

Navigating the lifelong
learning challenge

Lifelong learning and
the LLE: tackling the
unanswered questions

Reframing lifelong
learning in the civic
university

HE Horizons.

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Welcome



Welcome to the third edition of HE Horizons.

I would like to begin by thanking the contributors to our second edition, and the many members who engaged with its themes of workforce development, both as a driver of institutional effectiveness and in the context of AI, automation and the future of learning.

This edition turns to lifelong learning, a theme that connects naturally to workforce development in its broadest sense. As the nature of work changes and careers become longer and less linear, the question of how, when and what people learn across their lives has moved decisively to the centre of higher education's agenda. What strikes me about the contributions gathered here is how consistent the underlying challenges are, regardless of context. Whether we are looking at national policy reform, institutional mission, curriculum design or the needs of employers and learners, several observations recur.

Lifelong learning is a global imperative, not a regional one. The pressures driving it – skills gaps, demographic change, technological disruption – are felt across very different systems and contexts. So too are the opportunities, and our community is well placed to share and learn from one another's experience. Many institutions have embraced lifelong learning in principle while their underlying structures have yet to catch up. Systems, processes and cultures that were designed around a traditional, linear model of participation remain the norm in much of the sector.

The economic case is necessary but insufficient. Lifelong learning's contribution to individual development, social inclusion and civic participation deserves equal recognition alongside its role in meeting skills demand. Sustainable progress requires alignment across governance, systems and institutional culture, not simply an accumulation of new programmes running alongside existing provision.

Looking to our fourth edition, we will explore the pressures and leadership capabilities shaping higher education worldwide. From our experience working globally, certain capabilities stand out as particularly pressing: the ability to lead through change and uncertainty as the norm; sufficient fluency in digital transformation and AI to make sound strategic and governance decisions; stronger financial acumen and commercial awareness; and the capacity to navigate complex regulatory environments, manage sophisticated partnerships, and understand a student population that is itself changing rapidly. If these challenges resonate with your own experience and practice, [I warmly invite you to contribute to our forthcoming edition](#), focused at an institutional and strategic level, and look forward to the conversations it will generate across our global community.

Thank you for your continued engagement with this publication and with our global community of practice.

Alistair Jarvis CBE
Chief Executive

Navigating the lifelong learning challenge: questions, risks and opportunities

Leila Guerra, Associate Vice President (Education), London School of Economics and Political Science and Fiona Lennoxsmith, Head of Leadership, Governance & Management, Advance HE



Higher education is increasingly positioned at the centre of one of the defining challenges of our time: how to respond to a rapidly widening global skills gap. The World Economic Forum estimates that half of the workforce will require reskilling within the next five years, with nearly 40% of core job skills expected to be disrupted by automation and technological changes. For governments concerned with human productivity, employers facing acute capability shortages, and individuals navigating longer, less linear careers, question of how, when and what to learn have become critical. While the balance between state coordination, institutional autonomy, and market dynamics varies across systems, the underlying pressure on universities is strikingly consistent: the traditional, frontloaded model of education has become insufficient.

Demand is evident, reflected in national policy programmes, government strategies, commercial provision, and increasing uptake by learners of all ages. Recent surveys of employers and individuals show a growing demand for flexible, advanced learning opportunities tailored to the needs of the current and future workplace.

Demographic shifts and the accelerating impact of artificial intelligence are driving us to question long-established assumptions about the shape of the student journey and the role that employers and institutions play in their learning.

Lifelong learning has therefore moved decisively up the policy agenda. In the UK, the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and Skills England report signal a clear expectation that universities will play a more active, flexible, employer-centric role than many were designed to accommodate. Similar expectations are evident internationally, shaped by different combinations of state policy, funding mechanisms and labour-market priorities. While this promises financial returns, it places the responsibility firmly on institutions to transform their academic areas and operations at pace. At the same time, the range of stakeholders has expanded significantly.

Governments, employers, professional bodies, regulators, further education and vocational providers, and global technology platforms are all shaping lifelong learning demands. Each bring distinct, sometimes conflicting, priorities, timescales, and definitions of what lifelong learning should be. The resulting uncertainty and vagueness is not helpful to learners or institutions.

So far, on a global scale, lifelong learning agenda is being strongly shaped by an employer-led, demand driven conception of skills, in which education is closely aligned to labour needs and economic strategy. While necessary, this framing underdelivers on the broader dimensions and benefits of learning, including its contribution to individual human development, healthy ageing, social inclusion and civic participation.



And it raises questions about the nature of the employer-institution partnership as the narrative often positions institutions as provider and the employer as customer, overlooking the potential for mutual, two-way partnership building towards sustainable, long-term societal needs.

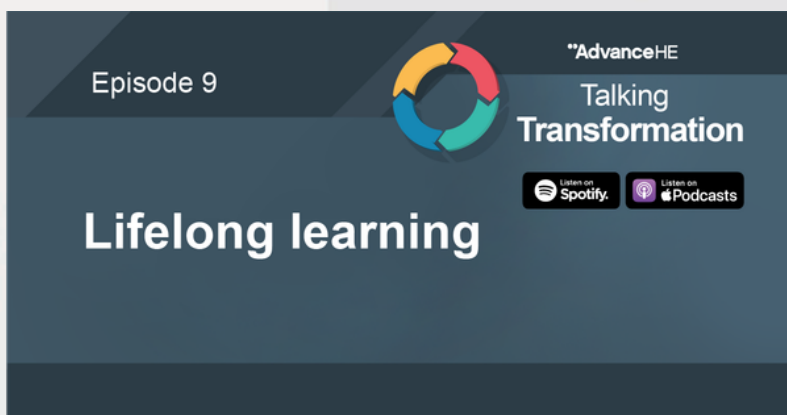
Institutions are being asked to respond simultaneously to economic imperatives, local and regional development agendas, employer needs, and increasing learner demands for flexibility. Responding to each in isolation risks fragmentation, an accumulation of initiatives without coherence. Yet failing to respond risks marginalisation and lack of competitiveness within an increasingly crowded learning ecosystem. The strategic question is therefore not whether to engage, but how to do so in a way that is both coherent and grounded in institutional mission.

How is the sector responding? Many institutions are developing lifelong learning strategies, expanding modular provision, introducing microcredentials, and investing in digital infrastructure. Partnerships with employers and regional stakeholders are deepening, supported by engagement with policy frameworks. This activity often builds on strong foundations: many institutions already have deep expertise in continuing education, professional development, executive learning or widening participation.

What distinguishes the current moment is the scale, urgency, and centrality of the agenda. Lifelong learning is moving from the periphery to the core of institutional strategy, educational practice, and sector-level leadership. A shared recognition is emerging: responding at the scale the current moment demands requires structural, relational, and conceptual shifts that cut across the very core of how institutions are organised.

Yet in many cases, lifelong learning activities sit alongside, rather than within the fundamental structures of the institution. Short courses, microcredentials, and executive learning often operate as parallel provision, with limited integration into mainstream curriculum design, quality assurance, or academic career pathways. They might be recruited, supported and taught by those with incentives, skillsets and roles outside of the academic-focused areas.

This points to a deeper structural issue. Culture, strategy, systems and processes have not yet adapted to the new reality. Most university systems including academic calendars, admissions processes, funding models, and digital infrastructure, are designed around a traditional student journey: entry in early adulthood, full-time study whilst living on campus, and exit with a degree. New patterns of participation are emerging, including mid-career learners, returners, and individuals seeking to stack qualifications over time whilst moving between institutions. Meeting these needs requires the rethinking of the core institutional design.



Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) Dean of Students Lay Yeo speaks to Advance HE's Fiona Lennoxsmith about lifelong learning in higher education.



The sector, therefore, finds itself at an uneven point of transition. There is significant innovation, but it is often fragmented. There is strong policy momentum, but it is not always aligned with the full breadth of higher education's mission. There is clear demand, but not yet a fully developed system capable of responding at scale. Looking ahead, three priorities are critical for the direction of travel.

First, structural change. Institutions will need to align governance, systems, and processes with flexible, modular, and continuous learning. This includes rethinking curriculum frameworks, credit systems, quality assurance, and innovative and agile digital infrastructures.

Second, relational depth. Effective lifelong learning depends on sustainable partnerships with employers, regional authorities, and learners themselves. Higher education's distinctive contribution lies not only in knowledge provision, but in their ability to provide trusted, long-term educational relationships. Breaking the stereotype of what a university student is could be a first start.

Third, conceptual clarity. Institutions must articulate how lifelong learning connects to their purpose, mission and values. Investment decisions, resource allocation, and educational priorities should be aligned with this strategy rather than reactive. Without this, responses risk being knee-jerk reactions to external pressures rather than strategically driven.

None of this is straightforward, particularly in contexts of significant financial constraint, technological progress and shifting demand. Progress will remain uneven. But the conversation is maturing, and there is growing recognition that lifelong learning is a systemic challenge requiring coordinated, sector-wide responses.

Lifelong learning presents both risk and opportunity. The balance will depend on whether the sector can move beyond incremental adaptation and towards more fundamental transformation, building a system that is flexible, inclusive, and capable of supporting learning across the full span of people's lives. The educational expertise within the sector is genuine and substantial. The task is to build on these foundations in ways that are coherent, sustainable, and ambitious enough to meet the scale of what the moment demands.

These questions are central to the future of higher education. They will be at the heart of discussion at the upcoming Advance HE International Lifelong Learning Symposium, where the sector will come together to share practice, challenge assumptions, and explore how universities can respond to the scale of change now required.



Lifelong learning and the LLE: tackling the unanswered questions

Harriet Dunbar-Morris, Provost and Pro Vice-Chancellor Academic at the University of Buckingham and Visiting Fellow at the University of Oxford



As the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) approaches implementation, the higher education (HE) sector risks repeating a familiar mistake: treating it mainly as a reform of funding and student loans, rather than as a deeper challenge to how curriculum, teaching and assessment are designed. That would be a significant oversight.

In my current role as Visiting Fellow at [Oxford Lifelong Learning](#), my work explores lifelong learning and the role of universities in enabling flexible, career-long education. Alongside this, I am engaging university-wide colleagues through lectures and scholarly exchange to develop collaborative work grounded in shared interests in lifelong learning and inclusive educational practice.

As part of my Fellowship, I have delivered a three-part interconnected event series, Designing Lifelong Learning: Evidence, Belonging and Co-Creation in Practice, which progresses from theory to application and, ultimately, to collaboration. An approach that can be taken in institutions across the HE sector.

Designing for real lives: belonging, evidence and co-creation in lifelong learning

As lifelong learning becomes central to higher education policy and practice, universities face a key design challenge: creating curricula, assessment and learning environments that reflect the realities of contemporary student lives, rather than idealised models of continuous participation. This opening lecture outlined the theoretical foundations of inclusive, evidence-informed curriculum design for lifelong learners.

Drawing on research into belonging, Universal Design for Learning, and collaborative design, we explored how concepts of being, belonging and becoming can be embedded at programme and module level.

It introduced curriculum design charrettes as a structured method for bringing together academic staff, professional services colleagues, students and stakeholders to co-create rigorous and inclusive learning.

This session also introduced the **Being, Belonging, Becoming** (BBB) survey, developed and championed by me and colleagues at the University of Portsmouth, as a source of evidence for pedagogic decision-making, illustrating how data about lived experience can be used as a catalyst for shared design conversations.

From evidence to design: reimagining courses and modules for lifelong learners

This interactive workshop saw participants move from theory to practice by working collaboratively on the redesign of programmes, modules or elements of provision for lifelong learners. Building on the ideas introduced in the lecture, this session used a charrette-style design process to explore how evidence about student lives, engagement and belonging can be translated into concrete pedagogic decisions.



Participants worked with curated prompts drawn from the BBB survey, and other relevant data and research, to examine questions such as: What assumptions do we make about availability, continuity and engagement? Where do current designs unintentionally exclude or disadvantage learners at different life stages? How might assessment, structured interaction or programme coherence be redesigned to support episodic, flexible or modular participation without diluting academic standards?

We ran a similar workshop at a recent meeting of The Spinnaker Group, which brought together colleagues who lead on Student Experience and Teaching and Learning in institutions across the HE sector.

Co-creating knowledge: developing research and practice in lifelong learning

This final session was designed as a collaborative incubator for colleagues interested in developing research projects, scholarship of teaching and learning, or practice-based inquiry focused on lifelong learning.

Using facilitated discussion and small-group work, participants explored shared interests such as the experiences of lifelong learners across different modes and life stages; pedagogic and assessment practices that support belonging in episodic study; and how policy ambitions for lifelong learning translate into lived student experience. The session also considered methodological approaches suited to this work, including design-based research, partnership with students, and practice-informed inquiry.

An outcome of this has been to support the emergence of collaborative activity that can continue beyond the Fellowship, whether through joint research proposals, publications, pilot projects, or further workshops and seminars.



Conclusion

Lifelong learning is often discussed in terms of access and flexibility, yet our conversations have highlighted how much current provision still assumes continuous participation and constant presence. If lifelong learning is to be effective, programmes must be designed around the realities of people's lives. Thus far, the LLE has focused largely on funding, with less attention to the academic and pedagogic changes needed to make it work in practice. In this sense, it is as much a question of institutional architecture as it is of finance.

There is clear sector-wide commitment to lifelong learning as a means of delivering more inclusive education. However, most students – though formally enrolled full-time – do not study in uninterrupted ways, or see being a student as their primary identity. This raises an important question: have our institutional and sector structures evolved to match this ambition, and does the LLE adequately address the challenges we see?

Ultimately, taking lifelong learning seriously requires alignment across programme design, institutional systems and sector frameworks. Where this alignment exists, lifelong learning can be realised; where it does not, it remains an aspiration.

Whose voice counts? Why lifelong learning demands we finally fix our feedback systems

Dr Helena Lim, PFHEA, Academic Lead, evasys and Educational Excellence Lead, Queen Mary University of London



Picture a seminar room: twenty-year-old undergraduates alongside a forty-five-year-old project manager retraining in data analytics. The lecturer asks for feedback. Whose concerns get prioritised?

From January 2027, the UK's Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) gives learners a £37,000 lifetime pot to use flexibly across modules. But we're not ready. Not because of the admin headaches, but because our feedback systems weren't built for this. And there's another problem: when someone's only with you for one module, they won't know how feedback works here, and they'll be gone before we close the loop.

The data problem we're not talking about

Right now, institutions are making decisions about modular provision based on incomplete data. Our current student record systems categorise learners who successfully complete standalone modules as "non-completers" because there's no award attached. This is already happening with CPD provision, and unless we fix it, LLE learners will face the same problem.

Most institutions cannot disaggregate feedback by learner type. And recent OfS guidance has added more questions than answers, which makes sorting this out now even more urgent.

This is not just a technical problem. It is an equity problem. We are at risk of creating a two-tier system where traditional students get "the full experience" and modular learners are just passing through, tolerated but not truly welcome.

Research shows part-time and mature learners already feel marginalised: less support, fewer connections, feedback that doesn't fit how they study. Modular feedback typically ignores the things that matter most to LLE students, like career transitions and integrating learning into their existing work.





The regulatory reality

From 2027-28, the OfS will collect modular completion data to develop quality indicators. In six months, there's a major consultation on performance principles for modular delivery. We need feedback systems that work now, not after the first cohort has struggled.

What we actually need:

- Modular-level feedback matched to 12-week cycles, not academic years.
- Disaggregated data by learner type to understand different needs.
- Real-time intervention mechanisms, not end-of-year reports.

What needs to happen now

Less than a year until LLE launches. Every institution should be asking:

- Quality and data teams: Can you disaggregate module data by learner type? Do you have real-time dashboards instead of waiting for end-of-year reports?
- Student support: What does "parity of experience" mean when some students are here for three years and others for twelve weeks?

The OfS consultation is coming this autumn. We need to engage now, not after the first cohort struggles.

Are we ready?

We won't hear from actual LLE learners until they've already enrolled. The first cohort will be our proof of concept, and they're paying for it. Getting the feedback infrastructure right now isn't premature. It's the bare minimum. The lifelong learning revolution is here. The question is whether we're brave enough to rebuild our systems properly. That starts with every learner getting an equal voice, not just in mission statements, but in survey design, data analysis, and decision-making.

At evasys, we believe lifelong learning needs feedback systems that are modular by design, not retrofitted from annual surveys. We're working with universities to build integrated feedback ecosystems that serve traditional undergraduates, mature learners, apprentices, and LLE students equally well.

Learn more: evasys.co.uk | Contact: enquiries@evasys.co.uk



Beyond the degree: Lifelong learning in the Antipodes

What Australia and New Zealand's education reforms mean for universities, vocational training and the learners in between

Jo Chaffer, Advance HE Global Associate

Background

Both Australia and New Zealand are facing productivity slumps and crippling and increasing skills gaps in multiple industry sectors. There's an urgent need for more trained, educated and mid-highly skilled people at a scale and pace that simply cannot be supplied or funded through high immersion, high-cost degree programs.

In addition, the bundles of skills, knowledge and experience needed for emerging roles are different and need developing via new bundles of VET, workplace, higher and other types of education. These are some, but not all of the dominant big picture drivers of what we are calling 'lifelong learning' (LLL).

In both countries national governments seek to resolve these crises through better vocational education and training (VET) systems and are directing significant funding into reform, restructure and uplift of their VET sectors. Universities are largely missing from these initiatives, and therefore from the associated funding and policy support enabling development of LLL services.

However, there are other enablers allowing universities to build on what many have been doing for decades in supporting learners of all ages and backgrounds to access quality assured education their way.



Firstly, our Australian and New Zealand universities rarely use the term lifelong learning. The work they do that: creates flexible pathways; allows seamless transition between VET and universities; reduces learners' financial and administrative burdens; improves mobility, flexibility and transportability of learning; that widens participation and improves access, comes through many drivers, some strategic, some more peripheral.

Before looking at these drivers in more detail, it is worth reminding northern hemisphere readers of the ethical, moral, and in NZ, legal mandates to improve learning access to First Nations people/ Māori and Pasifika, and to incorporate indigenous ways of knowing and becoming in learning. Whether through the work of Indigenous Centres or the centring of serving learning and learners differently in university strategy, these continuing acts of reconciliation have been shaping what we frame as lifelong learning.

Focus on Australia: policy enablers

Fee Free TAFE (Technical and Vocational Education provider) was instigated by federal government to improve VET uptake, part of a raft of measure to reduce TAFE reputation. Fee Free TAFE at first seems problematic for universities, but the Tertiary Harmonisation Plan is reframing TAFE and universities as interconnected parts of a strengthened tertiary system (rather than competitors). The Plan presents a way forward for better VET-HE collaboration. Whilst the six 'full-service' (university and VET) providers have been 'harmonised' for years, other partnerships are also beginning.

There's an urgent need for more trained, educated and mid-highly skilled people at a scale and pace that simply cannot be supplied or funded through high immersion, high-cost degree programs.

For example, Western Sydney University has just agreed that final year TAFE learners can skip the first year of their WSU degree program to create learning outcomes that mix the vocational and higher skills industry seeks. This should be an attractive pathway for learners who save their first-year WSU fees. Recent comments from Jason Clare, federal Education Minister, indicate that government will be pushing for more of such tertiary pathways.

The Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC), a key recommendation from the Australian Universities Accord, is almost established. ATEC will provide long-term stewardship, strategic planning, and coordination between the higher education and vocational education (VET) sectors. The Accord goals for lifelong and non-traditional learners are genuinely progressive, and if ATEC operates with real independence and uses mission-based compacts flexibly, it could create conditions where institutions feel rewarded rather than penalised for innovating for lifelong learning.





Another LLL enabler, is the removal of caps on low SES, First Nations and regional campus learners. This should provide demand-driven places for equity students pushing providers to innovate and extend learning forms and formulas.

Focus on New Zealand: education reforms – opportunities for better

Aotearoa New Zealand is undergoing a ‘whole of education’ reform initiative, which, similarly to Australia, shifts the impetus for skills and economic growth to vocational education and training. This includes introducing dual-system secondary education and decentralising VET to local industry-educator partnerships.

The new Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) envisions a more lifelong learning, outcome focused system where collaboration and more learner-centric metrics, and more flexible, accessible pathways are key. Secondly, the Universities Advisory Group recommend universities are treated as a system (rather than individual entities) by government, encouraging shared codes for eg., quality assurance, encouraging distinctiveness whilst supporting integration. Both these directives should support universities in their desire to deliver more flexible, equitable and transportable learning provision.

Whether these wonderfully aspirational directives gain traction or not, the huge potential of what is already a strong LLL foundation could be unlocked by decoupling completion rate metrics from university funding allocation. New Zealand already has a highly open, accessible university system: higher ed is free of charge and people come and go throughout their degree program weaving learning amongst work, home and community life. This learner-centrism could be further supported if ‘completion’ steps were not limited to ‘full degree’, or achievement measured differently.



Reframing lifelong learning in the civic university



Dr Lyndsey El Amoud, University College Cork

Lifelong learning is not an add-on

Lifelong learning is not an optional extra for universities. It is a test of whether our institutional architecture reflects who we say we are. Across the world, lifelong learning features prominently in university strategies. It is typically linked to skills, workforce agility and economic competitiveness – all undoubtedly urgent and legitimate concerns. At the same time, higher education institutions are navigating technological disruption, demographic change, ageing populations and shifting participation patterns. In many regions, the profile of what was once the traditional full-time undergraduate is no longer the dominant learner profile.

Much of our sector's institutional architecture was designed at a time when demographic expansion of younger cohorts underpinned university growth. Linear degrees for school leavers became the organising model around which admissions cycles, funding systems, data structures and academic workloads were built. Today, more complex learner journeys, mid-career transitions and lifelong engagement challenge that inherited design. Lifelong learning is therefore not simply an additional activity that can be layered onto this model; it represents a structural response to demographic and societal change.

A tradition worth renewing

Against this backdrop, as colleagues and I at University College Cork (UCC) have reflected on what it truly means to place lifelong learning at the centre of our institutional mission, we have found ourselves asking a more fundamental question: what is lifelong learning actually for in a university context?

UCC's engagement with [adult and continuing education](#) dates back to 1946. From the outset, this work was grounded in the belief that universities should extend opportunity beyond traditional entry routes and life stages. It was never solely about vocational progression; it was about intellectual curiosity, civic participation and personal development. As we redesign for a changing future, we are conscious that this holistic and humanistic tradition is one we do not want to lose. That tradition is not abstract. Through our Adult Continuing Education (ACE) provision, the university's presence extends far beyond the walls of the university into neighbourhoods, community centres, civic libraries, enterprises, and prisons.

As a founding partner in [Cork's UNESCO Learning City](#) initiative, we collaborate with community organisations, employers and public bodies to create inclusive pathways. In our classrooms – both physical and digital – learners in career transition sit alongside older adults returning to study for the pure joy of learning, migrants building new futures, individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who never had the opportunity to experience higher education and many other diverse adult learners.

'For me, the true value of Principal Fellowship lies in the clarity and confidence it has brought to my leadership.'



Lifelong learning part two

For us, all learners are welcome; all bring experience and insight; and all are part of the university's learning community. This is lifelong learning as civic practice.

Strong rhetoric, uneven reform

My recent research exploring how leaders across the Irish higher education sector interpret lifelong learning revealed that it carries multiple meanings ([El Amoud, 2025a](#); [El Amoud, 2025b](#)). For some, it is primarily an economic strategy. For others, it represents widening participation and second chance education. For others still, it reflects a civic commitment to education across the life course. These interpretations are not merely conceptual; they matter because they shape governance models, resource allocation and institutional priorities.

Through our involvement in the Erasmus+ [SAMUELE](#) project, led by [EUCEN](#) (the largest European association dedicated to university lifelong learning), we see a consistent pattern across the continent: strong rhetorical commitment, but uneven structural integration. Institutions speak confidently about lifelong learning's importance, yet governance arrangements, funding frameworks, workload models, and incentive systems often remain aligned to traditional full-time provision. In other words, lifelong learning may be strategically central, but it often remains structurally peripheral.

In other words, lifelong learning may be strategically central, but it often remains structurally peripheral.

In part two of our discussion of lifelong learning, Fiona Lennoxsmith speaks with Professor Ang Davies, the University of Manchester's academic lead for lifelong learning.

Beyond revenue

Financial pressures intensify this tension. In many universities, lifelong learning is expected to generate fee income as an additional income stream for universities reeling from endless public funding cuts. That expectation is understandable – universities must remain financially sustainable. Yet the value lifelong learning brings extends well beyond direct revenue. It strengthens civic and employer partnerships, enhances regional engagement, supports social inclusion, builds institutional reputation, and creates pathways into further study for learners who might otherwise never envisage a place for themselves within a university. These contributions are real, but they are not always measured.

When lifelong learning is judged primarily through short-term financial metrics, its broader civic and societal value risks being overlooked. The result can be a subtle misalignment whereby lifelong learning is celebrated rhetorically, scrutinised financially and measured narrowly.

The harder questions

At UCC, as we work towards a more integrated lifelong learning framework, we are consciously trying to hold these dimensions together. Yes, supporting career transition is essential. Yes, financial sustainability matters. However, lifelong learning is also about enabling people to engage critically with the complexity of the world around them, participate meaningfully in society, and continue developing intellectually and personally throughout their lives. Holding onto this holistic tradition while reforming for the future is not straightforward. If lifelong learning is genuinely central to institutional identity, it cannot remain structurally peripheral.



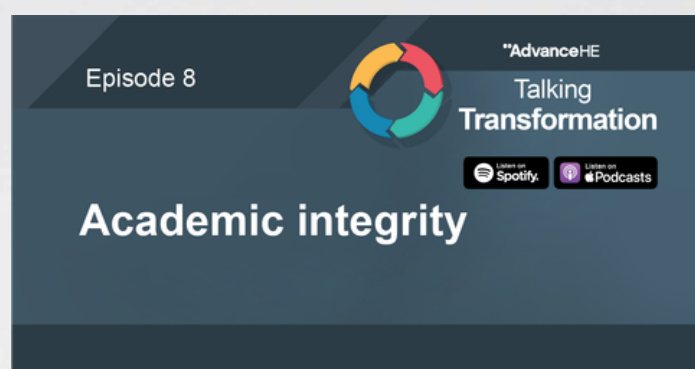
Our experience mirrors what comparative research from the SAMUELE project suggests: the most complex challenges are rarely pedagogical. They concern incentives, governance and alignment. How do funding arrangements genuinely support flexible provision while recognising its broader value? Where does responsibility sit when lifelong learning cuts across academic schools and professional services? What systems are needed to accommodate learners who may enter and exit at multiple points across their lifespan?

Like many colleagues across the sector, we are still working through these questions. Much of our current activity involves dialogue and careful institutional design rather than finished solutions. Nevertheless, one key insight is clear: how we define lifelong learning determines the seriousness with which we approach reform. If it is viewed solely as a revenue stream, incremental adjustments may suffice. If it is understood as a core civic and inherently human mission with economic, social and demographic dimensions, deeper alignment becomes necessary.

A broader vision

Embracing a humanistic framing of lifelong learning does not mean ignoring economic realities. Individuals need skills for work and of course, universities must remain responsive. Alongside these work-related skills and competencies though, societies also require adaptability, ethical judgement, critical thinking and resilience. These capacities develop across the life course; they are not reducible to short-term metrics alone.

If lifelong learning is to move from rhetoric to reality, universities must articulate clearly what it is for and ensure that their institutional architecture reflects that understanding. For us, reform is not about abandoning tradition, but renewing it. Lifelong learning is not an add-on to the university's mission, it is a reaffirmation of its enduring civic purpose. And perhaps the most important question for all of us is this: If lifelong learning is central to your institution's strategy, what has changed in your governance, funding or systems to reflect that?



Episode 8 of Talking Transformation features Kane Murdoch, Head of Complaints, Appeals and Misconduct at Macquarie University, Sydney. He discusses academic integrity in higher education, moving beyond reactive approaches to student misconduct towards data-driven, proactive strategies.

Forward expertise for a forward economy

Karim Seghir, Ph.D., Chancellor of Ajman University



The phrase ‘forward-looking’ is a widely used aspirational term often peddled by higher ed institutions but rarely backed by strategy or authenticity. Audiences are simply expected to trust these words without evidence. Similarly, we’ve come to rely on terms like ‘impact, inclusion, and innovation’ to speak for us. Yet, by trying to distinguish ourselves in this way, we are all starting to sound the same. To be truly exceptional is to make your blueprint knowable.

That’s why the “We the UAE 2031 Vision” is so compelling. The strategy is presented in no uncertain terms, with the way forward – toward greater prosperity for all – succinctly articulated to reflect the nation’s distinct values and aspirations. It is a crystal-clear call to action for all stakeholders on why and how to build a “forward society, forward economy, forward diplomacy, and a forward ecosystem.”

Higher education institutions must respond with full-scale capacity-building support for our country, far beyond the knowledge economy. The future of learning and leadership is in our hands. At Ajman University (AU), we have never waited for the future to unfold. Guided by our motto, Make It Happen, we forged our reputation on turning ambition into execution.

AU has been building the future since 1988, when we became the first private university in the GCC and the first higher education institution to welcome expatriate students. Today, more than 45,000 alumni from 102 countries are putting their knowledge to work for humanity and the global economy – as our AU+YOU Impact Magazine attests.

The UAE aims to build a forward economy at an accelerated pace, which requires learning at the speed of thought. This is precisely why AU spent a year investigating the needs of the executive community in the UAE and developing an approach to the kind of forward expertise needed to decide what happens next, rather than reacting to what comes our way. Ajman University Executive Education debuts later this spring because the UAE’s tomorrow must start today.

Our programs will provide solutions to questions such as: How do you run a global business in a local context amid worldwide upheaval? How do you exercise sound judgment amid constant ambiguity? How do you pursue innovation while preserving resilience?



Consider artificial intelligence. The forward economy is increasingly data-driven, automated, and algorithmically optimised. Yet the central leadership challenge is not how quickly an organisation adopts technology. The issue now is how wisely technology is governed. Leaders must understand not only strategic opportunities but also ethical implications, regulatory exposure, cybersecurity risk, and long-term societal impact.

The same applies to sustainability. Awareness is widespread. Reporting frameworks are multiplying. Investor expectations are rising. But forward expertise is not about issuing commitments. It is about embedding sustainability into decision architecture – capital allocation, risk management, supply chain strategy, and succession planning. It is about translating principles into practice.

Another defining characteristic of a forward economy is complexity. Systems are interdependent. Financial markets respond to regulatory shifts, regulatory frameworks adapt to technological innovation, technological innovation reshapes labor markets. In such an environment, linear thinking is inadequate. Leaders must think systemically. They must anticipate ripple effects.

There is also the question of continuity. In family enterprises and large institutions alike, succession planning is no longer a peripheral concern. A forward economy demands intergenerational thinking. Expertise must be transferred, institutional memory preserved, and governance structures strengthened. Leaders must look beyond quarterly performance and consider long-term resilience.

Continuous learning has become a leadership competency in its own right. The leaders who thrive in a forward economy are those who remain curious, open to recalibration, and willing to test their own assumptions.

Ultimately, a forward economy requires leaders who combine analytical rigor with principled judgment – leaders who can integrate technology without losing sight of human impact; leaders who can pursue growth while safeguarding resilience; leaders who understand that strategy and stewardship are not competing priorities but complementary responsibilities.

If the economy is moving forward at unprecedented speed, expertise must move with it – not by chasing every trend, but by deepening the quality of decision-making that underpins institutions.

Forward expertise for a forward economy is not about prediction. It is about preparation. It is about equipping leaders to make disciplined, responsible, and strategically sound decisions in environments that will only grow more complex.

The question is not whether change will continue. It's whether leadership capability can outpace change. The UAE is counting on institutions like AU to deliver a resounding, straightforward “yes.”



Member Benefits 2025-26

As part of our ongoing commitment to keeping you informed and inspired, here's a snapshot of what opportunities are coming up and how you can continue to make the most of your Advance HE membership.

What's coming up

- **Academic Leaders Survival Series**: Academic Leaders Survival Series This series offers 90-minute online sessions for academic leaders to tackle real world challenges, from financial management to change leadership. Connect with peers, gain practical tools and build confidence leading in complex environments.
- **(Re)Designing Higher Education**: This programme supports innovative approaches to teaching and learning, promoting experimentation and collaborative design across pedagogy, assessment, learning environments and the student experience. The final event on 16 June explores structure, strategy and sustainability in higher education institutions.
- **Smarter Futures**: Smarter Futures explores how AI and digital technologies can help reduce inefficiencies, enhance staff and student experience, and support more effective, data-informed decision-making. Through three expert-led online events across May and June, participants gain insights into how institutions can evolve rapidly while maintaining quality and accessibility, alongside access to peer networks, resources and a sector report highlighting emerging best practice.
- **Executives at the Leading Edge**: A monthly, member-exclusive online series for senior higher education leaders. Each two-hour session offers practical strategies, global insights and peer learning with Vice-Chancellors, Executive Directors and other sector leaders.
- **Advancing Gender Equity through Inclusive Leadership**: Join this two-hour interactive online session on 21 May for higher education leaders exploring how inclusive leadership can drive meaningful progress on gender equity. Bringing together senior leaders from across the globe, the event focuses on practical leadership behaviours, decision-making and cultural change that move beyond good intentions to measurable impact.
- **Elevate Australasia**: Advancing educational excellence and student success across Australasia, this tailored teaching support programme connects educators with peers who share their challenges and passion for transforming learning experiences.
- **Elevate MENA**: A tailored development series addressing shifting student expectations, AI integration and national priorities. Spotlight 3, taking place on 13 May, focuses on embedding AI in learning, teaching and assessment.
- **Elevate Ireland**: Join colleagues from across Ireland at the Fellowship Forum 2026, a day dedicated to connecting, sharing and celebrating Fellowship and its impact on teaching and supporting learning. Taking place on Wednesday 10 June at Munster Technological University, Cork.
- **Irish Higher Education Governance Forum**: The Irish Higher Education Governance Forum returns on 20 May 2026 at the National College of Ireland to bring together governance leaders to share insights, respond to regulatory change and explore people-centred, sustainable approaches to governance.

Spotlight on practice and impact

We share practice and thought leadership from member institutions, Fellows and colleagues at Advance HE:

David Bass, Director of Inclusion and Governance, introduces a thought leadership series that brings together contributions from three influential senior figures across the UK higher education sector, curated by Advance HE, in response to the depth and intensity of recent conversations on inclusion, free speech and community cohesion.

Klaus-Dieter Rossade, Executive Dean for the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies at the Open University, **reflects on HE leadership in the UK and Germany.**

Elevate Ireland case study showcase: Professor Mark O'Hara introduces a case study collection from the 'Elevate Ireland' Member Benefit designed to support academics to share innovative teaching practices and gain professional recognition in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

Global Insights: "What are the common challenges for universities, and what leadership capabilities do they need now?" asks our Chief Executive, Alistair Jarvis CBE. He also reflects on his recent visit to our member institutions in Australia, Listening, learning and looking ahead

Embedding inclusivity and resilience in creative arts at University of the Arts Sharjah (UAS): Senior Lecturer Lynne Holloway shares insights on directing and sustainable learning.

Senior Fellowship as structured reflection: Senior Fellow Hugh Crumley, Assistant Dean at Duke University, North Carolina, reflects on how writing for Descriptor 3 clarified his leadership and why the process itself is worth undertaking.

Professor Marianna Koli, Faculty Director of Social Sciences and Professor in Higher Education and Economics at Northeastern University London, **describes an efficient, evidence-led path to Advance HE Fellowships.**

Miri Firth and Amy Aisha Brown explore how guided AI activities can support employability and AI literacy in more inclusive, interactive ways: Employability with GenAI for inclusive & interactive teaching practice.



Teaching and Learning

International Lifelong Learning Symposium: Shaping Global Futures

Date: 21 May 2026

Location: Online, free to attend

Book now

AdvanceHE

Contact us

Email: enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

Our purpose is to help higher education transform lives by realising the potential of its people.

Advance HE is a member-led charity of and for the sector that works with partners across the globe to improve higher education for staff, students and society.

Our three strategic goals support the priorities of our members and of the higher education sector:

- Enhance confidence and trust in HE
- Address systemic inequalities and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society
- Support the work of our members and the HE sector.

We are experts in higher education, with a particular focus on teaching and learning, governance, leadership development and equality, diversity and inclusion. We work with our network of global associates and partners, and with people, providers and systems around the world, to understand different contexts and challenges in the higher education sector, and to deliver solutions.

We deliver our support through a variety of channels, applying our expertise and sharing best practice. These include professional development programmes, events, fellowships, awards, surveys as well as consultancy and enhancement services.

In addition, our membership provides a range of research, knowledge and resources for members, as well as accreditation for teaching and learning and equality charters that aim to advance gender and race equality in higher education and research.



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