



# REPORT ON THE SAMUELE UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING NATIONAL SURVEY

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## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	1
2. Literature Review .....	1
3. Methodology .....	2
3.1. Data Collection .....	2
3.2. Data Analysis .....	3
4. Key Findings .....	4
4.1. Overview of National Context for ULLL.....	4
4.2. Financing of ULLL .....	4
4.3. ULLL Learners.....	5
4.4. ULLL Offerings .....	6
4.5. Strategic Outlook.....	7
5. Discussion.....	8
6. Conclusion .....	9
7. References.....	10
8. Appendix: Key Findings from SAMUELE National Survey .....	12



# **SAMUELE Report**

## **ULLL National Survey**

### **1. Introduction**

University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) has gained increasing prominence in European policy and academic discourse over the past three decades. Since the 1990s, the embedding of lifelong learning (LLL) within the higher education (HE) sector has become a significant area of focus, driven by the sector's evolving role in supporting knowledge societies, economic competitiveness, and social inclusion. However, despite strong policy rhetoric, the development of across Europe – and globally – has been rather uneven.

As Slowey and Schuetze (2012) have argued, while LLL has been widely endorsed by international and supranational organisations, its implementation is largely shaped by national contexts, leading to significant disparities in practice and institutional commitment. Against this backdrop, the SAMUELE project conducted a comparative survey of ULLL across 18 European countries. The survey aims to provide a comparative overview of how ULLL is conceptualised, supported, and implemented within national higher education systems. The survey findings are intended to inform the development of a self-assessment tool for universities, as well as to strengthen the evidence base needed to advocate for more coherent, strategic, and impactful ULLL policies and practices.

### **2. Literature Review**

International organisations such as UNESCO and the European Union have consistently promoted a vision of LLL that positions higher education institutions (HEIs) as key actors in creating inclusive and flexible learning ecosystems. The 1998 World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century called on states to 'develop HEIs to include LLL approaches, giving learners an optimal range of choices and a flexibility of entry and exit points within the system' (UNESCO, 1998). The European Universities' Charter on LLL (EUA, 2008) echoed this vision, urging universities to make LLL a central component of their mission and strategy. More recently, EU-level communications (European Council, 2011; European Commission, 2020) have reaffirmed the role of HEIs in reaching out to non-traditional learners and promoting lifelong access to learning.

Despite this broad policy support, the extent to which ULLL is integrated into the institutional frameworks and operations of HEIs remains inconsistent. Critics argue that the holistic, humanistic vision of LLL has, in many contexts, been overshadowed by a market-oriented human capital approach. Scholars such as Jarvis (2001), Gouthro (2002), Keeney and Barrow (2012), and Mayo (2019) have cautioned against the

commodification of learning, where ULLL becomes primarily a vehicle for upskilling and enhancing employability, rather than for human development or democratic participation. The European University Association (2017) similarly warned that overemphasis on skills rhetoric in EU discourse risks marginalising the broader mission of HE to foster personal development, citizenship, and democratic engagement.

Within HEIs themselves, LLL is often not treated as a strategic priority. de Viron and Davies (2015) observed that LLL is often treated as an ancillary activity, rather than a strategic driver of institutional change. Michie (2021) referred to a tendency of institutions to pay 'lip service' to LLL without integrating it meaningfully into their strategies. Professor Tan Eng Chye of the National University of Singapore (Baker, 2021) has called for a 'full transformation' of higher education to realise the vision of LLL, but others like Gaebel and Zhang (2018) have questioned whether such ambition still exists in practice.

Persistent equity gaps in access to ULLL also remain a critical concern. Scholars have highlighted the persistence of the Matthew Effect in LLL where those who already benefit from education tend to continue accessing opportunities, while disadvantaged groups fall further behind (Osborne et al., 2015; Gouthro, 2002; Jarvis, 2007). To counteract this, organisations such as UNESCO (2020) and the UK's Centenary Commission on Adult Education (2019) have advocated for more inclusive models of ULLL. These call on HEIs to proactively address barriers to participation and engage marginalised communities through inclusive, responsive educational models.

Against this backdrop of policy ambition and uneven implementation, the SAMUELE project sought to gather empirical evidence of how ULLL is currently understood, supported, and practiced across Europe.

### 3. Methodology

The national survey was conducted as part of the SAMUELE project's efforts to better understand the state of ULLL across Europe. The survey targeted individuals with in-depth knowledge of their national ULLL contexts. To ensure the quality and reliability of the responses, the SAMUELE project team issued the survey through eucen's National Networks focused on ULLL and directly reached out to selected individual eucen members with recognised expertise in their respective countries. Respondents were advised that only individuals with substantial insight into national ULLL structures, policies, and practices should complete the survey. As a result, responses were collected from 18 countries, representing a geographically and structurally diverse cross-section of European Higher Education systems as can be seen in the map shown in *Figure 1*.

#### 3.1. Data Collection

The survey was administered in English using an online form. It consisted of both closed and open-ended questions, grouped under thematic headings to capture structural, policy, financial, demographic, and strategic dimensions of ULLL. Questions were designed to provide both quantitative indicators and qualitative insights into national systems.



*Figure 1 Map of countries participating in the SAMUELE National Survey*

### 3.2. Data Analysis

To enable a meaningful comparison across the 18 participating countries, a comparative matrix was constructed. The matrix was structured around five key thematic areas aligned with the SAMUELE project's analytical framework:

1. **Overview of National Context for ULLL**  
This section included items such as the presence of national ULLL policies or strategies, legislation, definitions of ULLL, quality assurance mechanisms, and perceptions of effectiveness. It also captured key the stakeholders and public bodies involved in ULLL governance
2. **Financing of ULLL**  
This section covered sources of funding for ULLL, as well as financial incentives available to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and learners. The matrix also assessed the perceived sufficiency of current funding levels
3. **ULLL Learners**  
This section focused on the characteristics and experiences of ULLL participants, including typical age ranges, target groups, motivations for engagement, and the barriers learners commonly face

#### 4. ULLL Offerings

This section examined the types and formats of ULLL programmes delivered by HEIs, including alignment with labour market needs, delivery modes (e.g. online, hybrid, face-to-face), and pedagogical approaches used.

#### 5. Strategic Outlook

This final section captured broader perspectives on ULLL trends and future directions, including emerging influences (e.g. digitalisation, microcredentials), systemic challenges, and stakeholders who should play a more significant role. Respondents were also asked to make specific recommendations for improving the attractiveness of ULLL in their national contexts.

The resulting matrix enabled both vertical (within-country) and horizontal (cross-country) analysis and supported the identification of shared patterns, regional distinctions, and unique models of ULLL development.

## 4. Key Findings

### 4.1. Overview of National Context for ULLL

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the data reveals significant variation in the maturity and coherence of national ULLL frameworks across Europe. Only 39% of respondents indicated that their country has a dedicated national policy or strategy for ULLL, while 50% reported partial implementation. Similarly, national legislation governing ULLL exists in just over half (56%) of the countries surveyed, and a formal national definition of ULLL is also present in only 56% of cases.

Perceptions of the effectiveness of national policy and legislation vary: 44% considered their system moderately effective, 28% minimally effective, and 22% very effective. Just 6% judged their national approach as extremely effective, and no respondents rated their system as completely ineffective.

Public authorities play a key role in the regulation of ULLL, with most respondents identifying a mix of ministries, national agencies, and qualifications bodies involved. Encouragingly, 83% of respondents confirmed the existence of national quality standards or mechanisms for ULLL.

In terms of stakeholder collaboration on ULLL, universities most frequently engage with employers and the private sector (94%), followed by regional or local authorities (83%), other HE or educational institutions (78%), trade unions and professional associations (61%), and civil society organisations (56%).

However, overall perceptions of national approaches to ULLL remain mixed. While 61% rated their system as moderately effective, only 6% considered it extremely effective, and a third (33%) rated it only slightly effective.

### 4.2. Financing of ULLL

Funding structures for ULLL vary widely and are often marked by fragmentation. The most common funding sources are student fees and national government funding, both cited by 72% of respondents. Other frequently mentioned sources include private

sector partnerships (67%), EU or international funding programmes (44%), and regional/local government funding (39%).

However, only 50% of respondents reported the availability of financial incentives for HEIs involved in ULLL. A more encouraging 67% reported financial incentives for learners, indicating that some national systems provide at least some support to encourage participation.

Despite the presence of diverse funding streams, the overall sufficiency of funding is a major concern. A striking 61% of respondents described ULLL funding in their country as not at all sufficient, while the remaining 39% saw it as somewhat efficient. No respondents described the funding landscape as fully sufficient, highlighting a clear and widespread funding gap that could undermine sustainability and growth in the sector.

### 4.3. ULLL Learners

The learner profile for ULLL across Europe is diverse, though some target groups are more prominent than others. The most frequently cited target group is employed professionals (72%), followed by unemployed professionals (50%). Alumni of higher education institutions (44%) and individuals without formal higher education qualifications (44%) are also commonly targeted. However, fewer respondents mentioned older adults (28%) and migrants/refugees (28%), highlighting the potential for broader inclusion strategies.

When asked about the typical age range of participants, 56% indicated that there is no typical age, reflecting the lifelong nature of ULLL participation. Nonetheless, mid-career learners (30–55 years) were cited by 44%, and early career participants (25–30 years) by 17%, suggesting a concentration around working-age adults.

Overwhelmingly, the most commonly reported motivations for learners to engage in ULLL are career-oriented. These include:

- Career advancement (94%)
- Career change (83%)
- Enhancing employability with new skills (78%)

However, personal goals also featured significantly:

- Personal enrichment (61%)
- Re-entering the workforce after a career break (56%)
- Lifelong curiosity and joy of learning (50%)

Barriers to access and participation remain a critical concern. The two most frequently cited obstacles were:

- Lack of financial resources (83%)
- Lack of time (83%)

These were closely followed by:

- Lack of guidance (67%)
- Lack of support from employers (67%)
- Lack of awareness about ULLL opportunities in higher education (50%)

Less frequently mentioned but still significant were:

- Lack of confidence to pursue study in HE (39%)
- Childcare issues, and technical barriers such as digital skills or access (both at 22%)

These findings underscore the need for more inclusive and flexible learning environments, backed by robust support systems, both institutional and personal, to facilitate equitable participation in ULLL.

#### *4.4. ULLL Offerings*

The types of offerings provided by universities for lifelong learners demonstrate a broad and flexible spectrum. All countries reported the presence of continuing education programmes (100%), while open and distance learning programmes were nearly as common (89%). A large majority also deliver:

- Short non-credit bearing courses (78%)
- Part-time credit-bearing courses (78%)
- CPD courses (78%)

More specialised formats such as executive education and microcredentials were reported by 61% of respondents, and apprenticeships by 39%, indicating growing but still uneven adoption of these models.

Modes of delivery are highly diverse and often technology-enhanced:

- Blended learning and face-to-face classroom delivery (both 94%) are the most frequently used
- Online synchronous learning is used by 83%, with asynchronous options close behind at 78%
- Workplace delivery (50%) and outreach delivery (39%) show efforts to bring learning into more flexible and applied environments

On the question of alignment with labour market needs, responses were evenly split:

- 50% of respondents believe ULLL offerings are fully aligned
- 50% indicated only partial alignment
- No respondents indicated a complete lack of alignment

A variety of pedagogical approaches are in use across the countries sampled, reflecting efforts to adapt to adult learners' needs:

- Online/blended learning is the most common (83%)
- Competency-based learning (67%) and work-based learning (61%) highlight applied and outcomes-focused approaches
- Recognition of prior learning (RPL), also at 61%, supports personalised and inclusive access to ULLL

This variety suggests a dynamic and responsive ULLL landscape across Europe, albeit with uneven implementation and room for deeper integration of labour market and learner needs.

#### 4.5. Strategic Outlook

The strategic outlook for ULLL in Europe reflects both the dynamic external environment and the systemic internal challenges facing HEIs. Trends influencing ULLL reflect rapid and substantial transformation pressures:

- Economic shifts demanding upskilling and reskilling (83%)
- Digitalisation and online learning (78%)
- Microcredentials and short courses (72%) are reshaping formats and expectations
- Demographic changes (50%) and stronger collaboration with industry (44%) are key drivers
- A government focus on ULLL is reported by 44%, though its impact appears uneven

The biggest challenges facing ULLL are clustered around:

- Funding and financial barriers (78% cite insufficient funding; 61% cite lack of incentives)
- Recognition and culture (56% note limited recognition of ULLL credentials; 50% cite lack of ULLL culture and national policy support)
- Institutional obstacles (50% report bureaucracy and resistance to change; 44% highlight staff training deficits)
- Awareness gaps remain an issue among employers (33%) and the general public (28%)

In terms of stakeholders who should play a greater role, the top actors identified include:

- National governments (72%)
- Regional/local governments (67%)
- University leadership (61%)
- Academic staff in HEIs (56%)

Other critical players include employers (44%), professional associations (44%), civil society (33%), and even the general public (22%).

Finally, the survey captured a wide range of recommendations for making ULLL more attractive, grouped into several priority areas:

- Policy & strategy development (33%) – including the creation of national ULLL policies, strategic frameworks, and legal obligations
- Funding & financial support (33%) – particularly for learners, employers, and institutions, alongside mechanisms like individual learning accounts (ILAs)
- Awareness & visibility (28%) – public communication campaigns, national LLL portals, and media engagement to build a culture of LLL
- Access & flexibility (22%) – such as part-time options, short courses, and flexible pathways
- Guidance and learner support (22%) – including career advice, support systems, and RPL
- Curriculum and pedagogical innovation (17%) – integrating microcredentials, co-designed learning, and adaptive formats
- Institutional capacity & staff development (17%) – investment in CPD, system building, and reduction of internal barriers

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this survey paint a nuanced picture of the current state and strategic trajectory of ULLL across the 18 European countries surveyed. While there is clear evidence of increasing interest and momentum in supporting ULLL - particularly in response to demographic shifts, economic disruption, and digitalisation - significant structural, financial, and cultural barriers remain.

The results strongly echo concerns in the literature regarding the disconnect between rhetoric and implementation. While European-level initiatives such as the European Universities' Charter on LLL (EUA, 2008) and the European Commission's 2020 call to diversify student bodies underscore a broad commitment to ULLL, the data suggest that only 39% of countries have a comprehensive national ULLL policy. Moreover, only 6% rate their national approach as very effective. This supports de Viron and Davies' (2015) and Michie's (2021) observations that LLL is often treated as a peripheral concern rather than a central institutional philosophy.

Funding and financial supports represent a critical obstacle in ULLL. Despite various funding sources being tapped - including national governments, student fees, and private sector partnerships - 61% of countries report that current ULLL funding is not at all sufficient. This aligns with Jarvis's (2001) critique that without sustained structural investment, the humanistic ideals of LLL cannot be realised. The limited availability of financial incentives for both learners and HEIs also perpetuates inequalities through the Matthew Effect: advantaged learners gain more access, while the disadvantaged fall further behind.

While the economic dimension of ULLL was strongly evident in the survey with the most commonly reported motivations for learners to engage in ULLL being career-oriented. It was nonetheless encouraging to see motivations such as personal enrichment (61%) and lifelong curiosity (50%) remain strong, suggesting room for a more holistic interpretation of ULLL.

From an institutional perspective, the lack of staff training (44%), bureaucratic hurdles (50%), and resistance to change (50%) all point to a systemic inertia within HEIs. This supports Gaebel and Zhang's (2018) scepticism regarding institutional willingness to fully embrace the transformation LLL requires. Moreover, the frequent lack of awareness among both the general public and employers reinforces the need for improved guidance, more strategic communication and greater outreach by HEIs. Importantly, the strong call for greater government involvement (72%) and clearer strategic direction reflects the view of the European Council (2011) and UNESCO (1998) that structural commitment must come from the top down. Respondents emphasised the need for clear policies, legal frameworks, integrated funding models, and national portals.

Taken together, the findings confirm that while ULLL is widely recognised as essential in navigating contemporary societal challenges, its implementation remains fragmented and under-resourced. To realise the vision articulated in European and global frameworks - of universities as engines of inclusive, lifelong, and human-centred education - a concerted shift is needed in both mindset and infrastructure.

## 6. Conclusion

This national survey marks a vital step in the SAMUELE project's mission to build a comprehensive understanding of the conditions and frameworks shaping ULLL across Europe. The findings indicate both promise and persistent challenges. While ULLL is increasingly recognised as a key element in addressing labour market transitions, demographic shifts, and societal transformation, its implementation is still hindered by insufficient funding, inconsistent policy support, and varying degrees of institutional commitment.

Despite these limitations, there is clear momentum and appetite for change. Numerous countries have introduced partial strategies or legislation for ULLL, and stakeholder ecosystems - from employers to civil society organisations - are increasingly involved. The diversity of ULLL offerings, blended pedagogies, and motivations among learners shows strong potential for inclusive, lifelong engagement. However, achieving the transformative vision set out in European and international frameworks will require stronger alignment between national systems and institutional practices.

Recognising this, the next phase of the SAMUELE project shifts focus to the institutional level. The project team has already surveyed almost 100 HEIs across Europe to explore how ULLL is structured, managed, and delivered on the ground. These responses offer valuable insight into institutional governance, leadership, and innovative approaches to ULLL. By connecting the results from the national survey discussed here with institutional perspectives gathered from the HEI questionnaire, SAMUELE aims to build a more comprehensive understanding of current practices in ULLL in Europe. The ultimate goal is to identify the key changes needed to develop an inclusive, strategic, and future-oriented model of ULLL that meets the learning needs of current and future generations.

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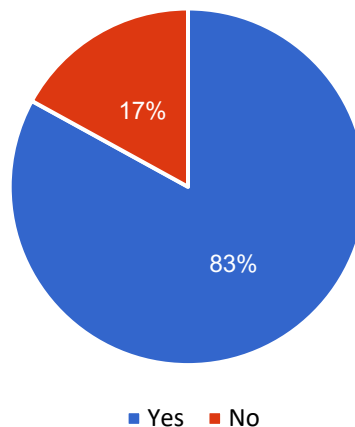
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## 8. Appendix: Key Findings from SAMUELE National Survey

### 1. Overview of National Context for ULLL

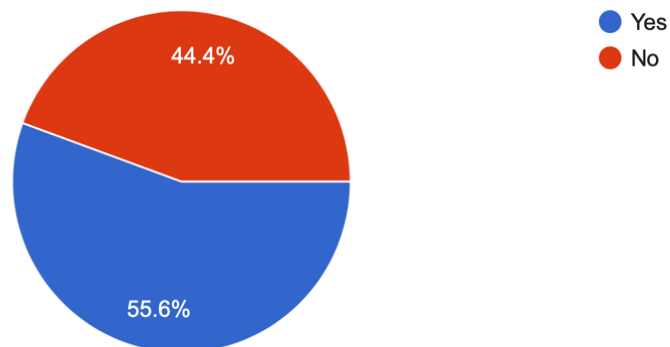
1. Does your country have a national policy or strategy for ULLL?

18 responses



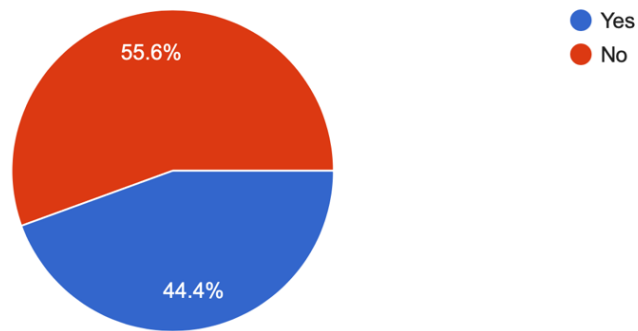
3. Are there specific national regulations or legislation for ULLL in your country?

18 responses



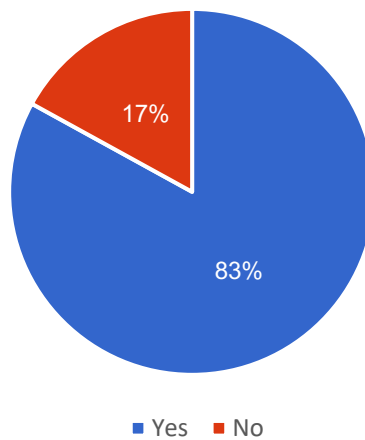
5. Is ULLL defined in your national policy, legislation or regulation?

18 responses



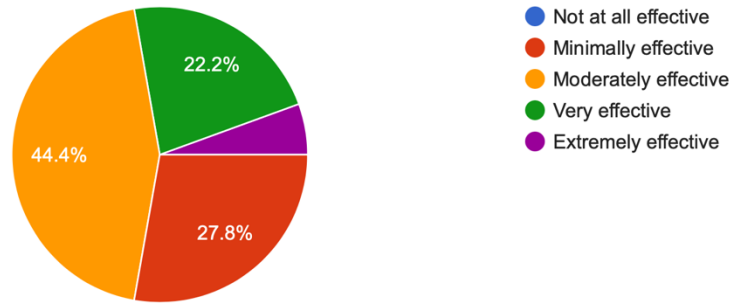
8. Are there any national quality control standards or mechanisms to ensure that ULLL in your country follows the standards expected at HE level?

18 responses



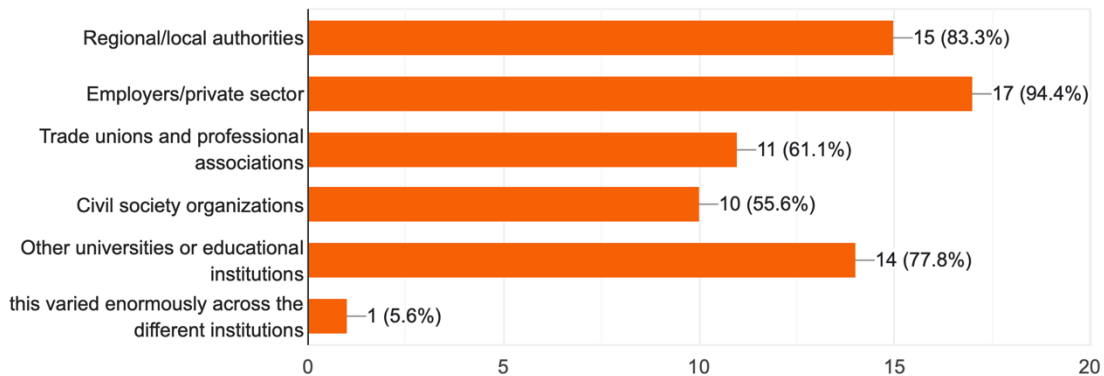
10. How would you rate the effectiveness of these national policies, strategies, legislation, standards etc. in your country in supporting ULLL?

18 responses



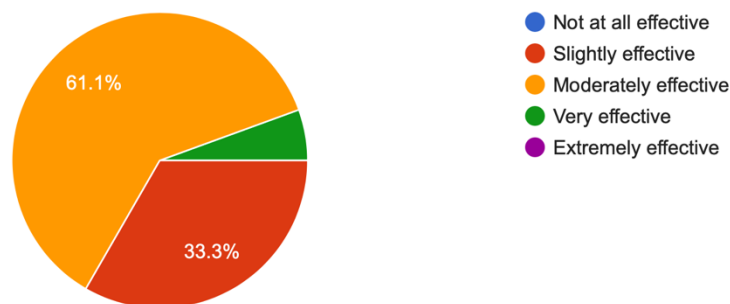
28. Do HEIs in your country typically collaborate with the following stakeholders in ULLL provision?  
Multiple selections possible.

18 responses



35. In your opinion, how effective is your country's approach to ULLL?

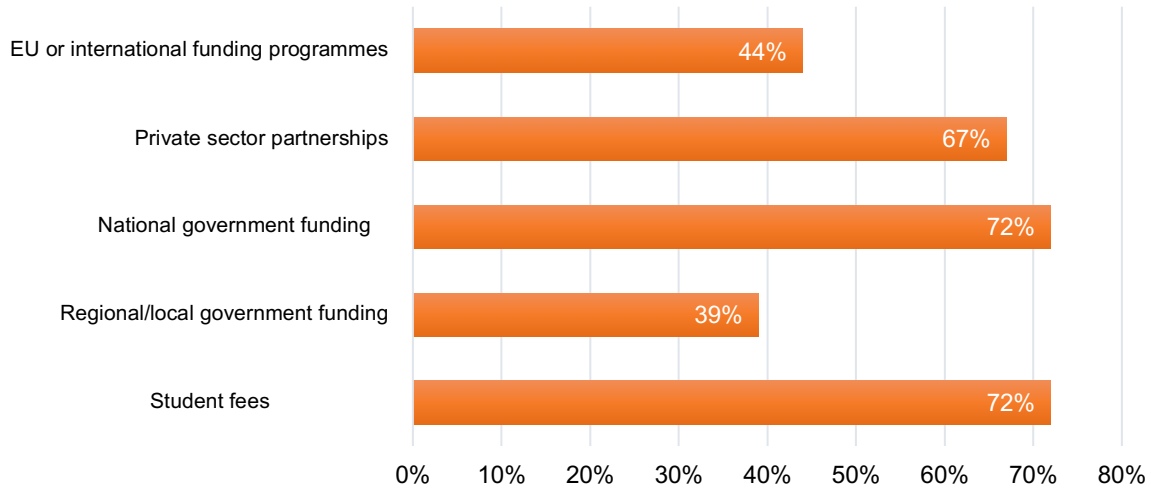
18 responses



## 2. Financing of ULLL

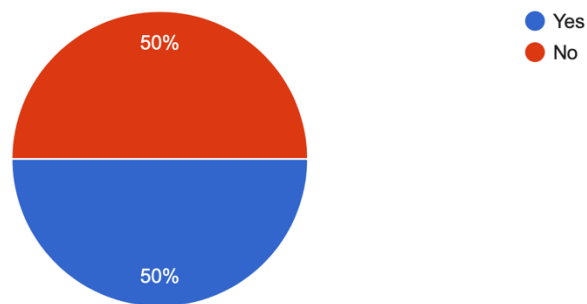
### 11. What are the primary funding sources for ULLL in your country?

18 responses



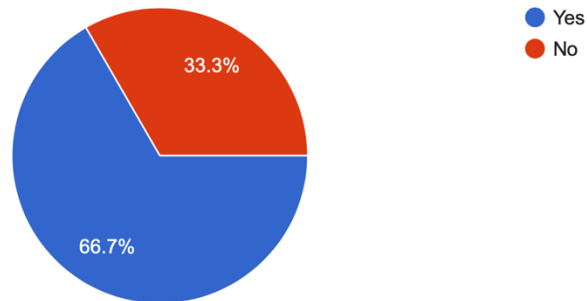
### 13. Are there any specific financial incentives (e.g., subsidies, tax benefits) available to HEIs to support ULLL?

18 responses



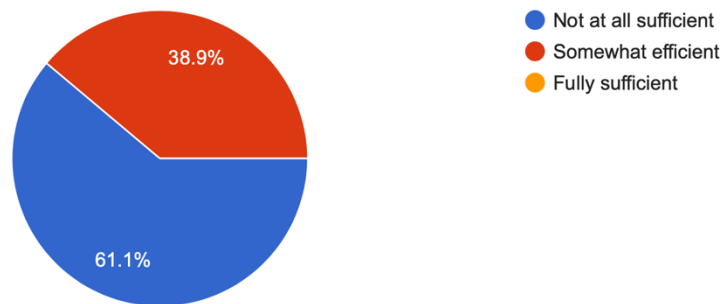
15. Are there any specific financial incentives (e.g., scholarships, tax breaks, individual learning accounts) available to learners in your country to support their participation in ULLL?

18 responses



17. In your opinion, is funding for ULLL sufficient in your country?

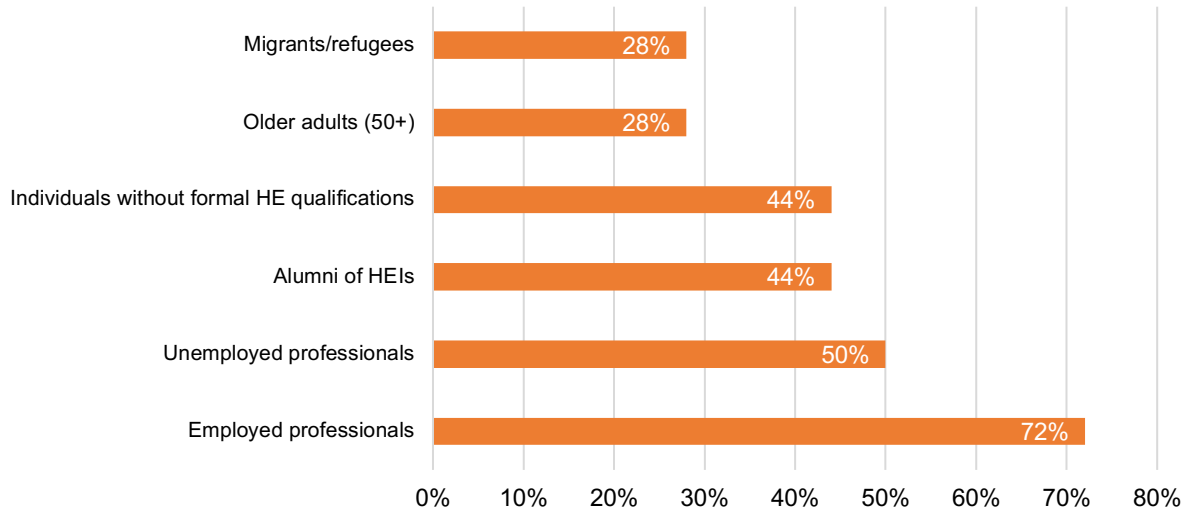
18 responses



### 3. ULLL Learners

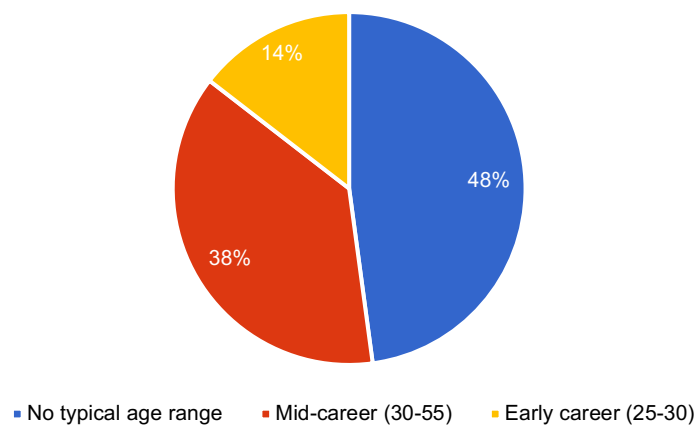
#### 23. Who is the target group for ULLL in your country?

18 responses



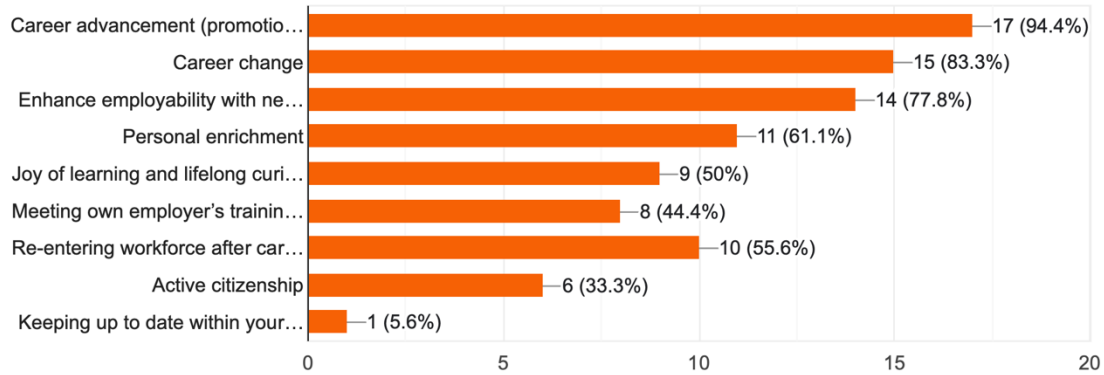
#### 24. What is the typical age range of the target group for ULLL in your country?

18 responses



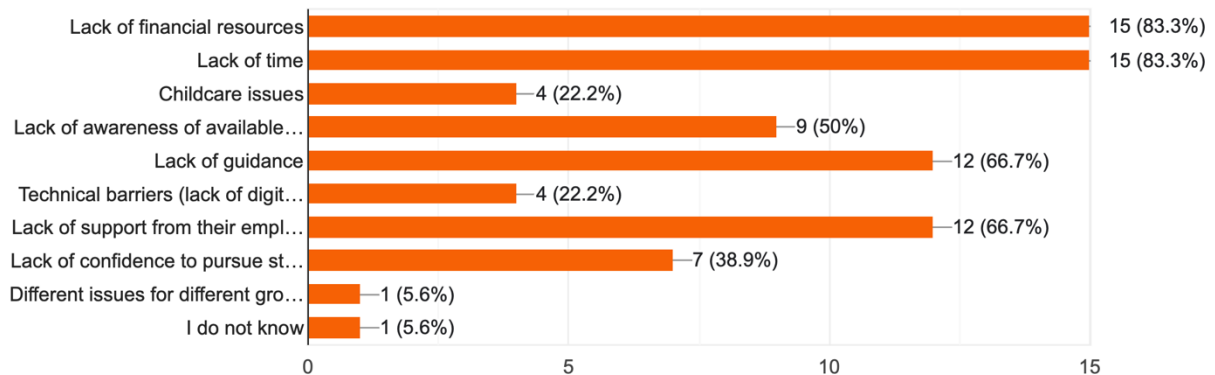
26. What are the most common motivations for learners in your country to participate in ULLL in HE? Multiple selections possible.

18 responses



27. What are the most common barriers learners face in accessing ULLL opportunities in HE in your country? Multiple selections possible.

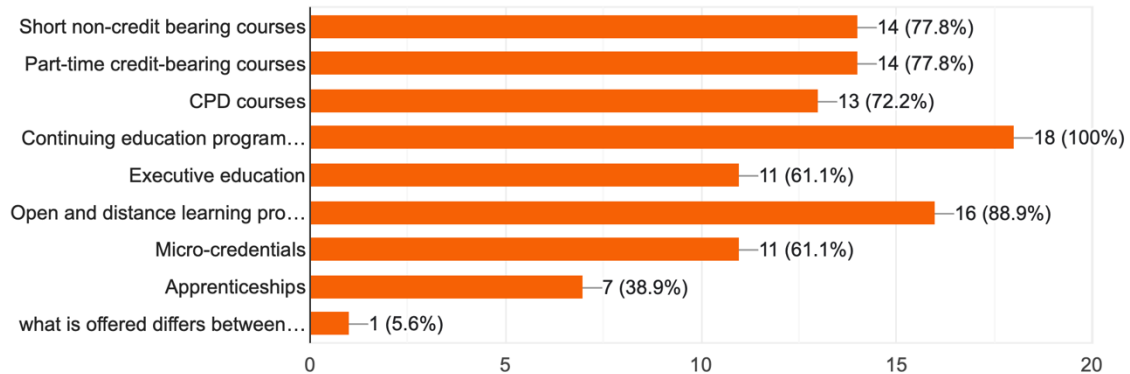
18 responses



#### 4. ULLL Offerings

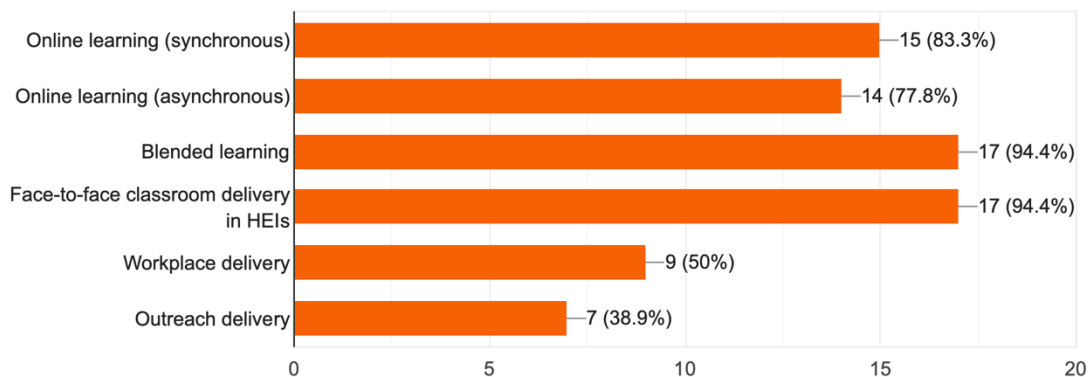
18. What types of offerings are typically considered as ULLL in your country? Multiple selections possible.

18 responses



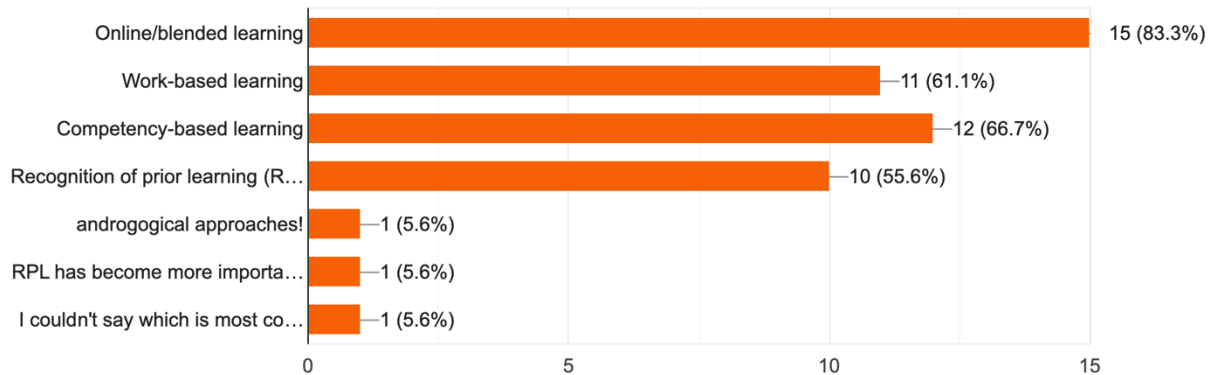
22. What modes of delivery are typically used for ULLL in your country?

18 responses



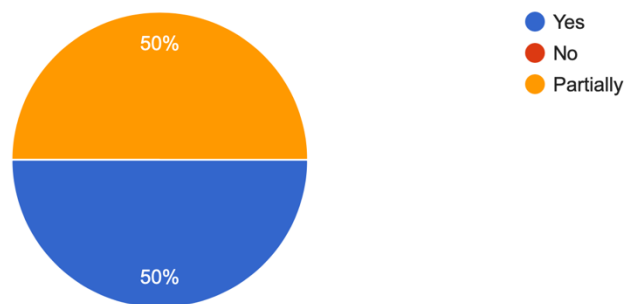
19. Are there specific pedagogical approaches or learning methods commonly used in ULLL programmes? Multiple selections possible.

18 responses



20. Is ULLL typically designed in alignment with national or regional labour market needs?

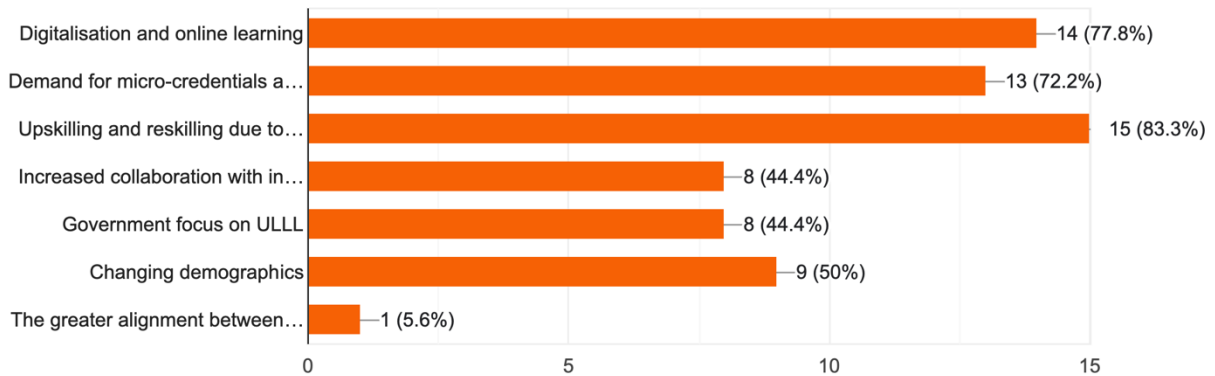
18 responses



### 5. Strategic Outlook

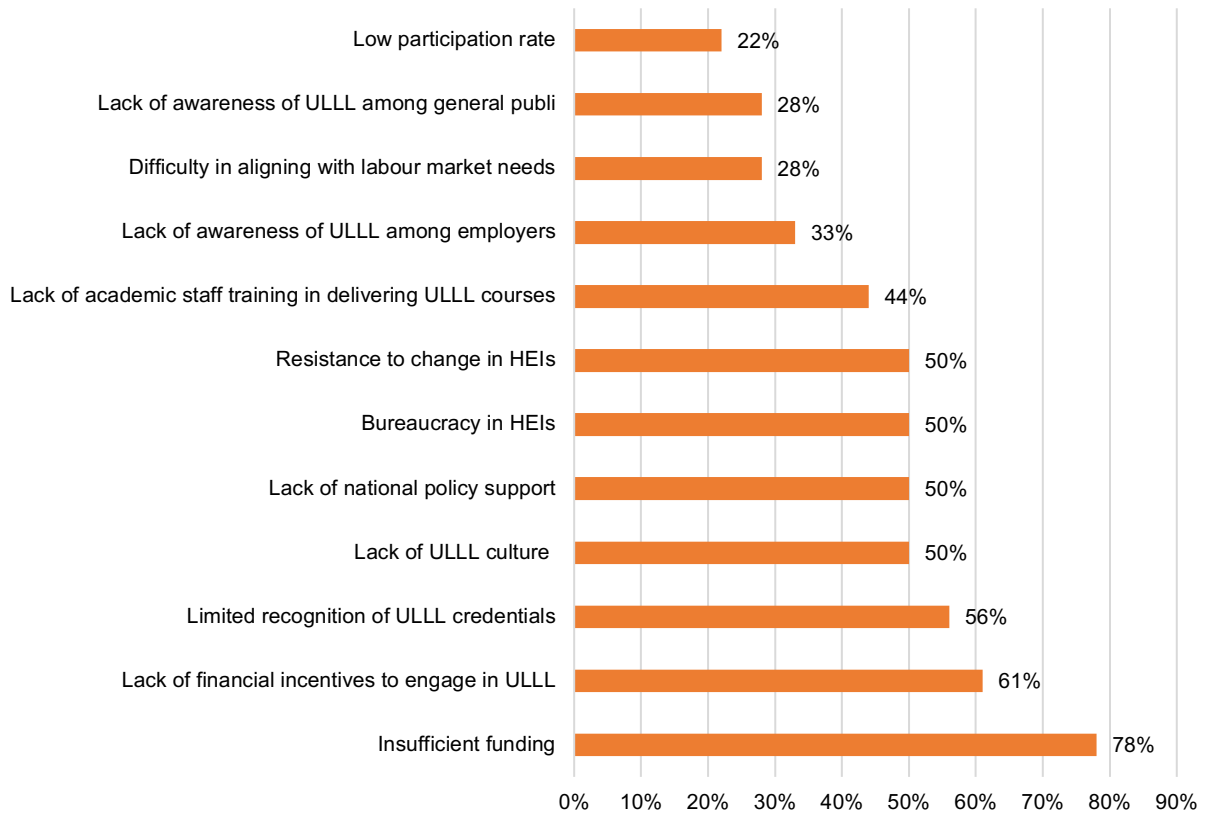
33. What are the current trends influencing ULLL in your country? Multiple selections possible.

18 responses



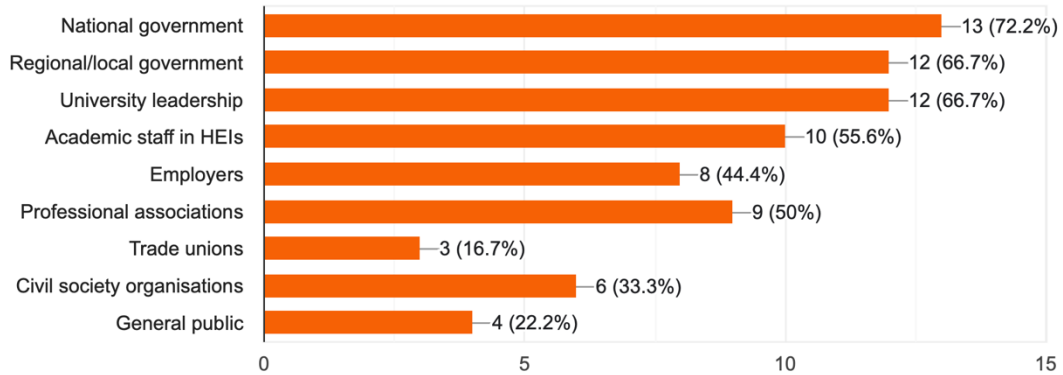
34. What are the biggest challenges that ULLL is currently facing?

18 responses



32. Which stakeholder group(s) from the list do you think should play a greater role in supporting ULLL in HE? Multiple selections possible.

18 responses







How is University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) organised across Europe? What frameworks and regulations are in place? Where have the most successful measures been implemented to make ULLL a reality? What are the key challenges and enabling factors to deliver a high-quality ULLL offer that meets today's needs?

If you're looking for answers to these questions—and more—the **SAMUELE Report** offers a comprehensive overview of the ULLL landscape in Europe in 2025.