



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

EAEA STATEMENT ON ADULT EDUCATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

The current economic crisis in Europe, which has its roots in the banking crisis started in 2008, has taken on different forms. EAEA outlines four main issues that adult education has to deal with: **the economic crisis, the crisis of European cohesion and identity, the ethical crisis and the personal crisis**¹.

The EAEA membership took the opportunity to discuss and analyze these challenges for adult education from their national perspectives.

Member feedback from various regions showed that the crisis affected every European country in different ways and to different extents. Even though several countries such as Germany and Norway are not experiencing a severe economic crisis, it was questioned if *“these are good times for adult education and learning (ALE)?”*

And yes, actually in countries like Ireland, the numbers of adults seeking education and training programmes have increased, partly as a result of the rise in unemployment and the lack of economic growth, but also as a result of a skills mismatch between new jobs coming and the skills required doing them. However in other European countries quite the opposite was reported: due to low unemployment rates non-formal adult education “can be seen as a luxury we have no need for”. As a result, EAEA members from countries with low and high unemployment rates, report that the public funding for non-formal adult education is very low. Governments have been forced to make numerous saving decisions,

¹ **The economic crisis:**

All over Europe, almost all sectors are very strongly affected by the economic crisis and are still trying to regain stability. The austerity measures put in place by EU Member States are having an adverse effect on employment, public services and people’s well-being. At least some member states have reacted by cutting budgets for education and training and/or by shifting funds to specific groups (e.g. young adults). We believe that cuts in adult education have far-reaching consequences that will hurt Europe in the long-term. They could impede the reaching of headline targets in the Europe 2020 strategy and be a burden on people that are already disadvantaged. However the crisis is not a reason for stopping to invest in adult learning. Therefore on the one hand, policy makers and the general public need to be questioned, how also in times of crisis a coherent strategy for lifelong learning can be ensured.

The crisis of European cohesion and identity:

The economic crisis has contributed to a growing distrust in European institutions and a loss of solidarity between European member states. While there are no easy answers, adult education will have to rethink its role in fostering discussions about solidarity and European values.

The ethical crisis:

The crisis was launched by the greed of a few and now contributes to the increasing poverty of many. What is the ethical response? Have we learned enough from the crisis? Do we have better policies and tools for the future? Which role can adult education play in fostering a push for ethical behaviour in all levels of European politics, economics and society?

The personal crisis:

Many people across Europe have lost their jobs as a consequence of the crisis, have fewer possibilities, less support, less salary and therefore have become poorer. Many (especially) young people do not have the opportunity to get into employment and therefore start building independent lives, careers and families. Is adult education doing enough to deal with this (new) target group? Can we contribute (and HOW can we contribute) to the resilience, support and further development of this group?



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which have influenced every sector of the society, including adult education. Adult education projects and services were cut back ruthlessly.

EAEA members recognized shifts in several European countries to further education now being provided by labor market authorities and increased funds being assigned to the vocational sector. In this way the governments and industries seek to support employability and prevent (youth) unemployment in their countries. Thus the focus shifted strongly towards raising educational levels through vocational training and focus on labor market needs. And although some EAEA members agree that there are undeniable benefits of an education developed in the context of "market learning opportunities" a danger is seen. The focus of investment in employability strengthens mechanisms of exclusion, through practices that tend to value and polarize among the most (formally) qualified and unqualified.

Europe is currently also undergoing a dramatic social crisis with a widening gap between poor and rich, where the poorest suffer, while the wealthy are relatively unaffected. This also affects the adult education sector. As for example in several countries adult education institutions have been forced to increase course fees, as a result, persons without financial means have little chance to participate in non-formal adult education. This is alarming from the viewpoint of lifelong learning and equality because persons most in need of education and training are under the risk of being left out.

However through its democratic and dialogical ways, EAEA members see adult education as a tool for subverting power dynamics, enhancing civil society exchange and dismantling (political) prejudices. As mentioned, the current crisis may be economical, but also a crisis of European social cohesion and identity, low civic participation and engagement can be seen. In these times adult education plays an important role in civic participation, learning for active citizenship, citizens' rights and democracy in times of political crisis.

In times of recession, policy and decision makers concentrate the focus on the immediate labor market needs, which often ignores the holistic aspect of (non-formal) adult education and narrows it down to a vocational view. However EAEA members see the necessity to think ahead and plan long-term in order to serve the future education and training needs of adults. The membership underlines the importance for adult education to continue to be responsive and flexible as well as to focus on the priorities and needs of the learners. For example adult education takes on the severe societal challenge of high percentages of adults in Europe with low basic education and skills. Additionally, adult education can contribute to people's well-being and resilience, which is especially important in times of personal crisis. Finally, we believe that adult education is a key tool for more active participation and citizenship, which can contribute to greater European cohesion.



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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE POLICY LEVEL

We believe that the ongoing and current crisis offers the opportunity to renew Europe's approach to education and training and especially adult learning. We therefore call on all politicians, policy-makers, social partners and companies to reflect on a European-wide campaign and related commitment to promote lifelong learning across Europe!

- We need to continue to create **real lifelong learning systems in Europe**, which include more exchanges and more equality between formal, non-formal and informal education and learning.
- We need more **cooperation, partnerships and mutual learning** between the different sectors and on different levels (European, national, regional)
- We need more **long-term planning** for education and training objectives as well as a mixture of short-term and long-term instruments
- Policy makers need to listen to **the voices of those concerned by the crisis**
- **Democracy** in all kinds of learning and teaching has to be reinforced, especially in teacher training
- We need more **links between policy, practice and research**, for example through a European Institute for ALE that brings the three areas together
- We need to **address all people in Europe** and we need to make all kinds of learning possible – create a 'Learning Europe' based on values and accountability.
- We need a **Europe-wide discussion on European values** and how to re-establish them, and a new lifelong learning manifesto to accompany the discussion
- European (member) states should be able to budget **education and training expenses as investments** rather than expenses
- We need a **Learning Europe Flagship strategy**, a commitment to promote and support learning for all target groups and in all forms, based on the four pillars *Learning to know*, *Learning to do*, *Learning to live together* and *Learning to be*², from The EU, heads of states, ministers, social partners, companies, civil society and individuals. We propose to use the flagship initiative to start a dialogue with candidates for the European Parliament, and at the same time discuss the idea with the European Commission (DG EAC). Once the new EC and EP are in place, EAEA will start an advocacy campaign to convince the main institutions in Brussels to support a flagship initiative.

² <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001095/109590eo.pdf>



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A CALL FOR MORE DEMOCRACY, JUSTICE AND PARTICIPATION - BACK TO THE ROOTS OF ADULT LEARNING

The financial crisis in Europe has led to a number of other crises that are undermining democracy and justice in Europe: **a crisis of European cohesion and identity, an ethical crisis and, for many people, personal crises because of unemployment and loss of future prospects.**

There is a widening gap between poor and rich, where the poorest suffer, while the wealthy are (relatively) unaffected and the very rich have become even richer. Poverty and all its accompanying problems such as bad health, declining mental health and social instability are on the rise. The people who originally caused the banking crisis have had no ill effects of their actions while countless others have lost their livelihood. European solidarity and trust in European institutions is at an all-time low.

While these issues need an overall political response from the European and national levels, we as adult educators believe that we can provide tools, instruments and proposals for more democracy, justice and participation in Europe. In the crisis, governments tend to perceive adult education as a repair shop for society and the formal education and schooling systems, i.e. providing basic skills training, contributing to upskilling, filling skills gaps and supporting people's employability. While the EAEA members do their part in providing these courses and measures, we would like to emphasise adult education's potential for positive change in Europe.

We believe that we have to return to the roots of many of our associations – whether it is *folkbildning* or *Volksbildung* or *educacion popular*. Many adult education organisations were originally created to enable less privileged people (workers, women etc.) to learn, to develop, to know and reinforce their rights, to participate in democracy and society and to live a life in dignity.

The author Stephane Hessel³ writes about the necessary outrage against the status quo and the need to overcome indifference. Now is the time to go back to the roots of adult education because European citizens need to become agents of change themselves – adult education is THE tool for more democracy, justice and participation.

EAEA believes that we need

- **A European-wide offer and organization of study circles / citizens panels / workshops** that provide information and input by economists, historians, political scientists or other experts about economic, social and political contexts. We need discussions in these groups about expectations and changes necessary on different levels and dialogue should be reinforced.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St%C3%A9phane_Hessel



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- To provide thinking and **debate space for different and controversial approaches**, which also means (more) cooperation with other sectors but also NGOs and movements
- Strengthen **work and learning with people rather than for people**
- To **increase democracy within our own structures** and empower / include learners
- To **raise awareness that learning contributes to well-being** and a sense of self that is more resilient. A course is not just a course – it is social interaction, self-confidence and many more things.
- Adult education providers very often have to work in a field of tension that needs to reply to the demands of cost efficiency and economic usefulness. Nevertheless, we have to find ways to **create space and time for supporting the individual** (resilience), **a debate and reinforcement of values** (see above) and **more justice, active citizenship, dialogue and democracy**.