Making lifelong learning central to university strategy

SUMMARY REPORT

carringtoncrisp

UALL

Introduction

The evolution of universities throughout history mirrors the shifting needs of society, from their origins educating clerics in Europe in the Middle Ages to their pivotal role in equipping professionals for successive waves of industrial revolutions. However, in the face of today's lightning-fast technological advancements, the question arises: can universities sustain their relevance?

The accelerating pace of change demands a re-evaluation of traditional educational paradigms to ensure they can meet the evolving demands of the world of work. Additionally, demographic shifts such as longer life expectancy and aging populations in many nations further underscore the imperative to reevaluate traditional approaches to education and meet the needs of lifelong learners, both practical and social.

The concept of lifelong learning is far from novel; continuing education, adult education, and in-company programmes have been available for decades. Moreover, numerous professions have mandated ongoing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to maintain the right to practice. However, in contrast to the past when learners were often limited to local providers, the internet has revolutionised learning, offering opportunities that were previously unimaginable.

CarringtonCrisp, in association with the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL), UPCEA and EUCEN, has conducted an international study to explore the perspectives of both employers and individual learners on the current state and the future of lifelong learning.

Two surveys were conducted in November 2024 to explore attitudes towards lifelong learning - one involving individual learners and the other employers, in addition to undertaking desk research and a review of recent academic literature covering lifelong learning. Interviews were also conducted with university providers, employers and others.

This document provides a summary of the full report. The full report can be downloaded by scanning the QR codes on the back cover or at either of these website addresses: uall.ac.uk or carringtoncrisp.com/intelligence/ll25

Particular thanks go to the following institutions who supported the study financially and those who gave their time for interviews:

Aberystwyth University
Bangor University
Cardiff University
Goldsmiths, University of London
Hong Kong Metropolitan University
Imperial College
London South Bank University
Middlesex University
The Nation Building Institute, Thailand
Newcastle University
Oxford Brookes University
University College London
University of Hertfordshire
University of Liverpool
University of Oxford
University of St Andrew's
University of Sussex
University of West London
University of Wolverhampton

Executive summary

In a recent article titled 'The English higher education market is broken' in the Financial Times, Philip Augar, author of the 2018 Augar Review into post-18 education and funding, devoted a single line to lifelong learning as part of his solution, 'A commitment to lifelong learning would restore a slump in adult education'.[1]

Lifelong learning continues to grow in importance for universities, individuals, employers and communities. For individuals and employers, demand is shaped by two overarching themes: flexibility and value for money. For learners, the motivation to engage in further study stems from a desire for skills development and personal growth, with many also choosing to learn for enjoyment. For employers, learning is seen as a strategic tool to manage change, address skills shortages, and drive productivity.

Individuals expect to engage in education more frequently and to continue learning into retirement. Their preferences are shifting towards shorter, more flexible learning formats, delivered in blended or online formats. While universities remain respected for their academic quality, research contributions and employer recognition, they are also viewed as costly and sometimes limited in the types of learning they offer, and they face tough competition from commercial providers. Learners are open to paying for learning, but also expect financial support from employers and governments. There is strong interest in technology subjects, but soft skills are also in high demand. Individual learners increasingly expect high-quality video content, accessible at anytime and anywhere.

Employers, meanwhile, are navigating a period of rapid change. They are looking for training solutions that are adaptable, efficient, and capable of helping staff adopt new technologies and ways of working. Flexibility is critical, not only in course content and delivery, but also in provider location, with many employers working with international institutions.

Universities are acknowledged as credible providers, but are often not the first choice, with employers leaning towards private training firms and professional bodies that can tailor offerings to their needs. Online providers are gaining traction, particularly those offering robust data on learner progress and impact. Across the board, value for money remains a key consideration, along with the need for providers to understand employers' unique challenges and to be an effective learning partner.

For universities, lifelong learning is not new, but the way it is being sought by individuals and employers and the way it is being delivered by competitors beyond higher education, means systems and strategies need to change. The future of lifelong learning lies in innovative delivery models that harness technology, foster partnerships (both between universities and with external providers), and embrace flexible, demand-driven solutions. Imaginative thinking is required to see the full potential of lifelong learning.

1) https://www.ft.com/content/7514ea72-70f8-469c-ac06-dbc82c993b39

"Workers of the future will spend more time on activities that machines are less capable of, such as managing people, applying expertise, and communicating with others. They will spend less time on predictable physical activities and on collecting and processing data, where machines already exceed human performance. The skills and capabilities required will also shift, requiring more social and emotional skills and more advanced cognitive capabilities, such as logical reasoning and creativity."

MCKINSEY GLOBAL INSTITUTE

Conclusions

There are three key findings from the research.

Firstly, education needs to be regarded as a lifelong endeavour. This message came through loud and clear, from learners and from employers. The pace of technological change was reported as a particular imperative, with the impact of AI being perhaps emblematic.

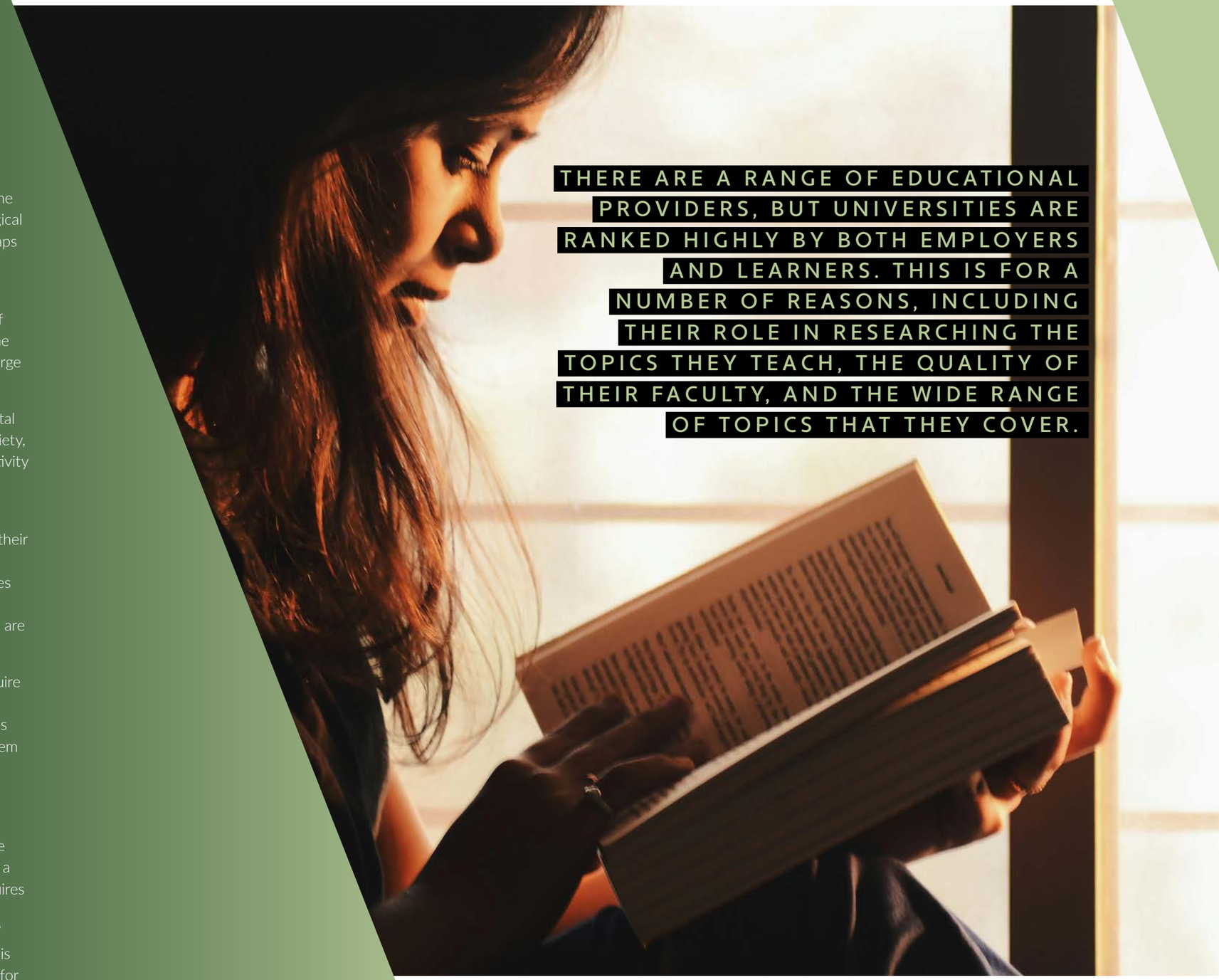
Any country wishing to be successful economically will certainly need to invest massively to keep up. It would be disastrous, though, to take too narrow a view of the skills required. What is needed is a workforce – indeed a population – with the capabilities to engage effectively with as yet unknown technologies as these emerge in the future.

Employers reported creativity and communication as being important. It is also vital to remember that technological change impacts individuals, communities and society, so the importance of lifelong learning goes far beyond its contribution to productivity growth and innovation at work.

Secondly, there are a range of educational providers, but universities are ranked highly by both employers and learners. This is for a number of reasons, including their role in researching the topics they teach, the quality of their faculty, and the wide range of topics that they cover. The successful delivery of lifelong learning requires effective partnership working between universities and other providers; local government, including mayoral combined authorities; and employers. Universities are well placed to play a role in galvanising and developing such partnership working.

Thirdly, though, for universities to contribute to the full extent necessary will require them to change. Employers and learners want access to short courses as well as degree programmes, taught in a variety of formats. This requires different systems and processes to those developed to handle full-time degree students. Such system change requires serious investment.

The UK government has set five key missions, including economic growth, and creating opportunity. These will not be achieved without a revolution in skills and lifelong learning. While that learning will need to be delivered locally, it will require a commitment – from the UK and devolved governments – at national level, with a strategic intent, and funding. It will also require universities to change, which requires investment, which government will need to provide, otherwise it simply will not be possible at the scale and pace required. That funding would not be to 'bail out' the university sector, it would be to enable universities to change in the way that is required to achieve the government's missions. To invest in the systems required for the sort of flexible courses that employers and learners need.



Lifelong learning for individuals & employers

Two surveys were undertaken in November 2024, one with 10,210 individuals from across 40 countries and a second with 1,255 employers from 32 countries. This section summarises the key results.

Key insights from employers

Employers are investing in staff development for a variety of reasons, with more than a third identifying as priorities - improving productivity, introducing new technologies, developing high potential staff, maintaining professional standards and building a workforce fit for future business needs.

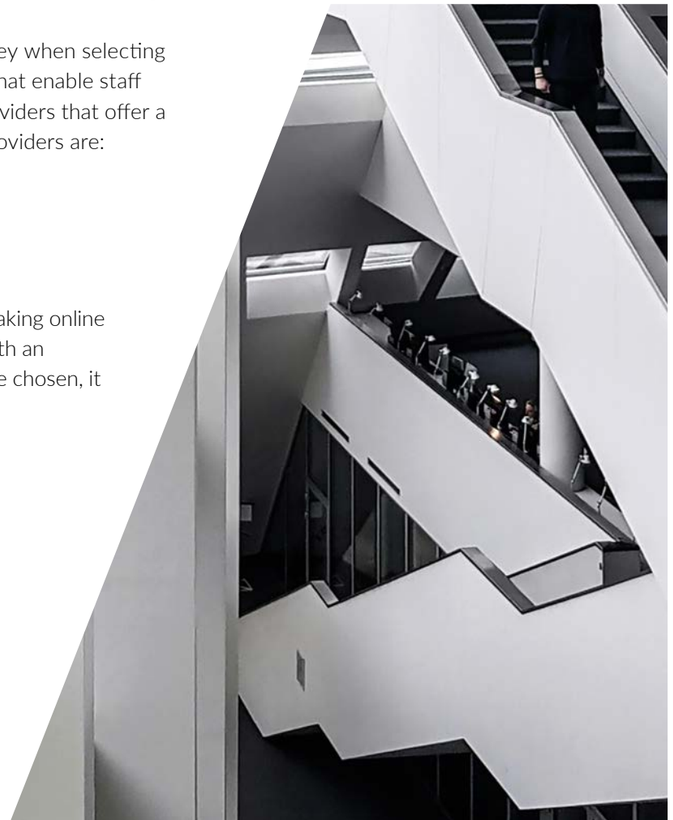
In meeting these demands, there is a strong emphasis on short non-degree university programmes, industry certifications and coaching, although a quarter of employers continue to express interest in postgraduate qualifications. When it comes to programme types, employers demonstrate a flexible approach: 36% use a blend of credit-bearing and non-credit options, while 30% focus exclusively on credit-bearing programmes, and 26% rely solely on non-credit bearing formats.

Employers place a strong emphasis on value for money when selecting providers for staff development, preferring courses that enable staff to continue working while learning and favouring providers that offer a broad range of options. The most frequently used providers are:

- **private training providers**
- **professional, industry or trade bodies**
- **universities**

Nearly half the employers (49%) would support staff taking online courses with a university based in another country, with an additional 39% open to the idea. When universities are chosen, it is typically due to:

- **their reputation for developing knowledge**
- **qualifications that are widely recognised by employers**
- **research activity that adds value to the learning experience**
- **the quality of faculty delivering the courses**



> ‘We need to hire people who can continuously learn, all of us need to evolve as the world evolves and the market changes.’
>
> **EMPLOYER**

However, there are several reasons employers may choose not to work with universities. These include:

- **perceptions that universities are too theoretical and not closely aligned with real-world business challenges**
- **the view that other providers better meet specific development needs**
- **a belief that universities lack the specialised expertise required for certain topics**

To better understand future learning and development priorities, employers were asked to identify skills they consider essential but difficult to find when recruiting. The most commonly cited areas of shortage included agility, change management, and decision-making in uncertain and complex environments. In the technology space, digital transformation emerged as the most critical skill, followed by artificial intelligence.

Employers would like to see universities evolve to better meet their workforce development needs. More than 70% of employers agreed on the importance of universities:

- **continuing to develop more flexible learning approaches**
- **offering affordable programmes that deliver practical, work-relevant skills**
- **becoming more innovative in how they support lifelong learning**

Online learning is expected to become the standard approach to staff development, with 64% of employers already using blended learning (a combination of face-to-face and online delivery).

Employers are also seeking innovation in learning design and delivery. Key features considered ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ valuable by more than half of employers include:

- **interactive online materials that track and confirm progress**
- **subscription models that allow staff to personalise their learning journeys**
- **on-demand video content to reinforce and extend learning**
- **bite-sized updates that can be completed in under an hour**
- **follow-up articles linked to previous learning topics**

For UK employers, the apprenticeship levy remains a key focus and its use is set to rise. Employers plan to use higher and degree apprenticeships funded through the levy to:

- **develop the skills of existing staff**
- **recruit and train younger workers**
- **strengthen leadership capabilities**

Key insights from learners

Learners are primarily motivated by the desire to acquire a specific new skill and to support their personal development, though improved earning potential is also a strong driver. For many, return on investment is a key consideration when choosing what and how to study. That said, a genuine interest in a subject remains important, with 23% of all respondents selecting it as a primary motivation.

- **58% of those aged over 65 are planning to study because of enjoyment of the subject compared with only 16% of those aged 21-35**

Among learners, 68% expect to upskill or reskill to advance their careers, and 69% believe they will need to update their learning more frequently to stay current with evolving skill requirements. Almost three-quarters (74%) are more likely to remain with an employer that actively supports their development, and 64% are more likely to join an organisation that includes lifelong learning in its employee offering. Flexibility remains essential, with 75% of respondents stating that they are only likely to engage with learning if it is delivered in a flexible format.

When it comes to preferred formats, postgraduate degrees rank only seventh, with learners showing a clear preference for short courses and certificates lasting from a week to a month.

Universities and colleges are the most popular choice for those looking to study, although around a third would choose a commercial online learning provider. More than a third say they would choose a university or college because:

- **they have a strong reputation for developing knowledge**
- **their qualifications are widely recognised by employers**
- **they offer high-quality teaching**
- **they provide a wide range of subjects**
- **their research adds value to the learning experience**

However, some learners are discouraged from choosing universities due to perceived high costs and the misconception that they only offer full degree programmes.

Value for money is the most important factor for learners when selecting a provider, closely followed by recognition of quality. Concerns about the cost of learning are closely linked to broader cost-of-living pressures. Nearly half of respondents (46%) expect to pay for future learning out of their own pockets. A quarter (24%) say they would only participate in free courses, while the same proportion expect funding to come from local or national government. One in five anticipate that their employer will cover the costs.

When asked what universities should prioritise in the future, 70% or more of learners agree they should:

- **develop more affordable programmes that deliver relevant skills for those in work or seeking employment**
- **offer more courses at convenient times, particularly outside standard working hours**

Among the work-related subjects of interest to learners, artificial intelligence emerged as the most popular choice. Other subjects selected by at least one in five respondents included business development, communication skills, digital marketing, cybersecurity, leadership, and e-commerce.

Blended learning is the most popular study format, with 55% of respondents preferring a mix of face-to-face and online learning, and 45% favouring a combination of live and self-directed online learning. Despite this, 38% still express a preference for fully face-to-face learning.

55%

Blended learning is the most popular study format, with 55% of respondents preferring a mix of face-to-face and online learning

Policy recommendations

Universities

Lifelong learning means many different things for many different audiences. Universities considering how to develop their lifelong learning provision should have a clear purpose in doing so. Provision should be central to the university strategy, but the focus will vary depending on the university's wider mission, history and positioning. The primary purpose may be community-based, part of a civic mission, supporting the development of key skills, engaging employers, developing alumni relationships or a combination of these and other elements. A necessary first step is a recognition that learning is a lifelong pursuit, not limited to younger people seeking degrees.

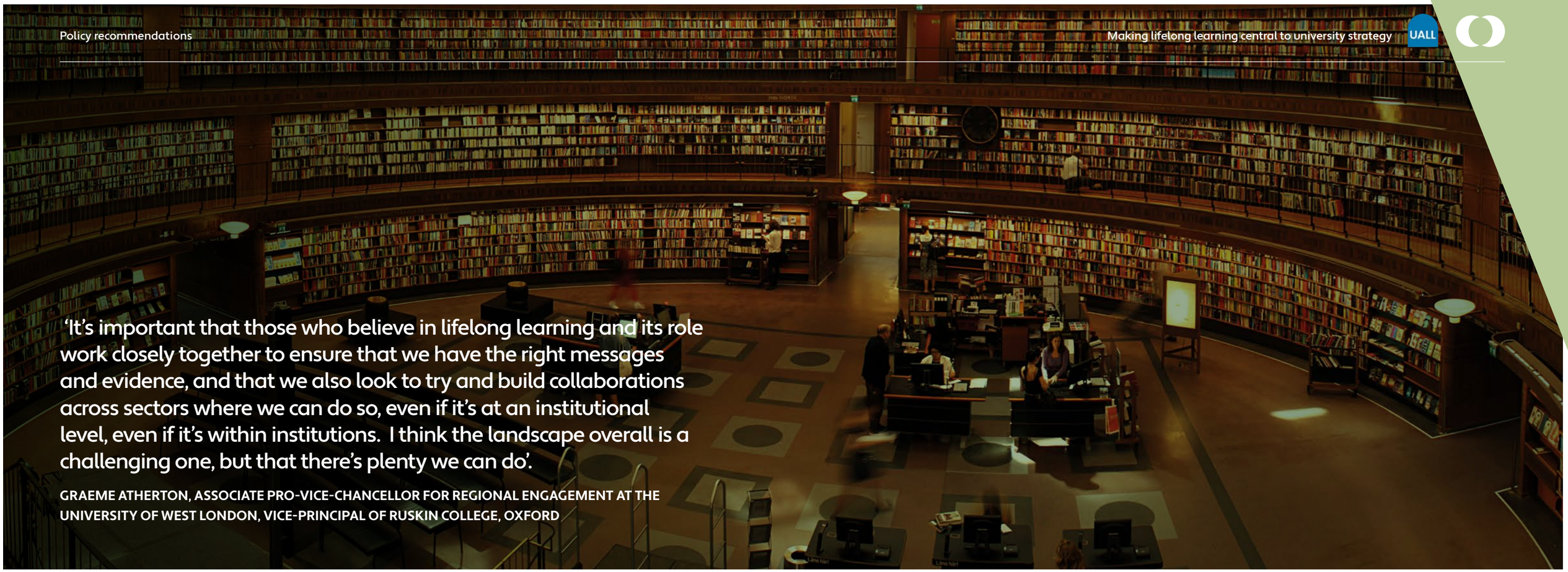
The successful development of lifelong learning provision by universities will likely require a significant programme of change management. Systems and services that were established for the purpose of delivering degrees to residential students studying on a full-time basis are unlikely to be appropriate for handling the shorter courses and flexible delivery methods that make up much of the demand for lifelong learning.

Universities will need to consider how they might make best use of new delivery tools to provide lifelong learning. Both individuals and employers anticipate much of their future learning will involve an element of online delivery. High quality video and innovative pedagogy will be a feature of future lifelong learning and universities should experiment to develop new approaches for lifelong learning provision.

Delivering lifelong learning requires both the same and different skills as those already found in a university. Research-active faculty can play a valuable role in informing programmes and content, but teaching in short bursts without formal assessment may require staff training for successful delivery. Sales skills may need developing to ensure strong B2B outcomes compared with the B2C focus that is common and well developed in most universities today.

Provision of lifelong learning by a university is unlikely to be something it does on its own. Partnerships may need to be formed locally and globally, with employers, local government, community organisations, and with other learning providers, including those providing services in the learning space.

And universities need to not only develop new provision, they need to communicate effectively with potential learners, employers, and other organisations that this new provision is now available.



‘It’s important that those who believe in lifelong learning and its role work closely together to ensure that we have the right messages and evidence, and that we also look to try and build collaborations across sectors where we can do so, even if it’s at an institutional level, even if it’s within institutions. I think the landscape overall is a challenging one, but that there’s plenty we can do’.

GRAEME ATHERTON, ASSOCIATE PRO-VICE-CHANCELLOR FOR REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON, VICE-PRINCIPAL OF RUSKIN COLLEGE, OXFORD

Employers

Building productivity at work means making a commitment to developing staff at all levels in an organisation not simply providing new technology. Employers need to be clear about the skills their organisation requires and build skill development into their business strategies. Identifying existing skills, recognising skill development on the job, and making it easy for staff to acquire new skills will all be key to successfully growing productivity.

> The study is clear – attracting and retaining staff will be made easier if employers demonstrate their commitment to lifelong learning. That commitment may in part be financial, part in providing the time to learn new skills, and part in communicating the value of skills development to existing and potential staff.

Learning and skill development requires investment by employers. While there are many good examples of employers developing the skills of their staff, overall spending by employers on learning and development seems to have declined recently. Ensuring consistent support for individual staff and for programmes across groups of staff will be key to developing a learning culture in an organisation.

Engagement with universities to build programmes for individual organisations, sectors or regional partnerships will yield benefits for both employers and universities. Backing that engagement with the provision of opportunities for new staff and programmes for existing staff will be key to building long-term relationships between employers and universities that ultimately lead to growing productivity.

Government

Recognising the need for lifelong learning as a strategic priority for the country must be a requirement of any government. To build prosperity and fund priorities, government needs successful universities and businesses to deliver the learning needed for increased productivity.

In order to advance provision of lifelong learning, all partners involved need certainty, whether that is funding or the roll-out of policy.

Universities need to know that there is support to help them develop new lifelong learning provision. While universities recognise the need to develop new provision, to do so in the current financial situation that many face will be difficult if not impossible. Government investment in innovation and transformation of university provision will result in stronger and more effective delivery of lifelong learning into the future.

Employers also need certainty to invest in lifelong learning, and this too requires leadership from government, committing to a clear national strategy. Employers need to be able to plan the growth of their staff development knowing that frameworks and policies will be consistently delivered over extended periods. Knowing that policies which have been successfully rolled out over a number of years through partnerships with universities, such as level 7 apprenticeships, will continue, offers the degree of certainty that employers need to support their investment decisions. Similarly, policy on recognition of prior learning needs to be developed. There are still unanswered questions around the Lifelong Learning Entitlement.

All this calls for a national strategy for lifelong learning, with a responsible Government Minister to report annually to parliament, and with the funding to enable successful uptake, delivery and impact.

Project methodology

The final report has been prepared through three key activities:

First, desk research to assess current trends in lifelong learning.

Second, interviews with universities, employers, local government and other organisations to assess their role in lifelong learning and how they are supporting communities. All the participating institutions were invited to take part in an interview and to recommend other contacts for interviews. Each interview followed a similar format focusing on the following themes:

- **The definition of lifelong learning**
- **Lifelong learning activities undertaken by their institution/organisation**
- **Future developments in lifelong learning**

Wherever possible interviews were recorded in order to help the production of the report, but all respondents were offered the option that their comments could be provided anonymously. All institutions referenced in the report were provided with the information set out about them in the report so it could be checked for accuracy.

And third, surveys with 10,210 learners and 1,255 employers – using a sample generated through a panel provider - were drawn from around 40 countries in Europe, North America, Latin America, India, Africa and Asia with the learner sample split across age groups from 20 to 80. No information was collected that would identify any individual taking part in the surveys, and completion of the surveys was entirely optional.

The panel provider is a member of both the British Polling Council and the Market Research Society. High levels of data quality are ensured through several validations and checks that respondents go through before entering the survey, as well as quality checks after the data has been collected. Before entering a survey, a combination of parameters enables the firm to construct a unique fingerprint of respondents to identify them and stop duplicates occurring.

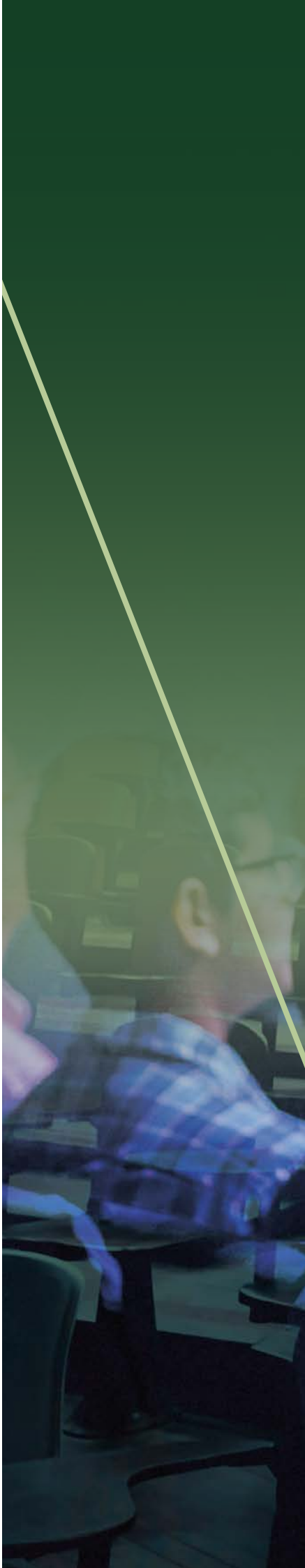
Additional link security is in place masking URLs and stopping link manipulation from fraudulent respondents. The survey software used also includes reCAPTCHA to deter bots and automated respondents. Geo-IP, Device ID and Respondent ID validation is used to ensure that the survey is being taken in the correct country and is another layer of security to stop duplicates. The panel provider draws on a panel of over 1 million engaged respondents globally with access to over 80 countries. The panel provider can target respondents across more than 100 attributes.

‘Online is here to stay and a lot of Chief Learning Officers have caught up with the fact that online providers can do it well and deliver it at much cheaper prices.’

EMPLOYER

admin@uall.ac.uk
uall.ac.uk

info@carringtoncrisp.com
carringtoncrisp.com

The full report can be downloaded by
scanning either of the QR codes shown here.

With thanks to UPCEA and EUCEN for their support of this report