



# **Review of Lifelong Learning Programmes, Market Opportunities and Organisational Structures**

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RESPONSIVE RESEARCH REPORT

# Strategic Advisory Services

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# Executive Summary

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**Lifelong learning programmes typically constitute, in order of frequency: audit modules, short courses, workforce development programs and microcredentials.** These programme types generally differentiate as either:

**Career-oriented microcredentials, workforce development programmes, and professional certificates.** These programmes enrol primarily 25- to 44-year-olds attracted to the potential career impact. Lifelong learning leaders typically price these programmes higher to account for instructional costs and given market demand. These programmes are therefore more likely to generate additional revenue for lifelong learning units. These can be challenging to recruit for, however, due to competition from other institutions and non-institutional providers.

**Enrichment-oriented audit modules, short courses, and non-credit programmes.** These enrol learners across the age range, and those 46+ overwhelmingly gravitate toward enrichment-oriented programmes. This wide audience and the volume of enrichment-oriented programmes' across institutions results in the highest lifelong learning enrolment volumes. These programmes typically prioritise accessibility in pricing—charging between €60 and €200—and only cover costs without generating additional revenue.

This schema simplifies the larger landscape and programme exceptions can exist; short courses, for example, can encompass both career-oriented and enrichment-oriented programmes and learners. Institutional portfolios and research contact experiences, however, affirm the overall dual nature of lifelong learning initiatives outlined above.

**Students aged 25-44 compose the majority of reported lifelong learners.**

Lifelong learning participation rates increase with educational attainment and decrease with age. Audit modules and non-credit short courses enrol a higher proportion of older learners, typically those aged 46 and above.

**Technological universities enrol more lifelong learners, but all institutions see concentrated demand in health, “generic programmes and qualifications”, business and technology.** Health and welfare, information and communication technologies (ICT) and business programmes account for the largest and fastest-growing enrolments.

**Enrichment modules and non-credit offerings prioritise accessible prices; microcredentials and professional certificates charge premium prices.** Costs range from as low as €60 for enrichment modules to more than €6,000 for advanced microcredentials or professional certificates. Institutions balance affordability for broad community engagement with higher fees for market-aligned credentials requiring specialised content.

**Few institutions report meaningful surplus from lifelong learning operations, with most reported revenues simply covering costs.** Institutional subsidies and external funding (e.g., Ireland's Human Capital Initiative) enable financial viability of lifelong learning programmes unable to fund operations with revenue alone. Those lifelong learning operations that do generate revenue may also share revenue with contributing faculties, who often provide teaching and incur instructional costs.

**Centralised lifelong learning units provide structure and coordination, but decentralisation can build faculty engagement.** Most universities use central offices to manage administration, partnerships and marketing, while faculties deliver content. Units typically develop new lifelong learning programmes in collaboration with academic staff and faculties, though new programme ideas can also originate from individual units. This model enables coordination but risks silos; decentralised or hybrid approaches can create stronger buy-in from academic staff.

**Institutional leaders incentivise academic staff participation in lifelong learning through promotion and tenure criteria and strategic plan emphasis.** Few institutions offer indirect financial benefits (e.g., seed funds, fellowships) to academic staff who support lifelong learning.

**Success measures extend beyond revenue to enrolment and community impact.** Institutions typically track enrolment, course completions and returner rates as primary indicators, positioning lifelong learning as a mission-driven initiative that broadens access, strengthens community ties and enhances institutional reputation rather than as a major revenue source.



### Defining Lifelong Learning for This Report

This report employs the lifelong learning definition outlined by Dublin City University's Educational Disadvantage Centre in their [Lifelong Learning Report](#):

*"All purposeful learning activity, whether formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence."*

This report focuses primarily on lifelong learning programmes offered to adult learners, as opposed to mature students and follows the guidance offered by [University of Galway's Centre for Adult Learning & Professional Development](#):

*"Adult learners are a diverse group – typically age 25 and older – with a wide range of cultural and educational backgrounds, abilities, responsibilities and experiences. Adult learners return to education for personal or professional reasons.... People often confuse an adult learner with a mature student. The mature student entry route refers to full-time undergraduate students only."*

# Lifelong Learning Market Opportunities

## Lifelong Learning Programme Types

### “Lifelong Learning” Programmes are Typically Non-Degree Credentials Designed for Adult Learners

Irish and UK lifelong learning programmes typically encompass non-credit-bearing modules and courses for enrichment and workforce development, as well as credit-bearing courses and modules in shorter formats more accessible to adult learners than traditional degree programmes (e.g., microcredentials, certificates). Formats and offerings range from library events for children to hobby-focused courses for retired adults to workforce development programmes.

While some may consider lifelong learning to encompass mature students (typically those aged 21 and over who seek to enrol or re-enrol in a traditional undergraduate course of study), this review focuses on adult learners seeking additional education.

### Taxonomy of Lifelong Learning Formats

*Profiled Institutions*



### Modules and Short Courses for Enrichment Constitute the Majority of Lifelong Learning Programmes

Modules for personal enrichment typically involve single sessions taught by academic staff on humanities-related topics such as history, literature or languages. These constitute the majority of lifelong learning programmes offered at profiled institutions and across Irish institutions broadly.

Illustrative examples include:

- At [Dublin City University](#) (DCU), the Age Friendly University features “Love of Lifelong Learning Modules”, which are eight-week-long modules covering topics including Creative Writing, Art Appreciation, Spanish and Photography.
- [University College Dublin](#)’s (UCD) Access and Lifelong Learning team offers specific Lifelong Learning courses, which allow students to explore a new subject area without taking any examinations. [Courses](#) cover topic areas including Art Appreciation, Classics, Environment, History, Languages, Literature, Maths, Music and Philosophy.
  - UCD’s [School of History](#) features “Open and Lifelong Learning” modules on a range of historical topics, including family histories and Ireland in the medieval world.
- The team at the Centre for Adult Learning and Professional Development at the [University of Galway](#) offers short courses on academic areas for personal interest and enrichment, ranging from an introduction to gemmology to Irish political history.

## Short Courses for Professional Development Constitute the Next Largest Share of Lifelong Learning Programmes

Short course offerings typically entail flexible, condensed educational programmes designed to teach specific skills or narrower knowledge more quickly than a degree. Lifelong learning leaders often offer professional development courses as a specific subtype of short course, aimed at helping working professionals succeed within their given fields.

These courses also encompass Professional Continuing Education and confer Continuing Professional Development hours for certified professionals (e.g., legal and medical professions).

Short course examples include:

- The [Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education](#) features a wide range of “Continuing Education and CPD in Training and Development programmes”, typically comprising one three-hour evening course per week with occasional weekend sessions.
- [Oxford University](#)’s lifelong learning portfolio includes a range of short courses specifically designed for continuing professional development, targeting professional learners who seek to develop or acquire new skills.
- The Professional and Continuing Education division at the [University of Cambridge](#) includes a “career accelerator” course in [data science](#), which features part-time learning, instruction from industry experts, mentorship and coaching.

## Some Institutions Offer Microcredentials within Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning portfolios at profiled institutions increasingly feature credit-bearing microcredentials. The [Irish Higher Education Authority’s Human Capital Initiative \(HCI\)](#) offers fee subsidies for microcredential learners through a five-year project investing €300m of National Training Fund (NTF) funding, commenced in 2020.

Institutions such as the University of Galway and the University of Limerick, among others, receive such funding to offer and subsidise fees for learners:

- The University of Galway’s lifelong learning team collaboratively developed [accredited micro-credentials](#) in various fields, including health, education, engineering, business, and technology, as well as courses conducted in Irish.
- [Credit-bearing MicroCreds](#) at the University of Limerick allow employees at partner companies and organisations to upskill in in-demand labour market areas, including business, aviation, health and medicine, artificial intelligence and technology.

## **Most Institutions Offer Lifelong Learning In-Person, Though Microcredentials Appear More Commonly Online**

Most lifelong learning programmes occur face-to-face, typically in a completely in-person format. Some programmes, particularly those offered to working adults, contain asynchronous components allowing participants to complete portions outside of scheduled in-person sessions. In-person programmes typically occur on campus, though some modules may be held at local partner organisations or cultural heritage institutions such as libraries or museums.

Though online modalities appear increasingly common for traditional degrees and credit-bearing courses (see the [University of Galway’s Online Learning](#) as an example), lifelong learning remains heavily place-based, as these examples illustrate:

- At University College Dublin, the [Lifelong Learning Programme](#) offers short courses (4–8 sessions) open to adults, mostly offered in-person in “a variety of locations, including the Belfield Campus, ...cultural partners and some will take place online.”
- [Trinity College Dublin’s \(TCD\) short courses](#) are typically offered in-person on campus, though they may be offered in an evening format.

Lifelong learning portfolios at profiled institutions feature more online programmes in newer formats, such as microcredentials. The University of Galway’s [micro-credential offerings](#), for example, are heavily online or offered in a blended learning format.

## **Credit-Bearing Programmes Focus on Professional Fields, While Noncredit Courses Emphasise Academic Enrichment**

As detailed above, for-credit lifelong learning programmes typically (though not always) focus on subject areas aligned to labour market needs. For-credit lifelong learning programmes largely prepare students to enter or advance in in-demand professional fields (e.g., health care, technology).

Audit modules and not-for-credit short courses typically focus on topics within the humanities, social sciences and STEM fields designed for personal interest and enrichment. Examples include history, languages and introductions to science and maths topics.

# Lifelong Learning Programme Enrolment

## Lifelong Learning Programmes Typically Enrol Students Aged 25-45, Though Audit Modules Attract Older Learners

The SOLAS<sup>1</sup> “Lifelong learning amongst adults in Ireland” [Q4 2024 report](#) offers key insights about the nature and participation of lifelong learners, including:

- There were **457,900 lifelong learning participants** (aged 25-64 years) in Q4 2024.
- The majority (60%) of lifelong learners were under 45 years of age. All age groups increased their participation in lifelong learning compared to the previous year, but **the largest absolute increase was among 35-44-year-olds** (+25,000 learners).
- More than two-thirds of participants were **employed full-time**.
- **Lifelong learning participation rates declined with age**. The rate for persons aged 25-34 years (20.4%) was almost double that of those aged 55-64 years (11.4%).
- **Lifelong learning participation rates increased with educational attainment**. Adults at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 6-8 were more than three times more likely to participate in lifelong learning compared to those with a level 3 qualification. Persons at NFQ levels 9 and 10 had the highest lifelong learning rate at 26%.
- **Nearly one-fifth of lifelong learners (72,500 learners) worked in the health sector**. The industry and health sectors experienced the most growth since the previous year, with 10,000 and 8,000 additional lifelong learners, respectively.

Additionally, research contacts offered directional guidance:

- Short courses, workforce development initiatives and microcredentials attract and enrol early-to-mid-career professionals interested in changing careers or upskilling in their current places of employment.
- Audit modules and personal enrichment courses enrolled a higher number of older learners (i.e., aged 46 and over).

However, contacts were largely unable or unwilling to share detailed information on lifelong learning enrolments.

## Technological Universities Tend to Enrol More Lifelong Learners and at Higher Proportions of Total Enrolments

According to [Higher Education Authority data on student enrolment](#), technological Universities tend to enrol higher absolute numbers of lifelong learners, and these learners tend to constitute a larger proportion of total enrolment at these institutions. Notable exceptions include University College Dublin, University College Cork and Trinity College Dublin.

The HEA provides student enrolment data across institutions by course level, field of study, mode of study, programme type, age group and other variables. The table

1) The SOLAS [ongoing report series](#) offers a wealth of information on lifelong learners in Ireland, including information on enrolments by age, gender, region, NFQ level, employment status, industry and field of study. These data were compiled by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS using the Central Statistics Office's (CSO) Labour Force Survey microdata.

below represents the full- and part-time enrolments of students aged 24 and over in the academic year 2024/2025, across the following programme types: certificates, higher certificates, postgraduate certificates, undergraduate occasionals and postgraduate occasionals. While these data likely do not capture all lifelong learning enrolments, they offer directional guidance on the volume of lifelong learning enrolments across institutions. The table also provides these enrolments as a percentage of total enrolment, reflecting the approximate volume of lifelong learning at each institution.

### Non-Diploma Adult Learner Enrolments at Irish Institutions

*Total 2024/2025 Enrolment by Learners Aged 24+ in Certificates, Higher Certificates, Postgraduate Certificates, Undergraduate Occasionals and Postgraduate Occasionals*

Institution	2024/2025 Enrolments	Percentage of Total Institutional Enrolments
Atlantic Technological University	7865	28.8%
Technological University Dublin	2895	11.6%
University College Dublin	2890	8.3%
South East Technological University	2730	17.7%
Munster Technological University	2275	14.9%
University College Cork	1980	7.9%
Technological University of the Shannon	1360	10.6%
Trinity College Dublin	840	4.0%
University of Galway	725	3.6%
Maynooth University	705	4.5%
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick	635	13.0%
National College of Ireland	605	9.8%
Dundalk IT	600	11.5%
Dublin City University	530	2.7%
Royal College of Surgeons	480	8.5%
University of Limerick	420	2.2%
St. Angela's College of Home Economics, Sligo	195	13.1%
Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology	190	7.9%
National College of Art and Design	160	10.5%

### Health and Tech Programmes Experienced the Largest Growth Since 2018; Business, Administration, Law and Health Programmes Enrolled the Most Lifelong Learners

"Health and welfare", "Information and communication technologies (ICTs)", and "Generic programmes and qualifications" experienced the largest average year-over-year growth since the 2018/2019 academic year. Lifelong learning programmes in "Business, administration and law", "Health and welfare", and "Engineering, manufacturing and construction" enrolled the largest number of students in the 2024/2025 academic year.

## Non-Diploma Adult Learner Enrolments by Field of Study

Total 2024/2025 Enrolment by Learners Aged 24+ in Certificates, Higher Certificates, Postgraduate Certificates, Undergraduate Occasionals and Postgraduate Occasionals

Field of Study	2024/2025 Enrolments	Average Year-Over-Year Enrolment Growth <sup>2</sup>
Health and welfare	4705	10.0%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	1205	8.5%
Generic programmes and qualifications	1195	7.2%
Arts and humanities	1695	7.0%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	345	6.7%
Social sciences, journalism and information	835	6.6%
Business, administration and law	9160	6.5%
Services	1035	5.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	4150	2.6%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	2210	1.6%
Education	1555	0.2%

## Workforce-Aligned Programmes Experience More Competition, Lower Enrolments than Short Courses

Higher-fee programmes in high-demand labour market subject areas targeted at working professionals faced more competitive markets than audit modules or non-credit short courses, according to their operators. Workforce-aligned programmes faced greater competition from other institutions as well as non-institutional providers, including on-the-job training and online programmes.

### Out-of-Sector Providers Offer Greater Competition for Microcredential and Workforce-Aligned Lifelong Learning

The noncredit certificate market is bigger than the for-credit market but is also dominated by alternative providers (see EAB's [Executive Guide to Certificate Market Risks and Opportunities](#) for more information). Specifically, tech firms and boot camps offer programmes which emulate higher education credentials and wraparound services.

Regarding [microcredentials](#), leaders must decide whether to offer microcredentials that target large addressable student markets or focus on more niche programming. Seventy-five per cent of microcredential offerings are in technology or business fields, which have larger potential markets. However, these fields are the most saturated and competitive, with high barriers to entry for new providers. Institutions seeking to launch credentials in these areas must ensure their offerings are unique and differentiated from those of others.

2) Average year-over-year growth calculated by first calculating the rate of change between enrolments in each academic year, starting in 2018/2019 and then calculating the average of those rates of change.

Non-credit programmes tend to enjoy higher enrolments at profiled institutions, due to their comparatively easier completion requirements, general interest subject areas and lower fees. However, these enrolments often distribute across a much larger number of programmes, as most profiled institutions offer a larger number of audit modules and short courses for personal enrichment than short courses and microcredentials for workforce development. These programmes also faced less competition, primarily due to their niche subject areas and in-person formats targeted at local community members (rather than online programmes trying to reach a larger audience). Disaggregated data on enrolment by individual programme is not publicly available, and research contacts were largely unable or unwilling to provide enrolment data at that level of granularity.

Region and geography also play a role in market competitiveness. The SOLAS report noted that “more than one third of lifelong learning participants (35%, or 161,900 persons) were in the Dublin region”, likely owing to its relatively large population and concentration of large companies and working professionals, as well as relatively high educational attainment rates.

### Factors Impacting Lifelong Learning Enrolments

	<b>Subject Area</b>	<p>Workforce-aligned programmes achieve lower enrolments due to increased competition</p> <p>Enrichment programmes in areas of community interest attract greater enrolments</p>
	<b>Modality</b>	<p>In-person programmes can attract fewer enrolments, depending on local population</p> <p>Online programmes can enrol more students due to larger market and greater access</p>
	<b>Format &amp; Schedule</b>	<p>Asynchronous and evening programmes attract more students, as they are easier to fit into busy schedules</p> <p>Synchronous and daytime programmes attract fewer enrolments</p>
	<b>Partnership</b>	<p>Employer partnerships can guarantee enrolments of company or organisational employees</p>
	<b>Marketing</b>	<p>Greater promotion and visibility of programmes can increase enrolments</p>
	<b>Cost</b>	<p>Unsurprisingly, lower cost programmes attract greater enrolment than higher cost programmes. However, student perception of quality and return on investment impact willingness to enrol</p>

## Prepare for Lower-than-Expected Enrolment in Lifelong Learning Programmes

Previous EAB [research](#) into certificate market risks and opportunities has found that while some graduate certificate programs (often considered within lifelong learning models) experience growth, most suffer from low enrolment. There are several market trends that make increasing certificate enrolments difficult:

1. **Students and Employers Cannot Discern Value and ROI:** Across the higher education sector, there is no consensus on programme structure, course requirements and titling of certificate programmes (as seen in the wide variation above), which makes it difficult for universities to position their programmes effectively to students and employers.
2. **Small and Competitive Market:** Overall, the addressed market is smaller than anticipated. In the United States, for example, new for-credit graduate certificate programme launches far outpace conferral growth.

## Lifelong Learning Programme Pricing

### Audit Programmes Cost as Little as €60, While Professionally Oriented Programmes Cost up to €8000

Factors influencing programme pricing include:

- **Topic area**, with the widest variation in pricing
  - Enrichment programmes (e.g., art appreciation) cost less
  - Professionally oriented programmes (e.g., AI development, legal certification preparation) cost more
- Programme **type**
  - Audit modules cost less
  - Short courses and microcredentials cost more
- Programme **length**
  - Single modules or sessions cost less
  - Longer courses with greater credits or hours cost more
- **Credit** award
  - Non-credit programmes cost less
  - Programme cost generally increases with the credits awarded
- **Competition**
  - More competitive programmes may have to lower costs to attract enrolments
  - Niche programmes may command higher fees due to a lack of competition

## Pricing for Lifelong Learning Programmes

### Profiled Institutions

Institution	Type of Course	Cost
<a href="#">University of Galway</a>	Short courses, microcredentials	€200 to €7950
<a href="#">University of Limerick</a>	Short course (microcredential)	€500 to over €6000
<a href="#">Maynooth University</a>	Short course (certificate)	€410 to €2,500
<a href="#">University College Dublin</a>	Lifelong Learning Module	€105 to €195
<a href="#">Dublin City University</a>	Lifelong Learning Module, Audit Module	<i>Lifelong Learning</i> : €90 to €160 <i>Audit</i> : €125
<a href="#">Trinity College Dublin</a>	Short courses	€85 full rate, €60 concession rate for retirees, over 65s, etc.

Designated lifelong learning modules, such as those at [University College Dublin](#) and [Dublin City University](#), operate under a one-time fee model. However, individual courses differ in price based on course length and other course-specific costs (e.g., student levies, differential tuition based on EU residency, specialised equipment).

Short courses, including certificate courses at [Maynooth University](#) and microcredentials at [Trinity College Dublin](#), designate prices with annually calculated components. Maynooth calculates total fees per year and Trinity College Dublin has annual tuition fees for new students.

# Lifelong Learning Organisational Structures

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## Lifelong Learning Operational Models

### **Most Institutions Operate a Centralised Lifelong Learning Unit, Though Faculties May Also Offer Their Own Programmes**

Almost all profiled lifelong learning leaders operate a centralised model in which a central unit oversees programmes developed by or in collaboration with faculties and academic staff. Profiled centralised lifelong learning teams, however, do not independently develop and deliver programmes.

Even with a central unit, individual faculties may develop and offer their own lifelong learning programmes, typically as audit modules or short courses. Workforce development programmes and microcredentials are typically offered through a central lifelong learning unit, with instruction provided by academic staff in various faculties.

#### **Benefits of Centralisation:**

- Coordination of lifelong learning programmes across campus
  - Reduces duplicated offerings and effort
  - Increases strategic focus and alignment with institutional priorities
- Single source of information and point of contact for prospective lifelong learners

#### **Drawbacks to Centralisation:**

- Some research contacts suggested that centralised lifelong learning units can become siloed.
  - By contrast, decentralised academic “ownership” of lifelong learning programmes can increase buy-in among academic staff for lifelong learning and contribute to increased support for lifelong learning across the institution.

Some unique or hybrid models exist, such as at Maynooth and Durham Universities, where lifelong learning operates within a single non-centralised faculty (e.g., School of Education) or division (e.g., Libraries and Collections).

## Lifelong Learning Organisational Structures

### Profiled Institutions

Centralised Models	Decentralised Models
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Dublin City University:</b> DCU demonstrates centralized civic and community outreach through DCU in the <b>Community and Age Friendly Learning</b> department.</li> <li>• <b>Technological University Dublin:</b> A university <b>Part-Time/Lifelong Learning</b> team acts as the access point for lifelong learners.</li> <li>• <b>University of Galway:</b> The <b>Centre for Adult Learning &amp; Professional Development</b> serves as the institution's Lifelong Learning hub.</li> <li>• <b>University College Dublin:</b> The <b>Access and Lifelong Learning Division</b> represents the university's central hub for lifelong learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Trinity College Dublin:</b> Short courses are developed and operated by individual departments and schools.</li> </ul>
Hybrid Models	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Maynooth University:</b> The <b>Department of Adult and Community Education</b> is located within the School of Education. The team includes both administrative roles and professors.</li> <li>• <b>Durham University:</b> The Libraries and Collections Division operates a <b>Families and Lifelong Learning</b> unit, which develops and offers programmes that increase engagement with the library's resources for community members.</li> </ul>	

## Institutions Typically Centralise Lifelong Learning Administration and Decentralise Instruction

Where centralised lifelong learning units exist, those units typically oversee:

- Administration of lifelong learning programmes (e.g., managing funding and budgets, scheduling space for modules),
- Admitting and registering students,
- Communicating about programmes (often simply maintaining up-to-date information on a website) and
- Coordinating with faculties and academic staff to develop and deliver lifelong learning programmes.

More advanced lifelong learning units, such as the Centre for Adult Learning and Professional Development at **the University of Galway**, also employ instructional designers, student support staff and dedicated liaisons to faculties.

### Benefits of Instructors Contracted Within Lifelong Learning Units:

- Greater agility and ability to respond to student and market needs by quickly developing new programmes and hiring the necessary instructors
- Greater control over programme launch and scheduling

### Benefits of Instructors Provided by Faculties:

- Greater access to academic expertise
- Potentially greater buy-in among academic staff

Some institutional lifelong learning staff collaborate with schools' academic staff for programme development. At **University College Dublin**, for example, a central unit

leads advising and Access & Lifelong Learning services, while microcredential programmes are developed and taught by UCD faculty.

### Centralised Lifelong Learning Unit Organisational Structure

*Centre for Adult Learning and Professional Development, Profiled Institution*

Role	Responsibilities
<b>Head of Lifelong Learning</b>	Manages overall strategy, program portfolio, new programme development, budgets and funding, team leadership, relationships with national funding bodies and employer partnerships.
<b>Admissions and Registration</b>	Admit and register new students to lifelong learning programmes, oversee recognition of prior learning and award appropriate credit, track registrations and enrolment.
<b>Instructional Design</b>	Develop content for lifelong learning modules in collaboration with academic staff, create multimedia materials for instruction, provide expertise on designing engaging content for adult learners.
<b>Marketing and Communications</b>	Promote programs through institutional websites, print and digital channels.
<b>Liaison or Coordinator to Faculties</b>	Collaborate with administrative staff and faculties to identify new programme ideas, manage scheduling and availability of staff and coordinate new programme development.
<b>Administrative Support</b>	Manage budgets and accounting, staff hours and other clerical tasks.
<b>Student Support</b>	Manage advising, disability services and EDI efforts.

### Incentivise Academic Participation Through Promotion Criteria and/or Institutional Strategic Priorities

Academic staff at some universities have non-financial, promotion- and tenure-based incentive structures to participate in the development and administration of lifelong learning courses. Alignment with institutional strategic plans also encourages academic participation.

#### Incorporating Lifelong Learning into Promotion Criteria

- The [Academic Careers Framework](#) at **Queen Mary University of London** explicitly cites “successful development and delivery of professional development/executive education to meet external needs”, defining a clear route for promotion cases to require participation in lifelong learning.
- The **University of Edinburgh’s** [Exemplars of Excellence in Knowledge Exchange](#) document, used by promotion panels, lists provision of continuing professional development and executive education as an exemplar of promotable achievement, with guidance on evidencing impact.

## Naming Lifelong Learning in Strategic Plans

- **South East Technological University's** dedicated "[Connecting for Impact in Lifelong Learning 2025-2028](#)" strategic plan explicitly envisions that lifelong learning will be embedded across the institution, with actions such as expanding micro-credentials, increasing recognition for prior learning (RPL) and designing flexible programmes.
- Some research contacts reported that their institutions were in the process of drafting new strategic plans that included lifelong learning as a component, although these plans were not yet finalised or available to share.

Direct financial incentives (e.g., extra income for teaching lifelong learning programmes) are rare in Ireland, while more common at institutions in the UK and EU.

## Lifelong Learning Programme Revenue

### Lifelong Learning Programmes Must Typically Cover Their Costs, While Some Receive Central or External Subsidy

Lifelong learning units at profiled institutions typically receive some core funding from the institutional budget, which teams use to pay staff and invest in administrative functions. Some programmes generate additional revenue, which typically funds additional operations in the lifelong learning unit, is shared with participating faculties, or is returned to the central institutional fund. Additionally, lifelong learning teams can secure funding from external sources (e.g., HCI, grant-making NGOs), and others have developed employer partnerships to cover programme fee costs for enrolled employees.

When lifelong learning units administer programmes in conjunction with faculties, each unit agrees to a revenue-sharing contract and a percentage of revenues generated by programme fees, external funding, or institutional subsidies is shared among the units. Exact revenue share amounts and agreements could not be obtained from research contacts. Models from other once-peripheral educational approaches offer insight into revenue distribution guidelines, however; [early online education initiatives](#) incentivised academic participation with up to 80 per cent of revenue distributed to the academic unit, but practitioners cautioned to reevaluate original revenue distribution formulas over time.

### Short Course Programmes Can Lead to Lower-Than-Desired Revenue

Seventy-one per cent of adult and graduate leaders in the US believe that [alternative credentials](#), a common structure for lifelong learning offerings, provide a pathway to achieving revenue goals. However, 2020 data indicate that the majority of institutions do not know the exact revenue of their alternative credential programmes. Many institutions do not separate their continuing education or lifelong learning revenue within their financial statements, making this data difficult to determine. As an exception, the [Institute of Continuing Education](#) at the University of Cambridge reported its lifelong learning fee revenue as £7.7 million during the 2022-2023 academic year. Additionally, the [Department for Continuing Education](#) at the University of Oxford reported £25.5 million for the 2023-2024 financial year. These

prestigious institutions are likely not representative of lifelong learning revenues at other institutions, however.

Few institutions achieve a high financial return on investment from lifelong learning programmes. US research has shown that, across several types of alternative credentials, including undergraduate certificates, graduate certificates, badges and professional certificates, professional certificates are the most lucrative but not by a significant margin. Overall, few institutions report an annual revenue of over \$200,000 and the highest amounts are concentrated among a small number of institutions.

2023 UPCEA data found that only nine per cent of professional, continuing and online education leaders reported that their [microcredential programmes](#) generate a net revenue of over \$500,000 per year. The median institution sees a return of \$203,261. Institutional leaders must consider the potential for low returns with these programmes.

Institutions may also find success with more [niche offerings](#), taking into account the region, special populations and unique topics. For example, cross-disciplinary and high-intensity applied skills in emerging fields, such as health care and education, can provide opportunities for alternative credential growth.

# Lifelong Learning Programme Evaluation

## Profiled Institutions Measure Lifelong Learning Programme Success with Enrolments, Revenue and Returner Rates

Administrators measure success by enrolment, completions, re-enrolments and student satisfaction. Research contacts report that significant revenue generation is not a stated goal for lifelong learning programmes. The profiled examples below provide details on institutional approaches to measuring programmes' success.

### Efforts to Measure Lifelong Learning Programmes' Success



**University College  
London**

Required annual non-credit short course evaluations impact departments' Annual Student Experience Review. The evaluation tracks:

- Number of applicants
- Number of short course learners registered
- Completion dates
- Course evaluation/ feedback from participants



**South East  
Technological  
University**

National Access Plan target progress, alignment to regional skills needs and growth of flexible and stackable offerings measure lifelong learning success. SETU's HEA Performance Agreement 2024–2028 confirms lifelong learning as a tracked priority. Example metrics include:

- Staff participation in University-wide sustainability of programmes
- Proportion of the portfolio that is aligned with Lifelong Learning concepts



**Dublin City  
University**

Quality reviews for all academic units, including Open Education, based on the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities framework include cyclical review, action plans, evidence of student outcomes and enhancement in line with institutional quality assurance. Templates for quality assurance include:

- Quality Improvement Plan Template
- Peer Review Group Visit Timetable
- Professional Support Area Templates

# Research Methodology

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## Project Challenge

Leadership at a partner institution in Ireland approached EAB with the following questions:

### *Lifelong Learning Market Opportunity*

- What types of lifelong learning programs, courses and other experiences do other institutions offer?
  - To which audiences are these programs offered?
  - Which lifelong learning programs generate the largest enrolments? What are the largest audiences for lifelong learning?
- What pricing structures and models do lifelong learning leaders at other institutions employ?
- How much revenue do lifelong learning operations at other institutions generate?
  - How does lifelong learning revenue break down by program area and/or audience at other institutions?

### *Lifelong Learning Operational Structures*

- To what extent do other institutions centralise lifelong learning offerings through a single division, versus allowing multiple divisions to offer lifelong learning separately?
  - What benefits or drawbacks do research contacts see to centralising versus decentralising lifelong learning?
  - To what extent is the centralised lifelong learning division responsible for developing and offering programs, versus working with academic departments and schools to develop and deliver programs?
- How do administrators at other institutions allocate revenue from lifelong learning operations?
  - What proportion of revenue generated stays with the unit or division offering the program, versus returning to a centralised lifelong learning unit or a central institutional fund?
- What incentives do other institutions offer academic departments and schools to participate in lifelong learning operations?
  - What non-financial incentives do administrators at other institutions employ to encourage individual faculty members to participate in lifelong learning?

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## Research Parameters

EAB researchers examined lifelong learning units at colleges and universities in Ireland and the United Kingdom.

The original version of this report contained detailed information on profiled institutions, as well as contact information for the research contacts who participated in interviews with the research team.