

# ASIA-EUROPE LIFELONG LEARNING HUB: INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE IN ASIA AND EUROPE

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*ABSTRACT:* The ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning (ASEM LLL Hub) is a key ongoing project of ASEM (Asia Europe Meeting), an intergovernmental process that engages with 51 countries in Asia and Europe as well as the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission. Under the patronage of the Government of Ireland the Hub has set out to facilitate a vibrant and impactful research community, built on partnership and parity of esteem between the two regions. It is also consciously framed in the context of global sustainability challenges, which adds a layer of complexity both conceptually and diplomatically. This paper examines its activities, its challenges, successes, and philosophical underpinning.

*Keywords:* lifelong learning, Asia, Europe

## Background Context on the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub

The ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning (ASEM LLL Hub) was established in 2005 in Copenhagen, with the goal of extending research and policy advice around lifelong learning in the ASEM Region, which encompasses 51 countries in Asia and Europe as well as the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission. The term ASEM refers to the Asia-Europe Meeting, which is an informal inter-governmental process, which was established in 1996. It does not have a central secretariat, instead it relies on the coordinating function of the ministries of foreign affairs of its members. The ASEM LLL Hub was initially hosted by Denmark, it is currently hosted at University College Cork in Ireland, through the support of the Government of Ireland.

The rise of neoliberalism since the 1980s has tended to create a more pragmatist or technocratic orientation in adult education/lifelong learning. The acceleration of climate change and a cocktail of significant other global challenges are creating a context that requires an urgent reappraisal of neoliberalism. This has specific resonance in adult education/lifelong learning, which in the 1970s was engaging with the ‘global nature of social problems’ (Gouthro, 2022, 108), before the onset of the neoliberal turn. At the inception of the Irish residency of the ASEM LLL Hub, there was already a growing concern about sustainability amid a cocktail of global challenges and there is an explicit call out to address these challenges in its five-year plan. That document was framed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but before the flashing lights generated by subsequent dramatic climate episodes like those experienced in the northern hemisphere in 2023. The ASEM LLL Hub is then more than just a collaborative enterprise across 51 countries, it is a process that is conscious of a need to address, with urgency, the critical issues of our day. It cannot be framed as a business as usual process, but one that has ‘a willingness to engage with complex ideas, seemingly obtuse language, and perspectives that can challenge one’s worldview and create discomfort’ (Gouthro, 2022, 116). In a network of this scale and diversity not all participants will necessarily share agreement on the current

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crisis, but nonetheless the hub's success will not ultimately be about the extent of its membership and its outputs, but the degree to which it has in fact challenged worldviews and created discomfort.

### **Objectives and Philosophical Rationale**

The ASEM LLL Hub was established within the ASEM framework to enhance collaboration between the two regions in the field of lifelong learning. Ireland, in taking on stewardship for the initiative, endorsed its original mission, but also sought to shape its next phase in line with international policy frameworks and a restated philosophical understanding of lifelong learning. The ASEM LLL Hub's understanding of lifelong learning closely aligns with how it is described on the homepage of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong learning, which frames it as 'being rooted in the integration of learning and living', applying to everyone from children to older adults, in all life's contexts, regardless of how and where it is generated and that it meets the needs and demands of the learner (<https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/unesco-institute/mandate/lifelong-learning#:~:text=Lifelong%20learning%20is%20rooted%20in,and%20through%20a%20variety%20of>). These principals were outlined in University College Cork's bid for support from the Government of Ireland (see Ireland Hosting ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning, 2019). In terms of a policy frame, it referred to instruments such as the Global Commission on the Future of Work which supports a push towards a 'universal entitlement to lifelong learning'; the OECD report *Envisioning the Future of Education & Jobs*; the United Nations Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the World Economic Forum's assessment of future skills needs. It also wove in more specific Asia-Europe statements of intent, including a history of dialogue between the European Union and ASEAN dating back to 1977. It drew on the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (2018 – 2022), which supports 'mutually beneficial cooperation', including Priority 3. Socio-Cultural Cooperation. It referenced *Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy*, which seeks to increase cooperation in education, research, innovation, culture, sport and tourism, helping to promote diversity and the free flow of ideas.

Philosophically, the Irish hosts subscribed to the view that universities, as elite institutions, should be "addressing the complexities of contemporary social, political, economic, environmental and wellbeing challenges" (Ó Tuama, 2019, p. 95). These complexities, often described as global challenges, include climate change, migration, security, including food and health security, advances in communications and technologies like AI that impact ordinary people, very often disproportionately negatively impacting the most vulnerable. Lifelong learning is key to enabling everyone in society better understand, appreciate the complex nature of the challenges and enable them to respond in considered, proactive and novel ways to mitigate their impacts locally and globally. In the context of the ASEM LLL Hub that also includes the concept of "learning to live together" as understood in the Delors Report (1996).

In its approach, the ASEM LLL Hub seeks to address how lifelong learning is essential in myriad ways in helping people stay current in areas like skills and careers, but equally in

terms of having the basic toolkit to be an actively engaged member of society. This approach understands lifelong learning almost as an essential software or operating system, that allows individuals to engage across the full spectrum of life's challenges and opportunities, and like software in need of regular upgrades and indeed bug fixes. It subscribes too to the idea that lifelong learning is an enabler of cognitive flexibility, an 'openness to consider ideas, concepts, and solutions that are novel and emerging from worldviews to which we may not personally subscribe' (Ó Tuama, 2019, 95). From these premises, it set about re-energising the ASEM LLL Hub drawing on the traditions, state-of-the-art, innovations and potentials in Europe and Asia to drive a research agenda that would not only extend scholarship, but also help shape policy and practice.

### **Adopting a Mission and Vision**

In September 2021 the ASEM LLL Hub adopted a strategic vision: *A Framework for Lifelong Learning Research in the ASEM Region: 2020-2025*, to cover the period of Ireland's stewardship. In this vision it sets out why lifelong learning is critical in helping society address the many grand challenges impacting people in their ordinary lives all the way up to major global ones. At a global level we are increasingly impacted by climate change, which is part of a complex cocktail that includes sustainability, migration, security, food security, health, the future of work among others, to which we should add the changing landscape posed by advances in AI (artificial intelligence). Through its then six research networks (now seven), the ASEM LLL Hub sought to support a research agenda, which is scaffolded by leading international researchers, but also includes the voices of practitioners and policymakers, to generate evidence that would deepen our understanding of lifelong learning and influence practice and policy in the ASEM region.

In the vision statement it set out a ten-point statement of intent and adopted a common research agenda, these have shaped the core of its work. The statement of intent is framed in an ambition to 'enable people to thrive in a carbon-neutral, digital age', and to flourish in a time of unprecedented uncertainty. It acknowledges global challenges like climate change, mass migration, economic transformation, the Covid-19 pandemic, which have been layered since by huge concerns around security and the potential impacts of artificial intelligence. It made a strong commitment to partnership building both regionally and within the ASEM process itself. In its 'Common Research Agenda' it set out a very clear statement that specifically called out: 'equity and inclusion; identity, respect and dignity; digital education and ICT; demographic trends such as ageing and migration; knowledge, policy and capacity building in lifelong learning across the ASEM region; and engagement with civil society and community-based lifelong learning' as core priorities.

This vision and mission have been bolted onto new governance structures to support the process. Ensuring parity between Asia and Europe in the leadership, fostering collaboration between the two regions and enhancing impact have been prioritised. Some of the research networks transitioned from the period when the Hub was hosted in Denmark, but as there was a hiatus before the transfer to Ireland some had lost

momentum. Six research networks were included in the 2021 framework document, with a seventh network established in 2023.

Research Network 1, e-ASEM, was rejuvenated under new leadership and extended its remit to also consider advances in artificial intelligence. Research Network 2, Workplace Learning, remained active through the transfer period and continued under the existing leadership. Research Network 3, Professionalisation of Adult Teachers and Educators, in ASEM Countries, transitioned to a new leadership and adopted a new programme of activity. Research Network 4, National Strategies for Lifelong Learning, continued through the transfer period, and the existing leadership continue in place. Three new Research Networks were generated in 2021. Research Network 5, Learning Transitions, which addresses the lifelong learning challenge on how to facilitate the many transitions people need to increasingly make in and out of education throughout their lives and especially how under-represented populations can transition in. Research Network 6, Learning Cities and Learning Regions, is engaged around the upsurge in the development of learning cities, is aligned very closely with UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (<https://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/learning-cities>) and other networks of learning cities and regions. Research Network 7, Non-formal, Informal Learning, and Civil Society, is the newest network, established in 2023. It aims to both raise the visibility of non-formal, informal learning, community learning and civil society activity in this field, and to drive a research agenda that can support policy formation and leverage existing good practices in both regions.

### **Indicative Activities and Achievements of the Research Networks**

Each network develops an annual work plan, aligned to the overall mission of the ASEM LLL Hub. This is supported by an annual budget from the Hub, progress is reported at regular meetings of the Council of Research Network Coordinators, and additional support is offered by a small secretariat located at Cork, Ireland. An indicative list of recent activities gives a better sense of the kinds of activities the networks currently support.

Research Network 1, e-ASEM, organized a webinar, aimed at graduate students, drawing from the Asia-European Open Class project, which focused on digital learning design. They also hosted virtual sessions on “AI - A Changing Landscape of Learning” and ‘The Digital University,’ drawing on the work of its researchers.

Research Network 2, Workplace Learning, initiated and edited a special thematic issue of the Hungarian Educational Research Journal focused on workplace learning in changing contexts. The thematic issue was guest edited by an international group from the research network, comprising Karen Evans (UK), Helen Bound (Singapore), and Gabor Erdei (Hungary). They showcased current research and trends in workplace learning, emphasizing its importance across diverse contexts. The research network relates to how workplaces serve as lifelong learning spaces, offering different types of learning opportunities. They also covered topics such as workplace learning in higher education,

the challenges of connecting academic learning with professional practices, informal and non-formal learning in the IT sector, and the impact of remote working.

Research Network 3, Professionalization of Adult Teachers and Educators, organized a webinar entitled “Developing a Professional Qualification for Adult Educators,” sharing the good practices from the new postgraduate programme at University College Cork, Ireland and has devised a new research trajectory under its new leadership.

Research Network 4, National Strategies for Lifelong Learning, has published a report on National Lifelong Learning Policies and Learning Cities. It discussed the limited evidence of national policies for adult education and lifelong learning explicitly linked to learning city development in the ASEM 51 countries, with some exceptions in China and the Republic of Korea. It highlighted national and supra-national initiatives in the United Kingdom and Germany, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), emphasizing the importance of considering the policies of the European Union as a whole and the role of the European Commission and city administrations in learning city development. It also mentioned the significance of place in learning, exemplified by Community Learning Centers (CLCs) and research on neighbourhoods.

Research Network 5, Learning Transitions, is leading a special issue in the journal *Studies in Adult Education and Learning*. At the 2023 International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) World Assembly, Bali will host a symposium exploring four themes on transitions in lifelong learning, which will also feed into a peer-review publication. It will host a hybrid conference in India also in 2023. Research Network 5 collaborated with Research Network 6 in delivering a workshop at the 10th ESREA Triennial Conference (2022), entitled “New Communities of Learning: Sowing Seeds of Change in post-Covid adult education”. Like other networks, Research Network 5 is organised into sub-clusters to facilitate a greater level of granularity in the research, regional focus and devolved leadership across the two regions.

Research Network 6, Learning Cities and Learning Regions, is working in partnership with EUCEN (European University Continuing Education Network) towards the publication of a book on learning cities globally, which is due to be published in 2024. It has also led a number of webinars including one on “New Trends of Learning Cities & Learning Communities in Japan”. It highlighted the unique approach of considering the entire city as a campus and promoting interaction among different generations. Besides the shift to online learning during the pandemic, the importance of offering free classes and the need for dialogue platforms were important. The webinar also showcased Japan's efforts in lifelong learning and emphasizes the commitment to collaboration and promoting learning opportunities. It has also collaborated with the COLLO (Coalition of Lifelong Learning Organizations) and with individual learning cities on webinars.

In 2023 Research Network 7, informal and non-formal learning, and civil society, was launched. It hosted a webinar pulling together research and case studies from Asia and Europe, specifically from Ireland, Greece, Thailand, and The Philippines, attracting an

audience of over two-thousand across both regions. It is currently developing research on the impacts of civil society in informal and non-formal learning in Asia and Europe.

In 2022, the ASEM LLL Hub hosted a global lifelong learning week in Cork, Ireland, which was its first major post-Covid in-person event. In line with its stated objective to work closely with national and international partners, this week drew on the activities of its own six research networks, and included contributions, events in collaboration with UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Higher Education Lifelong Learning Ireland Network (HELLIN), Empower Competences for Online Learning in Higher Education (ECOLHE), International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame, and Cork Learning City. Researchers from 22 countries contributed to the event.

### **Benefits and Challenges of Research Collaboration between Two Key Global Regions**

The ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub is not a research fund per-se, what it does is create the conditions for collaborative research, supported by very modest funding. The intention is to generate long-term, sustainable, collaborative relationships between researchers in the two regions and to demonstrate the value in a culture of collaboration between the two regions. These collaborations can address the realisation that ‘cooperation in humanities and social sciences often takes a long time, only by identifying high-quality collaborators, can the sustainability and scalability of research be ensured’ (Zhe et al., 2021, p.1). Zhe et al.’s (2021) analysis also indicates that ‘international collaboration in scientific research is conducive to improving the quality of scientific research output,’ that ‘international collaboration has a positive impact on the research performance of the institution’ (p.2) and that ‘the impact of international research collaboration papers is higher than that of local papers (p.3). These conclusions are not surprising in themselves; they confirm some key central assumptions about the value of international research. However, Zhe, Lu, & Xiong point out that much international collaboration can enhance the Matthew effect, where well placed individuals and institutions gain disproportionate advantage. They also point out that overcomplexity, like excessively large consortiums and administrative burdens can limit the advantages of international research. Lauerer (2023) speaks against the Matthew effect and the primacy of the administrative or efficiency imperatives of an overly pragmatic orientation. Addressing research in a different field of the social science, journalism studies, Lauerer (2023), advocates for placing a strong focus on inclusivity. They espouse an inclusive open science approach, while ensuring that the diversity of voices shapes the research. Inclusivity is about who people are and where they are in their careers as much as where they are on the planet. In succinct terms they see this inclusive approach as a bulwark against ‘research imperialism’ and that ‘true international collaboration illuminates blind spots’ (p. 395).

In their critique of the concepts of North and South to delineate the world between relatively richer and poorer countries, (Sabzalieva et al., 2020) highlight the inherent problems with the model. They specifically point out that it ‘overemphasizes national contexts while obscuring the specific capabilities and constraints of those engaged in research partnerships’ (p.3). In the case of the ASEM LLL Hub, the designation might be

more East and West, but nonetheless, there still exists in Europe a bias that assumes that European practice, policy and research in the field of lifelong learning is more advanced than in Asia. Countering that narrative, through ensuring shared leadership in the network was a stated aim from the beginning. The idea is that each region has its relative advantages and deficits in all three spheres. A mutually respectful acknowledgement of this can enable the leveraging of experience, reputation and achievement from both regions and simultaneously support emerging researchers and help advance new research, policy and practice themes emanating from either or both regions.

Dusdal and Powell (2021) list key determinants of successful international collaboration. These include ‘existing relationships, repeated interactions, and intellectual synergies’, the social, cultural, and institutionally complex contexts in which team members’ work give rise to ‘constraining and enabling factors’ that need to be addressed; individual motivations as diverse as ‘personal reasons include friendships ..., the ambition to maximize personal scientific output’; a well-functioning communications strategy that facilitates ‘valuable opportunities to advance scientific knowledge production, yet also imply challenges, risks, and drawbacks’ (p. 237). These realities exist within the ASEM LLL Hub too, but overall, it has achieved a reasonable geographical spread of researchers across the two regions; there are researchers from 33 countries currently active in the seven networks. The Hub also has a good balance between early career researchers and more established ones, and the research addresses issues across both regions.

The ASEM LLL Hub process has inherent advantages and disadvantages and significant challenges. It operates with a very low budget and is not entirely in tune with a new public management drive that pushes universities into a constant race to improve their ranking in various international league tables. League tables are not always consistent with this sort of process, which may explain why Weinrib & Sá (2020) noted less willingness by Norwegian academics to participate in the Norwegian Program for Development, Research and Education (NUFU). They factor in their assessment of why NUFU lost vitality, due to a Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) push towards ‘setting the agenda and ensuring the delivery of preestablished outcomes’ which operates against NUFU’s traditional ‘decentralized and bottom-up approaches’ (Weinrib & Sá, 2020. p.20). Norway was able to articulate a narrative, for a considerable period, that was against promoting asymmetrical relationships, but a changing political climate made that more difficult. This demonstrates clearly that a project like ASEM LLL Hub which has neither the resources nor the heft of an entire national policy behind it, has to be modest in terms of what it can realistically achieve. It can make progress in the margins rather than turning the tide. However, it is critical that the process endeavours to swim against that tide, which has strong currents of counter discourse. Skupien & Ruffin (2020) list among these as ‘a superior knowledge of what is needed to develop a country according to a certain (Western) model,’ ‘categorizing countries according to their scientific capacities along a model of deficiency’ and the assumption of ‘an objective truth’ (p. 20) that makes it easier to transfer the idea of the best model from one national context to another.

## Conclusion

The ASEM LLL Hub was established to promote university level research around lifelong learning in the ASEM region, which encompasses 51 countries, the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission. From its inception in 2005 it was supported by the Danish government and hosted at Aarhus University. In 2021 the hosting moved to Ireland, with the support of the Government of Ireland with University College Cork the new location of the Chair. This shift led to a refocus of the Hub's mission statement and objectives and the revitalisation and expansion of its research networks. In this process, greater emphasis was placed on partnership building, a closer alignment with international policy frameworks around lifelong learning, and an explicit acknowledgement of the serious global challenges like climate change, migration, and sustainability. It also led to a broadening of its membership to include a wider range of stakeholders, while university-based researchers still constitute the vast majority of its members, there is now greater visibility of policymakers and practitioners. Three new networks were also added, bringing the current total to seven, covering e-learning, workplace learning, professionalization of adult teachers, national strategies for lifelong learning, learning transitions, learning cities and regions, and non-formal and informal learning and civil society. The Chair, delivers keynotes, leads workshops, and contributes to conferences and webinars to raise the international profile of the Hub. He also engages in networking, in partnership with international organisations, universities, cities, civil society, governmental organizations and the Irish diplomatic service, to extend the active membership in both Asia and Europe.

While each of the seven research networks develops its own annual work plan, they also meet regularly to encourage collaboration and to share information. The Hub itself has an overall mission which was developed in 2021, reviewed in 2022 and is seen as a broad roadmap for its activities. It adheres to a strong commitment to inclusion, ensuring perspectives of both regions are equally represented and that the research agenda aligns with the UNESCO call that no one should be left behind. It operates with a relatively low budget, which limits the extent to which it can support the work of the individual networks.

Its role is therefore more as an enabler of research, the leadership of each of the networks is voluntary as is the general membership. However, it is producing significant research, organising seminars, webinars, and international publications. It is of significant scale and is a key factor in the research field around lifelong learning in Europe and Asia. Being embedded in both regions, which accounts for over 60% of the world's population and GDP, it is an influential voice in global lifelong learning research and policy.

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