

ALLIES (Alliances for Lifelong Learning, Improvement, Empowerment, and Skills)

Terms of Reference

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I. Objectives

Objectives of the ALLIES topical group: ALLIES seeks to enhance collaboration across European University Alliances to foster inclusive ULLL.

Key objectives include:

- establishing a forum for knowledge exchange and expert dialogue on ULLL (terms, definitions, target groups, cross-sectoral links (VET), common standards and processes, flexible pathways);
- identifying usable platforms for transparent certification and accreditation processes, e-sealing of microcredentials (complementary to the CoP working on microcredentials);
- creating common standards and enabling continuous improvement for quality assurance (complementary to the CoP working on Quality Assurance);
- taking into account Higher Education Pedagogy for Lifelong Learning.

Additionally, the network aims to identify pathways for increased access to higher education for non-traditional learners and to connect various European initiatives. Engaging stakeholders will ensure the integration of ULLL within broader educational policies and practices.

The group focuses on expanding accessibility to diverse learner groups, including non-traditional, underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable populations, to meet the increasing demand for reskilling and upskilling in response to evolving job market requirements.

The complementary work with other topical groups, especially those dealing with microcredentials, quality assurance, and IT & Digitalisation topical groups, is important.

Due to the fact that there is no money available within WP2 for the work of the Topical Groups, all aims and objectives and their outcomes depend on the engagement of the alliances' representatives in ALLIES.

Timeline to achieve objectives: In the short term (May 2025 – December 2025), ALLIES will conduct an overview and mapping of national and institutional themes, initiatives, and approaches, producing a comprehensive report. It will identify best practices and organise roundtable discussions intended to lead to position papers. During the mid-term phase (January 2026 – December 2026), the group will plan common projects and seek funding, particularly through Erasmus+ applications. It will encourage the creation and offer of accessible and recognized flexible microcredential courses. This period will also focus on developing a common understanding and standards, addressing lifelong learner mobility through grant applications, and publishing position papers aimed at stakeholders. From January 2027 to December 2027, ALLIES plans to develop case studies, guidelines, and exchange good practices, and plan and evaluate the possibilities for the creation of a virtual FOREU4ALL ULLL office and a common ULLL platform. Throughout the entire duration (May 2025 – October 2028), group members will publish position papers, guidelines, and best practices while facilitating dialogue between ULLL professionals and stakeholders.

Expected outputs and working modalities: In concrete the objectives of the work of this CoP will concentrate on three levels:

1. On programme level,
2. on policy level and,
3. on the level of governance and structure

On programme level:

- (a) Encouraging of common projects between the ULLL network partners with the aim to apply for Erasmus+ projects e.g. as Strategic Partnerships (Cooperation Partnerships);
- (b) Enabling the development of accessible and flexible courses (microcredentials) between the ULLL network partners;
- (c) Developing a common understanding and standards for transferability, stackability, certification and accreditation (along European microcredential standards);
- (d) Addressing challenges related to centralised student administration services.

On policy level:

- a) Provide stakeholders and policy makers with position papers and regular policy dialogue (workshop) on ULLL (together with partner organisations like EUCEN, EURASHE and others) to fasten Policy reforms;
- b) Identify Best Practices and give show cases and publish it;
- c) Drawing on research and available materials ALLEIES will advise on the following questions: How to develop a strategy and relevant policies in universities for the development of lifelong learning activities? How to become a University of Lifelong Learning? How to customise ULLL activities? How to include non-traditional lifelong learning students? Former European Projects Materials on this issue shall be used.
- d) Make mobility of lifelong learning students a reality by using Erasmus + funding

On structure/ strategic-governmental level:

- a) Provide a platform for mutual exchange between alliances on their ULLL activities;
- b) Discuss and evaluate the need and feasibility for setting up a virtual ULLL office, including Help desk for lifelong learners' support across all the alliances;
- c) Identifying and assessing the possibilities of a platform for ULLL courses (including digital credentials);
- d) Facilitate the pooling, management and acquisition of joint resources;
- e) Breaking down silos between lifelong learning education and research and innovation mission.

Working modalities involve online meetings every 6 weeks with agendas and minutes, participation in eight on-site transversal or topical Community of Practice workshops, and cooperation with established lifelong learning organizations such as EUCEN (European University Continuing Education Network), EPALE, EURASHE, the LLL platform and others. This cooperation is crucial due to limited additional funding, as the group will leverage the infrastructures of these organizations. ALLIES also aims to liaise closely with external stakeholders and policymakers, fostering synergies with other topical groups focused on micro credentials and quality assurance.

Target audience: The primary target audience for ALLIES consists of European University Alliances and their representatives who lead lifelong learning initiatives within their institutions. The group's outputs and advocacy efforts also address policymakers at European and national levels to influence educational

policies relevant to lifelong learning. Furthermore, the group engages external stakeholders such as local industries, public authorities, unions, and non-governmental organizations to foster collaboration and relevance. ALLIES specifically focuses on supporting non-traditional learners, including professionals without academic backgrounds, elderly learners interested in intergenerational learning, and vulnerable or disadvantaged groups—to enhance their access to higher education and lifelong learning opportunities. Collaboration with key lifelong learning organizations like EUCEN, EPALE, EURASHE, the LLL platform and others ensures a broad and effective outreach within the lifelong learning ecosystem.

II. Background

Overview of the rationale behind the topical group

The ALLIES group (Alliances for Lifelong Learning, Improvement, Empowerment & Skills) is strategically relevant as it aims to widen and strengthen higher education institutions (HEIs) to better serve lifelong learners. This directly addresses key European priorities such as building skills throughout life to bridge skills gaps, support labour market transitions, and foster social inclusion. The group also emphasises the importance of micro credentials — ensuring transparency, transferability, stackability, certification, accreditation, and standards within university lifelong learning (ULLL) as well as quality assurance. ALLIES' objectives align with key European policies such as the Council Recommendation 2022 on micro credentials and the 2024 Tirana Communiqué, which calls for enhanced lifelong learning opportunities within higher education institutions. Also, the “Union of Skills” Paper is crucial for the work of the group. By fostering collaboration among European University Alliances, ALLIES promotes unified approaches to lifelong learning, strengthening educational frameworks and contributing to workforce resilience and adaptability.

Information on past activities and how the current group will build on those

The ALLIES topical group builds on the existing informal FOR-EU group “Lifelong Learning,” which has existed since June 2023 under the coordination of Beate Hoerr (FORTHEM). Prior to the formalisation, the group conducted desk research to identify synergies, mapping which universities and alliances were already active in lifelong learning. It established connections with key partners such as EUCEN and identified potential cooperation with EPALE and the Lifelong Learning Platform. The group organised a workshop within a EUCEN conference in Cork (Ireland) in June 2024, focusing on upskilling, reskilling, and shared accreditation frameworks. It also engaged in advocacy efforts by sending communications (e.g., a joint letter with EUCEN to Roxana Minzatu) linking ULLL with microcredentials discussions. Up to March 2025, the informal group has held 13 meetings with participation from 19 alliances and over 40 experts, laying a solid foundation of knowledge exchange, network building, and strategy development that the current topical group will expand upon

Additional information on the needs behind the topic

Beyond its strategic relevance, the group addresses urgent needs stemming from Europe's demographic and economic context. There is a significant portion of adults in the EU needing upskilling or reskilling to adapt to the changing labour market. This necessitates flexible, accessible, and transparent lifelong learning pathways, especially for vulnerable populations and non-traditional learners. The expertise existing in ULLL regarding smaller learning formats and quality assurance is critical for designing and implementing micro credentials effectively within European University Alliances. Moreover, by fostering collaborations between HEIs, local industries, public authorities, and other stakeholders, the group aims

to break down silos between education, research, and innovation missions, thus improving the relevance and impact of lifelong learning initiatives. The integration of lifelong learners' interests further ensures that educational offerings truly meet diverse learners' needs, aiding social inclusion and supporting economic competitiveness.

III. Work plan and working modalities

Work Plan and Provisional Timeline

May 2025 – December 2025:

- We set up the operational structure for ALLIES;
- We constituted four sub-groups;
- Developing a shared understanding of ULLL concepts between partners;
- We prepared two applications for FOREU4ALL workshop, one of them being successful;
- We had a dialog with the stakeholders by inviting them to our regular meetings.

January 2026 – December 2026:

- Encouraging the common projects between the ULLL network partners with the aim to apply for Erasmus+ projects e.g. as Strategic Partnerships (Cooperation Partnerships);
- Enabling the development of accessible and flexible courses (micro credentials) between the ULLL network partners;
- Invite ALLIES partners to participate in the mobility offers for lifelong learners;
- Address stakeholders through workshop and disseminate the outcomes of the workshop.

January 2027 – December 2027:

- Develop guidelines and recommendations for policy makers, university leaders and practitioners;
- Discuss and evaluate the need and feasibility for setting up a virtual ULLL office, including Help desk for lifelong learners' support across all the alliances.

Meeting Plan and Working Modalities

- **Frequency:** The kick-off meeting is on 09 May 2025, followed by the next on 13 June (11:00–12:00 CET), then 05.09.2025 (11:00–12:00 CET) after the summer break, with subsequent meetings every six weeks.
- **Format:** Each meeting is planned for 1 hour and includes a clear agenda, member updates, and discussions. Minutes are circulated post-meeting. Describe the attributions of the GCTs (which notably include; planning of meetings, preparation of meeting agendas and meeting minutes, reporting to WP2 Board/WP2 Project Officer)¹.

Attributions of the Chair, Vice-chairs, GCT and group members

Chair and Vice-Chairs:

¹ See document on "[procedures for the management, monitoring and evaluation of the topical groups](#)" on Teams.

- Plan meetings and prepare agendas ensuring focused and relevant discussions (Chair, Vice-Chairs);
- Take comprehensive meeting minutes and distribute them to members (Chair, Vice-Chairs);
- Report regularly to the WP2 Board and WP2 Project Officer on activities, progress, and deliverables (Chair, Vice-Chairs);
- Facilitate cooperation with external stakeholders and other Topical Groups, maximizing synergies (Chair, Vice-Chairs).

Group Chairing Team (up to 10):

- Experts for ULLL, representing at least one subject of importance for the field of ULLL (microcredentials, strategy on ULLL, financing ULLL, research, governance of Centres for ULLL, didactics, Online-Learning, formats, market, taylor made programmes for the labour market etc.);
- Active participation in meetings and organising workshops of sub-groups;
- Contribute expertise and share updates on ULLL developments within their institutions or alliances;
- Support dissemination of outputs such as position papers, guidelines, and best practices;
- Co-develop initiatives including Erasmus+ project applications and common course offerings.

Group members

- Active participation in meetings and workshops;
- Contribute expertise and share updates on ULLL developments within their institutions or alliances;
- Engage in working groups and subgroups focusing on thematic areas such as microcredentials, policy advocacy, or course development;
- Support dissemination of outputs such as position papers, guidelines, and best practices;
- Co-develop initiatives including Erasmus+ project applications and common course offerings.

Considerations on Equality & Diversity in organisational modalities

- ALLIES is committed to inclusivity, engaging non-traditional learners such as professionals without academic backgrounds and older adults interested in learning;
- Emphasizes intergenerational learning and equitable pathways by offering accessible lifelong learning opportunities;
- Utilizes specialized tools such as self-assessment and Diversity Trainings developed in the ULLL context to ensure inclusivity in organisational modalities;
- Supports diverse participation by ensuring meeting times, communication, and outputs accommodate participants from different backgrounds and with different needs.

Communication and dissemination plan of both the topical group activities and outputs

- ALLIES will share interesting Calls for Papers, conferences, and other events, intending to promote the publication of papers and position papers among members;
- The group will organize forum discussions and participate in workshops to facilitate collaboration, and knowledge exchange;

- ALLIES plan to cooperate with key established networks and platforms such as EUCEN², EURASHE, EPALE, the Lifelong Learning Platform and others, leveraging their existing infrastructure for dissemination due to the lack of extra funding for the ToGs;
- Outputs such as position papers, guidelines, best practices, and case studies will be regularly published and disseminated to influence policy and practice in the lifelong learning field;
- The dissemination plan includes informing stakeholders and policy makers to foster policy reforms and uptake of ULLL approaches.

The planned activities

- TG Meetings approx. every 6 weeks, preparatory meeting of Chair/Vice-Chairs at least one week before;
- Exchange fora, Workshops focused on policy dialogue, best practices, and community building;
- Establishment and operation of subgroups within the topical group to advance thematic priorities such as quality assurance, microcredentials, policy e.g.
 - o Development and dissemination of position papers, guidelines, show case of case studies, and Best Practice collections
 - o Discussing and planning of a virtual ULLL office and common platform to support lifelong learners.
 - o Provision of yearly reports to WP2 summarizing progress, outputs, and impact.

IV. Inputs to WP3 Policy Dialogue & WP4 Communication and Dissemination

ALLIES plans to actively engage in advocacy through the development of position papers, policy recommendations, and discussions aimed at informing and influencing stakeholders in the field of university lifelong learning (ULLL). To align with FOREU4ALL requirements, all advocacy outputs will be linked to the activities of the FOREU4ALL WP3 Policy Dialogue. Position papers and statements produced by ALLIES will be submitted for review and adoption within the General Forum following consultation with the Forum Board, ensuring coherence and integration with the broader project advocacy framework.

Regarding communication and dissemination, ALLIES will implement a structured strategy based on their work plan. This includes organizing bi-monthly online meetings and being represented by the ALLIES members in if possible all of the eight on-site transversal and topical community of practice (CoP) workshops, which will serve as interactive platforms to update members and collect feedback. Materials such as position papers, guidelines, best practices, case studies, and policy recommendations will be regularly shared with partners and wider audiences. The group will leverage the communication infrastructures of partner organizations such as EUCEN, EPALE, and the Lifelong Learning Platform to disseminate results broadly, using newsletters, social media channels, and professional networks.

² For example: EUCEN offers wide dissemination through its network of 168 members (mostly universities), newsletter (LLL Pathways), social media presence (2600+ followers on LinkedIn, over 1000 on Facebook and X), and connections to civil society organizations and European institutions such as DG EMPL and DG EAC. This partnership will facilitate broad communication of ALLIES activities and outputs.

V. Members

Expected profile of topical group members:

- Two representatives per European University Alliance (but with only one person from the two joining) with leading role on ULLL at his or her background institution/company, working within this CoP according to their profile and expertise.

Expected role of members:

- Active participation in regular meetings, contributing their expertise;
- Participation in agenda setting, presentations, roundtable discussions, and working groups;
- Cooperation with other networks and platforms (e.g., EUCEN, EPALE, LLL platform);
- Contributing to policy recommendations, best practices, position papers, and collaborative initiatives;
- Liaising with external stakeholders and policymakers in lifelong learning.

Number of participants per alliance:

- Two representatives per European University Alliance are involved as members of the group;
- The representatives have to be installed and confirmed by the General Secretary of the leading Alliance.