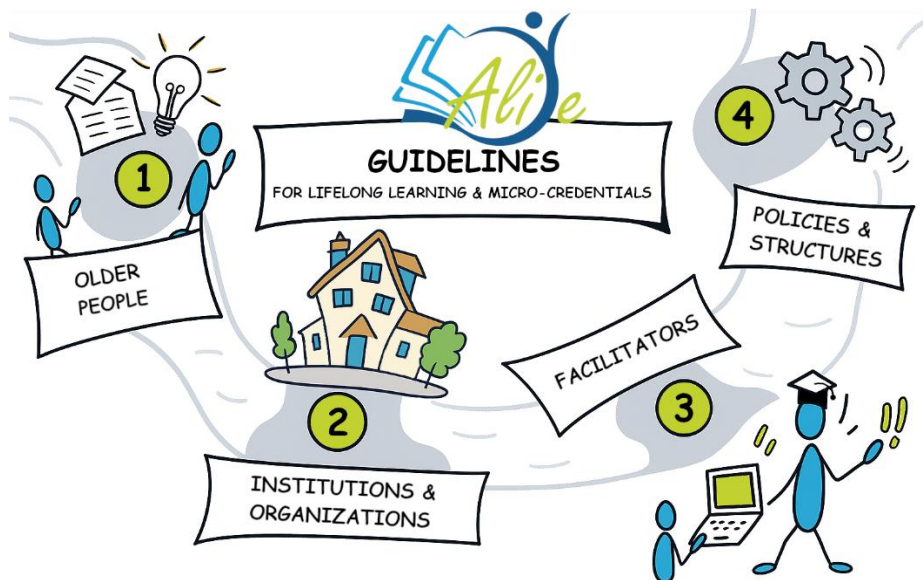




Age-inclusive lifelong learning:

A handbook for planning and implementing
micro-learning for people aged 55



Introduction

This handbook on age-inclusive lifelong learning was developed as part of the European Erasmus+ funded project AliVE (Age-inclusive Lifelong Learning: Microcredentials and Guidelines, 2023-2026). The project involved four European higher education institutions: Carinthia University of Applied Sciences in Austria, University College Cork in Ireland, Charles University in the Czech Republic, and Karelia University of Applied Sciences in Finland. European societies are aging, and there is a growing need to ensure that lifelong learning opportunities are accessible, meaningful, and inclusive for older people.

The content and recommendations of the handbook are based on a participatory co-designing process in four different countries and a joint synthesis of results. Particular attention is paid to the experiences of older people, aged 55 and over in the four different countries. The handbook reflects the voices, experiences and needs of older people.

This handbook is intended as a resource for those who plan and implement lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is examined from four perspectives: older people, higher education institutions and organizations, facilitators as well as the policy level and social structures. The argument guiding this handbook is that lifelong learning should be viewed holistically, as a phenomenon that supports well-being. For older people, solutions rooted in

Introduction

the labor market and the provision of continuing education do not sufficiently take into account the skills, potential, aspirations, and goals of people of different ages.

Lifelong learning is very diverse in different European countries, but the AliVe project has shown that there are similarities and comparable factors which go beyond national frameworks and are important to make visible on a European level

We hope that this handbook will provide readers with new ideas, insights, guidelines and concrete tools for planning and implementing lifelong learning, and that it serves as a source of inspiration for older learners, educators, representatives of various stakeholders, and decision-makers alike.



“Learning becomes meaningful for older adults when it is relevant, engaging, community-based, and easy to access.”

Learning empowers older adults when it builds social connection, delivers relevant skills, supports continued participation, uses effective methods, strengthens community ties, and is easy to access and understand.



Foster social and emotional learning environments

“Learning environments should foster community and emotional connection.”

Older adults generally enjoy contributing their own knowledge and experiences. Programmes should include informal spaces (e.g., coffee breaks) and opportunities for learners to share personal stories. This enhances motivation, retention, and the perceived value of learning.



Prioritise practical and relevant content

“Content should be directly applicable to people’s everyday life.”

Practical content, which is relevant and meaningful for people’s needs, such as digital literacy, caregiving, or boundary-setting resonate with older adults. Courses should prioritise practical skills that empower learners in their daily lives.



Consider potential labour market relevance in learning

“Content should be applicable to working lives of older people.”

While older adults are often motivated to engage in lifelong learning by curiosity, personal growth, and social connection, some of them are also motivated by staying in or returning to the labour market. For them, education has an economic dimension, helping them remain active in the labour market for longer or find new roles, such as in volunteer or community projects.



Consider social networks and peers in learning

“Social networks and peer to peer learning should be considered in learning formats.”

Social networks and peer relationships are powerful drivers of effective lifelong learning. Encouraging interaction and experience-sharing among learners fosters a sense of belonging, enhances motivation, and deepens understanding. Peer support creates opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and mutual encouragement, which are particularly valuable for older adults navigating new learning environments. Integrating social elements into learning design transforms education into a community experience rather than an isolated task.



Make information accessible and visible for the target group of older people

“Accessibility and visibility are essential for reaching and engaging older people.”

Clear, accessible, and well-placed information is critical for reaching older people. Many individuals aged 55+ may not actively seek out opportunities, so institutions must make learning options highly visible through multiple channels, both online and offline. Accessibility goes beyond physical availability; it includes using plain language, intuitive formats, and familiar platforms. By prioritising accessibility and visibility, organizations remove barriers and empower older adults to participate confidently in lifelong learning.

Key Takeaways



Create Learning Environments that Foster Community and Emotional Connection

- Are spaces welcoming and supportive?
- Do they encourage interaction and a sense of belonging?

Ensure Content is Directly Applicable to Everyday Life

- Is the learning practical and relevant to participants' daily routines?
- Does it address real-life challenges and interests?

Understand Learners' Motivations

- Are programmes designed to satisfy curiosity, personal growth, and social engagement?
- Do they also consider motivations related to staying in or returning to the labour market?

Key Takeaways



Use Effective Learning Methods

- Are teaching strategies, pedagogical and didactical approaches adapted to the needs of older people?
- Do they include interactive, hands-on, and experience-based approaches?

Integrate Social Networks and Peer Interaction

- Are opportunities for sharing experiences and collaborative learning provided?
- Is peer support encouraged?

Make Information Visible and Accessible

- Is information easy to find and understand?
- Are multiple channels used (online, offline, community spaces)?



“Institutions promote age-inclusive lifelong learning for people aged 55 and over by strengthening trusted partnerships, proactively reaching out to the target group, and creating supportive structures in the workplace.”

Lifelong learning is particularly successful when institutions actively reach out to people, build trust, and create supportive conditions. By working closely with established institutions and partners, proactively reaching people aged 55 and over, and creating age-inclusive structures in the workplace, organizations can sustainably promote participation in lifelong learning.



Collaborate with trusted community institutions

**“Partnering with adult education
institutes and civic organizations
increases reach.”**

Adult education institutes are more trusted and accessible for older people. Collaborations with these organizations, as well as with respected authorities (e.g., police, hospitals), can foster trust and improve outreach.



Implement proactive outreach strategies

“Institutions should actively go to where people are.”

Presenting educational opportunities directly to clubs, associations, or community groups enables institutions to connect with target groups and hard-to-reach populations (e.g., people of pre-retirement age or educationally alienated people). This approach supports inclusive learning and community integration.



Create structures in the workplace which enable age-inclusive lifelong learning

“Workplaces can support lifelong learning and their structures influence learning participation of older employees.”

Workplaces and employers can play an important role in supporting lifelong learning among employees aged 55 and over. Flexible learning arrangements, access to training opportunities, and recognition of prior experience can help older employees maintain and develop their skills throughout their working lives.

Key Takeaways



Partner with Adult Education Institutes and Civic Organizations

- Are collaborations in place to broaden outreach and resources?
- Do partnerships include community-based organizations for better engagement?

Bring Learning Opportunities to where People are

- Are programmes offered in familiar, accessible locations (e.g., community centres, workplaces)?
- Is outreach proactive rather than expecting learners to come to institutions?

Engage Employers as Key Supporters

- Are employers encouraged to provide time, funding, or facilities for learning?
- Are workplace learning programmes tailored to older employees' needs?



“Facilitators enable meaningful learning by creating inclusive and accessible learning environments, offering relevant and flexible learning opportunities, and empowering older people as active partners in the design of educational programmes.”

Meaningful lifelong learning is fostered when educators create inclusive, accessible, and relevant learning experiences that reflect diverse educational backgrounds and the needs of older people. By offering flexible learning formats, involving older people as co-designers, integrating micro-credentials, and supporting coordinated lifelong learning structures, educators can empower learners to participate actively and engage in meaningful learning throughout later life.



Design inclusive programmes for diverse educational backgrounds

“Courses should address diverse educational backgrounds.”

Facilitators should develop tailored strategies to engage people with less formal education and 'hard to reach' people. This includes simplified content, relatable examples, and culturally sensitive approaches. In addition, interactive content, regular feedback, and personalised support help in addressing the diverse needs of participants.



Create comfortable and accessible learning spaces

“The physical and emotional as well as psychological and social environment matters.”

Flexible, open spaces or nature-based settings can enhance comfort and participation. Facilitators should also ensure that timing and transport options are considered to avoid logistical barriers. Facilitation of courses by someone from the target group of the course (e.g., same age group) can make content more accessible for learners due to a shared frame of reference.



Integrate micro-credentials into curricular frameworks

“Micro-credentials should be embedded in broader curricular frameworks.”

Institutions should develop elective curricula that allow micro-credentials to be credited. This requires harmonisation across universities and flexible enrolment procedures to accommodate non-traditional learners.



Establish coordinated structures for lifelong learning

“Lifelong learning requires structured development and local coordination.”

A coordination office or responsible entity should oversee programme/course development, stakeholder networking, and local implementation. This ensures sustainability and responsiveness to community needs. Success depends on dedicated personnel and strategic planning.



Empower older people

“Make empowerment a core part of lifelong learning.”

Lifelong learning is not only about acquiring knowledge and skills, it is about fostering confidence, autonomy, and self-efficacy. Empowerment enables learners to take ownership of their educational journey, make informed decisions, and actively shape their personal and professional development. By embedding empowerment into learning environments, institutions create inclusive spaces where older adults feel valued, capable, and motivated to continue growing. Empowerment needs adequate structures and frameworks.



Ensure that older people are co-designers of educational programmes

“Older people should be co-designers of educational programmes.”

The important aspect of co-designing courses for older adults is ensuring that their voices, experiences, and needs directly shape the learning process. This makes courses more relevant, accessible, and empowering, while also fostering inclusion and dignity.



Offer learning opportunities in a diversity of formats

“Learning opportunities should come in different formats.”

Rigid formats and overly structured modules can create barriers for older people. Flexibility is essential to accommodate diverse needs, preferences, and life circumstances. Learning programmes should allow for adaptable pacing, modular participation, and personalised pathways, enabling learners to engage without feeling constrained. By prioritising flexibility, institutions foster inclusion, reduce stress, and empower participants to integrate learning seamlessly into their everyday lives.



Make sure that learning opportunities are meaningful

“Lifelong learning opportunities must be meaningful to older people.”

Lifelong learning opportunities must resonate with older people by aligning with their personal goals and everyday realities. Programmes should be designed to support individual needs, offering content that is practical, relevant, and immediately applicable. Meaningful learning fosters engagement, confidence, and a sense of purpose, ensuring that participants view education not as an abstract exercise but as a valuable tool for enhancing their daily lives and future aspirations.

Key Takeaways



Address Diverse Educational Backgrounds

- Are courses tailored to different prior knowledge and learning experiences?
- Is content accessible for both beginners and advanced learners?

Create Supportive Environments

- Does the physical space feel safe and welcoming?
- Are emotional, psychological, and social aspects considered?

Embed Micro-Credentials in Broader Curricula

- Are micro-credentials integrated into comprehensive learning pathways?
- Do they connect to recognised frameworks for progression?

Ensure Structured Development and Local Coordination

- Is there a clear plan for programme development?
- Are local networks and resources leveraged for implementation?

Key Takeaways



Include Empowerment as a Core Element

- Do programmes foster confidence and autonomy?
- Are learners encouraged to take ownership of their learning journey?

Engage Older People as Co-Designers

- Are learners involved in shaping micro-credentials and programmes?
- Is their feedback actively integrated into design?

Offer Both Formal and Non-Formal Learning Formats

- Are flexible options available beyond traditional classroom settings?
- Do programmes include informal, community-based learning opportunities?

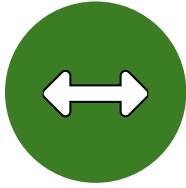
Ensure Learning Opportunities Are Meaningful

- Does the content align with learners' everyday needs and goals?
- Is it practical, relevant, and personally valuable?
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“Lifelong learning becomes inclusive when flexible and accessible learning opportunities, recognition, the reduction of technical barriers, and the overcoming of stereotypes are promoted.”

Policy frameworks and structural conditions play a crucial role in determining how accessible and inclusive lifelong learning can be for older people. Flexible and locally accessible learning opportunities, the consideration of technical barriers, opportunities for recognition, and the reduction of age-related stereotypes contribute to promoting the participation of people aged 55 and over in lifelong learning.



Ensure programme flexibility

“Lifelong learning should be flexible.”

Educational courses should be designed with modular, step-by-step formats that allow learners to engage gradually. Structural barriers such as rigid curricula hinder participation.



Ensure local accessibility

“Lifelong learning should be locally accessible.”

Localised, low-threshold courses are essential to reach diverse older populations, especially in rural areas. Examples are community-based sessions or informal learning environments. Structural barriers such as centralised courses hinder participation.



Offer recognition with or without formal certification

“Formal certification is not always necessary for older people.”

Older adults often value personal growth and contribution over formal credentials. Offering certificates of attendance or informal recognition can enhance motivation without imposing bureaucratic hurdles. This is especially true if older people are retired and no longer need to focus on their employability. If the goal is to improve formal qualifications, then a certificate may be necessary.



Be aware of potential technological issues as barriers to lifelong learning

“Technological issues may be barriers to lifelong learning.”

Accessing and effectively utilising lifelong learning programmes can present significant technological challenges, particularly when digital tools and platforms are integral to participation. These issues often stem from disparities in technical infrastructure, digital literacy, and system compatibility, which may hinder seamless engagement and limit the inclusivity of such initiatives.



Be aware of negative attitudes and stereotypes towards age-inclusive lifelong learning

“Negative stereotypes at policy-level may have a big influence on lifelong learning.”

Age-inclusive lifelong learning is essential for fostering equality, innovation, and social cohesion. Negative attitudes and stereotypes can create barriers that discourage older adults from participating in education and skill development. By recognising and addressing these biases, it is important to promote a culture where learning is valued at every stage of life. This approach benefits individuals, organizations, and society by focussing diverse experiences and perspectives.



Clarify current legislation and financial aspects

“Financial aspects may be a barrier for taking lifelong learning opportunities.”

Cost-related concerns often prevent individuals from pursuing lifelong learning opportunities. Tuition fees, material costs, and lack of financial support can create significant obstacles, especially for older people or those with limited income. Addressing these barriers through scholarships, subsidies, and flexible payment options ensures that learning remains inclusive and equitable. Investing in accessible education benefits society by empowering people to continuously develop skills and contribute meaningfully throughout their lives.

Key Takeaways



Ensure Flexibility

- Are learning opportunities adaptable in terms of schedule and format?
- Are part-time, online, or hybrid options available?

Guarantee Local Accessibility

- Are courses offered close to where participants live?
- Are there partnerships with local institutions (e.g., community centres, libraries)?

Rethink Certification

- Is formal certification truly necessary?
- Are informal learning opportunities also considered?

Key Takeaways



Address Technological Barriers

- Is support provided for using digital tools?
- Are platforms simple and user-friendly?

Avoid Negative Stereotypes

- Are age-related biases and discrimination actively addressed?
- Is communication inclusive and respectful?

Reduce Financial Obstacles

- Are affordable or free options available?
- Are scholarships, subsidies, or instalment plans offered?



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