

Lifelong Learning for Work Life: A Perspective from Norway

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The Centre for Lifelong Learning (SELL) at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences (INN) has been crafting tailored, flexible educational programs for working adults for thirty years, seamlessly integrating education with professional life. This paper underscores SELL's pivotal role in furnishing pertinent formal and informal education for individuals and businesses in the workforce, aligning with governmental strategies for lifelong learning. Our study poses two research questions: RQ1. What are SELL's current key functions and activities? RQ2. How can SELL bolster political agendas and address future workforce learning needs? Through document analysis spanning Norwegian authorities, INN, and SELL, we found concordance between governmental lifelong learning policies, INN's strategy, and SELL's focus areas. However, there's a gap in follow-up and prioritization. Recommendations include establishing dedicated units for external activities at educational institutions and fostering closer collaboration between academia and industry to enhance the relevance of offered competencies. Direct engagement between educational institutions and learners is crucial, possibly facilitated by streamlined access. Strengthening this cooperation is imperative for advancing workforce competence in tune with market demands.

Keywords: Education, lifelong learning, work life, document analysis

Introduction

In the foreseeable future, we anticipate confronting intricate societal challenges that will precipitate substantial transformations in the workforce. The evolving landscape of work necessitates both an increase in skills and adaptability, placing heightened demands on the education sector (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023). The burgeoning demand for specific skill sets underscores the significance of continuous skill development within the workforce, essential for fostering competitiveness and driving societal value creation. Effective collaboration among employers, employees, and government entities is pivotal for successful skills development initiatives, with the education sector poised to play a pivotal role in addressing future skills requirements (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022).

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Lifelong learning is defined as "all organized and unorganized learning throughout life, and includes formal education as well as informal learning through work and other activities" (author's translation) (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 1998). In our study, we have defined lifelong learning as encompassing structured educational opportunities within higher education tailored for working adults throughout their professional careers.

According to the CPD Service, "Continuing Professional Development is a commitment to ongoing lifelong learning. CPD¹ encourages looking forward and identifying opportunities to learn something new, refresh existing knowledge, improve skills, or simply keep up-to-date with the latest developments within a particular profession or industry. In practice, CPD can mean everything from taking a training course or attending an educational event, to studying for new qualifications or learning new aspects of a job" (The CPD Certification Service, 2024).

The education sector has an important role in developing subjects and subject areas that are relevant to working life and that enable employees to perform the tasks required in today's society (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023). The topic is important to put on the agenda because lifelong learning has become an important concept in the Norwegian education system. This has been clearly stated in paragraph 1-3.d in the University and University College Act from 2005 (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005). Here it is a fact that higher education institutions in Norway must "contribute to lifelong learning and offer continuing education" (author's translation) (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005). Furthermore, future cooperation between educational institutions and working life must be strengthened to develop relevant offers (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019). It is also important to look at the challenges and needs adults experience, so that learning new knowledge can be adapted to the individual's work situation (Tømte et al., 2015). Most Norwegian universities currently offer flexible educational opportunities that support lifelong learning through distance learning, part-time studies and continuing education.

At the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences (INN), the center for lifelong learning (SELL in Norwegian), established in 1990, has played a development role and been a key provider of continuing education for the college (Lesjø, 2000).

SELL² boasts interdisciplinary proficiency in crafting and executing customized, adaptable, and pedagogically tailored competency programs for working adults, seamlessly integrating education and professional practice. Their expertise spans the initiation and procurement of projects, proficient project management, and comprehensive needs assessment within corporate settings. Moreover, they excel in

¹In this article, we have chosen to use the term Continuing Professional Development (CPD) as a collective term for Further- and Continuing Education, which we use in a Norwegian context. CPD is about continuing professional development through learning something new, updating existing knowledge and improving skills within a profession or industry.

²SELL is organized with a broad and interdisciplinary project portfolio at Inland School of Business and Social Sciences - Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences (SELL HHS), and in a separate unit for competence development in the school and kindergarten sector at the Faculty of Teacher Education and Pedagogy (SELL department LUP) (SELL, 2024d).

tailoring study models to suit diverse organizational contexts, devising learning designs, pedagogical and technological facilitation, and conducting evaluation and research on competency programs, constituting the cornerstone of their operations (SELL, 2024e, 2024a).

Research Questions

Utilizing SELL as our focal point, we aim to delve into the requisites for higher education institutions and analogous units like SELL to assume a more proactive role in nurturing and fostering knowledge enrichment within professional domains, aligning with governmental agendas for lifelong learning. Consequently, our study examines two primary research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What are SELL's current key functions and activities?

RQ2. How can SELL bolster political agendas and address future workforce learning needs?

To tackle these two RQs, we scrutinized pertinent documents illuminating aspects crucial for SELL's advancement and potentially holding transferable relevance for other educational establishments.

Paper Outline

The paper offers an overview of essential documents pertinent to addressing the two research questions. Initially, we conduct a literature review followed by a methodological outline. Subsequently, we present the outcomes of the document analysis, aligning them with the two research questions. Lastly, we summarize our principal findings, draw conclusions, and critically assess the study's limitations while proposing potential avenues for future research.

Literature Review

To organize our literature review effectively, we've classified the documents into three tiers:

1. Documents at the Norwegian authority level, encompassing overarching political policy documents.
2. Documents at the institution level, featuring guidelines derived from governmental directives.
3. Documents at the unit level, providing guidance from within the institutional framework.

Below, we present these documents in hierarchical order, beginning with those from the Norwegian authority level.

Documents at the Norwegian Authority Level - Overarching Political Policy Documents

Act Relating to Universities and University Colleges and Preparatory Work for the Act

The Universities and University Colleges Act (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005) regulates the purpose, scope and tasks of all universities and university colleges in Norway³. The purpose of the Act is to offer and facilitate teaching, research and dissemination at educational institutions, and the Act stipulates that universities and university colleges "shall contribute to lifelong learning and offer continuing and further education" (author's translation). This is a statutory task, on a par with the six other core tasks listed in section 1-3 (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005).

It's noteworthy that in the preliminary stages of drafting the Act, there are explicit acknowledgments of educational institutions' social responsibility, encompassing lifelong learning and continuous education. The Act is designed to afford institutions the flexibility needed to ensure that students' educational demands for labor market qualifications are adequately addressed (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023b).

White Papers and a Report to the Norwegian Parliament

White papers are drafted by the Norwegian Government to address issues to the Norwegian Parliament that do not necessitate immediate decisions (Norwegian Government, 2012). These papers serve the overarching aim of coordinating research and education policies across sectors, aiming to foster a consistent, long-term, and foreseeable policy framework with clearly defined objectives and priorities (Norwegian Government, 2012). In our literature review, we have identified two white papers that were deemed most pertinent for our research objectives.

White Paper No 5 to the Norwegian Parliament (2022-2023) Long-term plan for research and higher education 2023–2032

The purpose of the white paper no 5 titled: *Long-term plan for research and higher education 2023-2032* to the Norwegian Parliament is to present the Norwegian government's long-term policy for research and higher education with the aim of strengthening competitiveness and innovation, environmental, social and economic sustainability, as well as high quality and accessibility in research and higher education. Priority is given to the following themes: ocean and coast, health, climate, environment and energy, enabling and industrial technologies, societal

³A new law comes into force on August 1, 2024, but there are no significant differences within the topics covered by this study.

security and preparedness, and trust and community (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022).

There exists a substantial demand for job requirements, underscoring the significance of developing and applying new skills within the professional sphere for enhancing competitiveness and societal value creation. Effective collaboration among employers, employees, and government entities is imperative for the successful development of skills. Moreover, the education sector is poised to play a crucial role in addressing future skills requirements and facilitating skill acquisition (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022).

The Norwegian government has identified three overarching goals for research and higher education in the period 2023-32: 1. Strengthened competitiveness and innovation capacity; 2. Environmental, social and economic sustainability; and 3. High quality and accessibility in research and higher education (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022).

White Paper No 14 to the Norwegian Parliament (2022–2023) Outlook on the skills needs in Norway

The objective of White Paper No. 14, titled "Outlook on the skills needs in Norway," is to delineate the skills requirements within the workforce, strategies to increase workforce participation, and the alignment of the education system with societal needs. It also emphasizes the importance of providing accessible and adaptable education options for a broader segment of the population and promoting lifelong workplace learning. Development agreements, focusing on lifelong learning, flexible, and decentralized education, have been established between educational institutions and the Ministry of Education and Research. Additionally, there is a concerted effort to enhance collaboration between educational institutions and the workforce, as well as local and regional authorities, to address skills gaps and optimize the organization of basic and advanced education (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023).

Official Norwegian Report 2019:2 Future Competence Needs II – Challenges for Competence Policy

Official Norwegian Reports serve as inquiry documents that frequently serve as the foundation for reports to the Norwegian Parliament. Their purpose is to explore a knowledge base and propose potential strategies for addressing societal challenges (Norwegian Government, 2007).

The Official Norwegian Report 2019:2, entitled "Future Competence Needs II – Challenges for Competence Policy," was authored by a committee tasked by the Norwegian government, known as *Kompetansebehovutvalget* in Norwegian. Its purpose is to identify challenges and dilemmas related to future skills requirements, providing a foundation for strategic competence planning and decisions by both governmental bodies and the workforce. The report emphasizes the necessity for enhanced collaboration between higher education institutions and the workforce,

aiming to ensure that such interaction results in the development of more pertinent study programs (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019).

Documents at the Institution Level - with Guidelines from the Government Level

The 2024 Letter of Allocation to INN from the Ministry of Education and Research

Annually, universities and university colleges in Norway receive a letter of allocation from the Ministry of Education and Research, delineating financial allocations and institutional priorities based on political directives and the national budget. This communication serves to guide institutional management by providing signals for forthcoming priorities. The letter encompasses the financial framework, sector priorities, and goals for the upcoming period. Additionally, the development agreement, comprising tailored objectives and management parameters agreed upon between the Ministry and each institution, is now integrated within the allocation letter. The 2024 Letter of Allocation to INN offers a comprehensive overview of the government's expectations for all Norwegian universities and university colleges: "Universities and university colleges shall prioritize lifelong learning and flexible and decentralized offerings so that education and skills development are accessible and independent of place of residence and life situation" (author's translation) (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a).

Objectives have been delineated for the higher education sector and INN's strategic priorities to aid in accomplishing the national sector objectives outlined in the long-term plan. Development agreements are crafted collaboratively between the Ministry of Education and Research and Norwegian universities and colleges. For 2024, the following overarching and enduring sector objectives are applicable:

1. High quality in education and research
2. Sustainable social development, welfare and innovation
3. Good access to education, research and expertise throughout the country

A section in 2024 Letter of Allocation to INN is referred to as a development agreement with INN for 2023-2026 (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a). Here four objectives are stated, in which two objectives were considered to be of relevance for our study.

Objective 3 delineates INN's commitment to spearheading lifelong learning initiatives. Specifically, it entails clarifying targeted measures and assessing which educational programs can offer flexible solutions. Additionally, INN will establish administrative systems for monitoring and ensuring quality, a process conducted in collaboration with stakeholders from society and the workforce, focusing on course and sub-course levels (microcredentials) (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a).

Objective 4 underscores INN's role as a regional influencer in Inland Norway and a national contributor through the further development of platforms and networks for engagement. INN's regional presence fosters collaboration opportunities, with a management parameter aimed at enhancing connections with society and the

workforce by expanding regional and national networks and partnerships (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a).

INN

INN is a medium-sized university college in eastern Norway, established in 2017 following a merger between two university colleges. INN is an important competence institution in the region and collaborates extensively nationally and internationally, both in research and education. INN has a wide range of subject areas that are relevant to working life and society, and will respond to the need for research and continuing education in working life and society, regionally and nationally, and will be a driving force in social development in the region and make its mark nationally and internationally (INN, 2024a).

The academic activities are organized into six faculties led by a dean with academic and administrative responsibility for their area. A board decision (36/17) gives the faculties academic and strategic responsibility for externally funded activities and academic and strategic responsibility for their subject areas (HINN, 2017). Continuing education, lifelong learning and collaboration with working life with external funding are the responsibility of the faculties themselves to further develop. In 2020, the university college board decided that the SELL, which until then was organized at the institutional level under the Pro-rector for Public Affairs, should be transferred and organized at one of the university college's faculties (HINN, 2020).

INN's activities related to continuing education, lifelong learning and collaboration with working life at the university college include positions at several levels. The Education Department has strategic responsibility for, among other things, educational quality, educational development work, further development of INN's overall study portfolio, including lifelong learning and continuing education (INN, 2024b).

INN's Strategy 2021-2026

INN's strategy for the period of 2021-2026 distinctly acknowledges the imperative for adapting to the evolving dynamics of the workforce, particularly in a region characterized by a significant elderly population, low formal education rates, and dispersed settlement patterns. Prioritizing accessibility to education across all stages of life, INN aims to achieve this through flexible and centralized study programs developed in close partnership with regional, national, and international collaborators. Positioned as a frontrunner in national lifelong learning initiatives, INN boasts an extensive array of continuing and advanced education offerings developed in tandem with industry partners. Bolstering this study portfolio further stands as a pivotal strategy moving forward (INN, 2021).

Documents at the Unit Level - with Guidance from the Institutional Level

SELL at INN

SELL was established in 1990 at INN, formerly known as Oppland District University College, with the primary objective of managing the college's distance learning initiative. These programs were designed to cater to adults in the workforce seeking skills development opportunities, locally, regionally, and nationally, leveraging new technologies for educational dissemination (Lesjø, 2000).

As of 2021, SELL has been integrated into the Inland Norway School of Business - Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences (HHS), operating directly under the dean's purview, overseeing the faculty's externally funded educational and research activities. While similar tasks at other faculties within INN are organized differently, SELL maintains its distinctive scope and range of activities (INN, 2024b). Currently, SELL boasts approximately 25 employees, serving over 2,000 students and 3,000-5,000 course participants annually, constituting a portion of the university college's total enrollment of around 14,000 individuals. Its operations are sustained through external funding from donors, businesses, and individual students/course participants (SELL, 2024b).

A hallmark of SELL's approach has been its provision of flexible study models incorporating synchronous and/or asynchronous teaching and learning methods. Central to its educational practices has been the integration of film in teaching, alongside the exploration of novel pedagogical and technological solutions to develop and deliver competency programs for employees of major national organizations, such as the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, the Norwegian Armed Forces, and the municipal sector (SELL, 2024b). Over the years, SELL's evolution has seen a transition from the distribution of educational films via satellite and Video Home System (VHS) in the 1990s to the transmission of a significant number of online study programs via the Internet, often complemented by physical or digital meetings (SELL, 2024b).

SELL's primary mandate, in collaboration with the academic environments at HINN, is to devise flexible, relevant, and practice-oriented competency initiatives for companies and individuals in society and the workforce. This is achieved through the application of learning-promoting methodologies in research-based and well-founded pedagogical approaches. SELL's expertise encompasses various domains, including project management encompassing administration and finance, pedagogy/didactics for adult learners and diverse groups, project acquisition, study administration, adult learner facilitation, collaboration and networking, as well as proficiency in educational material production, learning technology, and market knowledge (SELL, 2024b).

SELL's Action Plan

Since its establishment, SELL has developed action plans for the business. The purpose has been to choose a long-term direction for what to work on and how to

position itself in the market. The action plan also follows up on strategic plans at INN and at the faculty.

SELL's action plan aims "to fulfill INN's strategy of being a preferred player in lifelong learning by 1) being a driving force in development work and a provider of continuing education in collaboration with the academic environments, 2) being a contact point for working life and 3) being updated on political guidelines and instruments for lifelong learning" (author's translation) (SELL, 2024c).

The main goal of the action plan is to develop and offer "flexible, relevant and practice-oriented competence offers for society and working life"(author's translation) (SELL, 2024c). This will be done in collaboration with the academic environments at the faculty by:

- Strengthen the scope of relevant educational offerings regionally and nationally
- Increase the quality of study programs by focusing on active teaching and learning methods to increase learning outcomes
- Increase access to education for more people through flexible off-campus offerings that enable adults to combine education with work, family and other activities, and
- An appropriate organization of SELL for interdisciplinary collaboration with academic environments at INN and with external partners.

The target group for the competence offerings is companies in working life and individuals who need skills development. In addition, SELL's target group is also defined as the individual academic environments at the university college and external partners in the higher education sector (SELL, 2024c).

Methodology

Document analysis serves as a valuable method for qualitative case studies (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994), making it a suitable approach for examining SELL's activities and pertinent political documents central to both SELL and the research questions at hand. Additionally, the study encompasses other pertinent documents, including SELL's and INN's strategies on lifelong learning. Consequently, the study relies on documents deemed crucial for yielding insights into the investigation's objectives (Grønmo, 2015).

Document Analysis as a Method

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, both printed and electronic material (Bowen, 2009). Similar to other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rapley, 2007).

In our study, we aim to investigate how SELL can augment its engagement in promoting knowledge advancement within the workforce, while aligning with

governmental objectives for lifelong learning. To accomplish this, we will focus on two research questions (RQs):

RQ 1: What are the most important functions and core activities of SELL today?

RQ 2: How can SELL contribute to fulfill political strategies and support the need for lifelong learning in the working life of the future?

The authors first independently identified and then discussed key themes, concepts, and keywords crucial for the aim of our study and that was relevant in order to answer our two RQs. The interrater reliability (IRR) (Fink, 2010) among the authors was very high, indicating a strong agreement on the chosen keywords, concepts and descriptions of key themes. The authors ended up with the following keywords, concepts and descriptions of key themes: lifelong learning, CPD, skills needs, and collaboration with the workforce. To address our two RQs, we then analyzed both official and internal documents selecting only those documents that adhered to these chosen keywords, concepts and descriptions of key themes and with a content that indicated lifelong learning, CPD, skills needs, and collaboration with the workforce.

Procedure

Data collection involved identifying and scrutinizing official and internal documents deemed pertinent to address the two research questions. The analysis proceeded through three stages:

- 1) Initial documentation review: We sourced and selected relevant political documents, internal materials, website content, and notes from both INN and SELL to establish an overview of available documents.
- 2) Content organization: We systematically extracted relevant information from the selected documents, generating summaries to facilitate comprehension. Subsequently, we categorized and sorted the documents based on criteria pertinent to the research questions.
- 3) Interpretation: We interpreted the content in relation to the two research questions and the identified criteria, facilitating a deeper understanding of the data and its implications for the study.

Documents used in the Analysis

We also took into account several factors such as the purpose, age, credibility, and representativeness of the documents during the selection process. These documents originate from institutional sources, and our interpretation was guided by our understanding of their intended purpose. Table 1 provides an overview of the analyzed documents, with the superscript number ¹ or ² indicating their relevance to either RQ 1 or RQ 2.

Table 1. Documents Analysed and Their Relevance to the Two Research Questions*Documents at the Norwegian authority level - overarching political policy documents*

The Universities and University Colleges Act (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005)²

The White Paper 5 titled: *Long-term plan for research and higher education 2023-2032* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022)²

The White Paper 14 titled: *Outlook on the skills needs in Norway* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023)²

The Official Norwegian Report 2019:2, entitled "Future Competence Needs II – Challenges for Competence Policy (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019)²

Documents at the institution level - with guidelines from the government level

The 2024 Letter of Allocation to INN (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a)^{1,2}

INN's strategy 2021-2026 (INN, 2021)^{1,2}

Documents at the unit level - with guidance from the institutional level

Action plan (SELL, 2024c)^{1,2}

Organization (SELL, 2024b)^{1,2}

Center for Lifelong Learning (SELL, 2024d)^{1,2}

SELL's development of educational offers (SELL, 2024e)^{1,2}

SELL's view on flexible learning for adults (SELL, 2024a)^{1,2}

¹RQ1: What are SELL's current key functions and activities?

²RQ2: How can SELL bolster political agendas and address future workforce learning needs?

The document selection criteria primarily revolved around key themes such as lifelong learning, CPD, skills needs, and collaboration with the workforce.

Other forms of evidence, such as cultural artifacts, were not included in our analysis as they were deemed outside the scope of our investigation.

Results and Discussion

The findings are categorized under five main headings, each containing discussions of relevant documents. Through our analysis, we have identified several factors that collectively address our two research questions. Following the discussion of results, we will offer a summary to address our research inquiries. The five main headings are outlined in the subsequent section of the paper in the following sequence:

- 1) Political guidelines on lifelong learning are consistent with the institutions' strategy and focus areas
- 2) Political guidelines and the INN's commitment to lifelong learning harmonize with SELL's focus areas and expertise
- 3) Competence development is best achieved through direct contact with students and working and social life
- 4) Externally funded activities are organized in separate units
- 5) Interaction between higher education and working life

Political Guidelines on Lifelong Learning are Consistent with the Institutions' Strategy and Focus Areas

The Universities and University Colleges Act is the most important political instrument, and gives clear guidance and responsibility to the institutions to take responsibility for lifelong learning and continuing education (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005).

The White Paper 5, titled: *Long-term plan for research and higher education 2023-2032*, also states that lifelong learning and flexible and decentralized offerings are a key part of the institutions' social mission (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022). This mission and responsibility is also consistently reflected in the authorities' allocation letter from the Ministry of Education and Research to INN (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a), as well as INNs' strategic plan (INN, 2021) and other information about INN via its website (INN, 2024c), as well as SELL's action plan (SELL, 2024c) and other information about SELL via its website (SELL, 2024d).

The 2024 Letter of Allocation states that INN will be a driving force for lifelong learning, a regional force in the inland region in Norway and a national contributor by further developing arenas and networks for collaboration. Management parameters specify that studies/courses of various sizes are to be developed, as well as administrative systems for follow-up and quality assurance (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a).

INN's strategic plan addresses the desire to be a driving force for the need for lifelong learning in the working life of the future and thus responds to political strategies (INN, 2021). INN's strategy appears to be forward-looking, clear and up-to-date on today's challenges. Nevertheless, it may appear that there are major tasks to be solved with regard to today's challenges in the sector, where there are complex societal challenges to be solved through education and research.

In the long-term plans for the faculties at INN, all are concerned with interaction with working life and society, but the focus on lifelong learning and lifelong learning, continuing professional development (CPD) varies (SELL, 2024a). Tømte et al. (2015) point out that strategies for CPD, known as EVU in Norway are generally not widespread, even at institutions with their own EVU departments, and that CPD has been overshadowed by other initiatives (Tømte et al., 2015).

The Norwegian directorate Kompetanse Norge⁴ states that CPD initiatives must be more clearly stated in the educational institutions' strategic plans and mandates, and that the institutions themselves must clarify the role of CPD. This could help to ensure that CPD becomes an integrated and stable part of the study portfolio and is better anchored at department and faculty level, but there is a need for stronger national guidelines and incentives for the sector to prioritize this (Kompetanse Norge, 2018b).

⁴Kompetanse Norge was a directorate under the Ministry of Education and Research with the task of contributing to increased participation in working life and society. On July 1, 2021, it was merged with several other agencies to form the Norwegian Agency for Higher Education and Skills (Huseby, 2023).

According to the strategic plan for INN, it appears that INN is an institution that has clear strategies for its focus on lifelong learning and collaboration with working life and society, which are also embodied in the faculties' strategies and measures through the long-term plan (INN, 2021).

The 2024 Letter of Allocation from the Ministry of Education and Research supports this by stating that INN's work on CPD, lifelong learning and flexible and decentralized offerings is well described in strategies and development plans, but it is pointed out, however, that it is not prioritized or followed up well by the faculties' action plans and the number of CPD offerings (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a).

We observe a consistent dedication to lifelong learning spanning from the highest political directives outlined in the Universities and University Colleges Act (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005), through the government's allocation letter and white paper, down to the unit level within the educational institution's strategic documents.

Consequently, there seems to be alignment between the authorities' directives and INN's strategies and development agendas in this domain. However, a gap may exist concerning action plans, prioritization, and follow-up within INN's framework.

Political Guidelines and the INN's Commitment to Lifelong Learning Harmonize with SELL's Focus Areas and Expertise

The White Paper 5 titled: *Long-term plan for research and higher education 2023-2032* points out that access to flexible education programs that can be taken as continuing education and in combination with a job should be strengthened, and is concerned that in order to increase the accessibility of study programs, digital teaching methods must be used to adapt the study programs to regional and more local skills needs (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022).

Furthermore, white paper no 14 titled: *Outlook on the skills needs in Norway* provides direction for higher education institutions' priorities to increase the number of flexible study programs for more people, through lifelong learning (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023). As we have also seen, this is reflected in the Universities and University Colleges Act through the educational institutions' tasks related to lifelong learning (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005).

The 2024 Letter of Allocation to INN provides guidelines on following up and developing relevant continuing and further education offerings throughout Norway, and INN is expected to follow up on allocated resources to develop flexible and decentralized education (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a).

The INN's strategy and the authorities' guidelines emphasize a focus on lifelong learning, continuing education and collaboration with working life (INN, 2021). All of this harmonizes with the objectives and focus areas SELL has emphasized, and the expertise developed at SELL, cf. the action plan and information about SELL (SELL, 2024c, 2024b).

The Norwegian directorate Kompetanse Norge refers to the sector's lack of expertise and an administrative apparatus for investigating the companies' skills needs and organizing and adapting the skills measures accordingly. It is also pointed out that the sector has few people with sufficient networks, experience and expertise

to develop business-related CPD offerings (Kompetanse Norge, 2018a). This also supports the need for an organization similar to SELL, which has a large network in working and social life as well as pedagogical expertise and tools to develop relevant and tailored competence offerings for working life (SELL, 2024e, 2024a).

The Continuing Education Committee's report from the Norwegian Directorate Kompetanse Norge on the knowledge base states that CPD units at educational institutions in Norway have a high degree of pure administration. It points out a lack of broader expertise to solve more complex tasks in the development of competence programs. And through this, offer holistic deliveries in competence programs regardless of size. This is highlighted as an essential competence to succeed with customized CPD offers for working life (Kompetanse Norge, 2018b).

This indicates that SELL has expertise that is adapted to what the Continuing Education Committee (Kompetanse Norge, 2018b) has pointed out as a lack of expertise at educational institutions. In addition to administration, SELL has comprehensive expertise in delivering competence programs (SELL, 2024b).

At SELL, the development work is carried out in close collaboration with the professionals who deliver the academic content (SELL, 2024b). The competence described at SELL is in line with Mishra and Koehler's (2006) knowledge framework, the TPACK model, which outlines three pillars; technology, pedagogy and academic content highlighted as key academic components for developing education with digital tools. However, scrutinizing the TPACK model, it appears that SELL has an additional fourth pillar that deals with knowledge about and facilitation for the adult student, which is required in connection with combining studies with a work situation. This shows that SELL focuses on how interaction with working life and the target group of working adults is a recurring theme in the development and operation of study programs.

An internal study at INN that mapped external collaboration found that working life finds it difficult to know where to contact in order to establish collaboration with the university college. It has been suggested that having both an institutional level and a faculty level where public relations and work with CPD are organized very differently is confusing for working and social life (Stokke et al., 2020).

It may thus appear that SELL and similar units have a competence composition and structure that could serve as a "doorway" to an educational institution and be a link between academic environments and working life within lifelong learning and CPD.

Competence Development is best achieved through Direct Contact with Students and Working and Social Life

To ensure high quality and accessibility in research and higher education, the white paper titled: *Long-term plan for research and higher education 2023-2032* states that a decentralized structure will be used to contribute to lifelong learning. It is also pointed out that a closer link between the education offered and local businesses will strengthen the relevance of education. In summary, the white paper points to the importance of proximity to working life through accessibility and

decentralized location. In addition, access to flexible study programs such as continuing education will be strengthened (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022).

In the 2024 Letter of Allocation given to INN, the Norwegian Government states that competence needs are best solved by giving employees in the first line at educational institutions increased confidence. We interpret the first line as those individuals who has the closest contact with students and working and social life (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a).

The authorities also state in the 2024 Letter of Allocation to INN that it is in direct contact with students and working life that development takes place and that no bureaucratic organization must be created to increase the development of national and regional skills needs (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a).

INN's strategy provides limited detail regarding the organization of its frontline operations. However, it emphasizes the importance of maintaining close proximity between the university college and external partners, with an emphasis on enhancing employee competencies to collaborate effectively with these partners (INN, 2021).

It seems that INN may lack a cohesive structure for tasks involving direct interaction with CPD students and stakeholders in the workforce and society. There appears to be ambiguity regarding the distribution of responsibilities within INN. Consequently, it could be argued that units like SELL, equipped with requisite expertise, could serve as an operational arm to manage these tasks on behalf of the educational institution. Such a setup could play a crucial role in meeting the authorities' requirements for proximity, accessibility, and bolstering trust at the frontline.

Externally Funded Activities are Organized in Separate Units

The Universities and University Colleges Act does not provide any guidelines on the internal organization of the institutions when it comes to lifelong learning and CPD (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005). However, all externally funded activities, i.e. activities that are not funded by state transfers for ordinary education, which are regulated by the Regulations for Contributions and Contract Funding (BOA regulations in Norwegian) (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013), must be separate from ordinary activities in financial terms.

As mentioned in the section above, the Ministry of Education and Research specifies through the 2024 Letter of Allocation 2024 that the institutions should have a review of their own organization with the aim of giving employees in the first line increased confidence, and furthermore that no bureaucratic organization must be created to develop and offer national and regional competence needs (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a).

We believe this is a signal that it is important to find an organization internally that has resources and focus on the CPD area and that has the right expertise and can quickly respond to demand from working life.

INN's strategy says little about how the work on lifelong learning is to be organized, but it is stated that there should be a short distance between the university college and external partners and that the employees at the university college should

strengthen their competence to collaborate with external partners (INN, 2021). Furthermore, we see from the organization of INN that the scope and organization of these activities varies greatly at each faculty (INN, 2024b).

We contend that this reinforces the notion that activities focused on continuing and further education are best centralized within a distinct organizational and financial unit, akin to SELL's current structure. Such a unit would offer greater transparency and clarity, facilitated by its specialized and operational approach in shouldering this responsibility on behalf of the institution, while collaborating closely with academic environments.

An important point in the NIFU report on CPD offers in Norway by Tømte et al. (2015), is also the demand from working life for interdisciplinary programs, i.e. programs that are composed of subjects across the way educational institutions have often organized their academic environments and faculties. An apparatus that takes care of this contact internally is also specified as central (Tømte et al., 2015).

At present, SELL does not have a mandate to look after the whole of INN, but many of the tasks could be more effectively covered by a unit that has the expertise and network that SELL possesses.

Interaction between Higher Education and Working Life

The white paper no 14 titled: *Outlook on the skills needs in Norway* expects higher education institutions to cooperate closely with local and regional authorities and working life on skills needs and the provision of undergraduate and postgraduate education. For INNs purposes, this will be executed through the Council for Cooperation with Working Life at INN (RSA⁵ in Norwegian) or through participation in regional skills partnerships under the auspices of the county councils (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023).

As we've seen, the Official Norwegian Report 2019:2 titled: *Future Competence Needs II – Challenges for Competence Policy* (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019) provides guidelines for strengthened cooperation between higher education institutions and working life to help create more relevant study programs. This is a clear encouragement to work more specifically in the development of study programs, rather than in general and more overarching meeting places. This argument is also supported by the 2017 interim evaluation of the effect and impact of the Council for Cooperation with Working Life at INN (Tellmann et al., 2017). They conclude that the Council for Cooperation with Working Life at INN has had modest effects on the development of study programs at the institutions. It is highlighted as a main challenge that in the dialogue and in the meetings, much attention is paid to overall strategies and general status, and less to specific study programs and continuing education (Tellmann et al., 2017).

⁵The purpose of the RSA is to strengthen and structure the university college's collaboration with working life, to ensure that research activities and the study portfolio are developed in line with society's needs, and are based on a relevant and updated knowledge base (HINN, 2024).

In the NIFU report on CPD offers in Norway from 2015, it is stated that the institutions need framework conditions, capacity and expertise to meet the needs of the labor market (Tømte et al., 2015).

Through the analysis, it becomes evident that there exist numerous established platforms facilitating interaction between institutions and the workforce, yet these often fail to yield tangible outcomes to address the skills development needs of working life. This underscores the necessity of persisting in targeted development initiatives aimed at enhancing continuing and further education to better serve skills development goals. However, this endeavor necessitates institutions to prioritize and possess the requisite expertise. Considering SELL's expertise and core responsibilities, a similar unit could serve as a pertinent and effective model for offering comprehensive solutions to address multifaceted challenges.

Summary of the Results in Relation to our Two Research Questions

In the following, we will focus on answering the study's two research questions:

RQ1: What are SELL's current key functions and activities?

RQ2: How can SELL bolster political agendas and address future workforce learning needs?

Research Question 1: What are SELL's Current Key Functions and Activities?

In the document analysis and in the presentation of results and discussions, we have focused on SELL's role, tasks, organization and competence.

For more than 30 years, SELL has had a central position at INN to develop and offer competence programs for working life, regionally and nationally, through flexible educational offerings for individuals and employees in companies. In line with educational and technological developments, SELL has further developed its expertise to fulfill SELL's core activities. Market knowledge and an understanding and knowledge of the needs of working life are central to SELL's ability to fulfill the faculty's and university college's strategy and overall political intentions. SELL has the expertise to take care of interdisciplinary initiatives demanded by working life by coordinating collaboration internally at INN (SELL, 2024d).

SELL appears to be able to safeguard the "one door in" principle for working life. In addition, they currently have a role as a development actor and academic coordinator, as well as people who have the network, experience and expertise to develop CPD offerings in line with the needs of working life. This is called for in reports that analyze the status of CPD for working life (Tellmann et al., 2017; Tømte et al., 2015).

In comparison with similar units at other higher education institutions in Norway, for example from two of Norway's largest universities (NTNU, 2024; Universitetet i Agder, 2024), we find that SELL has to a greater extent played a development role with more extensive expertise in pedagogy and has thus worked on the holistic development of the competence projects together with the academic

environments at the university college and organizations in working life (SELL, 2024e). Other units that can be compared with SELL are smaller in scope and are to a greater extent support units that specialize in more administrative tasks and marketing related to the educational offerings, while academic development and pedagogical facilitation take place at the departments and in the academic environments.

Research Question 2: How can SELL Bolster Political Agendas and Address Future Workforce learning needs?

SELL can be seen as an actor to fulfill political strategies on lifelong learning. In light of the document analysis, we have also looked at how SELL can help to fulfill political strategies and support the need for lifelong learning in the working life of the future. The review has provided a clear picture of how lifelong learning and continuing education at a strategic level are emphasized in documents, from the highest level of authority through the Universities and University Colleges Act (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005), White Papers (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022, 2023) and the Official Norwegian Report 2019:2, the 2024 Letter of Allocation to INN (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a) down to an operational unit level such as SELL.

In our analysis, we have identified that the Universities and University Colleges Act gives higher education institutions a clear responsibility to take care of the task of lifelong learning and continuing education, but no guidelines are given on how this task should be solved at the institutions (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005).

Recent white papers on higher education and skills needs in working life emphasize increased access to flexible and decentralized education for more people and workplace learning throughout life to increase employment in Norway (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022, 2023).

The Official Norwegian Report 2019:2 titled: Future Competence Needs II – Challenges for Competence Policy states that a strengthening of the collaboration between educational institutions and working life is needed to develop more relevant study programs (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019), which supports the argument that educational institutions should have an apparatus such as SELL in the first line to take care of contact with working life and the development of tailor-made studies for skills development for individuals and companies. However, further consideration must be given to which meeting places are needed in order to achieve fruitful interaction.

The 2024 Letter of Allocation from the Ministry of Education and Research states that INN is to be a driving force for lifelong learning, and there is an expectation that the university college will follow up and develop relevant CPD throughout Norway. It is specified that the first line should be given increased confidence as the closest contact with students and working and social life (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023a), which is an important role at SELL today (SELL, 2024d).

Lifelong learning is an important strategic objective at INN. The strategy at INN addresses the need for restructuring in working life due to various regional

challenges, and INN is committed to ensuring access to education and learning throughout the lifecycle in collaboration with regional, national and international partners (INN, 2021).

However, there is a dearth of information and guidelines regarding the operationalization and structuring of an entity equipped to undertake this responsibility. Nonetheless, the aspiration for close collaboration between INN and external partners is underscored. The organization of tasks related to CPD, lifelong learning, and collaboration with the workforce at INN lacks a clear structure, with somewhat ambiguous delineations of responsibilities.

The response to the second research question, concerning how SELL contributes to fulfilling political strategies and supporting the need for lifelong learning in the future workforce, is rooted in insights gleaned from the first research question. This initial inquiry focuses on SELL's core operations, competencies, strategic trajectory, and an examination of the expectations set forth by governmental bodies within the education sector.

Through our deliberations, we consistently assert that SELL can indeed aid in fulfilling political strategies by bolstering lifelong learning in the future workforce. It achieves this through possessing the necessary expertise to discern and address the needs of the workforce, acting as a frontline liaison between the workforce and educational institutions to co-develop and implement competency programs. Additionally, SELL can undertake internal coordination efforts in response to demands for interdisciplinary education and boasts sufficient expertise in line with the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) model proposed by Mishra and Koehler (2006) to craft comprehensive competency programs.

Conclusions

In summary, this paper illuminates how higher education institutions, exemplified by units like SELL at INN, can play a proactive role in fostering lifelong learning, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) with the workforce and society. The aim is to foster knowledge enhancement within professional realms, aligning with overarching governmental goals for lifelong learning.

Through our study, we have investigated two research questions: RQ1: What are SELL's current key functions and activities? RQ2: How can SELL bolster political agendas and address future workforce learning needs?

We've addressed the two research questions using a document analysis, categorizing documents into three levels: 1) National authority documents encompassing overarching political policies, 2) Institutional documents featuring guidelines derived from governmental directives, and 3) Unit-level documents providing guidance from within the institution.

Our study's findings offer compelling insights into how units like SELL within educational institutions can play a pivotal role in shaping lifelong learning initiatives for the future workforce.

We have seen that the Universities and University Colleges Act (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005) stipulates that the tasks of higher education

institutions include lifelong learning and continuing education on an equal footing with six other key tasks. The two white papers (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022, 2023) and the Official Norwegian Report (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019) have highlighted the increased need for skills in working life and the need for the education sector to help increase the number of and access to study programs and make them flexible. The Ministry of Education and Research expect educational institutions to be drivers of lifelong learning through a first-line service for working life. INN has a lifelong learning enshrined in its strategy and an ambition for a short path to collaboration with external actors, but there is a lack of a clear structure or division of labor in the area.

SELL possesses the requisite expertise to design and deliver adaptable educational competency programs tailored to the needs of the workforce, both regionally and nationally. A profound understanding of market dynamics and the specific requirements of professional environments is crucial for SELL to effectively bolster governmental strategies and INN's overarching lifelong learning agenda for the future workforce.

Limitations

We have meticulously curated documents we deem pivotal to the research's validity, relevance, and potential to shed light on our investigative queries. Our scrutiny extends to questioning the pertinence and representativeness of these documents and their interpretations. While acknowledging that alternative selections could yield different outcomes, our focus on SELL unavoidably introduces some limitations.

Certain documents were excluded from our analysis due to irrelevance to our research questions, inadequate information, or lack of valuable insights. It's important to note that two of the authors have affiliations with SELL, having contributed significantly to competence initiatives over several years. While striving for objectivity, their familiarity with the organization, university structures, and political landscape enhances nuanced discussions and aids in answering the research questions.

Future Directions

Looking ahead, our broader review underscores the imperative for further research and evaluation on the management of lifelong learning and ongoing education, both within Norwegian higher education institutions and internationally for comparative analysis. However, we postulate that future research would benefit from examining the effects of the described activities over a longer period of time. We also advocate for exploring and experimenting with collaborative models between educational institutions and the workforce to enhance effectiveness.

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