Creating Flexible Pathways for Innovation

Webinar Summary

Community for Educational Innovation - CEI

15/09/2026

European Commission | CEI

Creating Flexible Pathways for Innovation

Thematic Strand 4: Lifelong Learning for an Innovative Workforce

This webinar examined how education institutions can develop more flexible learning pathways that enable learners to access, combine and build on learning throughout their lives and careers. Building on European policy developments supporting lifelong learning, skills development and flexible provision, including the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability,[1] the discussion highlighted the importance of recognising learning acquired in different contexts, providing shorter and adaptable learning opportunities, and creating pathways that respond to changing learner and labour market needs.

Through three expert presentations, the webinar explored the recognition of prior learning (RPL) at national level in Ireland, the design and implementation of micro-credentials and micro-degree programmes at Leibniz University Hannover, and the development of flexible and cross-institutional learning pathways within the INGENIUM European University Alliance.

Presentation 1: Recognition of Prior Learning: Creating Flexible Pathways into and through Higher Education

By Dr Ciara Staunton, Director, National Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Higher Education Project, Ireland.

The first presentation presented lessons from a five-year initiative involving all 14 publicly funded universities and technological universities in Ireland. The project aims to embed RPL more consistently across the higher education sector, enabling learners to have knowledge and competences acquired through work, professional training, volunteering, previous study and other life experiences formally recognised.

RPL can support entry or advanced entry to programmes, exemptions from specific modules and, in some cases, the achievement of a full qualification. However, Dr Staunton highlighted that effective implementation requires more than institutional policies. Learners need clear information about whether their previous experience can be recognised, what evidence they need and where they can access support.

[1] Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability*, 2022/C 243/02, OJ C 243, 27.6.2022, pp. 10–25. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H0627(02)

A central lesson from the Irish experience has been the importance of trust, collaboration and a shared framework. The project developed common definitions of RPL and a technical definition for collecting comparable data across institutions. It also invested substantially in staff capacity, including resources for learners and staff and a professional development digital badge that has been awarded to almost 500 higher education staff.

As the funded project approaches its conclusion, attention is shifting from project-based implementation towards long-term sustainability. Priorities include maintaining a national RPL hub, supporting a community of practice, transferring resources and communication tools to institutions and developing a self-paced version of the professional development badge. The experience underlined the importance of embedding successful innovations into mainstream institutional structures so that progress can continue after dedicated project funding ends.

During the discussion, Dr Staunton also emphasised that RPL depends on engagement across a wider ecosystem, including learners, employers, government bodies and quality assurance agencies. Industry cooperation can support the development of programmes tailored to workforce upskilling and reskilling needs. AI could potentially support parts of the RPL process, particularly by helping organise and identify evidence of previous learning, but academic judgement should remain with relevant subject experts.

Presentation 2: Flexible Formats for Innovation in Lifelong Learning - The Micro Credentials at Leibniz University Hannover

By Prof. Dr Elke Katharina Wittich, CEO, Central Institute for Lifelong Learning at Leibniz University Hannover.

The second presentation focused on the university's approach to flexible learning formats and micro-credentials. Building on the 2022 EU Recommendation on micro-credentials, Dr Wittich highlighted their potential to address skills gaps, complement existing degree programmes, provide access to new areas of knowledge and offer learning opportunities to people who may not be able to participate in longer programmes.

At Leibniz University Hannover, individual micro-credentials can be combined into micro-degree programmes. Their design varies according to the target group, learning objectives and subject area. Examples include short modules addressing the Sustainable Development Goals, an additional qualification in AI and Law, and more extensive interdisciplinary programmes developed through the Leibniz AI Academy.

The examples showed that flexible provision does not require a single model. Some micro-credentials can be deliberately small so that students can complete them alongside a degree, while others can form larger and more advanced learning pathways. Existing degree modules may also count towards a micro-degree, helping learners obtain additional qualifications without significantly increasing their workload.

Dr Wittich stressed the importance of transparent descriptions of learning outcomes, credit volume, level and assessment, as well as appropriate quality assurance. She also presented an initiative to develop additional qualifications for professionals working with pupils on the autism spectrum, illustrating how flexible programmes can respond to specific gaps in professional education and bring together learners with different educational backgrounds.

Discussion focused on the involvement of industry and the possibility of stacking individual micro-credentials over time. Leibniz University currently awards certificates for individual modules, allowing learners to accumulate them towards a micro-degree. Cooperation with industry has also informed the development of application-oriented modules, although this remains an area the university aims to strengthen further.

Presentation 3: Flexible Pathways for Innovation – INGENIUM European University

By Eeva Kuoppala, Project Director, INGENIUM European Universities alliance Xamk.

The third presentation introduced the work of the INGENIUM European Universities Alliance. Bringing together ten universities, the alliance has been developing international and interdisciplinary study pathways, joint programmes, mobility opportunities and micro-credentials as part of its work towards a shared European campus.

INGENIUM has developed three models for micro-credentials: jointly developed micro-credentials, created collaboratively by partners; realigned micro-credentials, which adapt existing institutional provision for use across the alliance; and decentralised micro-credentials, which combine learning offered by different partner institutions into a coherent programme. Individual micro-credentials can also be combined into larger learning pathways.

The alliance follows common principles for defining learning outcomes, target groups, delivery, assessment and potential stackability. At the same time, implementation must accommodate different national legislation, institutional procedures and digital systems across ten countries. Developing shared processes

and quality assurance arrangements has therefore been an important part of the alliance's work.

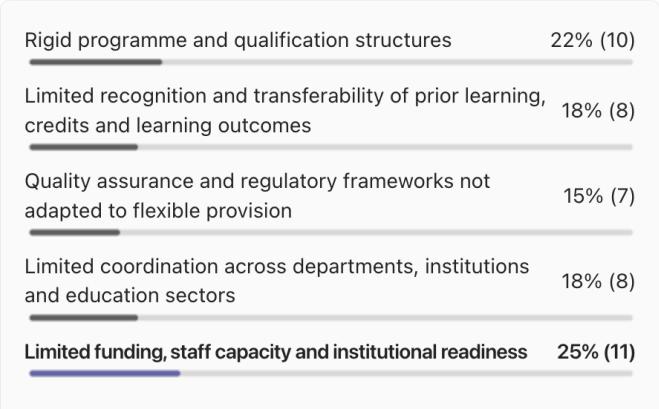
Dr Kuoppala highlighted co-creation with working life as an important mechanism for ensuring that micro-credentials respond to current competence needs. Employers and other stakeholders can contribute knowledge about changing skills requirements, while universities provide pedagogical expertise, assessment and quality assurance. Linking learning activities to authentic workplace challenges can also increase learners' motivation and strengthen connections between education and innovation.

The discussion highlighted the value of European-level frameworks in cross-border cooperation. Shared European definitions and principles provide an important common reference point when institutions in different national systems seek to develop joint approaches, even though practical differences in legislation, accreditation and infrastructure remain.

Interactive poll on flexible learning pathways

A live poll asked participants to reflect on the main barriers preventing education and training institutions from providing more flexible learning pathways, and how flexible learning can contribute most to innovation and competitiveness in Europe. Participants could select up to two options for each question, providing a snapshot of the main challenges and perceived benefits associated with flexible learning provision.

Figure 1. What are the main barriers preventing education and training institutions from providing more flexible learning pathways? Select up to two

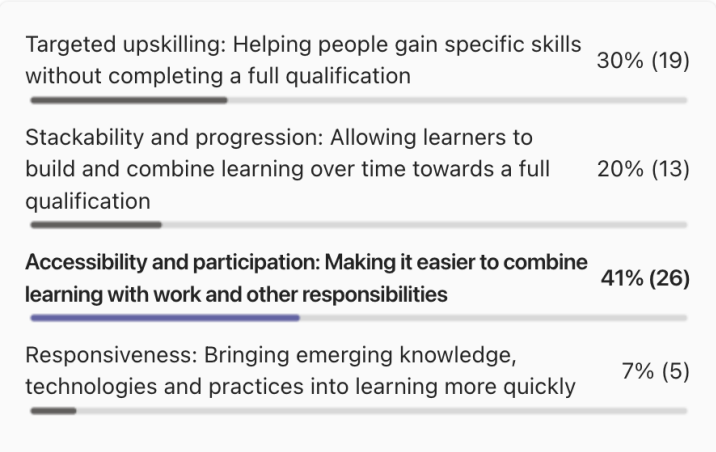


Note: Poll conducted through the Teams feature. 24 responses.

For barriers (Figure *1*), the two most selected options were limited funding, staff capacity and institutional readiness (25%) and rigid programme and qualification

structures (22%). For contributions to innovation and competitiveness (*Figure 2*), the top responses were accessibility and participation (41%) and targeted upskilling (30%).

Figure 2. How can flexible learning contribute most to innovation and competitiveness in Europe? Select up to two.



Note: Poll conducted through the Teams feature. 35 responses.

The results of the CEI Poll will help identify key priorities, barriers and opportunities for strengthening flexible learning pathways, contribute to the 2026 CEI Thematic Report, and inform recommendations for education leaders and policymakers.

Upcoming Activities

- **Webinar** Partnerships for Skills – Building Bridges Across Sectors (October 14, 15:30 CEST).
- **Webinar** Empowering Learners for Workforce Transitions (December 02, 10:30 CET).
- **Call for Good Practices:** Share initiatives or policies on Lifelong Learning for an Innovative Workforce.
- **CEI Study Visit:** Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo, Portugal. November 2026 (closed call).
- **CEI Semester poll on Lifelong Learning for an Innovative Workforce:** insights will provide evidence for our upcoming 2026-II Thematic Report. Vote here!
- **CEI Thematic Report on Education for Green and Digital Innovation,** bringing together insights from the webinars, community input, good practices and study visit exchanges (to be published soon).