning as a means of fostering cross-border mobility, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding among European citizens.

Figure 3: New lifelong learning pathways to incentivise continuous learning, such as in areas like health, engineering and languages.

Incentivising Continuous Learning	
Diversify Learning Formats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Introduce flexible learning formats tailored to the needs of diverse learners in areas such as health, engineering, and languages. This could involve the development of online courses, workshops, and blended learning programmes that accommodate various schedules and learning preferences. ▪ By offering accessible and adaptable learning pathways, individuals can engage in



	<p>continuous learning while balancing professional and personal commitments.</p>
<p>Integrate Lifelong Learning into Formal Education Curricula</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Embed lifelong learning principles and practices into formal education curricula at all levels, from primary to higher education. Incorporating elements of continuous skills development, critical thinking, and self-directed learning into the curriculum better prepares students for lifelong learning beyond the classroom. ▪ By instilling a culture of curiosity and self-improvement early on, educational institutions can help to nurture individuals who are motivated to pursue continuous learning throughout their lives.
<p>Promote Industry Collaboration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fostering new and innovative partnerships between educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and professional associations to design lifelong learning pathways aligned with current industry demands in areas such as health, engineering, and languages. ▪ Collaborative efforts can also help ensure that educational programmes are relevant, up-to-date, and directly applicable to real-world contexts. Industry involvement can also facilitate internships, mentorship programmes, and practical experiences, enhancing the effectiveness of lifelong learning initiatives.
<p>Recognition of Prior Learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implement Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms that acknowledge and validate individuals' existing knowledge, skills, and experiences gained through traditional and informal learning pathways. RPL allows individuals to receive credits or exemptions for parts of a formal education program based on their prior learning achievements. ▪ In recognising and building upon learners' existing competencies, RPL promotes inclusivity, reduces redundancy in learning, and facilitates smoother transitions between

	different educational pathways and career trajectories.
Increase Digital Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Digital skills are indispensable in lifelong learning due to their integral role in today's interconnected world. As technology continues to advance rapidly, proficiency in digital skills enables people to access vast amounts of information, collaborate effectively, and adapt to using ever evolving tools and platforms. ▪ Incorporating digital skills into lifelong learning initiatives, especially in professional spheres such as healthcare and engineering is critical.

Stimulating lifelong learning is therefore indispensable for the UK and Europe's future prosperity and well-being. By dedicating resources to education and advancing a climate that encourages ongoing learning, both regions can stimulate economic advancement, strengthen their workforces and tackle the many challenges of the modern era. Especially as new technologies emerge, embracing lifelong learning is an essential ingredient for constructing thriving communities.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thinkpiece has explored the significance of promoting lifelong learning and how it is paramount for fostering individual empowerment, societal resilience, and economic prosperity in both the UK and Europe. It has had the principal objective of highlighting the need for greater mutual lesson learning from both sides of the Channel. By recognising education as a lifelong journey rather than a finite endeavour, British and European societies can unlock the full potential of their citizens and navigate the complexities of the modern world more effectively. Lifelong learning serves as a catalyst for personal development, enabling individuals to adapt to evolving job markets, acquire new skills, and pursue their passions throughout their lives. Moreover, it promotes social inclusion by providing equitable access to education and opportunities for advancement, irrespective of background, resources or circumstances.

On a broader scale, lifelong learning is indispensable for driving innovation, sustaining competitiveness, and addressing pressing societal challenges such as climate change, healthcare, and digital transformation. In nurturing a skilled and adaptable workforce, both the UK and Europe can position themselves at the forefront of technological advancement and global leadership. Furthermore, promoting lifelong learning aligns with the core values of European integration and cooperation, facilitating cross-border mobility, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding among diverse populations. Initiatives such as Erasmus+ exemplify the collaborative spirit of lifelong learning, fostering solidarity and collaboration across national boundaries.

Cultivating a culture of lifelong learning is consequently not merely advantageous but imperative for both the UK and Europe, especially following the outcomes of the elections in June and July 2024,¹ to maintain their competitiveness on the global stage. The evolving landscape of technology and globalisation demands a workforce equipped with adaptable skills and knowledge. By prioritising continuous learning, individuals can stay relevant in an ever-changing job market while contributing to the overall innovation and productivity of their respective countries. Since its departure from the EU in January 2020, the UK stands at a pivotal juncture where learning lessons from Europe and instigating collaboration with its European counterparts becomes crucial. By working closely with neighbouring nations, the UK can not only foster a spirit of cooperation but also stimulate new initiatives aimed at enhancing educational

¹ European Parliament elections were held in June 2024, and the UK General Election and French Legislative elections were held in July 2024.

opportunities for all citizens. This collaborative approach can lead to the sharing of best practices, resources, and expertise, ultimately benefiting the entire region.

Embracing lifelong learning is therefore a necessity for securing a prosperous and sustainable future for generations to come. By investing in education, fostering a culture of curiosity and self-improvement, and promoting inclusivity and accessibility in learning opportunities, the UK and Europe can pave the way for a brighter and more resilient tomorrow.

Recommendations

1. Establish dedicated funds within UK and EU member states' national education budgets exclusively targeting the development of lifelong learning programmes funded via a minimum % of annual government spending. This should promote regional autonomy and empowerment over education and skills policy.
2. Enhance collaboration frameworks between the UK and European nations in the field of education to facilitate knowledge exchange, cultural understanding, and skills development across borders. This should include cross-border sector or subject specific networks and partnerships and an Erasmus+ style year abroad for learners across the further and higher education spectrum.
3. Prioritise digital literacy education and training programmes as integral elements of UK and EU education strategies to ensure that citizens are equipped with the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape by fostering innovation and addressing challenges related to digital transformation effectively.
4. Encourage EU-based partnerships, modelled on British Regional Skills Improvement Partnerships, between educational institutions, government bodies, and private sector entities to co-create learning opportunities tailored to the evolving needs of industries and society, promoting innovation and competitiveness.
5. Invest further in the development of flexible learning pathways, including via microcredentials, short courses, remote or hybrid learning platforms, specifically adapted for apprenticeships and vocational training to enable individuals to acquire new skills and adapt to changing job markets.
6. Expand measures to mandate national or supranational standards for education providers to eliminate barriers to education and ensure equitable access for disadvantaged and underrepresented communities, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, minorities, and individuals with disabilities.
7. Encourage employers to invest in the continuous professional development (CPD) of their workforce by offering training opportunities, upskilling programmes, and career advancement support, thereby enhancing productivity and retaining talent. They

should set a minimum training level for every worker to take at least 1 week of upskilling per year, and 30 days per year on average, as part of all future job contracts.

8. Support the technical implementation of standardised tools, modelled on the Europass, for recognising prior learning experiences, both formal, and informal, such as work-based learning and volunteering. This would internationally validate skills and competencies acquired outside traditional educational settings.
9. Create a Skills Entitlement Framework across the UK and Europe, dedicated to advancing lifelong learning, which guarantees the acquisition of a set of core competencies and skills (e.g. oracy, literacy, numeracy, interpersonal and professional development). This will also feed into further development of core specialisations for priority sectors such as health and social care and education.
10. Implement monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness and impact of lifelong learning policies and initiatives. These should be under the core remit of an established Skills England or Institute for British Productivity in the UK and, in the EU, an explicit task for the Economic and Social Council.

ABOUT THE LIFELONG EDUCATION INSTITUTE

The **Lifelong Education Institute** (LEI) exists to promote learning and skills training for people at all ages and stages of their lives and careers. We believe that education should be available and accessible to everyone whenever and wherever they need it. Whether they are school leavers or university graduates, new recruits or long-serving employees, recent arrivals or long-term residents, working people or those who have entered retirement.

Our approach is based on four principles:

- Putting the lifelong learner first
- Building an integrated tertiary education system
- Bringing stakeholders together
- Looking to the four nations of the UK and beyond

Together, these principles underpin every part of our work, from research to advocacy, from convening to commentary. They are the bedrock on which we must build the 21st-century education system that the UK's learners urgently deserve.

The Lifelong Education Institute's Secretariat is hosted by the thinktank ResPublica. The Institute gets its strategic direction from its Advisory Board, which comprises prominent and forward-thinking figures in education and skills space. In addition, the Institute has asked political figures to form a Board of Patrons, who will advise on the current political environment, and help by progressing the Institute's positions in Whitehall.

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Expanding Educational Frontiers: *Lifelong Learning in Europe and the UK*

This thinkpiece explores the significance of promoting lifelong learning and how it is paramount for fostering individual empowerment, societal resilience, cultural and economic prosperity in both the UK and Europe. It has the principal objective of highlighting the need for greater and mutual lesson learning from both sides of the Channel. By recognising education as a lifelong journey rather than a finite endeavour, societies can unlock the full potential of their citizens and navigate the complexities of the modern world more effectively. Lifelong learning serves as a catalyst for personal development, enabling individuals to adapt to evolving job markets, acquire new skills, and pursue their passions throughout their lives. Moreover, it promotes social inclusion by providing equitable access to education and opportunities for advancement, irrespective of background, resources or circumstances.



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