



## EPALE Conference 2018

### *Growing together: fostering an inspiring adult learning community*

## All you need to know about EU policy on adult learning

### The EU

- The goals of the European Union are: to promote peace and the well-being of its citizens; to offer freedom, security and justice without internal borders; to promote sustainable development based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive market economy with full employment and social progress, and environmental protection; to combat social exclusion and discrimination; to promote scientific and technological progress; to enhance economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among EU countries; to respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity; and to establish an economic and monetary union whose currency is the euro.
- EU values are an integral part of our European way of life: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights. Human rights are protected by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights; these cover the right to be free from discrimination on the basis of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, the right to the protection of your personal data, and or the right to get access to justice.
- These goals and values form the basis of the EU and are laid out in the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

### The EU and adult learning

- Member States are fully responsible for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems. The EU's role is to **encourage cooperation** between Member States and, if necessary, **support and supplement their actions**.
- For example, the [EU Agenda for Adult Learning](#) (EAAL), which was adopted by the Council in 2011, is the EU reference text on adult learning policy. Member States are committed to working towards its objectives. Its key message is that adult learning in its various forms – formal, non-formal and informal – ‘provides a means of up-skilling or reskilling those affected by unemployment, restructuring and career transitions, as well as making an important contribution to social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development’. Increasing participation and enabling all adults to develop and renew their skills and competences throughout their lives are at the heart of the Agenda. EAAL priorities are renewed periodically; priorities for 2015-2020 are:
  - ensuring the **coherence** of adult learning with other policy areas, improving coordination, effectiveness and relevance;

- significantly increasing the **supply and take-up** of adult learning provision, especially in literacy, numeracy and digital skills;
- widening **access** by increasing the **availability** of workplace-based learning, making effective use of ICT and providing second-chance opportunities; and
- improving **quality** assurance, including initial and continuing education of adult educators.
- A total of 36 countries have nominated a national coordinator, funded by the Erasmus+ programme, to facilitate cooperation in implementing the EAAL.
- A more recent example of the EU's role in encouraging Member States to take action on adult learning is the [2016 Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways](#). This is currently being implemented by Member States who agreed to improve provision for the 61 million adults who struggle with literacy, numeracy or digital skills. These adults will each receive an assessment of their skills, a tailored package of learning to improve their basic skills, and a chance to have their skills validated, so that they can progress to further learning if they wish. The Commission funds participation by Member States in mutual learning and other projects to assist them to implement this initiative, for which they can also use part of their ESF allocation.
- The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) was jointly proclaimed by the Commission, the Parliament and the Council in November 2017 and highlights the EU's commitment to adult learning as it establishes, as its first principle, 'the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market'. This reflects the increased attention that the EU is paying to adult learning as one solution to the multiple challenges facing our societies: demographics, the rapid pace of change in the labour market; the rise of nationalism, xenophobia and radicalisation; the low levels of trust in political systems and media, and so on.

### In practice...

Complementing these headline initiatives, the EU works in other ways to support adult education.

- Under the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds), the Commission invests in programmes devised by Member States wishing to improve their education and training systems. By the end of 2016, investments in education and vocational training had reached €14.6 billion, with a project selection rate close to 30 %. About 700 000 people are being given the opportunity to upgrade their skills and secure their career path. European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) investments have led to an additional capacity in education infrastructure equivalent to 4.4 million people.
- The Erasmus+ programme has around 5% of its total budget available to support adult learning. It funds learning mobility to adult education staff (Erasmus+ Key Action 1), grassroots projects linking adult education organisations and providers (Key Action 2), and larger-scale projects that help national or regional authorities to improve their systems (Erasmus+ Key Action 3 policy experimentation or forward-looking projects). In 2016 the Erasmus+ programme funded 406 mobility projects (KA1), enabling more than 5000 adult learning staff to train abroad, mostly via structured courses or training events; almost 60 000 additional participants, be they staff or learners, participated in the programme through the 1 300 grassroots projects contracted (KA2).
- The EU works with Member States towards a set of **benchmarks** in education and training. One of these relates to adult education; the aim is that by 2020 at least 15% of the adult population should be engaged in learning at any one time. Currently about a third of Member States meet this target, with others having a long way to go; the participation rate of adults with low levels of qualification, however, is only around 4%.

- To help build a robust and effective adult learning sector, the European Commission is investing in **EPALE**, an electronic platform forming a community for all those responsible for Adult Education in Europe (educators, policymakers, academics, training providers...). With over 42 500 users, the EPAL platform has grown to be recognised as a ‘one-stop shop’ for adult education in Europe.
- The **ET2020 working group** on adult learning brings together national experts to make recommendations on ways of improving policy on adult learning (most recently: how to promote adult learning in the workplace).
- The Commission periodically publishes studies and other research on adult learning policies and provision.
- For a closer look at all the activities of the EU in the field of adult learning, please visit the EU policy mini-site on EPAL: <https://ec.europa.eu/epale/en/policy-in-the-eu>
- The EU Policy mini-site is a section on EPAL that offers information about funding opportunities for individuals, activities and projects in adult learning; it allows users to discover useful tools, resources and research. On the mini-site users can also find the Policy Analysis Tool, which brings together existing data on adult learning and continuing vocational education and training and provides a central point of reference for monitoring and improving policy in adult learning.

### How has the world changed since the European Agenda for Adult Learning was adopted?

- The target date set for this Agenda was 2020. Now is a good time to review the role of the EU in supporting structural and systematic change in adult education. This could include rethinking current models of governance and coordination, financial support, benchmarks and monitoring tools; in a word: this is the time to reflect not only on what the EU does, but also on how it does it.
- There is now greater recognition of the fact that society has changed; the world of work has changed and is continuing to do so, in such a way that every adult needs to continue to learn throughout their life. This is especially so because changes in the economy mean that most people will have several ‘careers’ in a lifetime, meaning that they will need to upskill and re-skill.
- Adult learning is understood as a part of the solution to a range of challenges facing society. In addition to the uncontested benefits of vocational adult learning, non-vocational adult learning has a major societal, cultural and economic function to provide learning as a public good that supports: social equality and fairness, personal development and empowerment, local democracy and active citizenship, social integration and participation, environmental protection, health, fitness, active ageing, culture and heritage. Adult education benefits the economy (productivity, competitiveness, workforce motivation...); it benefits society (less poverty and criminal activity, more democracy, social cohesion, in particular given the growing isolation of individuals within the community...); it benefits individuals (employment, health, well-being, citizenship, self-esteem...).

### What progress have EU Member States made?

- Member States are at very different stages in the development of robust adult learning systems. In some, there is a century-long history of adults taking part in learning activities throughout their life; in others, the tradition of adults taking part in learning is not so strong; in some countries the benefits of investing in adult learning may not be so well understood.
- There are also structural problems inherent to the field: the greater part of adult learning is non-formal and informal, therefore non-regulated; adult learning is a complex policy field: responsibility for it is often divided across several ministries and agencies (e.g. education,

training, migration, justice ...) and several levels of policymaking (municipal, regional, national). This shared responsibility often results in a situation where adult learning policy is fragmented and its efficiency suffers from a lack of coordination between these many parties, leading to fragmented and incoherent provision.

- A recent cross-country analysis shows that the adult learning sector is doing relatively well in three areas:
  - there has been an increase in the frequency of the different agencies working together in partnership (which is vital given the very large number of bodies involved in providing adult learning in each country);
  - there is a trend towards targeting public policy and investment at groups most in need, such as low-skilled adults, adults out of work and older workers; and
  - provision is becoming more led by demand, particularly in relation to matching it more closely to the needs of the labour market and employers and the modernisation of outdated adult education schemes.
- On the other hand, the same analysis highlighted some significant weaknesses:
  - In many Member States, there is a large number of organisations providing adult learning, often in an unplanned and uncoordinated manner, which makes it very difficult for an adult to find the right learning opportunities amongst the many, often very similar courses on offer. The lack of coordination hampers forward planning for future learning needs.
  - In a majority of Member States, in all corners of the EU, experts stated that a lack of funding was a key weakness of the adult learning system. Furthermore, in many countries there has been a drop in national funding over the last 5 years; in some cases, EU funding has been used to replace national funding, which is not a sustainable solution.
  - Finally, a lack of a robust evidence base was seen as a weakness in several countries; this can lead to provision not being based on real needs. Data are lacking on the needs of adult learners in terms of their skills needs or skill gaps and on the needs of employers and/or the wider economy. Perhaps because of this, most Member States make little attempt to forecast how demand for adult learning provision may change in the future.
- When measured against the agreed European benchmark, which aims for 15% of all adults to be taking part in learning by 2020, progress in many Member States is extremely slow: only one in ten Europeans takes part in any kind of regular education or training; one in five Europeans struggles with basic skills. There are now eight Member States who have met this benchmark.
- It is also a fact that not only is there a low participation rate in adult learning, there is also a very low level of *willingness* to participate – despite the growing need for up-/re-skilling. The role of outreach and guidance is therefore key.

## Where next for adult learning in the EU?

The European Agenda for Adult Learning set out a vision for the kind of adult learning policy and provision that seemed appropriate in 2011, but the world is in constant evolution. The EPALE conference should help us define our vision for the next few years, and how the policies and actions of the EU could help.