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**Paper**

**Between flexibility and assurance: a lean approach to internal QA for lifelong learning**


## Abstract

As higher education institutions expand lifelong learning (LLL), they face a dual challenge: ensuring robust and comparable quality assurance while operating in a diverse, fast-moving and resource-constrained environment. QA systems designed for degree programmes can become too heavy or fragmented when applied to flexible and modular LLL initiatives.

This paper presents a structured and lean approach to the internal quality assurance of LLL, integrating certified learning initiatives into an institutional QA cycle while contributing to a developing quality culture. Instead of adding a separate layer, the approach embeds QA as a lightweight thread throughout the lifecycle of LLL initiatives and shifts part of QA upstream, fostering ex ante quality development rather than relying predominantly on ex post control.

The methodology combines four components: an ex ante business case aligning initiatives with labour market trends, learner needs and institutional feasibility; learner personas to support portfolio management and programme design; a feedback phase involving professional stakeholders, programme committees and action planning; and a meta-reflection phase with external peers to support continuous improvement at system level.

The paper discusses the tension between maintaining a lean QA system and enabling bottom-up LLL initiatives. It offers transferable design principles for embedding LLL in internal QA systems while strengthening quality culture, portfolio-level governance and responsiveness to the world of work.


## 1. Introduction

Technological change, demographic shifts and the green and digital transitions force professionals to update their knowledge throughout their careers. Higher education institutions respond with a growing lifelong learning (LLL) portfolio of short courses, workshops, summer schools, postgraduate programmes and microcredentials. Two realities shape this provision. In Flanders it is not subsidised, so it follows the economic logic of a private provider and must operate within a minimal break-even framework. At the same time, universities of applied sciences are knowledge creators with up-to-date expertise in house, and the professional field expects them to respond quickly to its needs.

Quality assurance (QA) designed for degree programmes fits this reality poorly. It can be disproportionate for a three-session course, yet treating all LLL as incidental risks overlooking provision with formal assessment, certification or substantial commitments by learners and employers. Flexibility and assurance both matter, and neither can simply be traded for the other.

Odisee University of Applied Sciences is therefore developing a lean QA approach for LLL, adapting a common KU Leuven Association framework to its own governance. It seeks recognisable institutional responsibility for quality while preserving flexibility and bottom-up initiative. Few initiatives have yet

completed the cycle, so this paper analyses the system design, the lessons from external meta-reflection and the challenge of moving from templates to quality practice, rather than evaluating the outcomes of a fully implemented system.

This leads to the central question:

*How can a higher education institution extend its responsibility for educational quality to a diverse lifelong learning portfolio without importing a quality assurance system designed for degree programmes?*

## 2. Lifelong learning and the Flemish quality assurance context

In Flanders, lifelong learning extends beyond post-initial education. Accessible entry routes and flexible study arrangements also enable adults to enter or return to regular degree programmes to upskill, reskill or obtain a degree. Admission requirements, prerequisites and study-progress rules still apply.

Regular degree provision thus serves learners over 25 alongside younger entrants from secondary school. Adults may seek a first degree, an additional qualification or a career change, sometimes alongside employment. Lifelong learning describes a purpose and trajectory, not a separate category incompatible with degree-seeking.

Credit contracts allow learners to take individual course units from accredited programmes and obtain credit certificates without pursuing a full degree. They attend classes and assessments alongside other students, offering an established route for targeted learning.

Odisee therefore distinguishes two QA routes, not two categories of learners. Degree programmes and their course units, including credit contracts, fall under *eigen regie*: institutional responsibility for monitoring and assuring accredited programme quality within the Flemish external QA framework, subject to review by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO, 2025). Age or professional motivation does not alter this coverage.

The second route covers provision outside established programme arrangements. Beyond the financial constraints noted in the introduction, the regulatory framework for this provision is almost non-existent. Odisee provisionally distinguishes postgraduate programmes, continuing education with a certificate of achievement, continuing education with an attendance certificate, and in-company training. This route also includes microcredentials not organised through a regular credit contract. Such provision does not automatically enter accredited-programme QA procedures, creating a gap in systematic coverage—not necessarily in quality. The approach discussed here addresses this gap without replacing QA within accredited programmes.

Microcredentials make the boundary between these routes particularly visible. Education Decree XXXVI, adopted in 2026 (Flemish Government, 2026a), introduces microcredentials into the Flemish Higher Education Code.The accompanying explanatory memorandum describes a microcredential as a record of learning acquired after completing a small volume of knowledge and skills (Flemish

Government, 2026b; English paraphrase). The credential thus records the learning acquired, rather than merely naming the short course through which it was acquired.

Alongside the European approach set out in the 2022 Council Recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2022), this definition clarifies the legal position of short learning provision but does not establish equivalent assessment, recognition or QA standards across all provision.

Because the European approach includes public and private providers beyond recognised higher education, the microcredential label alone implies neither accredited higher education QA nor clarity about quality responsibility, outcome assessment, claimed level or recognition elsewhere.

Each initiative therefore needs an identifiable QA route. Learning within accredited programmes remains covered by *eigen regie*; other provision requires a proportionate approach. Here, **certified learning initiatives** means provision for which Odisee formally confirms participation or achievement through a certificate, credential or postgraduate qualification. Certification implies intended continuity in response to societal demand; without certification, recurrence warrants inclusion in the formal cycle. Certification of assessed achievement, unlike confirmation of participation, makes a public claim about learning outcomes and requires credible assessment.

## 3. Designing a lean quality assurance cycle

The KU Leuven Association developed a common, fit-for-purpose framework for the lifelong learning provision brought together under the Continue brand. The framework consists of three phases: planning, feedback and follow-up. Association partners retain responsibility for the concrete instruments and procedures used within these phases.

Odisee translated this framework into four interconnected components: an *ex ante* business case, the use of learner personas, feedback from learners and the professional field, and meta-reflection with external peers.

### 3.1 Planning: moving quality assurance upstream

Planning centres on an *ex ante* business case informing decisions before substantial resources are committed. It establishes intended continuity—not programme duration—through certification or, for non-certified provision, recurrence. Initiative owners examine:

- the societal or professional need addressed by the initiative;
- the intended learner groups and their characteristics;
- the relationship with labour market developments;
- the position of the initiative within the existing portfolio and its intended continuity, evidenced by certification or, for non-certified provision, recurrence;
- the expected learning outcomes and educational design;

- organisational and financial feasibility;
- the form of assessment and certification;
- responsibilities for monitoring and follow-up.

This shifts part of QA upstream. Rather than waiting for participant evaluations to reveal weaknesses after delivery, the institution asks whether an initiative is educationally and strategically convincing before approval.

Accessible to everyone involved, the business case remains the shared, living reference for monitoring throughout the initiative's lifecycle, not merely approval. Follow-up decisions, ongoing improvement actions and updates are recorded there, connecting planning with subsequent development.

Learner personas support this analysis. The business case distinguishes five profiles, using the Dutch labels *bijblijver*, *toekomstbouwer*, *(her)ontdekkingsreiziger*, *autodidact* and *achterblijver*.[1] This typology provides a shared reference for considering differences in learners' expectations and constraints and their implications for accessibility, scheduling, learning design, assessment and support. At portfolio level, personas also help identify duplication or gaps in provision.

Documentation remains proportionate to the initiative's educational claims and context. Short duration does not preclude formal inclusion. All provision requires clear objectives, appropriate expertise and opportunities for participant and stakeholder feedback.

### 3.2 Feedback: from satisfaction to transfer and impact

The feedback phase includes evidence from participants and the professional field. Participant surveys were redesigned to become more consistent with indicators used for degree provision. This does not mean that regular and lifelong learning are treated as identical. It means that recurring concepts, such as relevance, learning experience, recommendation and perceived achievement, are measured in sufficiently comparable ways to support institutional learning.

The revised instruments also move beyond immediate satisfaction. Participants are themselves professionals, and the alumni survey will examine how they apply what they have learned in their own work and what impact they perceive on their professional practice. No formal survey of employers or other professional stakeholders is planned. Their perspectives may nevertheless inform reflection through informal input from external programme committee members or lecturers who work in the relevant professional field.

[1] The labels distinguish potential learners on their learning maturity and intensions. The learner personas used in the business case are based on the research and policy recommendations presented in "Levenslang leren: een onderzoek naar de persona's, drempels en hefbomen van burgers met een leernood" (30 October 2021), published on Vlaanderen.be. <https://www.vlaanderen.be/kennisplatform-werk-en-sociale-economie/bijdragen-van-het-kennisplatform/levenslang-leren-een-onderzoek-naar-de-personas-drempels-en-hefbomen-van-burgers-met-een-leernood>

This is particularly relevant for provision developed with the world of work. A course can receive positive satisfaction scores while producing little transfer to practice. Conversely, a demanding programme may receive mixed immediate evaluations but generate significant professional change. QA for lifelong learning should therefore not rely on satisfaction as a proxy for educational impact.

The approach nevertheless has limitations. Employers commissioning and financing provision may have strong interests in its continuation. Participants may be less critical when the financial decision was taken by their employer rather than by themselves. Feedback must consequently be interpreted as one source of evidence rather than a definitive judgement.

### 3.3 Follow-up: from individual initiatives to portfolio governance

Content owners and programme committees interpret an evaluation report combining participant feedback, professional stakeholder input, participation and certification data, and financial information. Planned exit analysis examines how many participants obtain a certificate and why others do not. Decisions, responsibilities, actions and progress updates enter the shared business case: the single reference for monitoring development and informing the next planning cycle.

Planned institutional dashboards will cover initiative types and numbers, participants, intake, exit analysis, stakeholder feedback, professional impact and financial results.

Shared indicators support institutional learning but require contextual interpretation: completion and certification differ across degree programmes, short courses and employer-sponsored postgraduate programmes. Non-attainment therefore requires explanation, not merely a count.

### 3.4 Meta-reflection: quality assurance of the quality system

The most distinctive element is the meta-reflection phase. Association partners organise a quality dialogue in which an institution presents its approach to lifelong learning QA to peers and an external expert. Participants examine the coherence of the system, the closure of feedback loops, stakeholder involvement, institutional governance and the balance between formalisation and flexibility.

The first quality dialogue focusing on Odisee took place in December 2025. It included peer reflection by association partners and an external perspective. The dialogue confirmed strengths in central coordination, the coherence of the quality narrative, proximity to programme teams and the intention to connect education, research and lifelong learning.

The dialogue also produced concrete development priorities: greater visibility of the portfolio, more systematic reporting by programme or cluster, better closure of feedback loops and further development of common indicators. Subsequent refinement of the feedback approach focused on transfer and impact through participant and alumni feedback. As outlined in Section 3.2, professional-field perspectives may inform reflection through informal input from external programme committee

members or lecturers working in the relevant field, rather than through a formal employer or stakeholder survey. Plans for integrated reporting and dashboards were further specified.

Meta-reflection shapes the developing system rather than reviewing it only after maturity. The first observable QA outcomes have therefore emerged at system level, before mature programme-level evidence is available.

## 4. Implementation status and early outcomes

Implementation is deliberately phased. By autumn 2026, the templates for the business case and evaluation report had been developed. The redesign of feedback instruments focused on participants and alumni, including transfer to professional practice, with technical implementation approaching completion. Professional-field input is envisaged through informal contributions rather than a formal survey of employers or other professional stakeholders.

In 2026–2027, each cluster is expected to develop a business case for one existing recurrent programme and one new initiative, such as a summer school; remaining recurrent provision is scheduled for 2027–2028. Further work covers automated data collection, evaluation reporting, programme committees, intake and exit-analysis dashboards, impact indicators and integrated financial reporting.

This status requires caution. Few initiatives have completed the cycle, and the institution cannot yet demonstrate a systematic relationship between the cycle and programme-level outcomes. Claims about impact would therefore be premature.

Three early outputs can nevertheless be identified.

First, QA instruments have been redesigned before institution-wide implementation. The quality dialogue prevented the initial framework from becoming fixed too early and directed attention towards transfer, workplace impact and portfolio information.

Second, the implementation plan establishes a transition from isolated evaluations towards a common evidence base. The use of comparable indicators should make lifelong learning more visible within institutional decision-making while retaining space for contextual interpretation.

Third, the phased pilot recognises that QA must itself be tested. Introducing the business case in selected existing and new programmes allows Odisee to examine whether the instrument informs decisions rather than merely documenting them.

## 5. Challenges and unresolved tensions

### 5.1 When an *ex ante* instrument becomes an *ex post* justification

The principal implementation risk is not excessive bureaucracy but ritualised compliance. In some cases, business cases are completed after the substantive decision to launch an initiative has already been made. The template then administratively confirms a decision rather than informing it.

This reveals a cultural challenge. Moving a document to the beginning of a procedure does not automatically create evidence-informed decision-making. Governance bodies must be willing to question assumptions, request changes or stop an initiative. Otherwise, *ex ante* QA exists only procedurally.

### 5.2 Independent expertise in niche fields

Postgraduate and specialised programmes frequently operate in small professional communities. Potential external experts may be collaborators, competitors or contributors to the initiative. Innovation-sensitive programmes may also involve confidential knowledge.

Odisee intends to clarify mandates, terms and periodic rotation for external members. These measures can strengthen independence but do not fully resolve the structural problem. The relevant question is not whether an expert is entirely detached, but whether interests are transparent and whether the process contains sufficient plurality and critical distance.

### 5.3 The sorites problem of proportional QA

The sorites problem remains: when does provision warrant formal QA? Odisee uses enduring character—certification and/or recurrence—rather than duration, with intended continuity made explicit in the business case. This provides an inclusion criterion but does not resolve responsibility for provision outside the cycle.

Certification implies intended repetition in response to societal demand for the certificate; inclusion need not await a second delivery. Without certification, recurrence is the criterion, even when an annual seminar changes topic. Yet much provision, including in-company training, is one-off. Clients rely on Odisee's higher education expertise, although a single delivery cannot offer the assurance generated through repeated planning, feedback and follow-up.

Such provision relies more on earned trust than on evidence from a recurrent QA cycle. Is that a defensible basis over time? The argument here is that it may be, provided institutional review examines how the institution takes responsibility for this provision, including the limits of its formal cycle. The inclusion criterion then defines procedural intensity, not the boundary of institutional accountability. For provision within the cycle, educational claims, assessment, certification type, scale and professional risk shape scrutiny; the microcredential label is not a separate inclusion criterion.

### 5.4 Comparable indicators without false equivalence

Aligning indicators for regular and lifelong learning increases institutional visibility but creates a risk of false equivalence. Lifelong learners differ from degree-seeking students in motivation, time constraints, financing and relationships with employers.

The solution is neither complete separation nor uncritical harmonisation. Institutions need a common core of indicators and a differentiated layer reflecting the purposes and formats of lifelong learning. Comparable should mean interpretable across contexts, not identical in meaning.

## 6. Discussion: what does “lean” mean?

The case suggests that lean QA should not be equated with minimal documentation or reduced institutional responsibility. A lean system uses formalisation selectively, at moments when it can influence educational decisions.

This requires three distinctions.

First, quality culture encompasses all initiatives, while enduring character determines formal inclusion through certification or recurrence. One-off provision, including in-company training, relies more on earned trust in institutional expertise. This remains a responsibility to account for, not an exemption from QA.

Second, certification both signals continuity and shapes scrutiny. Certifying assessed achievement, rather than participation alone, makes a public claim about learning outcomes and assessment, warranting greater scrutiny regardless of duration.

Third, external reflection operates at different levels. Periodic meta-review can complement stakeholder engagement where niche expertise limits independence. Bringing responsibility for the whole portfolio, including one-off provision, within institutional review may also make reliance on earned trust defensible without imposing the same cycle on every initiative.

Implementation is not neutral: business cases and indicators derive value from the decisions they inform. Even a well-designed cycle can fail if experienced as retrospective administration rather than support for educational judgement.

Lean QA therefore depends on quality culture as much as on process design. Its test is not how few forms an institution uses, but whether the selected instruments generate timely reflection, consequential dialogue and visible follow-up.

## 7. Conclusion

Odisee is developing a QA system that brings lifelong learning within institutional quality responsibility without creating a parallel version of degree-programme QA. The system combines a three-phase framework with an *ex ante* business case, learner personas, participant and professional-field feedback, evaluation reporting and periodic meta-reflection.

With piloting and broader implementation continuing during 2026–2028, initial outcomes concern quality architecture, not demonstrable programme impact. The December 2025 quality dialogue identified gaps, refined feedback instruments and set priorities for portfolio reporting and dashboards.

Transferable principles are to start QA before delivery, base formal inclusion on enduring character through certification or recurrence, and tailor scrutiny to educational claims and risk. Feedback should address transfer and workplace impact beyond satisfaction. Comparable indicators should support institutional learning without erasing contextual differences, while external reflection examines the QA system itself.

The new Flemish regulatory framework formally introduces microcredentials into higher education, but further development is required regarding level determination, assessment standards, transparency and their relationship with other short learning provision. If microcredentials are to function as recognisable and trusted records of learning, their value will depend not only on a legal definition but also on transparent and credible QA.

The central tension cannot be resolved by choosing either flexibility or assurance. A credible lifelong learning system requires both. The task of lean QA is to determine where formalisation adds educational value and where professional trust, dialogue and a shared quality culture can carry the greater part of the responsibility.

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*Copilot was used as an assistant to draft and edit this contribution.*