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Strategic positioning of continuing education in research-intensive universities

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Strategic positioning of continuing education in research-intensive universities

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The idea for this thesis was born from my professional context when it became clear that Erasmus University Rotterdam was exploring a more structured approach to integrating lifelong learning and continuing education into its regular activities. As I was working at one of institutes related to the university that provides continuing education, the topic was close to my heart and a perfect fit for the focus of my studies for an MBA in Strategic Management and Technology. The research trajectory provided me with numerous insightful conversations with incredibly strategic colleagues in the Netherlands and abroad, for which I will always be deeply grateful. I want to thank my managers, as well as my team and friends at the Institute for Housing and Urban Development who provided me with so much support throughout this journey; the colleagues at the Erasmus University Holding, who took the initiative for this study, accompanied me during the interviews, and were the most helpful sparring partners; as well as the fantastic interviewees and their impressive continuing education institutions – the fact that they were willing to provide their insights for this study openly and foster a spirit of collaboration underscores the value of learning across institutions. I also want to wholeheartedly thank my supervisor, who asked the right questions which made my thesis far better than I could have accomplished myself; and to my best friend and colleague in the field, who was always there to support me when things got difficult. My endless gratefulness goes out to my husband, sons, my friends, and the whole family who were so incredibly patient with me during this time when much of my attention was devoted to my studies.

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Franziska Schultz.

Abstract

With knowledge developing at unprecedent speed, and a population that is both getting older and staying in the workforce longer, continuous learning across all ages is critical to address the challenges of our time. Research-intensive universities are increasingly recognizing their key role in these developments and are focusing more on making continuing education and lifelong learning a part of their core activities.

This thesis examines the strategic positioning of continuing education in research-intensive universities. It does so by identifying the main purposes the universities want to achieve by embedding this non-core task and assessing which types of continuing education units are most successful in achieving the different purposes, as well as which other factors are critical to support this activity. The findings are based on qualitative data gathered through interviews with leaders of continuing education units in recognized research-intensive universities in Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Using the Gioia method of qualitative research, the findings reveal that three purposes compete for strategic attention: most of the interviewed continuing education units within universities try to operate between the tension of fulfilling an access, impact and engagement mission while having to be financially viable by earning their funding through fees, and at the same time ensuring that their teaching reflects the research conducted at the university. The study further demonstrates that the different types of units show different rates of success in achieving these different purposes. Additionally, it identifies different baseline factors which support the success of continuing education in universities: incentives for academic staff, strong senior leadership support, a clear strategic direction as well as the establishment of external partnerships for regional synergies, labour market demand alignment and the reaching of broader target groups.

These findings can help university leadership make informed decisions about how to embed continuing education within their institutions depending on their objectives, as well as support them in their understanding of the key factors that need to be in place to ensure the success of their continuing education activities.

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List of abbreviations

CE	Continuing Education
LLL	Lifelong Learning

1 Introduction

This thesis examines the strategic positioning of continuing education in European research-intensive universities by identifying the main purposes of embedding continuing education in higher education institutions and the factors which contribute to a successful implementation of this (traditionally) non-core task of universities.

1.1 Background

Due to the increasingly aging population and rapidly developing knowledge, continuing education is becoming more important to meet the societal challenges of our time (Atchoarena, 2021). This has also become clear to policy makers and university leadership and is currently leading to a (renewed) push for embedding continuing education more strongly in higher education institutions (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023a, 2023b). However, traditional structures, funding, and incentive mechanisms at universities are primarily aimed at providing initial education – as a direct continuation of the traditional educational pathway – as well as conducting research, a focus that can lead to universities functioning like an "ivory tower" (Matthews, 2023). This traditional focus of university structures and purposes inadvertently leads to detrimental effects on the successful embedding of continuing education with its rather opposite focus, namely the engagement with the community as a whole with the purpose of transferring research knowledge to society in more tangible ways and thereby contributing to the overall betterment of society (Agasisti et al., 2019; Sheila A. Martin, 2022). It is therefore clear that the embedding of continuing education activities requires strategic attention to achieve the desired effects required by societal changes; however, universities struggle to systematically adjust to the changing societal needs (Schuetze, 2014) as university leadership often encounters challenges when investigating how to position higher education and understanding how it can flourish and be successful.

1.2 Problem statement

As established above, continuing education has become an ever more relevant topic in society as well as in university settings and there has been increased attention in scholarly literature regarding the topic of continuing education, its embedding in institutions of higher education and the corresponding policy making. We can see that the policy situation differs across the globe, and also within the Central and Northern European context where the focus of this thesis is set (see e.g. European Commission, 2020; Milic, 2013), influencing choices made by universities and policymakers regarding this topic. From the existing literature on this topic it becomes clear that universities feel increasingly responsible for playing a more coherent and strategic role in educating a widening target group throughout life based on the body of theoretical knowledge they are building to enable learners to find solutions for the current and future issues society is facing (e.g. Atchoarena, 2021; Gouthro, 2019; Choudry & Rochat, 2015).

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning has done comprehensive research on how universities shape the embedding of continuing education and already establishes that, "to enable a concerted approach towards LLL [*lifelong learning; author's note*], it makes sense to bundle responsibilities for LLL in a central unit that acts in coordination with the university leadership and at the same time maintains close ties to the faculties" (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023b, p. 24). However, while the topic of continuing education in higher education is gaining increasing attention, a systematic investigation of what type of structural embedding of this (currently still) non-core activity in universities is conducive to the success of its intended objectives is still missing, a gap that this thesis aims to address. Additionally, it aims examine which added critical factors need to be in place to establish a supportive environment for continuing education to flourish and contribute to the societal challenges of this time.

1.3 Research objective and methodology

The objective of this study is to add to the growing body of research on continuing education, including the universities' roles and responsibilities in this respect, by shedding more light on how continuing education can be embedded successfully

in research-intensive universities. This is done by means of interviews with university leadership in charge of continuing education in countries across Central and Northern Europe, using the Gioia methodology of qualitative research.

As a starting point, the study sets out to examine how the interviewed leaders define the purpose of embedding continuing education in research-intensive universities to subsequently establish different types of continuing education units. It proceeds to assess to what extent these different types influence the intended purposes positively, neutrally or negatively, as well as what other critical factors contribute to the success of this activity. The viewpoint of the continuing education leadership is taken as the focus to gain first-hand knowledge of strategic embedding, best practices, success factors and challenges that are faced when implementing continuing education activities in research-intensive universities in a time of increased need for such activities.

The study therefore aims to address the following central research question including three sub-questions.

What are the main purposes of embedding continuing education units within research-intensive universities and what are the factors influencing their achievement?

a. **How do leaders of continuing education units define the purpose of embedding continuing education within research-intensive universities?**
b. **What are different institutional models to implement continuing education and how do these positively or negatively influence the achievement of these purposes?**
c. **What other conditions need to be in place to support the success of continuing education?**

To gather a wide range of input, nine case studies from across central and northwestern Europe, more specifically from Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom were selected, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with university leaders responsible for the positioning and/or the implementation of continuing education activities. Ensuring a rigorous analytical approach, the interviews were assessed according to the Gioia methodology of qualitative research (Gioia et al., 2013) and in line with the same methodology a grounded theory model was developed based on these findings.

It should be noted that terms *adult education*, *lifelong learning* and *continuing education* are often used interchangeably. In this thesis, the term *continuing education* was chosen as main point of reference during the interviews, their analysis and in the findings as it is the most used term in the current Dutch university context in which this thesis was written. More information about these terms, their use and differences can be found in Chapter 2.1 Learning as an ongoing process: key definitions.

1.4 Significance of the study

Both theoretically and practically, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge. By gathering knowledge based on the expertise of continuing education leaders in university, a rich basis is built for this research: their first-hand practical view can add to the theoretical underpinning of the complexities faced by this activity, that is not consistently seen as a core responsibility of universities – or, when viewed as such, not consistently successful in its implementation. In terms of theory, how different types of continuing education units influence the different purposes of continuing education has not yet been studied. In more practical terms, university leadership can gain valuable insights when (re-)positioning their continuing education activities for increased success when understanding how different types of units affect the different identified purposes and what other factors are key to consider.

1.5 Chapter overview

Following this first Introduction chapter, the literature on the topic of continuing education will be examined to provide a Theoretical background regarding the existing body of knowledge in Chapter Two. Chapter Three will elaborate on the Research methodology used. In Chapter Four, the Findings are laid out in line with Gioia's methodology, which are then combined into a Grounded Theory model. Finally, the findings are brought into a broader perspective in Chapter Five, the Discussions and Conclusions chapter, which links back how the findings relate to the existing body of research done on this topic.

2 Theoretical background

This chapter will examine the status of existing literature regarding this topic. It will do so by laying out several key concepts from the existing research. The chapter will begin by examining key terminology surrounding *lifelong learning*, *continuing education*, and *adult learning*.

2.1 Learning as an ongoing process: importance and key definitions

Philosophers and educators have addressed forms of adult education for many decades. With knowledge changing more quickly today, adult education is becoming increasingly important. Malcolm Knowles already recognized in 1980 that the faster pace of development influences how education should be viewed:

> "Under this new condition, knowledge gained at any point of time is largely obsolete within a matter of years [...s]o it is no longer functional to define education as a process of transmitting what is known; it must now be defined as a lifelong process of continuing inquiry."
>
> Knowles, 1980, p. 41

While we can observe that adult learning has been an object of research for many years, the fast pace of the development of knowledge is also becoming a key factor when training the workforce:

> "The selection and training period for working in a profession is not a decisive or unique life event, but rather an ongoing process. In this context, the concept of lifelong learning acquires importance. Knowledge has an expiration date and it is necessary to acquire new skills to meet changing work situations."
>
> Sabrià-Bernadó et al., 2017, p. 1

The title of this research refers to *continuing education*. However, as already been established, there are other terms with significant overlap, among which *lifelong*

learning and *adult learning/ education*. To ensure a clear understanding of the terms, this section will elaborate on the different definitions.

The EU refers to *lifelong learning* as learning that "is not limited to a single, specific phase in life, that of the years at school, but also happens in different contexts, over the course of a lifetime" (European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), n.d.). As such, the EPRS (2021)regards *adult learning* as part of *lifelong learning* (next to early childhood education, compulsory education, vocational education and training, and tertiary education). More specifically *adult learning* is defined as follows: "Adult learning refers to a range of formal and informal learning activities, both general and vocational, undertaken by adults after leaving initial education and training" (European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), n.d.).

The UNESCO defines *adult education* as follows:

> "Education specifically targeting individuals who are regarded as adults by the society to which they belong to improve their technical or professional qualifications, further develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge with the purpose to complete a level of formal education, or to acquire knowledge, skills and competencies in a new field or to refresh or update their knowledge in a particular field. This also includes what may be referred to as 'continuing education', 'recurrent education' or 'second chance education'."
>
> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.

As indicated by this definition, the term *continuing education* has a somewhat narrower focus. According to the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning:

> "In many HEIs, *continuing education* forms a vital part of lifelong learning engagement. It involves learning opportunities for adult learners to either prepare them for traditional study, provide a more flexible alternative to traditional study (e.g. evening classes or online learning), or it may be

> subsequent to traditional study programmes (Teichler, 1999; (Teichler & Hanft, 2009), the latter being the most common option (including, for example, postgraduate and non-degree courses and workforce training)".
>
> UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023b

While the concept of *lifelong learning* has a broader definition and may in some ways also be adequate for the research at hand – especially in view of the fact that some universities are attempting to be more inclusive in their educational thinking and broad in their vision of what to offer adult learners –, *continuing education* was chosen as a term used in the interviews and as an umbrella term when summarizing the findings. This decision was made as the thesis is written in the context of Dutch Higher Education where universities predominantly choose *continuing education* as the English term for addressing any activities that concern activities in the realms of *adult learning*, *lifelong learning* or *continuing education*. It should be explicitly mentioned that some of the interviewed institutions also have a clear lifelong learning focus even when bearing continuing education in their name. Accordingly, the term *lifelong learning* was used in the reporting of the findings when relevant for the differentiation of meaning in relation to *continuing education* or when direct quotations required its use.

2.2 Continuing education policy developments in Europe

In recent years, policy makers have put adult learning high on the agenda. This can for instance be seen in the context of the European Union, where the European Skills agenda focuses on lifelong learning as a basis to ensure the building of skills. The European Commission recognizes that new skills are needed to be able to respond to the challenges of our time and engage in the necessary transformations. The European Commission and the EU member states collaborate in the European Education Area strategic framework to achieve their common vision on education:

> "Education is the foundation for personal fulfilment, employability and active, responsible citizenship. It is essential to the vitality of European societies and economies. Access to quality and inclusive education, training

> and lifelong learning is a right for all citizens, as enshrined within the European Pillar of Social Rights."
>
> European Commission (c), n.d.

The European Education Area defines clear targets, one of which is that by 2025, "at least 47% of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning during the last 12 months" (European Commission (b), n.d.), however, it already states that while other targets are close to being achieved, the participation of adults in learning still requires further attention (European Commission (c), n.d.).

In 2016, the European Skills Agenda was introduced, in an action to "help individuals and businesses develop more and better skills and to put them to use". (European Commission (a), n.d.). By stimulating the development of the skills needed, competitiveness of the region, social fairness and resilience is ensured – to achieve all of this, lifelong learning is essential (European Commission, 2020). The European Commission sees an important task for higher education institutions when it comes to lifelong learning:

> "Universities have a key role to play in preventing skills mismatches and bottlenecks that risk hindering Europe's recovery, and in enabling the development of learners as creative and critical thinkers, problem solvers and active and responsible citizens equipped for lifelong learning."
>
> European Commission, 2022

The embedding of this task takes different forms. Milic (2013) provides insights into how this is approached in different countries, showing that in some countries there tend to be independent institutions while in others central logistical support to academic structures is more common. This is supported by Schuetze (2014) who reports that there can be significant differences in policies in different countries, with e.g. Anglosaxon countries providing more autonomy compared to e.g. Central Europe.

In her book review of Slowey and Schuetze's review on higher education and lifelong learning, Preece (2014) reports that the *Bologna Process* – which sought increased comparability and credit transfer possibilities across the European Union

(European Commission (d), n.d.)– had differing effects on different countries; e.g. it increased access to higher education in Austria generally but not necessarily in terms of continuing education, whereas in Germany it did open up new educational pathways and increased flexibility between vocational and academic education trajectories.

In the Dutch context, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is making a commitment to lifelong learning at universities by stating that universities should invest in societal embedding by means of flexibilization, micro-credentials, specifically for second cycle learners (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap 2019, p. 58). The Dutch legislature is in the process of reviewing a new law aimed at allowing higher education institutions universities to offer more flexible education and learning trajectories for the working population.[1] At the same time, a considerable growth fund has been set up to support education institutions financially to professionalize and coordinate their lifelong learning expertise, systems and structures in the upcoming years to foster the offer of lifelong learning more systematically in the Netherlands, recognizing the need for increasingly strengthened skills development among the adult population to build the right skills and expertise needed to deal with the required societal transitions (Staatscourant: Subsidieregeling LLO-Professionalisering Opleiders 2023–2026, Nr 1409103, 2023); (LLO Katalysator, n.d.). The Dutch government also tried stimulating the education of adults by providing everyone with a personal budget through the so-called STAP budget starting in 2022 (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2022), which was introduced in lieu of cost deductibility through tax declaration and with the aim of reaching a broader population. However, this – immensely popular even though difficult to implement – measure was already cancelled by the beginning of 2024 as the courses followed did not seem relevant, course prices were increased following its introduction, and abuse was made by different parties.

[1] The new law has passed the Second chamber of parliament in March 2023 and will be reviewed by the first chamber this year (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, n.d.)

2.3 Continuing education in higher education institutions

Significant societal changes such as ageing, digitalization, and global crises, are at the core of the even more pressing necessity of universities to engage in lifelong learning, as these changes "pose huge challenges that need to be addressed through collective, participatory and decentralized processes which require and support active and global citizenship. Fostering these dynamics through lifelong learning may be a new frontier for universities" (Atchoarena, 2021, pp. 316). The universities' special role lies in the fact that they provide theory-based education. There seems to be consensus that it is based on theory that we can learn how respond to the challenges posed by our fast-changing society, and understanding theory helps students learn to apply critical thinking and comprehend complexity (Gouthro, 2019). In line (Choudry & Rochat, 2015) argue how practical issues and theories need to be connected through learning to effect social change.

As the need for lifelong learning and continuing education becomes more pressing in society and ensuing policies, universities see their roles changing when it comes to offering this type of education. This means that higher education institutions cannot just continue with "business as usual" and provide the same type of teaching to the target group of adult learners as they do to their traditional target groups, as with a widening profile of learners, there is also a need for universities to become increasingly learner-centred (Atchoarena, 2021; Cendon, 2018). Jarvis (2012) specifies further that successful continuing education entails taking the learner's diverse experiences into account. As Cendon (2018, p. 81) lays this out clearly by stating that "lifelong learning shifts the focus from an institutional view to the learner and his or her learning, which includes life-long, life-wide, and non-formal and informal learning processes."

Learner-centeredness also results from a different situation. Universities across Europe increasingly have to think in terms of market demands, and especially when it comes to continuing education as this is not funded by public money streams: while learner-centredness and market orientation may go hand in hand and have positive effects by being beneficial for learners who are aiming to advance their career, the market-led system also leads to higher fees which may deter students

from households that are not traditionally reached by higher education (Schuetze, 2014, pp. 46).

Efforts are being made at universities to address this shift in view of the stronger focus on continuing education, however, in many cases it is still not approached systematically (Schuetze, 2014, p. 52). According to Slowey and Schuetze (2012), "overall, higher education has been slow to adapt its mission, structures and understanding of knowledge and learning – in short, its culture – to the demands for a more open, flexible and egalitarian system."

2.3.1 Structural embedding of continuing education in higher education

As studied by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, there are different ways of embedding continuing education. This may range from not having any centralized coordination to dedicated units focusing on lifelong learning or continuing education where the "main responsibility is usually the coordination and delivery of continuing education" (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023a, p. 57). In a related report, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning mentions that "[c]ommon models for organizing LLL include having either a central operating unit, a working area in central administration, a unit within a faculty, a scientific centre or an external institute" and comes to the conclusion that "to enable a concerted approach towards LLL, it makes sense to bundle responsibilities for LLL in a central unit that acts in coordination with the university leadership and at the same time maintains close ties to the faculties" (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023b, p. 24).

2.3.2 Best practices and challenges

Higher Education Institutions typically face challenges when focusing on strengthening continuing education within their organizations as this typically has not been seen as a core task for universities, and a cultural shift is needed to adjust policies and structures to increase the success of this activity. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning found that an institutional strategy is key for coordinating continuing education successfully and ensuring sufficient support throughout the organization (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023b, p. 56).

In addition to this situation, however, universities face several additional (internal and external) obstacles (Milic, 2013). One of these obstacles revolves around incentive systems which currently do not work in favour of engaging in activities other than research. Sheila A. Martin (2022, reviewing A.J. Hoffman) describes this tension:

> "Many academics struggle to balance their desire for a career that includes engaging the public in their work with the pressure to publish in A-level, high-impact journals year after year, with little time left to engage audiences who could benefit from their ability to distill, interpret, and communicate important and policy-relevant findings from their research."
>
> Sheila A. Martin, 2022, p. 219,

The author adds that different roles in higher education institutions should also be designed to cater to different strengths and get rewarded for different focuses, concluding that "although not every individual must take on a public engagement role, every department, institute, or college should have an ecosystem that performs a complete set of academic functions, including engaging with the public" (Sheila A. Martin, 2022, p. 220). Adding to this perspective, Cendon (2018) states that different perspectives of teachers are also important when it comes to continuing education – including of teachers outside the university context when in terms of combining practical experience and theory.

2.4 Higher education trends and developments

As mentioned above, changes in society are also changing how universities position themselves throughout time. This chapter sketches how universities are moving from a more exclusive position to one that is focused more on engaging with society as a whole.

2.4.1 Third mission of universities: impact and engagement

As Matthews (2023) describes, over time universities have taken on different modes which also still coexist and are continuously debated: one as an "elite ivory tower born out of the Enlightenment period", one as a "factory producing knowledge for societal market driven needs for mass participation in the neoliberal knowledge economy" and the "universal networked university [....] with potential universal

access in socially and technologically networked epoch of digital reason" (Matthews, 2023, p. 667). The third mode moves away from the concepts of "knowledge as an end in itself" (Ivory tower mode), as "applied" and "useful", often in a "commercial manner" (Factory mode), to one that deliberately includes outside influence and collaboration (Universal Network University mode) (Matthews, 2023, p. 678), and thereby is provided with "the opportunity to be a key institution with regard to social cohesion rather than mere producer and disseminator of knowledge" (p. 687). It is this role of influencing social cohesion by engaging with the community, both on a local and global level, that universities increasingly take on.

Already in 1916, in one of the core pieces about learning, John Dewey (2001/1916) elaborates on how education forms the basis for learners to participate in democratic processes. According to Dewey, education should be focused on transmitting skills to critically examine existing beliefs. A century later, this is still relevant, as Sheila A. Martin (2022, p. 220; in review of A.J. Hoffman's work) writes: "In today's divisive, confusing, and cynical political and social environments, connecting with an audience beyond academia isn't just a fun diversion from a scholar's focus; rather, it is necessary to our democratic process and key to keeping academia relevant." This also implies that higher education institutions have a responsibility to positively impact their direct regional environment by "transferring knowledge, disseminating culture, and fostering economic competitiveness" (Agasisti et al., 2019, p. 819). Atchoarena (2021, p. 315) further points out that universities often also have economic importance for the region as major employers that get to influence policy discussions on employment market developments.

Creating such an impact cannot be done in isolation. The connected university engages with their communities on such issues that are relevant for society, especially when it comes to sustainability, migration or the inclusion of marginalized groups and does this in connection with stakeholders in the communities around them; hence collaboration and networking are at the root of making an impact, also called the "'third mission' of universities" in addition to the education and research tasks (Field et al. 2016 quoted by Atchoarena, 2021, pp. 314).

In line, Fleming (2006, 19) specifies universities should "respond to the needs of a democratic society", therefore "redefining lifelong learning". While the ideal of engaging with the community is becoming voiced more strongly, practice often looks different, as expressed by Choudry & Rochat (2015, p. 35): "The idea of academic–community engagement is celebrated by many universities. Yet in practice, there is often little or no support for—and sometimes hostility toward and trivialization of—the actual work involved in building, maintaining connections with, and supporting community struggles as part of socially engaged forms of scholarship." However, if universities want to create more impact they need to be more in touch with the communities around them: "Through engagement with local and broader communities, we seek a means to expand and shift from the established internally focused, discipline-based framework of higher education to a framework focused on a stronger level of societal relevance that improves both society and the overarching goals of higher education." (Fitzgerald et al., 2016, p. 223)

Universities also use engagement increasingly as a way to position themselves strategically and change their internal structures to support this purpose which is slowly leading to a change in the frameworks used when it comes to rankings, accreditations, and recognition and rewards systems, which so far are posing a considerable obstacle to actually implementing an engagement-oriented higher education system, as academic staff are promoted on the basis of research publications that are not read by a wider public, and investing in reaching out to the community is not rewarded (Sheila A. Martin, 2022, in review of A.J. Hoffman's work).

2.4.2 Flexibilization and demand-orientation of higher education

One of the challenges when trying to focus more on continuing education is that it requires a significant diversification in the students universities teach – and these students require need a more individualized approach due to their diverse backgrounds (Slowey & Schuetze, 2012). While the learners are hyper diverse, attempts have been made to group the types of learners. Roughly these can be grouped into three categories for which they join continuing education "career change, current work and personal development" (Sabrià-Bernadó et al., 2017, p. 15). Schuetze (2014, p. 14) reports on the following OECD-based typology of

learners which includes learners who do a full first degree ("delayers"); who return to higher education to acquire a second (higher) degree ("recurrent learners"); who want to gain additional skills or knowledge for career purposes; who want to learn for purposes of "personal fulfilment"; who come from marginalized or weak economic groups; older learners (mostly for personal development); who return to university at a later stage in life to complete a degree ("returners"). As these target groups are not always easy to reach, Sabrià-Bernadó et al. (2017) suggest a demand-driven approach by understanding what skills are sought after by potential students, providing flexible courses and making use of technology where possible and convenient as well as trying to arrange financial support.

Such a flexibilization of education includes different modalities, such as lengthened studies, or hybrid or online learning and could be developed in collaboration with employers (Johannesen et al., 2018). The use of online learning was already rising before the pandemic and has since the pandemic professionalized further and become a fixture in higher and continuing education, which greatly contributes to flexibilization of the provision of courses.

Cendon (2018) states that universities are adjusting to the increased flexibilization needs of participants and the market and are therefore providing a wide range of different programme formats, (stackable) certifications, and delivery options on- and offline, to allow for combination with work and private life. The introduction of micro-credentials is a way of providing more flexibility as well. These are a tool introduced by the European Union and are defined as follows: "Micro-credentials certify the learning outcomes of short-term learning experiences, for example a short course or training. They offer a flexible, targeted way to help people develop the knowledge, skills and competences they need for their personal and professional development." (Boston Consulting Group, n.d.; European Commission (e), n.d.) However, quality assurance of these, and stackability are still not fully developed, which means that quality frameworks need to be adjusted and are a crucial factor to enabling flexible learning. (Atchoarena, 2021)

2.4.3 Strategy and change

Universities in Europe increasingly use deliberate strategy to increase their focus and position themselves on the market and will need to do so especially when

adding continuing education to their portfolio, as this activity is not generally supported by public funding streams. This subsection will introduce a number of central strategic concepts and then look into how strategy has been discussed in the context of higher education institutions.

There are several ways of defining strategy. Whittington et al., (2019, p. 5) have come to the definition that "strategy is the long-term direction of an organisation". The authors chose their definition for two reasons: "First, the long-term direction of an organisation can include both deliberate, logical strategy and more incremental, emergent patterns of strategy. Second, long-term direction can include both strategies that emphasise difference and competition, and strategies that recognize the roles of cooperation and even imitation." As Michael E. Porter stated: "a company can outperform rivals only if it can establish a difference it can preserve" (Porter, 1996, p. 62).

To arrive at the formulation of a clear strategy, analyses must be done first to understand the macro-environment, the sector, the own resources and capabilities, the stakeholders and governance structures, as well as history and culture of the organization (Whittington et al., 2019). Subsequently, the strategy must be communicated consistently and clearly to all stakeholders through different communication elements, which usually include: mission statements, vision statements, statements of core values, and objectives. (Whittington et al., 2019) Additionally, the competitive positioning is relevant in this context. According to Michael E. Porter (1996, p. 6) – another definition that was highlighted by Whittington et al – „[c]ompetitive strategy is about being different. It means deliberately choosing a different set of activities to deliver a unique mix of value", and he goes on to add: „The essence of strategy is choosing what *not* to do." (Porter, 1996, p. 12).

Another tool that is helpful in making strategic choices when it comes to positioning services on the market was developed by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG). BCG's Alan Zakon introduced the Growth Share matrix, which was further promoted by Bruce Henderson in 1970 through a publication entitled "The Product Portfolio". This matrix is a "portfolio management framework that helps companies decide how to prioritize their different businesses by their degree of profitability" (Boston Consulting Group, n.d.). By categorizing different products or services,

their profitability can be assessed effectively. The categories developed by BCG are as follows: *"Low Growth, High Share. Companies should milk these 'cash cows' for cash to reinvest; High Growth, High Share. Companies should significantly invest in these 'stars' as they have high future potential. High Growth, Low Share. Companies should invest in or discard these 'question marks,' depending on their chances of becoming stars. Low Share, Low Growth. Companies should liquidate, divest, or reposition these 'pets.'"* (Boston Consulting Group, n.d.)

Figure 1: Growth share matrix developed by Boston Consulting Group (n.d.)

Implementing strategy tends to entail changing existing structures and processes and requires careful change management techniques. Effecting change can be challenging and, if not done right, the possibility of failure is high – to avoid that sketching a clear vision is key (Güttel, 2021). Taking into account several aspects that are important for change can e.g. be found in John P. Kotter's 8-step model: (Kotter, 1996): "Establishing a sense of urgency"; "forming a guiding coalition"; "creating a vision"; "communicating the vision"; "empowering others to act on the vision"; "creating short-term wins"; "consolidating gains and building more change"; and "institutionalizing new approaches".

With respect to strategy formulation in a higher education context, according to Fumasoli & Lepori (2011), "[s]trategies are conceived as instruments by which universities manage their organizational processes and deal with their environments in order to select a portfolio of activities and find an appropriate position in the higher education system" (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011, p. 157). Fumasoli & Lepori (2011, p. 160) further note that planning is an important part of this – which is often required by ministries – but long-term strategy formulation can be difficult as universities tend to be organized in a strongly decentralized way, stating that "the level of autonomy of the academic understructure would indicate that

constructing shared frames of reference and motivating individual's behavior is more important than command and control, making a strong case for interpretive strategies." This means that strategy formulation is hindered by "external constraints (for example from State regulations) [... and we] find a variable balance between informal processes of decision and consensus-building – based on personal contacts within an open setting – and formal processes where decisions are taken by the responsible body and those legitimated officially." (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011, p. 162) As stated above, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning reports about the importance of having an institutional strategy in place that focuses on the task of continuing education for the overall success of continuing education (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023b, p. 56).

> "I therefore consider the development of a lifelong-learning strategy at the university level extremely important. That strategy should not be an elegant mission statement that is never put into action. Without a doubt, this task is difficult, for it involves paradigmatic, structural, and behavioral changes. Nevertheless, it is a job that must be done."
>
> Milic, 2013, p. 168

The final theoretical subsection will provide the framework provided externally, namely on policy developments.

3 Research methodology

This research focuses on identifying the main purposes of continuing education units in higher education institutions as well as the main different types of continuing education units and how these different types affect the achievement of the identified purposes. Additionally, the study identifies other baseline factors that are key to the successful implementation of continuing education in universities. While research has been done on several factors of how universities engage in continuing education, it has not yet been established how the different types of structural embedding influence the success of the intended purposes.

To gain a deeper understanding of the aspects that influence the positioning and the decision-making by administrators, the Gioia methodology of qualitative research was chosen: it keeps the expertise of the interviewees front and centre, while ensuring sufficient academic rigor. This section will provide information on this methodology and how it was applied in this research.

3.1 Qualitative case study – the Gioia methodology

To establish a grounded theory informed by actual practice, assuming the organizational world is a social one (Gioia et al., 2013), Gioia moved away from imposing research frameworks onto "knowledgeable" practitioners: "As a matter of philosophical principle, it's important to give voice to the informants and record their articulation of their experience before you impose our theoretical frameworks on their experience" (Gioia, 2019, p. 31). Hence, qualitative, semi-structured interviews form the basis of this methodology.

3.1.1 Research design

At the heart of the Gioia methodology lie semi-structured interviews. This approach allows for the authentic voices of the interviewed experts to be given full attention, in line with Gioia et al.'s methodology of the "discovery of new concepts rather than the affirmation of existing concepts" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 17). In preparation, an interview guide (see Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview guide) was used but applied flexibly, following Booth et al in their advice of "[y]ou don't need to script an interview around a set list of questions—in fact, that can be a bad idea if it freezes

the interviewee" (Booth et al., 2008, p. 82). In accordance with Gioia, the guide was adjusted to accommodate the preferred focus of the interviewed experts and edited when it became clear that some of the questions were not resulting in information that contributed clearly enough to the research question. To safeguard that the information provided by the interviewees is handled with care and kept confidential, the interviewees are treated anonymously in this study.

The interviews were subsequently analysed by building a data structure that combines both the informants' individual expertise and the researcher's insights (Gioia, 2019, p. 32) in a 1st-order and 2nd-order analysis, which were then distilled into "overarching theoretical dimensions" and subsequently combined into a "data structure" (see Figure 2: Data structure example (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 21)) whereas the first-order terms are close to the informants' terms and the second-order themes link these more closely with the existing theory, where possible (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 26). Due to this approach, the first-order terms are numerous, while these are structured increasingly by identifying second-order themes, and finally "aggregate dimensions" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20).

The data structure was finally turned into a grounded theory model, or a "motion picture" as phrased by Gioia showing the "dynamic relationships among the emergent concepts" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 22).

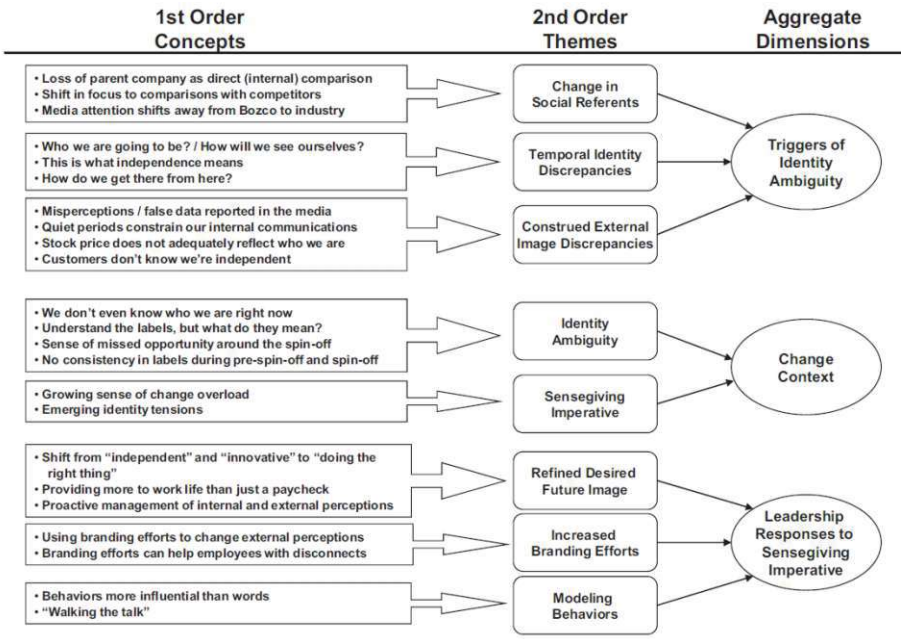

Figure 2: Data structure example (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 21)

3.1.2 Data collection and selection of cases

As a basis for the data analysis as described above, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the representatives of nine continuing education units. An interview guide was used but adjusted to the situation and the focus of the interviewees as well as on concepts that were of special interest. Questions that provided results which proved to be outside the core scope of the research were dropped in the later interviews.

The cases were selected based on a number of criteria. The selected institution needed to:

a) Be a research-intensive university
b) Be based in central and northwestern Europe
c) Provide access to high-level management of the relevant continuing education units for the interviews

This resulted in nine interviews with the selected continuing education units located in reputable research-intensive universities in Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, and ranging from continuing education units that were in existence for 150 years and those that just started 1-3 years ago. To protect the valuable and often confidential information shared by the interviewees, the universities are not mentioned in this study.

While in most cases conducted face-to-face, the interviews were recorded with the Microsoft Teams software to allow for automated transcriptions for seven out of nine interviews, as these were conducted in English. The automatically generated transcriptions were edited for correctness. For the two interviews that were conducted in Dutch, these were translated into English in a shortened version focusing on essential keywords and phrases.

3.1.3 Data analysis

As described above, the data was analysed following Gioia's methodology of qualitative research. The nine transcripts resulting from the interviews were uploaded into Atlas.ti, a software used to support qualitative research analysis. Atlas.ti was used to code the information provided by the informants into 543 initial codes trying to stay close to their terms (including the detailed quotations to refer

to the original wording and more extensive context). Through an iterative process, the initial codes were finetuned through axial coding. Subsequently they were exported to Excel where the codes including the quotations were analysed and categorized into first-order concepts (see example in Figure 3 below).

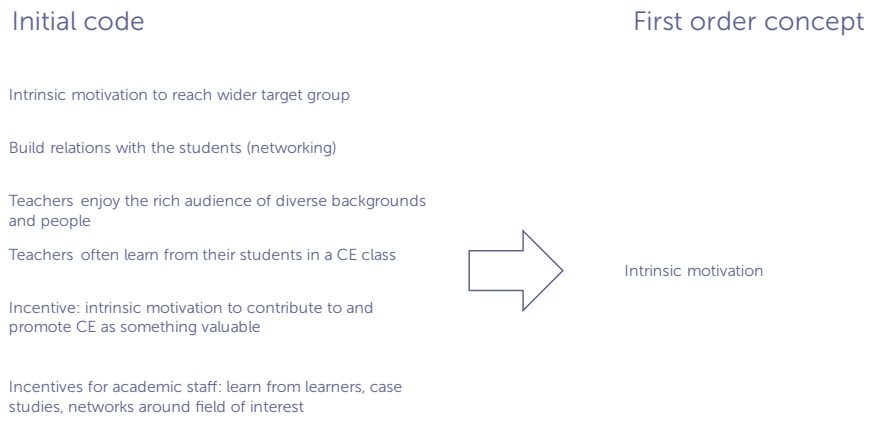

Figure 3: Example of initial codes and first-order concepts in data structure

Then, the first-order concepts were analysed manually to establish connections among them as well as connecting them with theory, resulting in second-order themes (see example in Figure 4 below).

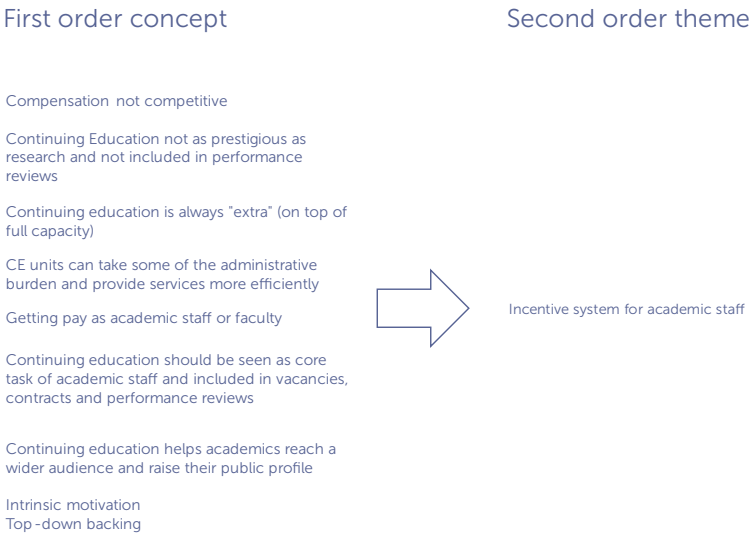

Figure 4: Example of relation between first-order concepts and second-order themes

In a final step in building the data structure, these second-order themes were combined into four overarching aggregate dimensions (see Figure 5), namely Background information; Institutional purpose; Institutional embedding; and Critical conditions.

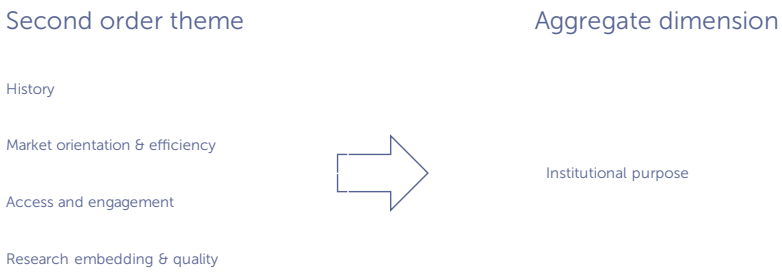

Figure 5: Establishment of aggregate dimensions from second-order themes

The aggregate dimensions serve as the final element to the data structure that Gioia sees as an indispensable basis to establishing informant-centred yet theory-infused findings and a resulting grounded theory model. The following section will zoom in on the findings resulting from the data analysis.

4 Findings

This section provides detailed insights into the findings gained from the interviews and derived through coding and structuring of the information using Atlas.ti.

As outlined in Chapter 1, the data was analysed to answer the following research questions:

What are the main purposes of embedding continuing education units within research-intensive universities and what are the factors influencing their achievement?

a. **How do leaders of continuing education units define the purposes of embedding continuing education within research-intensive universities?**
b. **What are different institutional models to implement continuing education and how do these positively or negatively influence the achievement of these purposes?**
c. **What other conditions need to be in place to support the success of continuing education?**

As mentioned in 2.1 Learning as an ongoing process: importance and key definitions it is to be noted that the term *continuing education* was used to encompass both *continuing education* and *lifelong learning* concepts in the questionnaire, data analysis and the findings for simplification purposes. Only in cases where the difference is of key importance, other terms were used.

The following subsections reflect the dimensions as per the data structure: Subsection 4.1 provides **background information** on the realities and strategic considerations of the continuing education units, Subsection 4.2 elaborates on the dimension of the **purpose of continuing education** as identified by the interviewed continuing education leaders, while Subsection 4.3 examines the **different institutional models and how these influence the achievement of the previously identified purposes**. To complete the findings, Subsection 4.4 identifies which other critical conditions support the success of continuing education. And finally, Subsection 4.5 shows how all the different aspects which were identified are combined in a Grounded theory model.

4.1 Setting the scene: background information

This first dimension covers background information about the interviewed institutions as derived from the interviews to provide the context in which the continuing education institutions operate.

4.1.1 Size and funding

The scope of the continuing education activities varies significantly between the interviewed continuing education units, with turnovers ranging from EUR 1.7 million to EUR 26 million, and staffing sizes of the continuing education unit between two and 200. The continuing education providers serve between 500 and 30,000 course participants annually, with larger numbers including online learners of massive online open courses (MOOCs). The programmes offered show a great variety in numbers and formats. These include postgraduate award-bearing studies, micro-credentials, short courses with evaluations, lectures, study days, and doctoral studies.

All the continuing education units face the restriction that public funding cannot be used for continuing education, requiring them to operate with separate funding streams from the main university (except for project-based innovation funds). Financial full-cost models are often used which include overhead to calculate break-even points, and fees when it comes to running programmes. In most cases, this also entails that continuing education has to pay for facilities, services and tools. Generally, continuing education budgets are funded by participant fees without using public funds, except for innovation programmes which are often project-funded and must eventually be self-sustaining. Regarding reserves, some continuing education units do not have direct access to them, while others keep reserves for financially tough times. "*We also have an investment budget from the rectorate which is taken from our money and given to us by the university*." One interviewee mentions that the continuing education unit "*should not return a positive contribution to the university due to their access mission*". Another perspective is that the faculties should pay for the expertise and support they receive from the continuing education unit. Faculties often benefit from financially successful programmes. At one university, the principle used is that all the continuing education activities must have a sustainable, self-supporting financial

situation, but this is applied at the aggregate level rather than at the programme or faculty level.

4.1.2 Policy and legal framework

Clearly, there are some country-specific differences regarding policy and legal frameworks, as also reflected in the interviews. In Austria and Germany every university has to offer continuing education for a few decades already, albeit not as a funded element. In the Netherlands on the other hand, this activity used to be located in the Open University, whereas nowadays the government increasingly asks universities to include continuing education in their activities, even though the legal framework is still discouraging. The situation is comparable to Belgium where lifelong learning experiences a push by the government. There has however a Growth Fund been installed by the Dutch government which can be used to strengthen the embedding of continuing education, and lobbying takes places towards the government that continuing education should be core task for the universities. The UK is seeing a new policy where a lifelong learning entitlement can be spent throughout life.

4.1.3 Dependence on the university

Continuing education units heavily depend on the main university, such as on (vocal) support through senior leadership but also that of individual colleagues for collaboration efforts. More concrete dependence is related to services and infrastructure that are provided by the university (against a fee). The university is also viewed as a financial safety net. One important dependence is related to the university brand. The university is also seen as a critical stakeholder when it comes to lobbying for continuing education.

4.1.4 Trends and challenges

Continuing education unit managers recognize that continuing education is becoming more important due to the fast-changing society and quickly developing knowledge. With knowledge becoming outdated more quickly, education and work will intertwine. Micro-credentials are seen as a relevant trend responding to these new societal changes. Similarly, individual course design based on modules or specializations is seen as something that will be thought after more. Another trend that is observed is that people will be less focussed on certificates and

diplomas. Digitalization has come to stay and is also seen as a tool for further opportunities but also comes with challenges. The flexibility that comes with digitalization is seen as a means to reach a wider variety of target groups including those that may not traditionally have access to continuing education. A further decline of on-campus learning is seen as likely. One of the challenges is that for one of the concerned units used to have a positive turnover due to providing accommodation, which is now less used. Continuing education units also see themselves as having a "*pioneering role in online delivery and other pedagogies*" and due to its success "*continuing education is no longer as marginalized*". One of the interviewees sees *"[...] a lot of possibilities because of digitalization [...] not a whole programme; it's not going to work – because networking is that important in our programmes – but geographically, our target groups we can increase with international programmes. And also [...] people with care work. It's lot easier to do a certificate course when you can [join] a zoom meeting in the evening."*

4.1.5 Target groups

Probably the most central target group for most interviewed institutions are people active in the workforce. *"Everybody who's in the middle of their career and wants to do a programme."* Generally, this is also considered the main difference between the continuing education and university master programmes: participants have to already be experienced. There are some exceptions to this though, with some programmes accepting students without experience. Target groups can also be defined in a strategic way: one institution aims at fitting the requirements that public officials for a promotion and has this group as a main target group.

Alumni are regarded as an important target group, also in connection with career services. However, there are also challenges connected to this in some countries where alumni are difficult to reach due to a lacking alumni tradition.

When it comes to widening the engagement, the target group of non-academically trained participants is especially interesting. For a number of the interviewed continuing education units these are also reached, especially for programmes without admission requirements. "*We are trying to attract people who have not been engaged with education, but it is difficult to make it work*." But even where this is an explicit aim, 85% of students have a degree level or higher. A means to

reaching these groups is to "*offer some more attractive educational biography or educational pathways*".

Diversity is also an explicit target for some of the continuing education units. *"It's diversity [...]: the target groups from lawyers who can pay a lot of money and we can cover that in the financial plan, and programs for immigrants and refugees."* Other ways to diversify the continuing education classroom in terms of cultural backgrounds is by targeting expats and their partners or refugees. Also, diversity in age is an explicit target mentioned. One of the advantages of a having for instance a wide range of ages in the continuing education classroom makes for different ideas. One of them is defined as "*the curious*" by one of the interviewees, i.e. a more broadly interested group. This diversity can be reached, for instance, through lectures about different topics for everyone. "*There are still some people who don't think [the University] is for them.*" To solve this, working with local community organizations as facilitators can be a way forward.

4.1.6 Programme types and internal alignment of offer

Programme types range from free events and workshops, via summer schools, certificate short courses and evening lectures, to master programmes and doctoral education. In some cases, attending existing initial education courses as a continuing education module is possible (so-called *aanschuifonderwijs* in Dutch). In-company trainings are also mentioned as a (new) field of activity. Programmes take place in on-campus, online and hybrid course modalities.

In terms of as to whether the continuing education programmes are aligned with the main university's offer, there are some differences. In some cases, there is clear alignment through central coordination processes and roles, such as a central decision-making process by a committee or the nomination of a Vice Dean of Education or similar. University content is often seen as the basis, but it is also stated that the continuing education offer is much more expansive and that it needs to be attuned to the needs of the target group. Additionally, programmes that have been successful but do not fit a new strategy are often kept as part of the offer. *"But at this institution we are path-dependent, and this is the reason why we have some Master of Science programmes in our portfolio and they are successful and we do not cut them."* In contrast, some continuing education units also state that they

have no structured approach to building continuing education programmes, and that having similar programmes as the main university feels like creating internal competition.

Micro-credentials are a dominant topic among continuing education units in Europe. The concept is viewed as not very accessible but at the same time convenient for international learners. Micro-credentials come in different forms: such as just joining existing courses or tailoring existing courses with additional elements for the continuing education target group. One interviewee mentions that it is important that micro-credentials are only for continuing education learners and not for 18-year-olds in order *"not to create our own competition"*. Stackable programmes are so far mostly thought of in terms of individual trajectories and own competencies, not with the aim of providing a degree.

4.1.7 Developing new programmes

Enhancing the programme portfolio is seen as a very difficult part; it is often a gamble which course will be successful. In many cases the continuing education unit collaborates with academics to enhance the programme portfolio: *"Now that there's a person for the programme development, I'm proactive. Before [...] the [continuing education unit] waited till there comes a professor and says OK, I have an idea, can we do it."* Academic staff are seen as experts in bringing up relevant future-proof topics.

In the more dependent continuing education units, the main university must approve all programmes in terms of quality and/or content alignment. Such a check might involve external and internal peer review to align quality with university standards. When it comes to degree programmes, this central approval is the case for all of the interviewed institutions as the university provides the degree. As approval is needed, lobbying is often considered essential. Programmes tend to be successful if there is a tight connection to the professor or faculty. In one case, one faculty has to support the new programme, after which it is installed in an intra-faculty way.

It is also important to note that the academics are essential in delivering the courses. The courses are mostly run by own staff or in collaboration with other divisions – in one case it is defined that 50% of teaching staff need to be from the

own university. However, it must be noted that continuing education courses are rarely taught by the most high-level staff.

4.1.8 Strategic processes and directions

The interviewed universities show strong strategic considerations and are also clear in defining their challenges. The strategic processes vary in their dependence on the university. The top-down backing of university leadership is considered of high strategic importance. In some cases, the universities are steered through a planning cycle of five years. Their strategy is often influenced heavily by ministry demands and policy changes. Government policies can also work in a confusing way, and it is stated that the *"government needs to provide a clearer framework"*.

Among the interviewed education units, market orientation and agility are central to their strategic ambitions. One realization in this context is that the market in continuing education has gotten much more competitive and the idea that university continuing education is often not agile enough to compete with lean new continuing education institutions. One expresses it like this: *"our overall goal is to [...] keep up with what's offered in the market [...], how can we better ourselves. What are we missing, what do we need to offer?"* It is mentioned that continuing education schools need strong leadership to be market oriented. Market research is also done to include all the competencies the labour market is looking for. Hence, the offer should respond to market needs and solve societal issues caused by shortage of personnel. It is mentioned that a methodology for demand-driven programmes is needed, as labour market and target group needs are not yet being systematically scanned. Continuing education units see the possibility to put interesting topics in non-degree programmes that will attract a wide audience.

Having a growth strategy is mentioned as a strategic objective. Establishing niche programmes for competitive advantage is regarded as one way of achieving growth. Interdisciplinarity is also seen as key to success as this is a strength that is typical of continuing education programmes. Also process orientation such as having more key performance indicators (KPIs), e.g. regarding new programmes, can be linked to growth. Meta sites to search for continuing education offers could also support that goal. Increasing income from non-traditional topics (AI, data) is for instance also regarded as a possibility to subsidize access mission courses.

Growth ambitions also centre around impact-related motives: such as looking at what is happening in the world right now and help clientele to move forward and compete; identify needs and competence requirements of employers. On the other hand upscaling of the local population is seen as a major task for continuing education in units in universities. One of the challenges is that education has an unclear return on investment. Economic crises, long-term economic uncertainty and impact of inflation are seen as potential threats.

Becoming a centre of global excellence in continuing education is one of the visions mentioned. In this strategic consideration competition has a key role – it is considered *"cut-throat"* but the high-quality brand of the university protects from this competition to some extent. To stay competitive, it is considered helpful for programme development to move more from academic-led to market-led. Doing a portfolio analysis to understand who enrols in what type of course and develop relevant target groups from there is another way of becoming or staying competitive. Another strategic idea is to stimulate investment in continuing education through philanthropic giving.

It is expected that the impact question will become (even) more important in the upcoming years, with some of the interviewees stating that their strategy is already focused on societal impact. With access being a central part of their strategy, it is also mentioned that it is difficult to diversify as people have time for (face to face) continuing education are a relatively rich demographic.

Flexibilization and diversity in disciplines and formats is another key strategic theme. Existing systems are sometimes considered a hindrance in this development. Universities should make sure that *"systems allow for the inclusion of flexibilization of education"* and not let systems dictate what is possible. In terms of flexibilization, micro-credentials are regarded by some an important strategic element. *"[I am] really a believer of this. We need to go for that."* It is seen as favourable as it is easy combine with work and private life, and institutions do not have to reinvent their entire course. On the flipside, micro-credentials are seen as increasing the competition as everybody can offer it and so universities are in the same market as private companies. Other continuing education units want to keep certificate courses and modules instead as it would require a *"cultural shift"* to introduce micro-credentials that is not seen as likely to happen. In terms of the

diversity of disciplines, all faculties should be involved in continuing education, and both skills and substantive subjects are considered important. The strategic fit of the programme, with a strategic topic and suitable academic staff is regarded as a key element here. Even though the skills element is part of the continuing education, it is also stressed that universities should not be a mere skills provider.

Strategic improvements, such as enhancing internal structures and aligning common goals university-wide are another focus of continuing education units. The continuing education units view themselves as a network organization that co-creates with other parties. In this alignment of internal and external stakeholders, it is stressed that all faculties need to be involved in continuing education.

4.2 Institutional purpose: the Why of continuing education in universities

The Institutional purpose dimension describes the "Why" of continuing education in research-intensive universities and answers the question: What do universities want to achieve through their continuing education activities?

While the historic background of the continuing education units shows quite some variation, with their years of existence ranging from 1 year to 150 years, a number of dominant reasons for existence or purposes could be identified. When the longest-existing units were set up, their primary mission was to reach new target groups. In the other cases, there were already a number of continuing education activities going on within the larger university, and the unit was set up to offer all programmes under one umbrella, harmonize the programme offer and centralize the services for increased efficiency and quality. The reason for this is summarized as follows by one interviewee: *"We wanted continuing education to be part of our veins as there is a whole world out there after graduation and knowledge develops quickly."* Responding to the fast-changing society and corresponding knowledge development, the continuing education units regard the (internal and external) promotion of continuing education as something that is "*part of it*", part of what universities should be doing, as one of their main tasks. They do this through lobbying and reminding colleagues of existing policies and the importance of lifelong learning.

Continuing education units regard it as a task for the university to provide continuing education as they "*have the research and this needs to be translated to society*". Their aim is to provide evidence-based high-quality education in line with the university brand. "*We are close to research, this makes us different from competitors*." However, they also realize that continuing education cannot be the same as the initial education provided at universities, so an additional element of this type of education is that it is practice-focused and flexible, suitable for wider target groups. This means involving practitioners, co-creating with other external partners, and offering education at different times and in different modalities.

In line with the trend of moving the universities closer to society, continuing education units regularly aim to make higher education and scientific knowledge accessible for a wider target group, i.e. groups that are not easily reachable by universities normally or who otherwise are no longer an active part of society.

There is a clear market and demand focus among most of the interviewed continuing education units. Responding to the fast development of knowledge and the ensuing adjustments in the labour market, the continuing education unit is often responsible for initiating and coordinating programmes and does so specifically in line with (labour) market demands and needs, collaborating with stakeholders from within and outside of the university. They also identify a need for faculties or academic staff to design programmes on a demand-driven basis: they should do market research, or a scan of what competencies are needed. *"One of the [...] challenges [...] is that our portfolio of courses is traditionally being academic-led. You know, what maybe people we work with want to develop a course in, where it's actually, [...] we need to be more market-led than that. That's a change that we would say we need to bridge that gap. But we're conscious that that's where we need to be."* The units see themselves as a specialist in bringing the educational programmes to the market. This includes another aspect of improving a previously uncoordinated offer, namely providing external exposure and a clear continuing education offer overview through one point of entry, i.e. a platform where all programmes offered can be easily found: *"We should be the ones who are able to bring the programs to the market, and not every faculty doing it in whatever way they find appropriate."*

They aim to create impact by e.g. supporting companies and the working population by connecting studies with the needs of the labour market: "*University should focus on knowledge that helps organizations.*" Helping people progress their education and careers and strengthening the competitive advantage of mid-sized global companies (education of leadership) is seen as a key responsibility: *"[...] we need to support them, the companies and the leaders there."* This is especially approached by providing the right kinds of professional skills, which is also a means to keep workers in the region. On an international level, showcasing the university's scientific knowledge online is seen as a way of having impact.

An aspect that is special to continuing education programmes is that they are entrepreneurial: they offer room to be able to develop new things, such as programmes that wouldn't work otherwise. In that, they have the role of an incubator of new programmes or modalities that are later often picked up by larger main university programmes. Central selling points of the continuing education programmes are networking and peer learning aspects, a practice focus, and employability. Teaching staff and experienced experts are mentioned to show that the quality of the programme is high.

A central ambition is making continuing education a visible part of university education. "*We want our university to be associated with (quality, research-based) continuing education*" or more specifically "*We want to be known as #1 option for continuing education among alumni*". Interviewees recognize a momentum to professionalize and centralize continuing education in universities and make it a core task. Having the university's education vision already including continuing education, is a step in this direction. One of interviewees states that they pursue a vision of establishing a "[*l*]*ifelong learning culture: we no longer use the phrase 'completing your studies'*". Physically, having a common building for all continuing education activities would be good for their visibility.

Impact is also seen as supporting companies and the working population by connecting studies with the needs of the labour market: "*University should focus on knowledge that helps organizations.*" A key responsibility is to help people progress their education and careers and strengthening the competitive advantage of mid-sized global companies (education of leadership): *"[...] we need to support them, the companies and the leaders there."* This can be seen especially in terms

of professional skills, thereby keeping workers in the region. On an international level, showcasing the university's scientific knowledge online is seen as way of having impact.

However, in some cases, the continuing education units are not directly responsible for the programme content and decisions related to the programmes. They place the responsibility for the programme content with the faculties. In many continuing education units, experimentation and professionalization are often possible, new systems, policies and strategies can be piloted. Continuing education (or in this case more specifically lifelong learning) often focuses on skills or liberal arts as offering broad, science-based general knowledge for the general support and development of society. It brings people in contact with each other, enables them to participate in society in a new way or teaches them new skills.

More generally speaking, in terms of core values, the continuing education units of research-intensive universities see themselves as relevant for society, accessible, academic, high quality, practice-oriented, non-profit, but also independent, market-oriented, entrepreneurial, and flexible.

These first-order concepts were then used to build an overarching graph visualizing the main purposes of the continuing education units in the following second order themes: Access & engagement; Research embedding & quality; Market orientation & efficiency. This can be seen in Figure 6: Main purposes of continuing education units in universities.

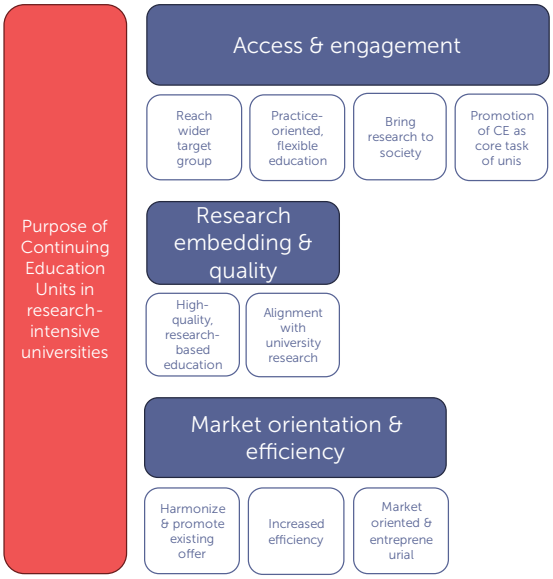

Figure 6: Main purposes of continuing education units in universities

The next subsection will examine which type of institutional embedding is successful in achieving the three main purposes of continuing education within research-intensive universities identified above.

4.3 Institutional embedding and its influence on continuing education purposes

This section examines the Institutional embedding dimension, i.e. how continuing education is embedded structurally in higher education institutions and then identifying three different types.

While there is a great variety within the different continuing education set-ups, there are also a lot of commonalities, which made it possible to identify three main types. The interviews show a great diversity in the continuing education structure and staffing, ranging from two-people (project) teams to full-sized institute/ department with almost full university structure (often excluding teaching staff). History and policy conditions seem to influence strongly which type is predominant in a region. From this information, the following three main types of continuing education units could be identified:

- **Separate fully staffed unit:** In a first type, the most comprehensive one, the internal structure looks almost like a full university structure, including a

number of academic staff. In these types of units, everything comes together under one roof, "*a separate department unlike other departments*", with separate budgets, separate strategy and separate targets, even including a large base of teaching staff. Here, the operations division (almost) fully recreates functions of the core university. This is seen as necessary "*as students and programmes are quite different*". Regionally, the institutions interviewed for this study are situated in the UK.

- **Full-service coordination unit:** In a second type, the continuing education unit is responsible for a large part of support and coordination activities, but consists of (mainly) supporting staff, while hiring (almost all) academic staff from the faculties for the activities. This type exists either within the public university or as a private (not-for-profit) daughter company. Regionally, these types were found in Austria, Germany and the Netherlands in the framework of this study.
- **Light-touch coordination unit:** In a third type, the continuing education unit consists of a very small core, with a minimum of two people, such as a programme manager and Dean. All continuing education activities are located in the faculties including most of the corresponding services, and with only limited central coordination. The central unit intends to not interfere with the existing activities in the faculties too much, seeing them "*in the driver's seat*". This is based on a decision to "*enhance existing structures instead of adding a new entity*". Regionally, this type was found in Belgium and the Netherlands in this study.

When analysing how the three different types of continuing education units influence the above defined intended purposes, the following conclusions can be derived.

4.3.1 Influence on Access and engagement

When it comes to Access and engagement theme, the three different types of continuing education units have a differing influence on its different aspects: reaching a wider target group; practice-oriented, flexible education; bringing research to society; promotion of continuing education as core task of universities (see Figure 7: Access and engagement factors below).

Figure 7: Access & engagement factors

a) Separate, fully staffed continuing education unit

The separate, fully staffed continuing education unit representatives interviewed in this research traditionally have a clear access and engagement focus: their main focus has been on **reaching a wider target group**, even going back to their foundation, and they are also expressing this clearly in their mission. As quoted from one of the interviews, they state that they have an *"access mission, an inclusion mission, and there's an income generation mission, and there is a taking [the university's teaching] to the world mission."* Another interviewee confirms this focus: *"[We are] trying to open up a [university's name] quality education to anyone."* They see this as their focus even when the policy framework is not necessarily helping their mission: *"...there is no government policy about what happens to a 35-year-old or a 45-year-old who is stuck in a low-income job [...]. And that's really our agenda, if they wish to get into the knowledge economy, if they wish to progress their education, that's our definition of widening participation and impact."* They do this e.g. by running general interest courses – based on academic content – for the elderly, carers, or people who want to change their profession completely. However, also these universities face the challenge of actually achieving this mission to some extent. They are committing to changing this though: *"So working out how we address our portfolio, to diversify, to attract a wider demographic and diversify that is a priority at the moment."* They recognize that there is a clear trade-off with funding aspects: *"Teaching always costs if you're trying to do an access mission."* With these units having a strong focus on the access mission and all of their thinking and strategizing revolves around that, this factor can be interpreted to be influenced **positively** overall.

These units also focus on **Practice-oriented, flexible education**: *"What we're trying to do is be accessible, flexible, affordable."* This learner-centeredness also adds to the quality of the programmes:

> *"Because I think my colleagues are very, very learner-centred and very intentional in the way that they develop the learning."*

They e.g. offer summer courses to enable different target groups to attend their courses: "*they come for a short, sharp shock. It's not like studying long term over a period of years or terms.*" One of the interviewees elaborates why this is so important: "*We have people who are [...] carers for either partners or parents or whatever, who've managed to leave something behind*." And these learners will say something like *"That's changed my perspective on something, [...] it's just made me decide to study something else at a higher level, it's brought me back into education after forty or fifty years*", which exemplifies how this translates into the access and engagement mission. These quotations show that in these units, this objective is influenced **positively**.

This type of unit also tends to focus on the factor **bringing research to society** in the sense of lifelong learning: "*And whether that be for personal development, so literature, sociology, archaeology, or whether it be for cutting edge skills like coaching, AI, you know healthcare, data that that kind of thing. So, we believe passionately in the liberal arts as solving and understanding complex problems, but also vocational skills you can take back to the workforce of tomorrow*." This factor is influenced **positively** in this type of unit.

The factor of **promotion of continuing education as a core task of universities** is somewhat more difficult to achieve in this set-up. They are clearly positioned outside of the regular structure and point to how faculties tend to not understand the need for a certain programme as the staff have not been in touch with continuing education at all themselves. The interviewees refer to the position of continuing education within research universities: *"[...] how continuing education units in elite universities [...] are put to the margins and the periphery [...] because research is what's valued."* This indicates that this factor tends to be influenced **negatively** when having continuing education as a separate part of the university.

The graph below visualizes how the different factors in the field of **Access and engagement** are negatively or positively influenced by this type of continuing education unit.

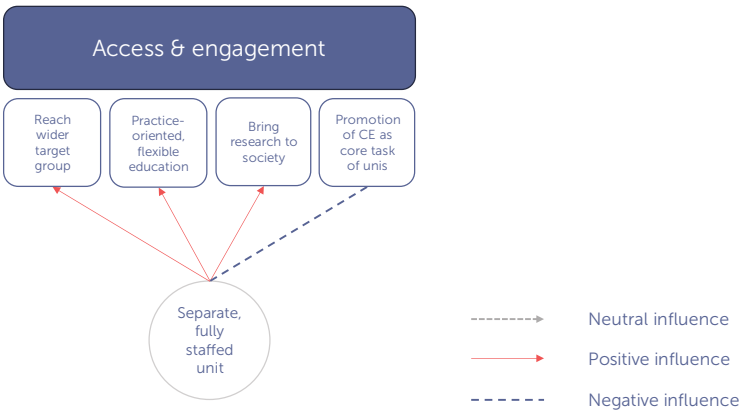

Figure 8: Influence of the Separate, fully-staffed continuing education unit type on Access & engagement factors

b) Full-service coordination unit

These types of units also tend to have a focus on **reaching a wider target group** than the traditional universities, such as non-academically trained participants. One of the interviewees explains: *"Due to the high demand in the labour market you have to offer some more attractive educational biography or educational pathways."* At another unit this is done by means of exceptions: *"persons without a bachelor's degree – there were like two or three persons per cycle also could do the Master's degree in continuing education."* One of the interviewees mentions a specific course example which is focused on such target groups: *"[We run] humanitarian courses. That is, you don't have to have any previous knowledge or previous experience, but typically they're coming from NGOs, they're coming from organizations, international organizations [...], workers that want to be further developed and further gain further knowledge to be able to take it out into practice and into the field. [...] But of course they don't have to have a degree or something like that. They register and that's enough."* This also applies to focussing on strengthening businesses by educating staff who have not gone through a traditional education trajectory:

> *"I think the competitive strength depends on the education of your staff, and in particular of leaders, so you have an economic structure with a lot of mid-sized global companies, and we do not really have a deeper academic tradition in many companies, even in larger companies. [...] Because engineers [...] sometimes they fail to complete their studies, [...] to educate them is also a way to strengthen competitive advantage."*

It can be concluded that this aspect is influenced **positively** through this type of unit.

In terms of **practice-oriented, flexible education**, these units are clear in aiming to achieve this or perceiving themselves at being strong at this already: *"Also our USP [unique selling point] is that we offer practice-oriented [education]."* One of the units express that adaptivity to different target groups is key: *"Mainly because we try to solve some issues when it comes to lifelong learning that they have to be flexible in time and space to be most convenient to fit into the business and the family and hobbies actually. And therefore adaptivity is a key issue and individualization so that you can deal also with an architect and a structural engineer in the same group."* Practice orientation is also achieved by hiring a diverse set of professors to ensure practice-orientation*: "some professors that are fully engaged in research and other professors fully engaged with their own companies. They are contributing to impact, others to research impact, or to practical impact."* Another unit states that they are focusing on practical elements as well:

> *"[T]he methods come from the academia and also the case studies. But then we have also some experts from the companies to put their perspective into the [programme]."*

Concluding it can be stated that overall, this factor is influenced **positively** through this type of unit.

In terms of the factor of **bringing research to society**, this is done in a strong way in these types of units. They identify strongly with this mission and focus on their background as being part of a large research university: *"[...] primarily focusing on knowledge transfer, so we try to get the professors, let's say into connection with*

the society to talk about the results, the research results [...]. And then they can let's say challenge the results with some society issues as well and their opinion." This is also reflected by one of the other interviewees:

> *"[T]hat's one goal in our programs and program development that is always scientific driven [sic]. [...] We have that aspect of practice orientation, but always scientific driven [sic].*"

It can be concluded that in these types of units bringing research to society is influenced **positively**.

When it comes to **promoting continuing education as a core task of universities**, we can see that these types of continuing education units achieve this to some degree by convincing academic staff to participate in their programmes and ensuring service orientation towards them. *"This was a fight with the old scientific directors that now all the programs have to cover 20% overhead. [...] I think most of the old scientific directors I call now don't have a problem with it. They also see what the programs gain with the centralized services we offer. Yeah, like marketing, student service centre."* For other interviewees of this type this does not seem to be a first point of attention. This aspect can therefore be considered to be influenced **neutrally**.

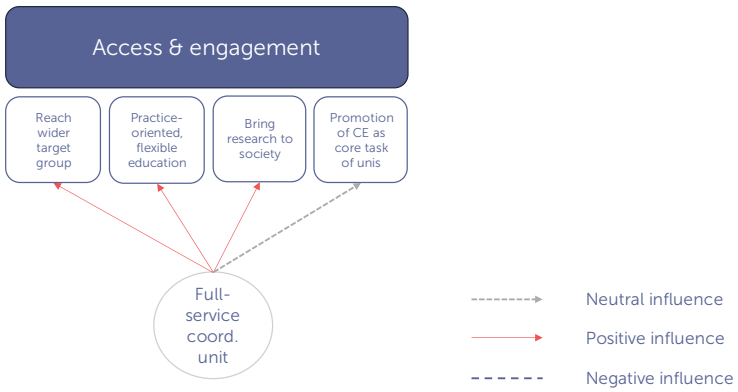

Figure 9: Influence of the Full-service coordination unit type on Access & engagement factors

c) Light-touch coordination unit

In the case of light-touch coordination units, the **reaching of wider target groups** shows an inclination towards professionals who need to follow a training due to their current or a future job, so in the narrowest sense of the term of "continuing education". As one interviewee states: *"Yeah, not only alumni, but they are of course very important target group. Professionals [...] People who are active in the workforce and also are participating in lifelong learning in function of their job yes or the future job. But it's broader than that. [...] we organize lectures about all different topics for like everyone. Yeah, it's also part of our lifelong learning program [...for instance] about art and philosophy."* Another continuing education leader defines it as follows:

> *"And what we said was we want it to be part of our veins because we're not only here to educate this small group of young people. Because after they graduated, there's another world and knowledge [develops] quickly."*

One of the interviewees also run programmes "for the curious" to attract a wider group. This aspect is influenced **positively**.

In terms of providing **practice-oriented, flexible education**, this is a main consideration also for this type of unit. One interviewee states it clearly:

> *"But if you're working, you have a family and you want to have other courses. Then you have different needs. And yeah, it's in the evenings or it's online – you need more flexibility."*

Another one mentions the introduction of e.g. micro-credentials as a way to support the combination of studies with work and free time. Structure can be supportive or hindering flexibilization of education: *"So they did and they placed it underneath continuing education. Which is not as I would have hoped it would be, because flexibilization is way bigger than continuing education."* However, as can be seen from the quotation below in the factor on Bringing research to society below, having the faculties tends to put research interests before societal interests. Overall, it can be concluded that these units manage to influence this aspect **neutrally**.

When it comes to **bringing research to society**, these types of units have the advantage of leaving their researchers in charge of programmes but the challenge of making their contents relevant for society: However, in this case, the faculties are in the lead, and therefore research interest often takes precedence over demand orientation:

> *"We want our [unit...] to think more like demand driven. And that's very hard. They are not used to it. They are mostly thinking from their own expertise and so on. But for lifelong learning there are so many needs."*

We can deduct that this aspect is also influenced **neutrally**.

These types of units clearly see it as their task to **promote continuing education as a core task of universities**. As these units have all only been established in recent years this is of great importance to them. *"We included it in a policy paper in clear words that we want to embed [continuing education] as a core task [of the university."* Lobbying becomes especially important in these cases.

> *"We spoke with all the faculties and units and sat down with all the stakeholders, and we made it clear that we will be there – if we can add value – and the trick is to show what that value is."*

They also do this by working closely with the faculties and develop an understanding of what is important to them: *"We schedule the meetings also, every month we're on a different location. So we go to the faculties. And then you realize that it's actually a different environment and it feels like a different company, a different world. [...] So that for me it helps to understand those differences, because if [...] I would never go there, I would say, OK, let's organize this completely differently."* They often do not only see it as their task to lobby internally but to also strengthen continuing education policies by engaging with the policymakers on a national level as well as becoming more known in the community:

"But I hope that we can make our part like more known, and that higher education is important in lifelong learning. [W]hen you ask someone at the street or in a company about lifelong learning, will they say, uh, [university name]?"

This type of unit can be interpreted as influencing the purposes **positively**.

The graph below visualizes how the different factors in the field of **Access and engagement** are negatively or positively influenced by the light-touch continuing education unit.

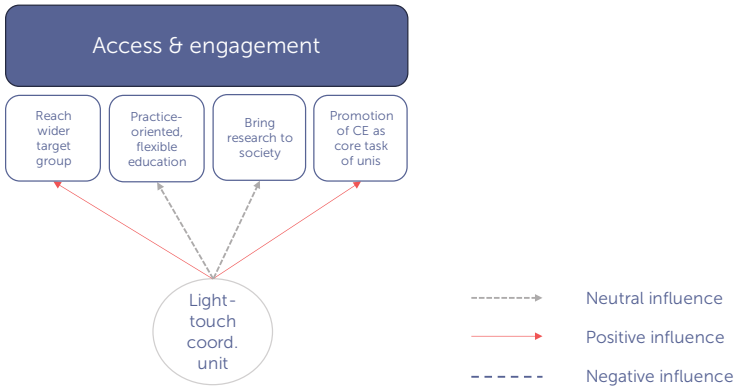

Figure 10: Influence of the Light-touch coordination unit type on Access & engagement factors

Concluding, the three types of continuing education units have differing influence on the Access and engagement factors that were identified. While they are all equally driven in their attempts and conviction to reach wider target groups, light-touch coordination units struggle slightly more in designing practice-oriented, flexible education than the other two types, due to leaving the academic staff in the driver's seat. Similarly, this type of unit finds it somewhat more challenging than the other two types to bring research to society as the academic staff are in charge of the programme content and design where research interests may weigh stronger than societal needs. Finally, this type of unit promotes continuing education most strongly, among other things due to the stronger need to do so in view of their stage of development and their closer connection the central university policy makers. The separate, fully-staffed continuing education unit has an overall negative influence on this last aspect.

4.3.2 Influence on Research embedding and quality

This section will examine how the three different types of units influence the Research embedding and quality factors of continuing education – namely high-quality research-based education and alignment with university research – positively or negatively, see Figure 11: Research embedding & quality factors below.

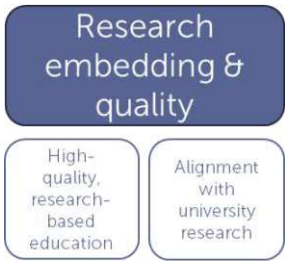

Figure 11: Research embedding & quality factors

a) Separate, fully-staffed continuing education unit

With relation to the factor of **high-quality, research-based education**, the Separate, fully-staffed continuing education units are providing this out of tradition, with a pride of being part of a high-quality research-strong university. They are very committed to meeting quality strongly:

> *"It puts an obligation on us to meet those very high-quality standards. And that's absolutely number one on our priorities. [The courses] have to be academically excellent, and they have to positively reflect on the university's identity".*

Additionally, they conduct an *"external peer review and we would look at internal peer review. So [university's name] academics look at all of that process, even if they're not teaching, and say so this is commensurate or it's not commensurate with [university's name]"*. They are adamant about quality: *"[W]e would have at least one academic director on our payroll in each academic discipline because we want to be able to have a mechanism where we can assess quality."* In some cases, quality can be even higher than at the main university: *"[In meetings, he likes to state] that we out-perform the university – but we do. Because I think my colleagues are very, very learner-centred and very intentional in the way that they develop the learning."* However, there are obstacles to doing this at the desired level:

> *"Probably only about 10% of our teaching would be through research active academics and I personally think [...] it is a fantasy that your lifelong learning will be delivered by research active stellar academics."*

Overall, we can still infer that this factor is influenced **positively** in these types of units.

In terms of **alignment with university research**, the situation is more mixed. Overall, there are efforts to align. One of the interviewees answers the question whether the offer is aligned: "*Broadly. But much more expansive, much more expansive*." Another respondent elaborates on the complexity:

> *"One is absolutely, yes, it's about alignment. So, for example if you look at the continuing professional development needs of doctors and healthcare professionals, we're absolutely aligned to what the university and professional bodies want to do, because that's the smart marketplace thing to do. The flip side of it is why would we want in other disciplines to copy what the parent university does? We want to be distinctive, and we want to be focused on midlife adult learners, and we want to respond to what they need."*

For degree-bearing programmes they do have to get permission from the main university stakeholders to run a new programme: *"It's simply the permission. We, as part of the governance process, we have to have a signed letter from the cognate faculty [...] saying I think your genomic medicine programme or your law programme is great and that we are supportive of it."* In terms of non-award bearing programmes, there is a lot of freedom though: "*So we can put on courses that sometimes the academics want to try out [...] then see whether or not it would work*." Overall, the alignment can be seen as influenced **neutrally**.

Figure 12: Influence of the Separate, fully-staffed unit type on Research embedding & quality factors

b) Full-service coordination unit

In terms of **high-quality, research-based education**, in these types of units the educational programmes are headed by academic directors to ensure that quality education is provided in line with university standards. This is only done with own university staff: "*For example, if we know that there's an expert in this area and he could be the scientific director? It's not possible. […] But I also understand the decision because it's like the quality*." Another interviewee states as follows:

> "*The academic director is responsible for the content and therefore needs to be part of the research staff*."

Also admission policies are aligned with the university. These units also see quality as their highest competitive advantage*: […W]e have a very competitive market environment. We have some private universities which are focusing on let's say still quality. But huge class is low price. And so we figured out the segment is quality. And right now it's working*." High-quality education, research-based education in this case is **positively** influenced by this type of unit.

When it comes to **alignment with university research**, also full-service coordination unit model shows various aspects. One of the interviewees clearly states that in terms of alignment: *"University content is always the basis."* Another one elaborates on how this is achieved in terms of implementation: "*And the faculty has to stand up and say, yes, we want this program in the development programs*." Similarly, another interviewee states: "*Programs work best if there's a tight connection to a professor or to institute*" adding that: "*So I think our we are very much complementary actually [to] what is done in bachelor, master and PhD*." At the same time they are also mentioning examples where similar programmes are installed within the university, creating competition and therefore hindering successful alignment. Overall, it can be concluded that this factor is influenced **neutrally** by the full-service coordination unit.

The figure below shows how the full-service coordination unit influences factors related to Research embedding and quality.

Figure 13: Influence of the Full-service coordination unit type on Research embedding & quality factors

c) Light-touch coordination unit

When it comes to **high-quality, research-based education**, the light-touch coordination units leave the content up to the faculties mostly. While this can mean increased quality, there is not always overarching quality assurance in place in these, especially in the starting phase. Others have a clear system. "

> *[When it comes to quality assurance there are] two levels. Central is the Commission of lifelong learning and the Steering Committee of the [continuing education unit]. Those are the two levels, and of course the teacher."*

Another interviewee also clarifies that quality is one of their priorities: *"And quality, quality assurance. Yeah, we've stayed at nine rules for continuing education to make sure that it's the quality that we want to deliver as a university."* While it is possible to hire external staff, there are clear rules in place for this: *"But to make sure that it aligns with our quality assurance, we stated that it should be a minimum of 50% of university staff teaching."* Summarizing it can be said that the influence on quality assurance factors of this type of unit is **positive**.

As these units leave the content of the programmes fully up to the faculties, the **alignment with university research** is strongest in these constellations: *"We are an academic provider, we are close to research and so we want that our lifelong*

learning programs stays close to the research. So it's in the faculties." This factor is clearly influenced **positively** in this set-up.

The light-touch coordination units' influence on Research embedding and quality can be summarized as follows:

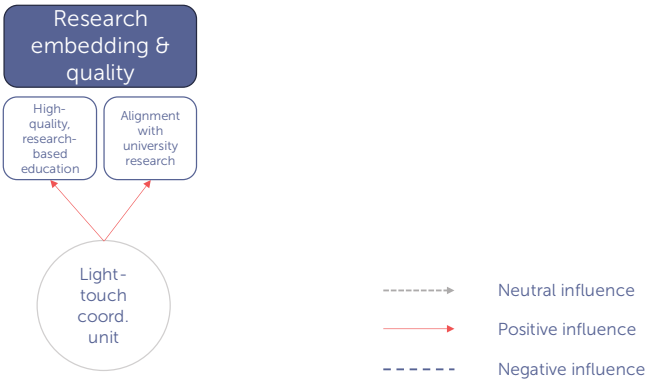

Figure 14: Influence of the Light-touch coordination unit type on Research embedding & quality factors

Concluding it can be inferred that the three types of continuing education units have differing influence on the two Research embedding and quality factors. High-quality, research-based education scores are positive for all three types of units as soon as overarching quality structures are in place. When it comes to alignment with university research, the picture changes: here the first two types are more focused on their own target groups, and while alignment is broadly desired they also see reasons for not doing it; while the light-touch coordination units are see it as their main purpose to have continuing education close to research and be mainly influenced and organized by those conducting the research.

4.3.3 Influence on Market orientation and efficiency

This section examines how the different types of units affect the factors associated with the Market orientation and efficiency theme. The factors are harmonize & promote existing offer; increased efficiency; and market oriented & entrepreneurial, as can be seen in Figure 15: Market orientation & efficiency factors.

Figure 15: Market orientation & efficiency factors

a) Separate, fully-staffed continuing education unit

In terms of the factor **harmonize and promote existing offer** these units already have a clear one-point-of-entry system in place. Due to their separate structure, they have considerable control over harmonization. While in some cases there is still work to do: *"Based on a number of considerations which is, over time the department's grown enormously and organically, with no real clear strategic direction. [...] it's just become a sort of a monster in that sense*. However, the set-up favours the harmonization where continuing education leadership can proactively incur change by taking charge of the strategic direction:

> *"And so I came up with a kind of draft strategic plan and that was focusing on what we do and how we should do it, you know what we currently do and what should we be doing? Who are we doing it for? And who should we be doing it for? And how are we doing it and how should we be doing that? So you know the descriptor and a normative future."*

Overall it can be stated that this factor is influenced overall **positively**.

The **increased efficiency** factor is mixed for these units. While the overall standardisation and unification is positive there are also concerns*: "We still have the bureaucracy of a research-intensive university. So, it's like turning the oil tanker. We're seeing, well, there was a market opportunity here, now, six big brand universities have entered that space by the time we get there."* But of course, there are efficiency gains as well: *"you can do it more efficiently than they could [the academic staff alone] and you can take some of the burden and they still get the outcome they're looking for."* The influence on this factor is therefore **neutral**.

When it comes to the **market-orientation and entrepreneurial factors**, while there are clear market considerations, the access mission also influences decisions:

> *"Many of our courses are priced at less than it costs to deliver when you look at the numbers of students doing it, because we have an access mission to enable people to take advantage."*

Other hindering factors are that the academic staff are in charge and focusing more on their own expertise when designing courses: *"And one of the follow-on challenges of that, is that our portfolio of courses is traditionally being academic led. You know, what we maybe people would work with want to develop a course in [a certain subject area], where it's actually, you know, we need to be more market-led than that is it. That's a change that we would say we need to bridge that gap. But we're conscious that that's where we need to be."* As the units all do need to keep their bottom line healthy, they have a clear entrepreneurial focus: *"I think some universities have let their continuing education unit completely run free reign because we're more entrepreneurial, we're more dynamic. We'll outcompete any university department because we have to fight for our living. And that doesn't often go down very well, so there always has to be checks and balances."* At the same time, the entrepreneurial spirit is very well developed, which can be seen from the following quote:

> *"Our job is to be an incubator, so we've introduced - so if you track the history of continuing education [...] if you look at academic disciplines like entrepreneurship, most [...] business schools didn't want to know about it: entrepreneurs were born, not made, you couldn't train for it; which is added to be another member of the team: Now, entrepreneurship is the mainstay of most business schools. [...] So we see our role as being expansive, with new academic disciplines, with new modalities of delivery."*

Knowing they have to be more market-led, they have clear strategic thinking: *"What are the levers we compete on? Is it price? Well, no, because of an overhead of buildings like this and the team that we have. We can compete on quality to an extent."* This ambivalence is expressed clearly by one of the interviewees:

"You're amplifying the educational haves and the have nots. And then when you look at your society and say, well, why is our economy and social cohesion broken? [...] See we're completely hypocritical because we have to run this kind of master's to make the economics work, but it's not the heart of what we really want to do."

The influence on this factor can therefore be considered overall **neutrally**.

Overall, the influence on the Market orientation and efficiency factors of this type of unit can be summarized in the following graph:

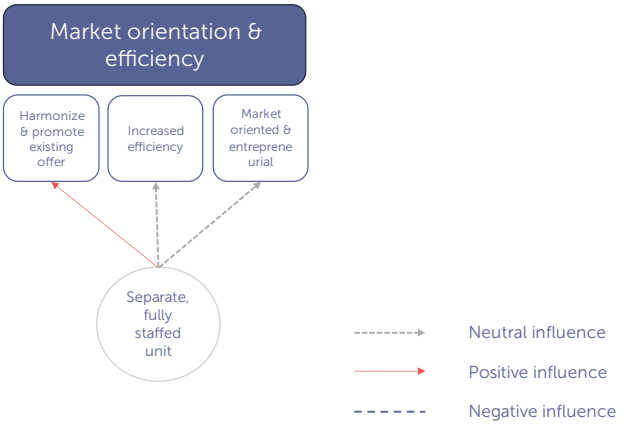

Figure 16: Influence of the Separate, fully staffed unit type on Market orientation & efficiency factors

b) Full-service coordination unit

The full-service coordination unit types have a clear focus on the **harmonizing and promoting the existing offer** aspect. One of the interviewees describes:

"That was actually the reason why the [continuing education unit] was created, right, because we should be the ones who are able to bring the programs to the market, and not every faculty doing it in whatever way they find appropriate."

They make sure there is one point of entry for all programmes, meaning one central portal where all continuing education programmes can be found, showing the high

volume of existing courses and making it visible to the market and the faculty. This factor can be considered **positive** overall.

When it comes to **efficiency**, one interviewee says how the central university is too big and not flexible enough to support the continuing education unit in the way it would need it. However, they have enough freedom to handle the situation: *"[The university is] not flexible, it's not service oriented. [...] So, [...] we do it sideways and we do it on our own because we also have the money."* Overall these units are succeeding in increasing efficiency to achieve their task, and this factor can be evaluated **positively**.

In terms of **market-oriented and entrepreneurial** factors, one of the interviewees, says:

> *"We want to unlock what is there, connect the market demand with our offer. We have done market research, with often obvious results, but these are still important to use to hide behind."*

Another interviewee state that their core values are very much along those lines: *"And the new values which we intend to promote are independence, flexibility, speed, decision making, market orientation, sales driven, entrepreneurial."* These units have a clear market orientation and entrepreneurial outlook. Overall, it can be concluded that the influence of this type of unit on this factor is predominantly **positive**.

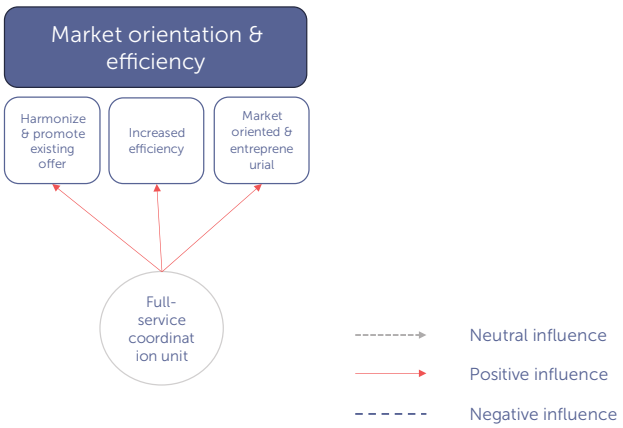

Figure 17: Influence of the Full-service coordination unit type on Market orientation & efficiency factors

c) Light-touch coordination unit

In terms of the factor **Harmonize and promote existing offer**, these units are aware of the need to do that. When it comes to harmonization, with the faculties in the lead, this is not something that can be done easily. They are using structure to align the offer – either through commissions or a position such as that of educational director that takes decision on what fits the demand and what does not. However, they tend to make great strides in increasing promotion efforts: One of them goes so far as to collaborate with others in this promotion: *"And it brings together all the programmes, all the offers from the three universities [...] but, if you want to register, yeah, you will register not in [the website's name]. It's not an institution. It's like just [...] a small layer of communication*." Not just for promotion purposes but also to ensure a comprehensive market offer:

> *"We want to look at all the programs together and see if there too much deluge, or if there something missing. That's one thing, but also on like regional offerings, because for lifelong learning, we think it can be important that you as a citizen, you don't have to go too far to find what you need. So we are also thinking on using each other's locations for our own programmes so that we can multiply it over."*

Overall the effect of this can be considered **positive**.

The factor of **increased efficiency** is of less importance for these units. Almost all support activities are arranged in the faculties, and that is also desired to enable their different approaches. One of the interviewees summarizes this clearly:

> *"Either you work towards the form of a separate entity, which means that you that your business case is stronger, but your connection to what you do as university gets weaker. But if you move towards the other way, the more you integrate within the university, the stronger your content gets but the weaker your business gets. Umm, so that was the choice that we actually made. It was very clear for us, and we decided that as university it's more important that we stick to what we know and that we are actually relevant rather than being, or going for the easiest way of administration."*

Overall, the effect of this type of unit on the efficiency factor can be considered **negative**.

In terms of **market-orientation and entrepreneurial** outlook, they are aware of the need to do so. However, content is however decided in the faculties and predominantly by academic staff who tend to base content on research interest rather than market demand: This is expressed by one of the interviewees in the following way: *"We want our [school] to think more [...] demand driven. And that's very hard. They are not used to it. They are mostly thinking from their own expertise and so on. But for lifelong learning there are so many needs. So we cannot put energy in things which society is not waiting for."* Also the quotation above in terms of efficiency is relevant here.

The market orientation of this type can be considered predominantly **negative**.

Overall, the influence on the Market orientation and efficiency factors of this type of unit can be summarized in the following graph:

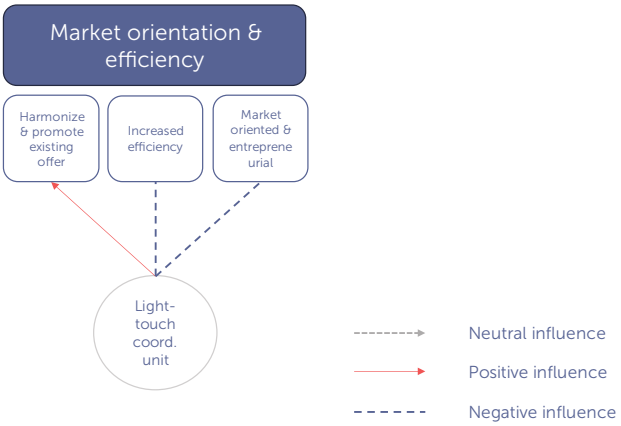

Figure 18: Influence of the Light-touch coordination unit type on Market orientation & efficiency factors

Concluding, it can be observed that the three types of continuing education units have differing influence on the Market orientation and efficiency factors that were identified. The Full-service coordination unit type scores positively throughout all the factors, with having significant control of the harmonization and promotion of the existing offer, are in many ways able to steer their efficiency, and are clearly

market oriented and entrepreneurial in their outlook. The Separate, fully-staffed continuing education units perceive a lack of efficiency though as they tend to experience a high level of bureaucracy from the main university and struggle to unite market orientation with their access mission. In terms of harmonization and promotion of the existing offer they do have more control. Finally, Light-touch coordination units are least effective when it comes to these factors. While they tend to be able to make strides in the harmonization promotion of the existing offer, efficiency is less of a given due to most support activities being arranged in the faculties, and market orientation and entrepreneurial direction take a backseat to the research orientation.

The next section will address a number of other critical conditions that need to be in place to foster the implementation of continuing education in research-intensive universities.

4.4 Other critical conditions supporting continuing education

This section covers the fourth dimension on the critical baseline factors that need to be in place that support the success of continuing education. The interviews with experts from all three types of continuing education units all point to three baseline elements that need to be addressed to support continuing education to succeed within the framework of a research university: Strategic direction; Senior leadership backing; Incentives for academic staff. There is a fourth critical condition influencing the Access & engagement as well as the Market orientation and efficiency dimension: the engaging in External partnerships.

4.4.1 Strategic direction

The first baseline success factor that is mentioned by the continuing education unit is identifying a sound strategy to be able to offer continuing education as a university. First and foremost, continuing education needs to be part of the overall university strategy to enable the activity to thrive.

> *"But it is now clearly mentioned in the strategy – which is not fully alive yet, but that's what we are for."*

Additionally, there are a lot of competing elements when establishing continuing education in research-intensive universities. From the previous analyses we can

clearly see that a necessary precondition for success is making strategic choices, e.g. by focusing either on an access mission or financial success factors.

4.4.2 Senior leadership support

In addition to the strategy, the backing of senior university leadership is considered an essential parameter for the success of continuing education as it serves as one of the main incentives for academic staff to contribute to it, and to get strategic priority in the case of important decision-making. This senior leadership support can be grown by garnering support from continuing education "champions" e.g. by respecting their existing initiatives. A humble position in this can be helpful to shape the continuing education pillar within the university and get ownership from the faculties. Generally speaking, communication with all stakeholders is key to get everyone on board.

> *"You do it for the faculties to make sure that they can actually provide the sort of education. But together you do it for the external client. They need education. The society needs this path. Make sure that you provide for that. And it may be a humble position in some way, but it can also be very strong, because if you're humble it means you're open for inputs and you get this strong connection with the faculties and with the [...] champions."*

This means senior leadership support is not only a key factor in incentivizing academic staff to participate in continuing education activities but also key in terms of lobbying. To become a core part of the university, the university's leadership has a key role in advocating for strengthening education policies in favour of the embedding of continuing education activities.

4.4.3 Incentives for academic staff

With continuing education (still) often being considered as not core to the university's main tasks, fostering internal engagement is key to add to it success. The interviews show that due to the dominant incentive systems, it can be extremely challenging to engage academic staff in continuing education and to therefore making it work at all. Several (systemic) reasons work as disincentives. One of the main disincentives is that contributions to continuing education are not considered nearly as prestigious as research, are also (generally) not included in performance reviews or are not perceived as enhancing the reputation. In cases

where academic staff receive compensation, this is often not regarded as competitive as the engagement in other compensated extra work. Finally, according to the interviewees, university staff generally have an issue with capacity and continuing education is something that is considered to come on top of already full capacity:

> *"Continuing education activities are always extra and that's one problem to incentivize new professors or young people who are still in their academic career to engage in continuing education."*

In the conversations with the experts leading continuing education units, they do point out a considerable number of incentives. These should be considered when trying to increase the engagement of academic staff and to therefore contribute to the overall success of continuing education at higher education institutions. When it comes to factors that are considered as incentives by the academic staff, for those who are already teaching continuing education courses, continuing education units can take some of the administrative burden and provide services more efficiently. In many cases, either individual staff members or the faculty benefit financially from teaching in continuing education courses. Another incentive can be that continuing education helps academics reach a wider audience and helps them raise their public profile. This is closely connected to the intrinsic motivation to participate in continuing education activities to reach a wider target group.

> *"My insight is that what motivates them and drives them to engage in continuing education is intrinsic motivation to spread their insights and to engage with civil society like our mission. We want to go out and we want to reach the people. Yeah, that's the main motivation, not the other way around."*

While this can also seem daunting to some, continuing education students have more experience and bring this to the classroom. Learning from their students, can serve as an additional motivator for teaching staff: *"We do get teachers and then we'll talk to them afterwards. You know, over a meeting or in a corridor and say my students have just taught me things I didn't know. And, you know, almost to a person, they are very happy just because they then adjust what they teach."*

In line with the other baseline dimension on senior leadership support, having top-down backing for the activities can be seen as a very important incentive that is linked to continuing education being evaluated as a core task of academic staff and included in vacancy texts, contracts and performance reviews – which is not yet the case or only in a limited way.

4.4.4 Collaboration with external partners

One of the factors contributing to success is the collaboration with external partners. *"For continuing education, cooperation with other institutions is the way to go."* They see themselves as an important connection with the community.

> *"Universities are too often busy with themselves and forget their community partners."*

Similarly: *"We regard ourselves as a network organisation."* The interviewees mention the importance of collaboration for their strategic objectives. One of the ambitions mentioned is that every programme should be run in cooperation with a stakeholder, for instance with universities of applied sciences or regional educational centres (ROCs, Dutch context). Commercially, such an approach can also result in giving discounts to members of partner associations or companies. By collaborating with local governments, developing programmes for whole sectors can be an option. In line, doing market research in partnership with other continuing education centres of universities can reduce costs. A regional cooperation with other (complementary) universities in terms of marketing and positioning is also mentioned as successful example of strategic collaboration:

> *"Okay, we will work together and we will set up a cooperation to develop the policies and the structures as one point, but also in the way we are presenting ourselves to society."*

But also internal collaboration can be a strategic consideration, such as by connecting companies to the university career centre through funding and enabling those to hire the high potentials graduating, and subsequently promoting continuing education to them.

The next section will combine the elements identified in the findings into a grounded theory model.

4.5 Grounded theory model of embedding continuing education

By combining the different elements identified in this findings chapter, a grounded theory model was developed. It shows the interplay between the different identified purposes and how their successful achievement is influenced by the different types of continuing education units. Additionally, the Baseline conditions, i.e. critical factors for the success of continuing education in research-intensive higher education institutions that require attention of university leadership, are shown as continuous arrows at the bottom of the figure – or, in the case of Collaboration with external partners as boxes (Partnerships) influencing the Access and engagement as well as Market orientation and efficiency themes.

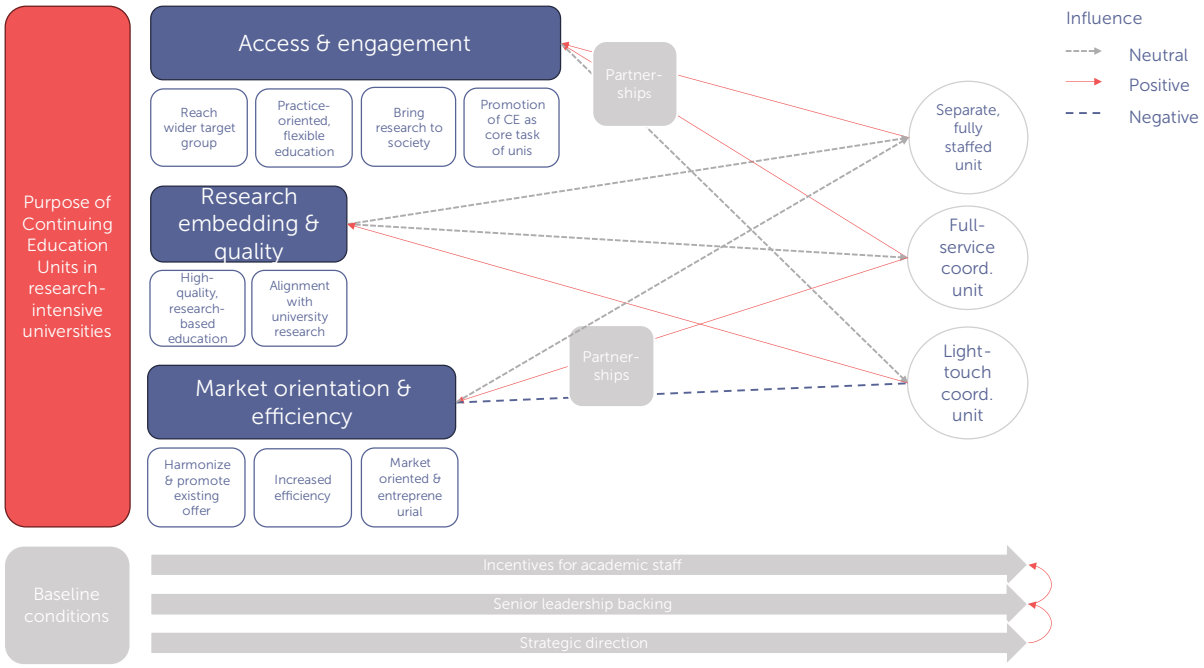

Figure 19: Grounded theory model of embedding continuing education in universities

In the next chapter, the findings combined in this model will be discussed and connected to existing theory, recommendations for further research and for university leadership provided, and concluding remarks given.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, the findings will be evaluated and connected to the existing theory as laid out in the chapter elaborating on the theoretical background. It will identify a number the main findings of this research, establish recommendations for university leadership and clarify the limitations of the conducted research as well as recommendations of further studies regarding this topic.

With increasing demand for universities in the European Union to take on a central role when it comes to providing continuing education, this thesis investigated how this can be achieved by identifying what purposes continuing education units have defined for themselves, what type of continuing education units exist to achieve these purposes, and how they affect their successful achievement. Additionally, it set out to identify what other critical baseline factors need to be in place to support the success of continuing education in higher education settings.

5.1 Discussion of main findings

Based on interviews with leaders of continuing education units in Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, the study clearly showed that the purposes of embedding continuing education in research-intensive universities across Europe revolve around **access and engagement**; **research embedding and quality**; and **market orientation and efficiency**. All continuing education units have in common that they regard it as their main task to coordinate the existing continuing education activities, to structure them and to promote continuing education internally and externally. The embedding differs considerably though, with some leaving most of the initiative and development of programmes to the faculties, and only delivering light-touch coordination and support while others are positioned as a rather complete school within a university. With the exception of academic staff who are on the payroll of the continuing education unit itself, it consistently is seen as challenging to motivate (a sufficient number of) academic staff to engage in continuing education activities.

With regards to the types of units, the results show that some universities have a strong tradition in providing continuing education in a structured way, while for

others there may have been programmes provided throughout the faculties but without a coordinated approach. These findings are in line with the research done by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023b, 2023a). As can be seen from both the theoretical context provided in this thesis - see e.g. Milic (2013), Schuetze (2014), and Preece (2014) – as well as from the interviews, national policies and historic developments play a central role in this context.

To add to the existing body of research, the thesis at hand aimed to find out what specific types of embedding exist and which of these has the most positive influence on the different objectives of continuing education units. The research established three main categories: the **separate, fully-staffed unit**; the **full-service coordination unit**; and the **light-touch coordination unit**.

The findings showed that the first – and most complete, yet more external – type, shows a predominantly positive influence on the Access and engagement with neutral effects on the Research embedding and quality purpose as well as on the Market orientation and efficiency purposes.

The second type, which is more embedded into the central university than the former, but with stronger centralized infrastructures than the latter, shows a predominantly positive influence on the Access and engagement as well as on the Market orientation and efficiency purposes and a neutral influence on the Research embedding and quality purpose.

The last type, the light-touch coordination unit with only limited coordination elements that leaves most responsibilities to the faculties, shows neutral influences on the Access and Engagement, positive effects on the Research embedding and quality aspects, yet an overall negative influence on the Market orientation and efficiency purpose.

Summarizing it can therefore be inferred that **access mission and engagement purposes are most strongly positively influenced in the units with stronger centralized coordination**, while **research embedding & quality related factors are most positively influenced by a light-touch coordination set-up**. Finally, **market-orientation and efficiency factors are most successfully achieved by the full-**

service coordination unit, with the **separate, fully-staffed unit** embedding having a neutral influence and the **light-touch coordination an overall negative influence.**

One of the main findings of this research is that the **three purposes frequently compete for strategic attention**. The interviewed continuing education units as part of research-intensive universities try to operate between the tension of fulfilling an access, impact and/or engagement mission while having to be financially viable by earning their funding through fees and having to ensure that their teaching actually reflects the research conducted at the university. This is added to by having to bridge the gap between working in a both market-oriented and mission-oriented way while having to incentivize the academic staff to engage in continuing education, who – while not necessarily being opposed to e.g. the mission – are traditionally guided by other incentives such as focusing on research or initial education as these are traditionally included in performance assessments, are guiding in rankings and more (Sheila A. Martin, 2022). Similar tension can also be seen in the realm of programme development, where academic research interest, market demands, and access mission needs all demand attention. Strategic decision-making and choosing a focus is key here as can be seen in Porter (1996).

The purposes defined by the senior leaders of continuing education are in line with previous findings in the existing literature. The Access and Engagement aspect links clearly with research which shows that universities across Europe increasingly see the importance of getting out of their "ivory tower" (Matthews, 2023, p. 667) and engage with the communities around them, bringing the scientific knowledge gathered through research to society. This is done e.g. by engaging with stakeholders on the labour market and ensuring that workers have the right up-to-date knowledge for the positions that are relevant for society at this moment, or by trying to reach target groups that have not necessarily been in contact with higher education but would benefit from the knowledge conveyed there (e.g. Fitzgerald et al., 2016). This study contributes to the research by showing that these purposes can be more successfully achieved by Separate, fully-staffed units or Full-service coordination units.

Literature also specifies the need for theory-based continuing education to teach students how to deal with complex problems and acquire the knowledge to address the problems posed in our changing society and global challenges (Gouthro, 2019, Choudry & Rochat, 2015). This corresponds to one of the three main purposes identified by the senior continuing education leaders, the Research embedding and quality focus. This study shows that the light-touch coordination unit embedding is strongest in achieving this objective, especially when it comes to aligning the programmes with the research content conducted at universities.

As described by Schuetze (2014, pp. 46) market orientation and learner-centredness is becoming increasingly important for universities in Europe, with continuing education being at the forefront of this development as it is not funded by public money streams. This is also in line with Atchoarena (2021), Cendon (2018) and Jarvis (2012) who point out the need to take the diverse profiles of learners into account when designing continuing education, and focus on them – and important aspect when ensuring market needs are fulfilled. This is also confirmed by this study, where university leaders within continuing education regard market orientation and efficiency as one of the main purposes of their units. The study adds to this knowledge by stipulating that Full-service coordination units generally are more successful in delivering on this purpose, while the Separate, fully-staffed units show mixed effect, with the light-touch coordination unit scoring overall negatively on this aspect.

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning stipulates that "having a central unit for LLL can be considered a strong indicator for the level of institutionalization and [...] that further efforts are needed to ensure well-coordinated approaches for LLL (in contrast to scattered initiatives)" (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023b, p. 56). Considering how the different types of units positively or negatively affect the identified purposes of continuing education units, this study confirms this by drawing the conclusion that stronger centralized units overall have stronger positive effect on the success of continuing education within higher education.

Additionally, the study identified **three key baseline factors** that need to be in place to ensure the success of continuing education within research intensive universities. The first criterion revolves around **incentives for academic staff,** and

the second to the importance of strong **senior leadership support**. Lastly, a clear **strategic direction** is supportive of the success of the continuing education unit. An extra aspect, which is relevant for both the Access and engagement as well as the Market orientation and efficiency themes is the establishment of **external partnerships** for regional synergies, labour market demand alignment and the reaching of broader target groups, which links with Matthew's work on the "Universal Network University" (Matthews, 2023) or academic-community engagement by Choudry & Rochat (2015) or Fitzgerald et al. (2016).

With regards to the first baseline factor, **strategic direction**, it is known that universities increasingly formulate their own strategies to position themselves in the higher education landscape as laid out by e.g Fumasoli & Lepori (2011) and that a successful implementation of continuing education requires a thoughtful strategic approach (e.g. Milic, 2013 and UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023b). This study delves deeper, as the analysis of the interviews shows that it is key to decide which of the three main purposes is paramount and which trade-offs are acceptable. In balancing profit with purpose, a clear strategic analysis (Whittington et al., 2019) can support the establishment of a framework for decision-making which of the three strategic objectives is guiding in which context and should be the basis for thorough strategy development. We can see that leaders do take into account strategic principles when implementing continuing education, as they consider e.g. the use of "cash cow" programmes (in line with the BCG model, (Boston Consulting Group, n.d.)) to ensure financial income to at the same time support access-based programmes. They often are clear about identifying a niche (quality, research-based) in line with Michael E. Porter who claims that "a company can outperform rivals only if it can establish a difference it can preserve" (Porter, 1996, p. 62). At the same time we can see that when trying to make a decision between research-focus and market orientation they often run into complications posed by the (policy) conditions or the decentralized structure of the university they are operating in (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011). The findings also show that some of the interviewees are adamant about the importance of having written strategy in place and communicating about it regularly, as we have also seen with Whittington et al., (2019).

As another baseline factor, **senior leadership** support is key. This not only provides one of the major incentives for academic staff to contribute to continuing education, but also contributes to essential lobbying activities internally and externally. Strategic change processes are particularly dependent on the top-down backing of the leadership (as has been established by Kotter (1996). Also, when it comes to success factors, we see that relations within the university are of particular importance. Ensuring that there are supportive leaders, identifying champions, working with others who have an interest in continuing education is key in getting or maintaining a support base that will ensure the success of the programmes (see also 5.2 Managerial recommendations). It was additionally established that through lobbying the conditions on a policy level can be improved, based on which strategies can be clarified, internal mechanisms and embedding can be improved, and the institutional form and purpose adjusted, taking practices of change management into account (see e.g. Güttel, 2021; Whittington et al., 2019).

The third baseline factor revolves around the **incentives for academic staff**. As we learned from Sheila A. Martin (2022, reviewing A. J. Hoffman) academic staff are (formally) mainly incentivized by the publishing of their research results in highly regarded papers with engaging with (adult) learners and relating to the practical sphere taking a back seat. The study confirmed that the current incentive system still poses severe challenges for the implementation of continuing education as it depends on the engagement of academic staff. Additionally, the research showed that academic staff do feel motivated to participate in continuing education, with the main incentives revolving around intrinsic motivation, monetary compensation, reduced administrative burden, increased contact with stakeholder and a raised public profile, as well as it receiving top-down backing including it becoming a core task of their work and being evaluated as such. This aspect has an influence on the strategic direction.

In line with Field et al. 2016 (quoted by Atchoarena, 2021) and Fitzgerald et al. (2016) collaboration is key in fulfilling the third mission of universities. The study at hand indeed confirms that **external partnerships** are an extra key factor to achieving two of the three main purposes. They are seen as one of the main tools of actually becoming demand-oriented and providing the employment market with the

knowledge needed to confront the societal changes; so they are key in fostering both the Access and engagement as well as the Market orientation & efficiency aspects.

5.2 Managerial recommendations

This study demonstrates that the types of embedding of continuing education show different strengths regarding the three identified purposes. Depending on which of the three main purposes is considered most important for the respective university, a different type of model may be preferable. This also implies that clear strategic focus is imperative. In the case of (re)positioning this activity structurally within a higher education context, this finding may be considered.

Leaders of continuing education units have an important role in conducting and stimulating lobbying efforts as well as to establish structures that are conducive to the success of continuing education. A culture change is needed, and heavy lobbying required, to slowly establish recognition and rewards structures for academic staff, to enable them to more strongly engage in continuing education. Clear strategy formulation and communication is key when implementing or strengthening continuing education within research-intensive universities. Also, demand-oriented programmes in flexible modalities, while keeping in mind a mix of different programmes that attract a high number of paying students and those that further an engagement mission, will be have to be created – frequently in partnership with the communities and local stakeholders – to cater to a diverse market of adult learners.

Without the support of the senior leadership of the main universities continuing education units will not be able to deliver both the engagement and impact mission and the financially sound programmes required from them: high-level endorsement is essential in making continuing education successful in higher education. This is in line with Kotter's eight steps of transforming an organization, where "establishing a sense of urgency" and "forming a powerful guiding coalition" (Kotter, 1996) are the first two steps needed to manage change effectively, in both of which leadership buy-in is essential. To ensure the lasting implementation of the change, also the other six steps become relevant: "creating a vision"; "communicating the vision"; "empowering others to act on the vision"; "creating

short-term wins"; "consolidating gains and building more change"; and "institutionalizing new approaches".

While continuing education units find themselves in a complex situation to achieve their mission and objectives, the results also show that there is a feeling of a momentum for change – especially in the Belgian and Dutch contexts which are still at the beginning of the trajectory of centralizing and strengthening continuing education efforts in research-intensive universities.

When strengthening continuing education in universities, leadership may want to consider the following aspects also derived from the interviews and laid out in the model below:

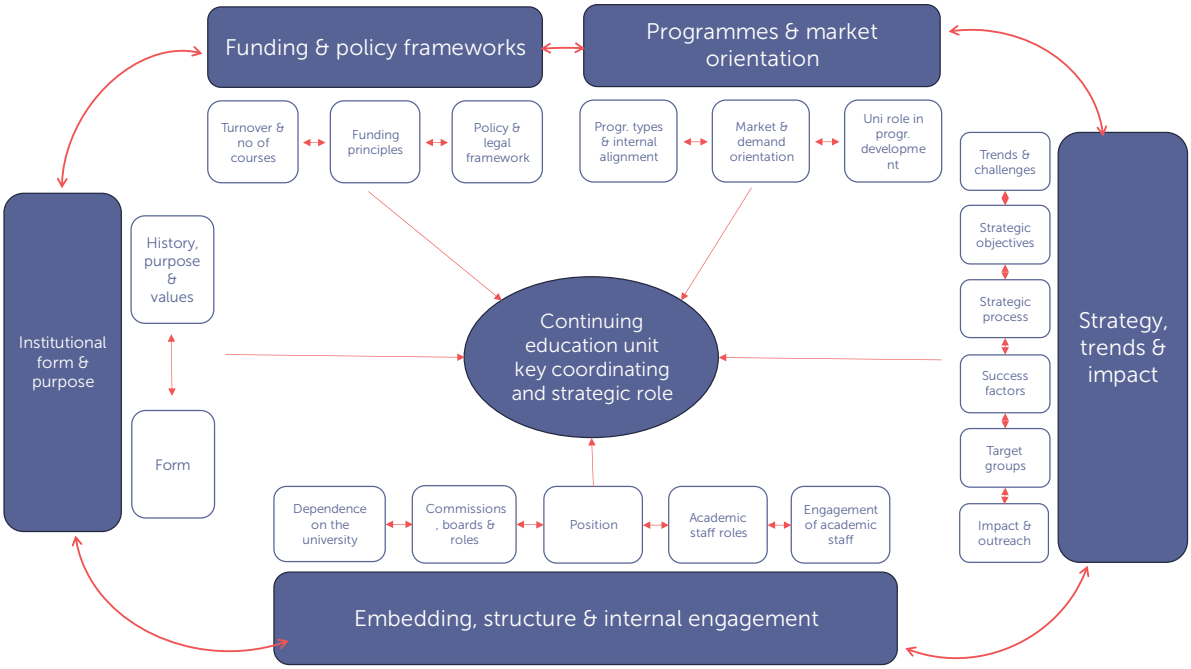

Figure 20: Aspects to consider when implementing continuing education in research-intensive universities

5.3 Limitations and recommendations for further research

This research adds a systematic analysis of factors that influence the strategic positioning of continuing education units as perceived by the practitioner-experts who are at the forefront of making the activities a success. However, in terms of limitations, the research was not able to take into account additional complex

factors for the positioning, such as the national policy or funding situations. Also was the number of cases due to the qualitative nature of the study limited. Connecting this research with more quantitative ones (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023a, 2023b) could provide more in-depth information.

From this and other studies (e.g. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, (2023b, 2023a), it becomes obvious that a clear strategy is key for the implementation of higher education. Further research could investigate the success factors to be included in such a strategy to foster the results of continuing education in higher education institutions. Additionally, it could dive into other aspects to consider when implementing continuing education in research-intensive universities as can be seen above in Figure 20.

One specific element that is of particular importance to fulfil the engagement purpose would be to investigate how non-typical target groups can be reached (Access and engagement factors) while ensuring a strong link with the university's academic research (Research embedding and quality factors) without compromising on the financial components of continuing education units (Market orientation and efficiency factors).

5.4 Conclusion

Concluding, it can be stated that continuing education in research universities has come to stay and is benefitting from significant momentum due to societal changes and efforts to make it more structured and successful both in terms of mission and financial aspects. However, the units charged with the responsibility of coordinating (and implementing) these activities are facing numerous challenges when trying to accomplish the purpose intended for their units.

This research provides university and continuing education units leadership with insights into which factors support the success of embedding continuing education, especially in terms of structure and other critical conditions. Based on the findings derived, it can provide an understanding of a number of key elements that foster the embedding of continuing education by showing which type of continuing education unit affects which of three main purposes – access and

engagement, research embedding and quality, market orientation and efficiency – most successfully, and what other critical conditions need to be in place to add to the positive results of continuing education within higher education institutions.

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Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview guide

Organization & history

1. What type of organization is it?
2. How would you define the purpose of your organization?
3. How is the organization structured?
4. In how far is the organization integrated into the main university?
5. In how far is the organization dependent on main university?
6. What is the background/ history of your organization?

Financial structure

7. How is the organization financed?
8. Does the organization receive any public funding or funding from the university?
9. How many participants participate in your courses annually?

Organizational values & impact orientation

10. What are the core values of the organization?
11. What kind of impact does the organization aim to achieve?
12. What are your target groups?
    a. Do you also aim to reach non-academically trained target groups?
    b. What are the admission requirements?
13. In how far do you consider sustainability?

Personnel policy

14. What characterizes a successful employee?
15. What kind of employees do you aim to recruit?
16. What are the incentives for university staff to contribute to your organization?

Educational offer

17. What kind of educational programmes does the organization offer?
18. Are the educational programmes aligned with the main university's programme?
19. Is the perspective of sustainability integrated into your curriculum?
20. Do the programmes offered address any other societal macro trends?
21. Is the educational offer practice focused and does it include real-life cases?

Organizational strategy & change

22. Have strategic ambitions been identified and, if so, what are those?
23. Has the organization undergone any recent change processes and, if so, why?
24. What challenges are you expecting to encounter in the future?
25. Do you see any relevant policy changes happening at the European or the national or regional level that have an impact on your strategy or future outlook?