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From Declaration to Design: Operationalising the Third Mission through University-Based Lifelong Learning for Companies and Working Adults

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Abstract

Public universities are increasingly expected to contribute to social, cultural and economic development beyond their traditional teaching and research missions. Yet less is known about the organisational conditions through which this “third mission” is translated into concrete lifelong learning provision for companies and working adults. This paper examines the design and early development of the UniTo Lifelong Learning Program, a continuing education initiative developed by the Teaching and Learning Center of the University of Turin in partnership with Unione Industriali Torino.

Drawing on a single embedded case study, the analysis combines programme documentation, methodological materials, semi-structured interviews with HR managers and training directors, pilot communication artefacts, and early demand signals from company outreach. Rather than evaluating programme impact, the paper reconstructs the early institutional process through which a public university began to assemble an employer-facing lifelong learning offer.

The case suggests that university-based continuing education depends on intermediary infrastructures: a boundary-spanning institutional unit able to curate academic expertise across departments; a broker partnership with an employer association; a catalogue model that mediates between academic governability and external responsiveness; and pilot mechanisms, such as pre-adhesion and expressions of interest, that transform uncertain demand into institutional learning. Preliminary demand signals clustered around AI and data-related competences, finance and risk, sustainability and ESG, HR and organisational development, and DEI/soft-skill domains.

The paper contributes a process-oriented account of lifelong learning as mediated third-mission provision, situated between academic legitimacy, workplace usability and public mission.

Keywords: Lifelong Learning; Third Mission; Higher Education; Continuing Education;
University–Industry Partnership