

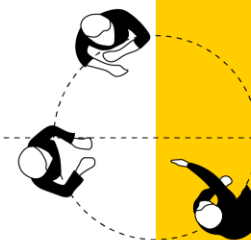
Lifelong learning ecosystems and potentials for HEIs

22 May 2025

MELLearn

Hungarian Universities' LLL Network Conference

Prof Wieger Bakker
Dean Lifelong Learning UU



1. The long road to an (European wide) UCE system
2. Needs for and barriers to UCE
3. Towards an UCE ecosystem
4. Potentials for HEIs

(UCE in the Netherlands and at Utrecht University)

1 The long road to UCE

Early examples

University Extension Movement Cambridge 1867 Oxford Extension 1878

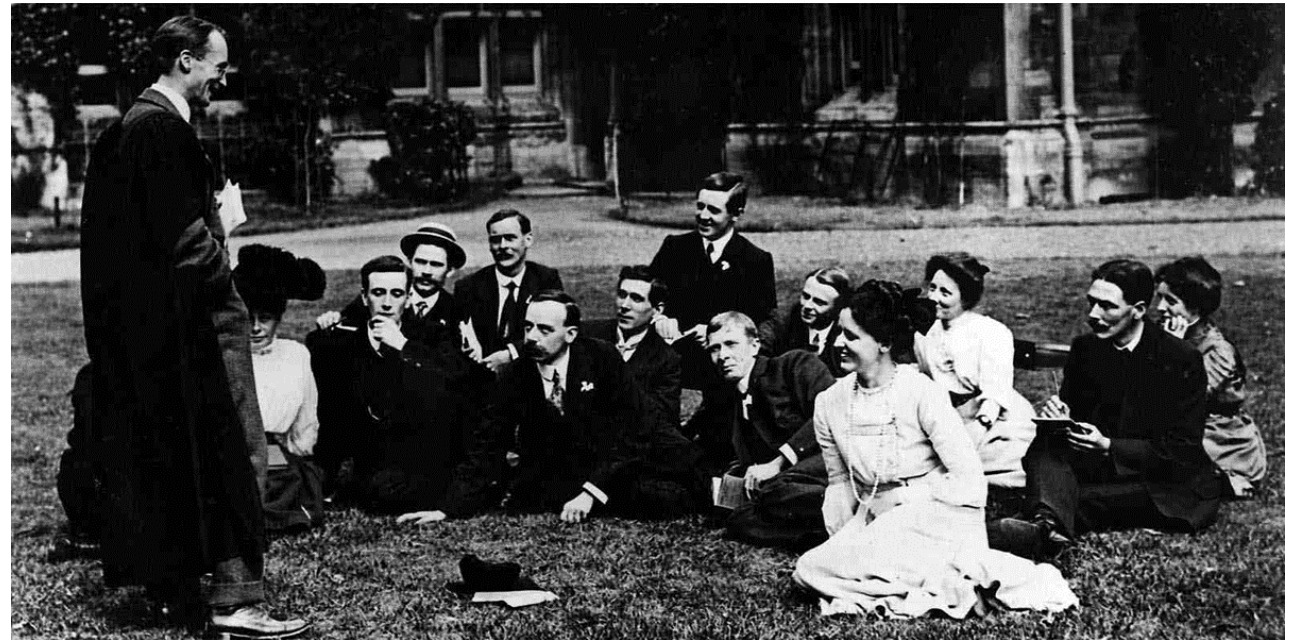
Educational reform

Social responsibility

Industrialisation

Enlightenment

Out of school Adult education



Take off

1960 - 1970

Council of Europe

OECD

UNESCO

Permanent education was seen as a “fundamentally new and comprehensive concept ... an overall educational pattern capable of meeting the rapidly increasing and ever more diversified educational needs of every individual, young and adult, in the new European society.”

Council of Europe. Permanent Education, Strasbourg, 1970.

EU Prague Communiqué 2001

“The Prague Communiqué signals that in a Europe built on a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies, and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and quality of life.”

University Continuing Education

EU Council Social Summit
Porto Declaration, May 7 2021

“We will put education and skills at the centre of our political action. The green and digital transitions will bring enormous opportunities for European citizens but also many challenges, which will require more investment in education, vocational training, lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling, so as to stimulate employment transitions towards sectors where there is a growing demand for labour (EU Council, 2021).”

European University Association Charter on Lifelong Learning 2008

“European universities will respond positively to the increasingly diverse demand from a broad spectrum of students - including post-secondary students, adult learners, professionals who seek to up-grade skills for the workplace, senior citizens taking advantage of their increasing longevity to pursue cultural interests, and others - for high quality and relevant higher education throughout their lifetime (EUA, 2008, p. 5).

LERU, March 2025, reacting on the Union of Skills

“LERU recommends adopting a more holistic, well-funded, and inclusive approach to skills development—one that values interdisciplinary learning, lifelong education, and the flexibility universities need to shape the workforce of the future.”

And yet:

“At a time when the importance of continuous education is increasingly recognized, many higher ed institutions in Europe are still grappling with the integration of lifelong learning into their core frameworks.”

Friedrich Faulhammer, rector University of CE, Krems, 2024

2. Needs for and barriers to UCE

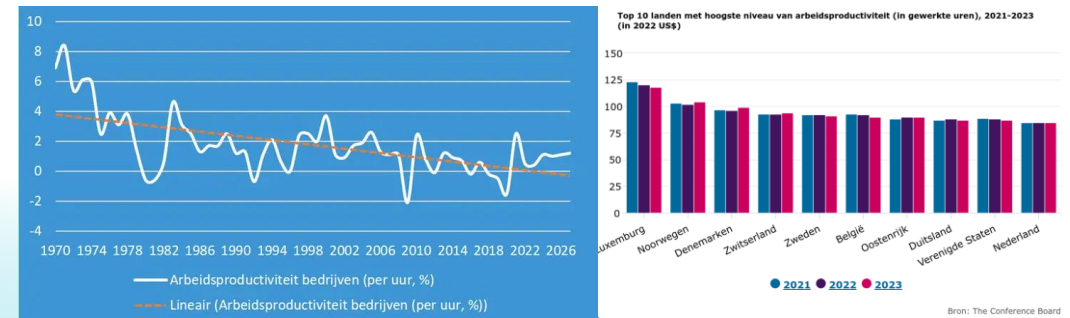
⚙️ Shortages on the labor market
(greening and graying / lifestyle)



⚙️ Transitions (sustainability, AI and data)



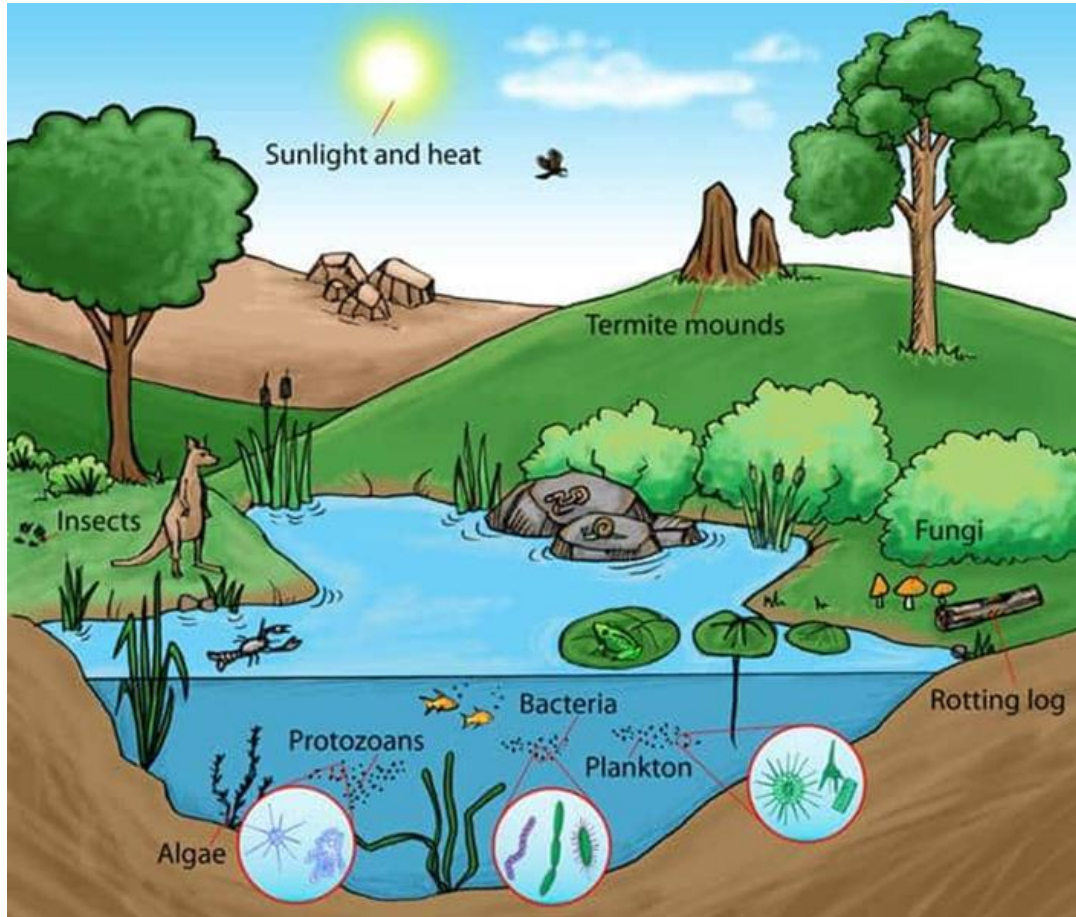
⚙️ Job productivity



2. Needs for and **barriers** to UCE

- ⚙ Focus on research and young students: UCE sections are small and marginal
- ⚙ Financial: contrary to initial higher ed, you have to pay for UCE
- ⚙ Institutional: educational, labor market and social policies are not aligned
- ⚙ Educational sector: Silo's of higher ed and VET, of formal and non-formal ed.

3. Towards an UCE Ecosystem



A situation in which all living organisms in a given area influence and interact with each other in such a way that they form a powerful living community that sustains itself.

Building Blocks for a Learning Ecosystems (UNESCO)

‘Lifelong learning involves a broad set of knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes through which a learner’s agency is both recognized and fostered.’

‘The learning ecosystem is interconnected, employing both online and offline resources to enable learning to take place anywhere, anytime, via individualized pathways’



Three pillars of a Learning Ecosystems (UNESCO)



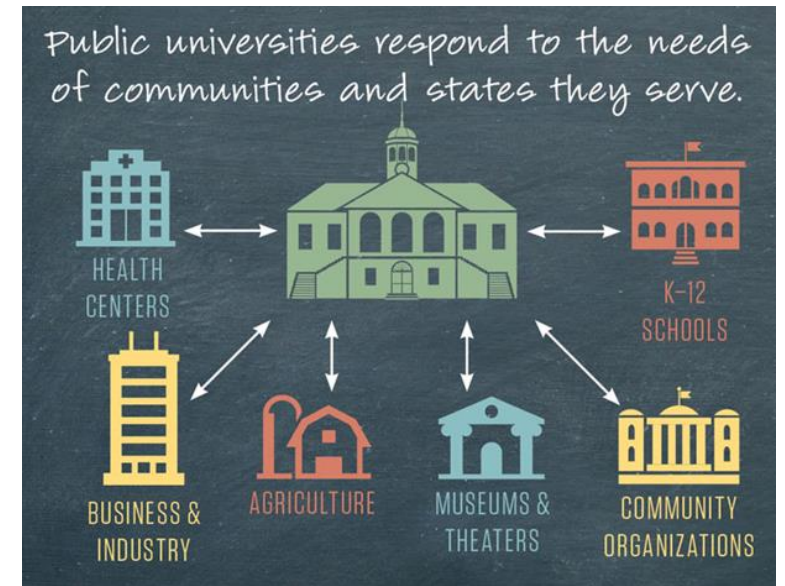
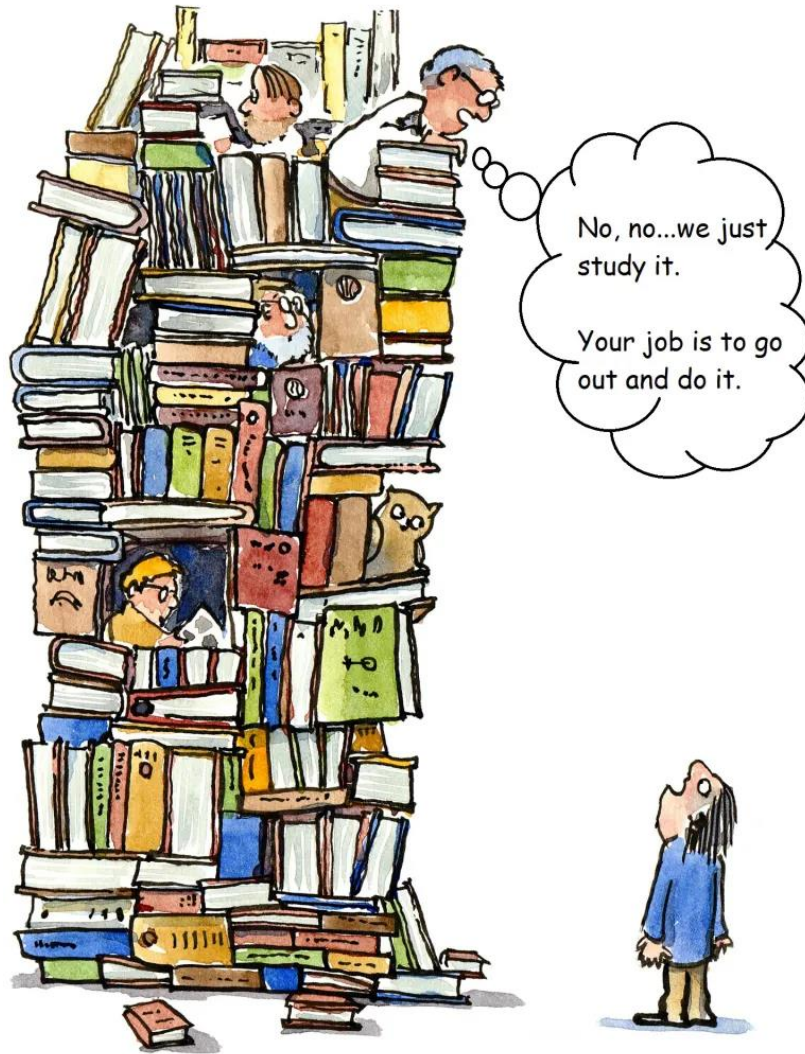
Pillar 1: Redefining content: develop transformative competences in innovation, responsibility and awareness to cope with uncertainty, respond to global challenges

Pillar 2: (Digital) Technology - 'anytime, anywhere' learning, as well as learning that is tailored to individual needs

Pillar 3: Educators - a trainer but also a facilitator, mentor and coach within a larger, connected network and technology-rich environment.

Where do we stand?

Ivory Tower? Responding to societal needs?



In an ideal world UCE contributes to

- A) Early detection of labor market bottlenecks, systematically linked to learning & development needs;
- B) Flexible LLL options available for different groups, levels and forms to respond to the changing needs for training and education in the labor market;
- C) Availability of knowledge, skills and adaptive capacity to be used in public and private organizations (in particular for the purpose of solving societal issues);
- D) Accessibility of LLL-activities for employees and employers based on their own interests, needs and opportunities.



Building Blocks for a Lifelong Learning Ecosystem

A situation in which knowledge centers, educational institutions, public and private companies and organizations, governments, interest groups as well as individual workers and job seekers

are in such a way interconnected and interacting from their own roles

that they reinforce each other and contribute to achieving common goals.



Recommendations for University Continuing Education as part of an Ecosystem



1. Break down the silo's between:
 - Higher education and vocational education and training
 - Formal, non-formal and informal learning
 - Knowledge transfer, skills training and knowledge application
2. Invest in developing a future oriented and an integrated perspective on the societal need for Lifelong Learning activities

Recommendations for University Continuing Education as part of an Ecosystem



3. Invest in co-creating innovative Lifelong learning solutions with public and private stakeholders of (regional) economies.
4. Invest in a Lifelong Learning infrastructure in cooperation with governments, public and private organisations, trade unions, professional organizations and more.
5. Adapt institutional university structures and rules, and make use of institutional entrepreneurs.

4. Potentials for HEIs

Expand the training domain to diverse target groups
(all professionals that use / need expert knowledge, research)

Variation in (non formal) formats with different forms of validation

Co-creation of UCE in partnership with businesses

Variation in funding flows (te be agile and flexible)

Be knowledge producer and knowledge partner (practitioners)

Strengthening connections with other knowledge partners in UCE networks

Extra UCE in the Netherlands

Fragmented landscape

- Professional Associations
- Independent Institutes
- Universities of Applied Science
- Open University
- Commercial providers
- Research Universities (accelerating recently)

UU mission and UCE



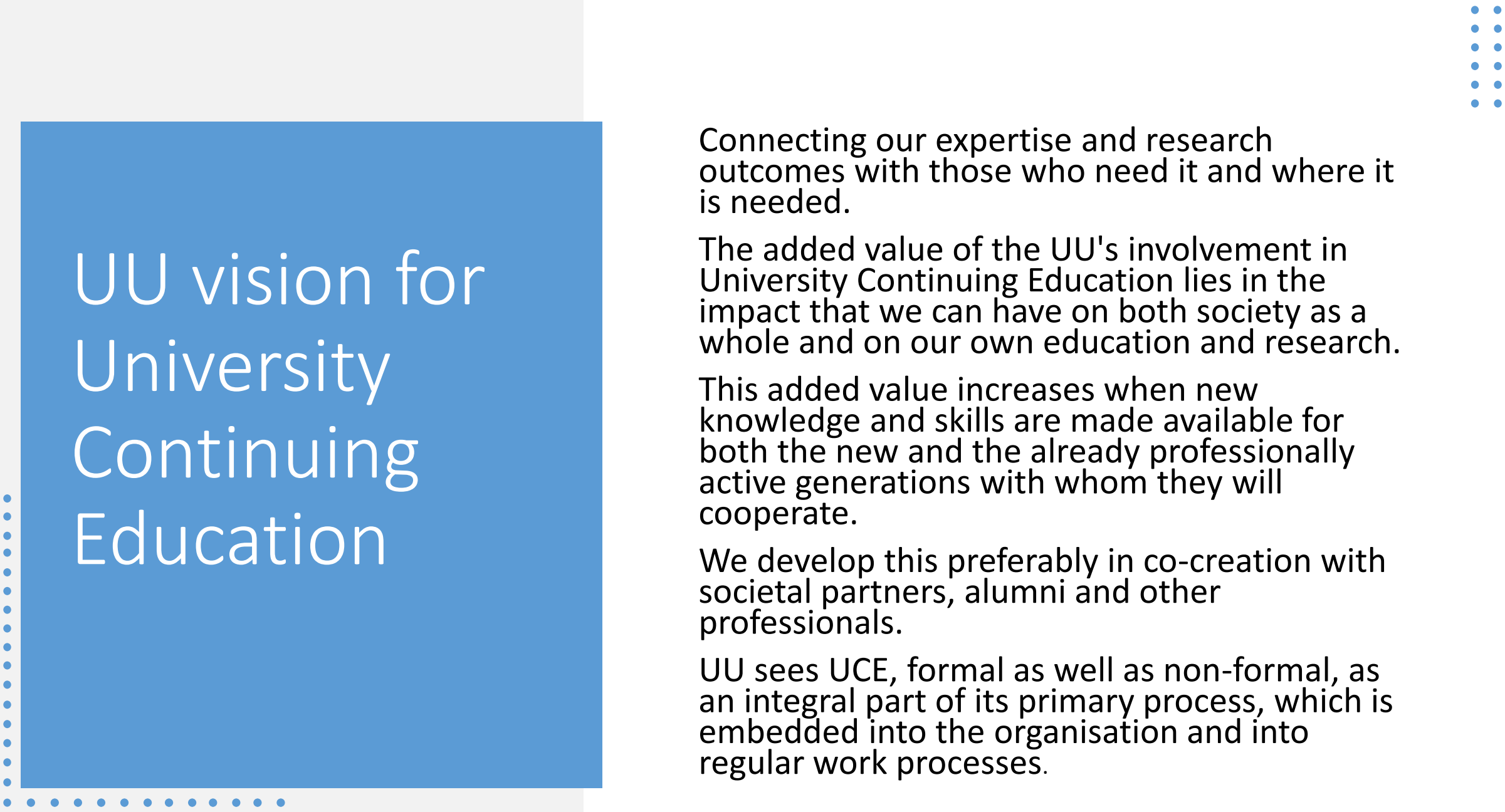
Universiteit
Utrecht

Sharing science,
shaping tomorrow

UCE is part of our social mission and forms the third pillar of our education in addition to the initial Bachelor's and Master's programmes:

with our expertise and research, through UCE we support alumni and other professionals in their development and contribute to solving social issues under the banner '*Sharing science, shaping tomorrow*'.





UU vision for University Continuing Education

Connecting our expertise and research outcomes with those who need it and where it is needed.

The added value of the UU's involvement in University Continuing Education lies in the impact that we can have on both society as a whole and on our own education and research.

This added value increases when new knowledge and skills are made available for both the new and the already professionally active generations with whom they will cooperate.

We develop this preferably in co-creation with societal partners, alumni and other professionals.

UU sees UCE, formal as well as non-formal, as an integral part of its primary process, which is embedded into the organisation and into regular work processes.

What are we talking about? UCE:

- responds to needs of and in society: professional groups, sectors, issues, regions and citizens in their respective roles
- is smaller than LLL, but both lifelong and life wide;
- refers to a wide range of activities (in company, open offer, on demand) and a wide variety of formats: masterclasses to one-week summer, longer programs and accredited degree programs;
- is linked to UU's expertise, research output & initial educational programs ;
- is aimed at people who work at degree level;
- Is usually privately funded.

Embedding UCE in the UU organization

- (Minimum) Quality Requirements for all UCE-activities
- Systematic quality control
- Appointed Directors of UCE-programs (equal to directors for bachelor and master programs)
- Aligned with existing mandate arrangements
- Organizing Student-participation & informing existing student councils on the level of faculties and universities
- Dedicated (chambers in) committees for the exams.
- Organizing investment budget for new initiatives and support

What are we working on now:

- Broadening the number and diversity of offers:
through dialogue with faculties/strategic themes/hubs and supporting initiatives (financial support, design, organization).
- Embedding UCE in regular processes
administration, financing, governance (directors of CE), quality control (criteria, participation), support. For the Alliance with TuE and Wageningen, on national level and international EUCEN (see: <http://www.eucen.eu/>)
- Professionalisation, knowledge sharing,
Program on UCU design and didactics for lecturers started at CAT mid 2021, workshops and training sessions for administrators and support organization started spring 2021.
- Stimulating Educational research on UCE
- Participating in the Lifelong Learning Catalyst program

Lifelong Learning Catalyst

- Governmental funding → public finance VET & Higher Education
- Budget: €167m (2023/2026) + €225m (2026/2030)
- Aim: contributing to economic growth by boosting LLL
- 4 work packages:
 1. Development of a LLL 'radar'
 2. Boosting innovative LLL-activities with employers
 3. Strengthening the organization of LLL in educational institutes
 4. Enhancing learning culture in organizations
- 2023 – 2025: WP2 and WP3 → 3 calls
- Utrecht WP 2 and 3, each €2m



LL0-Katalysator

More?

- Utrecht University UCE programs: <https://professionals.uu.nl/en>
- Connecting UU UCE & Research
<https://professionals.uu.nl/en/p/sustainability>
- <https://professionals.uu.nl/en/p/data-and-artificial-intelligence>
- Lifelong Learning Catalyst Utrecht
<https://www.utrechttalentalliantie.nl/llo-katalysator-regio-utrecht/>
- European cooperation and research on UCE: <http://www.eucen.eu/> & <https://eucenstudies.eucen.eu/ejournal/vol05-no01-2021/>



**Utrecht
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Sharing science,
shaping tomorrow



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