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Bridging The Gap: Lifelong Learning From A Higher Education and Collaboration Perspective

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BRIDGING THE GAP: LIFELONG LEARNING FROM A HIGHER EDUCATION AND COLLABORATION PERSPECTIVE

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TREO PAPER

Abstract/Summary

Lifelong learning (LLL) is pivotal in today's society. While prior research largely focuses on the learner perspective, our study introduces the university viewpoint as University Lifelong Learning (ULLL). We explore how universities can enhance ULLL through collaboration with stakeholders. Drawing from prior research and based on empirical insights from a four-year long ULLL-project, we propose a collaborative and value-oriented ULLL definition and present five comprehensive guidelines. The guidelines not only augment prior knowledge but also serve as prescriptive tools for practical implementation by universities aspiring to enhance and craft compelling value proposals to adult learners and develop lifelong learning universities. Our findings inform prior research on LLL through a university perspective and are applicable by universities in forming valuable partnerships with stakeholders supporting them in tailoring education that correspond to the needs of professional adult learners. This approach opens new avenues for personalized and relevant lifelong learning experiences.

Keywords: professional adult learners, University lifelong learning, university-company collaboration, working professionals

1. Introduction

Since the aftermath of World War II, UNESCO has recognized the significance of adult learning and education (UNESCO 1949), which has become increasingly vital following the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Lifelong learning (LLL), encompassing all forms of learning—formal, non-formal, and informal—across all life stages, now stands as the core vision for education globally. This commitment is encapsulated in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG #4), aiming to provide inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for everyone. At this critical juncture, the imperative to enhance lifelong learning is heightened by numerous challenges, including environmental issues, social and economic disparities, conflicts, democratic instability, technological advancements, globalization changes, and demographic shifts, underlining its importance for societal development.

The European University Continuing Education Network (EUCEN) highlights critical challenges for universities, emphasizing the necessity of integrating LLL within their core mission (EUCEN 2009). This involves the development of comprehensive strategies, fostering a research culture, promoting staff development, and engaging in collaborations with a wide range of stakeholders, including educational institutions, unions, professional associations, businesses, and local governments. A holistic approach to LLL, underscoring its significance in addressing contemporary societal and economic challenges, is therefore crucial and universities have an important role to play.

2. Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of the research is to develop knowledge on how universities can effectively integrate lifelong learning to support adult learners. This means that we apply a university perspective on lifelong learning, which we call for University Lifelong Learning (ULLL). ULLL focuses on the development of a collaborative and value-oriented approach, emphasizing the importance of partnerships with external stakeholders.

We define collaboration as an interactive concept that is constructive and takes place in an atmosphere of mutual trust with the intention is to realise added value for all parties involved (Glasbergen 2011). Our focus on collaborations is supported by prior research, which suggests that effective management of collaboration between universities and stakeholders is the most challenging issue in successful organisation of LLL (Cronholm 2021).

Our research question reads: *How can collaboration between universities and external stakeholders support the transition to lifelong learning universities?* The outcome of our research is to provide universities with actionable guidelines to enhance their lifelong learning programs and align them with the needs of adult learners and the broader societal context.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this research involves empirical analysis from a four-year ULLL project, focusing on collaborative efforts between universities and external stakeholders. It includes evaluating project activities related to the design, implementation, and assessment of lifelong learning programs. The approach is grounded in developing a collaborative and value-oriented definition of ULLL, aiming to create effective partnerships to support adult learners. This approach emphasizes the importance of aligning university offerings with the professional and societal needs of adult learners.

In the pursuit of comprehensively evaluating the ULLL project and proposing informed guidelines, we adopted the Qualitative Content Analysis framework (Mayring 2004). In a more focused context, we applied the principles of direct content analysis as elucidated by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). This specific approach proved invaluable, particularly when existing knowledge presented gaps or warranted enhanced description. Data was collected by analysing a) notes taken from project meetings, b) video-recorded workshops involving academics and company representatives and c) notes taken from interactions with company representatives and employees, d) interaction with organisations such as trade and interest organisations.

Our analysis process was inherently informed by the general aggregated challenges defined by EUCEN, namely: embedding LLL within institutional mission and culture, devising a holistic and coherent strategy, cultivating robust scientific research in LLL, fostering staff development, and engaging a diverse array of stakeholders from different educational sectors, trade unions, professional bodies, organisations, and local authorities (EUCEN 2009). These five paramount aspects were treated as predefined categories, and we applied a collaborative lens. We also applied these five generic questions when collecting data: *why collaborate*, *what collaborate about*, *how to collaborate*, *when to collaborate* and *who should collaborate*. These generic questions refer to the challenges identified by EUCEN and seek to create a prescriptive approach to these.

4. Findings

The findings of the research indicate that collaboration with external stakeholders is crucial for aligning university offerings with the needs of professional adult learners and the broader societal context. This collaboration enhances the design, implementation, and evaluation of lifelong learning programs, contributing significantly to the transition of universities into lifelong learning institutions. The study also identifies key guidelines for universities to develop compelling value propositions for adult learners, facilitating their integration of lifelong learning into their strategic and operational frameworks.

The guidelines are critical actions needed to be taken for fostering mutual understanding and collaboration between academia and industry. It highlights the value of integrating stakeholders throughout the lifecycle of educational offerings, from course design and implementation to evaluation, emphasizing the importance of creating courses that address real-world challenges and meet the evolving needs of the workforce. The five suggested guidelines refer to five overarching perspectives.

<u>Overarching question</u>	<u>Guideline</u>
Why is it important to collaborate?	1) Define compelling arguments for fostering collaboration with stakeholders and obtaining the necessary support and resources within universities.
What to collaborate about?	2) Provide added value to professional lifelong learners, universities, and educators through the engagement in collaboration across three key processes.
How should collaboration be carried out?	3) Ensure that different motives for collaboration are fulfilled.
When is it appropriate to collaborate?	4) Ensure that the collaboration embraces the full life cycle of course development and implementation, and evaluation.
Who should be part in these collaborations?	5) Decide who to collaborate with.

Each guideline is complemented with a set of actions to be undertaken by interested universities to develop their ULLL strategies. A comprehensive set of actions as well as presentation of logic for each guideline is developed and will be presented in the full version of the paper as well as the poster presentation at ECIS TREO event.

5. Originality

This study contributes to the field of lifelong learning by providing a university perspective on ULLL and presenting actionable guidelines for universities aspiring to transform into lifelong learning institutions. These guidelines are formulated around the critical aspects of why, what, how, when, and with whom to collaborate.

The research's originality lies in its attention on University Lifelong Learning, particularly in its emphasis on partnerships with external stakeholders. Unlike traditional models with their focus on learners' perspective, this study offers a concrete framework for integrating ULLL into higher education institutions by focusing on the creation of compelling value propositions to adult learners. The innovative aspect is thus in providing actionable guidelines based on empirical evidence from a four-

year project, aiming to align university offerings with the changing professional and societal needs of adult learners.

6. Research Implications

The research implication consists of knowledge regarding how universities can integrate lifelong learning within their institutions. By focusing on collaboration and value creation, the research proposes guidelines for universities to align their offerings with the professional and societal needs of adult learners, supporting their transition into lifelong learning institutions. Our study contributes with actionable insights for universities, detailing strategies to engage effectively with stakeholders and to integrate lifelong learning into their institutional ethos and culture. It underscores the significance of adapting to the needs of professional adult learners and the broader society, aiming to enhance the relevance and impact of higher education in the face of rapid technological and societal changes.

7. Practical Implications and Limitations

The practical implication consists of actionable guidelines that could enhance ULLL programs through effective partnerships with external stakeholders. These guidelines are aimed at helping universities develop compelling value propositions for adult learners, thereby facilitating their integration of lifelong learning into their strategic and operational frameworks. The practical implication is expressed as five generic guidelines concerning collaboration with stakeholders. Why collaborate, what collaborate about, how to collaborate, when to collaborate and who should collaborate. One limitation of our study is the context-specific nature of the findings, derived from one empirical study in Sweden. This context-specificity suggests the need for further research to validate the proposed guidelines in different settings and contexts to enhance their applicability and robustness for universities transitioning into lifelong learning institutions. Additionally, the study calls for future research to explore other aspects of University Lifelong Learning, such as strategies for ULLL, staff development, premises, and communication skills necessary for effective lifelong learning activities.

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