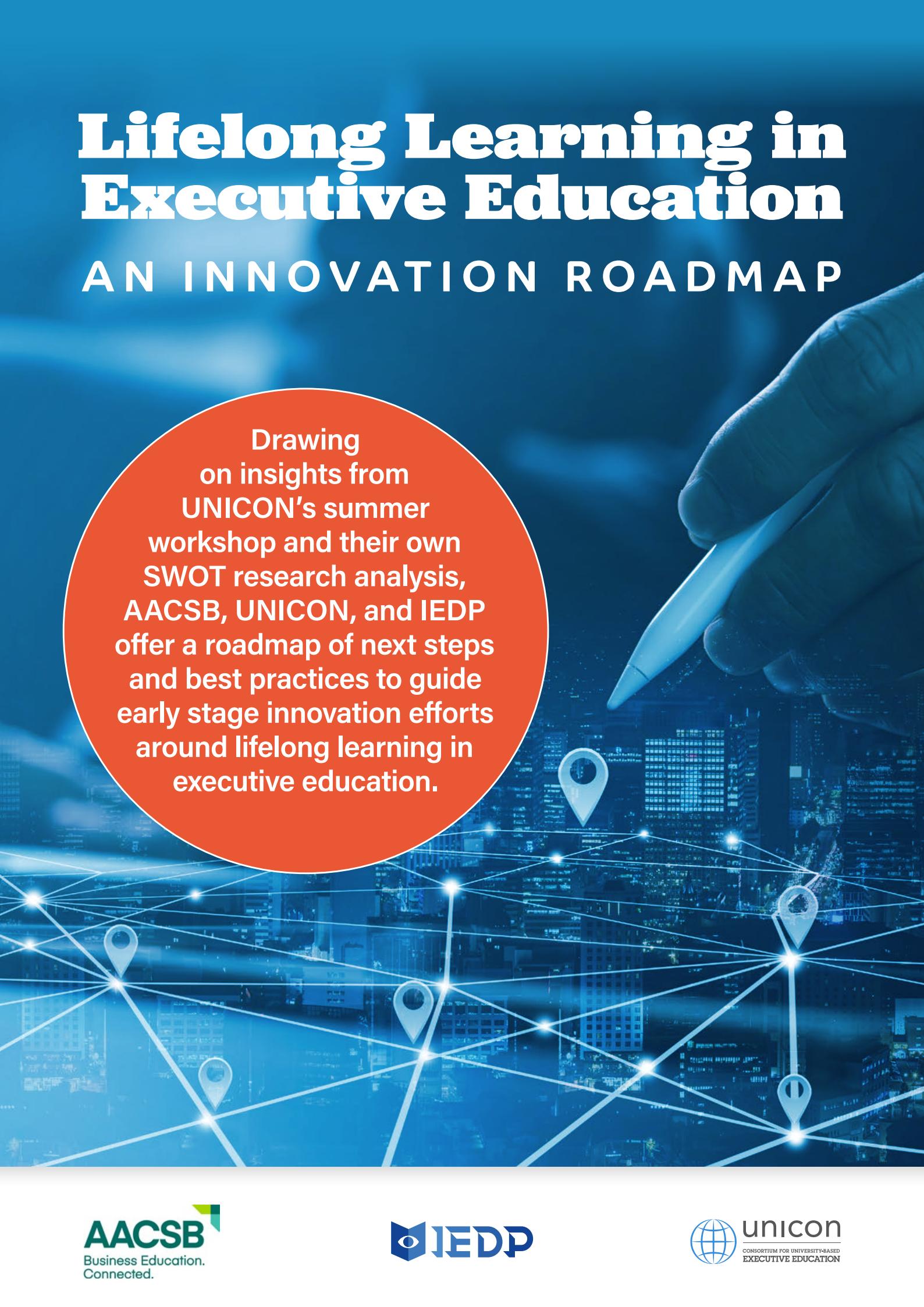# Lifelong Learning in Executive Education

AN INNOVATION ROADMAP

Drawing on insights from UNICON's summer workshop and their own SWOT research analysis, AACSB, UNICON, and IEDP offer a roadmap of next steps and best practices to guide early stage innovation efforts around lifelong learning in executive education.

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CONSORTIUM FOR UNIVERSITY-BASED EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

GETTING STARTED

Nine best practices to help maximize the impact of your early stage innovation efforts.

DON'T BE A SOLUTIONIZER

1

Get comfortable saying 'I don't know.' Fight the urge to jump to solutions.

TURN UP THE VOLUME

2

Design thinking encourages a 'more is more' approach to ideation. Aim to generate innovation ideas at volume and from differing perspectives.

KEEP IT UP!

3

Keep feeding the innovation funnel. Don't turn off the ideation too early. Ultimately the aim is to develop a continual process of idea generation.

4

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

Identifying the correct problem to address is another key aspect of design thinking. Are your efforts focused on an area of genuine need for your audience?

UNDERSTAND STAKEHOLDER NEEDS

What do your clients and learners need to accomplish? Learning more about the pains and gains of learners is key – and the picture is always moving.

5

6

FOCUS ON GAINS

Focus on possible gains and benefits of lifelong learning such as: just-in-time provision of skills; portability of credentials; flexibility of learning; deeper connections with alumni networks; knowledge acceleration with shorter learning formats; applied and on-the-job learning; skills signalling for employees; etc.

FOCUS ON PAINS

Focus on pains and challenges on the demand side of executive education that lifelong learning can address, such as: lowering high costs; facilitating greater job mobility in a tight labour market; countering high hiring costs with internal skills development; improve time inefficiencies with faster learning products; support people and organizations in a fast-changing skills landscape with agile products; etc.

DIAL UP DIVERSITY

Try incorporating more diversity into your ideation process, increasing the volume of ideas and broadening the horizon of the ideas generated.

WORK WITH EMPATHY

Continually ask: how is our innovation work related to what real clients are thinking, saying, feeling, and doing?

ESTABLISHING A PROCESS

Ten best practices for establishing an on-going process of developing innovation ideas in a sustainable way within the university-based business school system.

START SMALL, BUILD BIG

Start with small, achievable targets and build from there. Begin by dedicating 15 minutes a week to innovation work for all members of your team or lifelong learning working group, and increase your efforts over time.

1

MAKE IT STRATEGIC, MAKE IT JOINED-UP

For meaningful results lifelong learning should be a key strategic agenda point for leadership teams across universities, business schools, and executive education— with clear communication between the three.

2

FORM A WORKING GROUP

Create a working group to meet regularly and ensure a joined-up approach. It could be cross-functional and/or cross-university. Which stakeholders should be involved?

3

FUNNEL AND FILTER

The systematic funnelling and filtering of ideas, stress-testing and interrogating your concepts from different angles and perspectives, is a continual process – the output of which will be testable prototypes.

4

FOCUS ON CONTEXT

Every school and provider's strategy will be different, devised according to market segmentation, geography, demography, brand strengths, operational capabilities and areas of expertise. Innovation ideas should map onto this unique context, to maximize the advantages of your market position.

5

BE GENUINELY DEMAND-LED

What can you do to better understand your stakeholder needs? Research, interactions, bringing client voices into working group meetings, etc. What mechanisms and forums can you leverage to listen to the market and learn about their changing requirements?

6

REFRAME THE QUESTION

Reframing problem statements and questions is a vital tool in the innovation process. Always ask: is this the question we should be asking? If not: reframe and ask again.

7

CHAMPION COOPERATION

A culture of teamwork and cooperation within universities and across different schools will be critical in developing innovative ideas that address real pains and gains in lifelong learning and executive education.

8

MAKE CONNECTIONS, EXPLORE PARTNERSHIPS

Partnering and collaborating with other schools, with corporate clients, and with external providers such as technology specialists, will be pivotal in meeting the range of new needs in the lifelong learning space.

9

BE ACADEMIC ENTREPRENEURS

Early stage innovation efforts in lifelong learning are best approached with an entrepreneurial mindset i.e. working with independence, decisiveness, creativity, and commercial drive. Within the university system the executive education arm of a business school has long been viewed in these terms.

10

IMPLEMENTATION

Six best practices to help transition from idea generation and development to smart experiments and real-world business results.

TEST SMARTER, NOT HARDER

Lean start-up principles emphasize high-quality, intelligent experimentation. The objective is to develop an MVP (minimum viable product)—and to build, experiment, measure, and learn from that process in progressive iterations.

1

DROP THE PILOT

Devise lo-fi experiments rather than more costly and high-profile 'pilots.' The aim is to obtain the maximum amount of actionable information about stakeholder needs and value creation with the minimum amount of time, money, and effort expended.

2

IMPLEMENTATION

PREPARE TO IMPLEMENT

"Execution is a people problem not a strategy problem," was the title of Peter Bregman's influential 2017 HBR article. Many stakeholders affect implementation. To prepare to execute your ideas – whether they are experiments or rollouts – identify and tend to all of them.

3

LEARN TO LIVE WITH FAILURE

An important best practice in innovation is simply to set realistic expectations for yourself and others. The majority of any organizations' innovation efforts fail. As many as 95% of all new product launches fail. Failure is a natural part of the innovation process – and learning from failure is key.

4

EMBRACE RISK

A certain amount of risk is inherent in any innovation process and innovating in lifelong learning will be no different. There will be failures, there will be 'breakage'. Factoring this reality in to your plans will enable your institution to be prepared and make the process work.

5

KEEP PURPOSE IN MIND

Keep in mind the big picture purpose behind lifelong learning and education more broadly. Innovating in ways that drive new revenues is a central aim, but so too is innovating in ways that produce a positive societal impact; from access to affordability and inclusion.

6

RECONCILING THE CRITICAL TENSIONS

Several critical tensions exist between the aims and goals of lifelong learning and those of executive education in its current form. Awareness of these tensions, to balance, address, and even exploit them, presents opportunities to innovate.

ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS **VS** INDIVIDUAL PATHWAYS

Balancing the needs and goals of organizational clients with those of the individual learner is a key challenge for lifelong learning in executive education. Innovation opportunities lie in ensuring both are met.

DEGREE-LEARNING **VS** NON-DEGREE

Lifelong learning formats trend naturally toward disruption in the degree learning sphere – with longer, multi-year formats displaced by more flexible products. Within the university system however, degree-learning typically remains the major partner in terms of funding and revenues. A more synergistic relationship between the two can create opportunities for greater innovation across the portfolio.

PERSONALIZATION **VS** SCALE

The growing trend in executive education towards personalization aligns well with the individual needs of the 'end user' in lifelong learning. On the other hand this presents challenges in terms of scaling.

SELF-DIRECTED **VS** QUALITY CONTROL

There is a well-known lack of reliability in self-directed learning, with self-driven learners achieving outcomes that far out-strip the less well-driven. Catering for both types of learner presents opportunities for innovation.

AFFORDABILITY **VS** PROFITABILITY

A tension exists between the potential societal gains on offer in lifelong learning and the bottom-line drivers that will make it viable. Balancing the two will be key.