



EAEA BACKGROUND PAPER

PARTNERSHIPS AND COOPERATIONS IN ADULT EDUCATION

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1. Introduction

Adult education strategies, initiatives and projects do not happen in isolation. Partnerships and cooperations are frequently a basic prerequisite for success in shaping and implementing an effective and learner-centred adult education policy, for driving innovation in the design and delivery of adult education programmes and, in some cases, for building sustainable adult education structures.

As highlighted in the EAEA Manifesto (EAEA, 2015), adult education has a role to play in a number of challenges that Europe is now facing, such as digitalization or radicalization, and these can best be solved in cooperation. As the experiences of EAEA members show, on many occasions such co-operations happen bottom-up, for example in Sweden, where a folk high school association brought together over a hundred intellectuals and several like-minded organisations to start a public discussion about democracy, or in Serbia and Croatia, where a cross-national running team combines sport with dialogue for peace and understanding.

Encouragingly, at the policy level there has been an increasing understanding of adult education as a complex and cross-sectorial field, one that has an impact not only on education and employment, but also other policy areas, such as health, family and environment. More and more incentives are available at the national, regional or local level, supporting adult education organizations in delivering programmes in cooperation with other services. At the EU level, the potential of partnerships has not gone unnoticed: cooperation between different stakeholders represents an important element of Upskilling Pathways and other actions of the New Skills Agenda for Europe (European Commission, 2016a); it is the core principle of the Erasmus+ programme and of EPALE, the latter aiming to encourage cooperation and exchange between adult educators. That said, EAEA members across Europe signal a number of setbacks that hinder their cooperation with other organisations at the national, regional or local level.

Based on the collection of best practices and feedback from EAEA members, as well as desk research, the present paper looks at the benefits of collaborative partnerships within the adult education sector and with other sectors, at different enabling factors at the European and national levels, and at the barriers that still exist. It closes with recommendations for the policy level and adult education organisations.

The paper concludes the thematic work of EAEA on the topic of partnerships and cooperations in 2018. The best practice examples were collected through the Grundtvig Award and study visits to organizations in Ireland and Belgium. Reflections and recommendations on partnerships and cooperations were also gathered from EAEA members: through discussions at the Annual Conference, held in June in Tallinn, and through a series of face-to-face and phone interviews conducted in October 2018. Unless specified otherwise, the quotes come from EAEA members (personal communication).

It is also important to note that while the paper references the Grundtvig and Erasmus+ programmes on several occasions, transnational project partnerships are not its sole focus; the overarching aim of the paper is to discuss and provide general recommendations for collaborative partnerships in the adult learning sector.

2. Why cooperate?

2.1. Building learner-centred approaches

The experiences of EAEA members show that successful cooperations and partnerships bring a number of benefits, impacting learners, organisations and strengthening the sector itself.

Cooperations can support outreach to those that do not participate in learning and drive learner-centred policy and practice. Wide cooperations at the regional and local level play a key role in bringing information about learning opportunities directly to the learner, ultimately increasing participation rates. This is the case in Estonia, where the successful work of ANDRAS and its regional support networks has contributed to a considerable rise in participation levels across the country (see the box below). In Ireland, a variety of cooperations launched by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation – and in particular the National Learner Forum – have helped to significantly increase learner engagement in policy-making, with the learner in the centre of the Further Education and Training Strategy for 2014-2019 (SOLAS, 2014).

Case study 1

The regional support network of ANDRAS promotes adult learning in 15 counties of Estonia and the city of Tallinn. Members of the network organise the events of the Adult Learners Week in their county, collect and disseminate success stories, and make sure that support activities are brought to learners' doorsteps. In promoting adult education, ANDRAS cooperates closely with a number of partners, such as vocational schools, upper secondary schools for adults, training companies, libraries, as well as the Ministry of Education and Research. Promotion of adult education and regional cooperation has contributed to a considerable rise of participation in lifelong learning during the recent two years. According to the Statistical Office, it currently stands at 15.7%, comparing to only 7% in 2007. In 2018, ANDRAS was awarded the EAEA Grundtvig Award (EAEA, 2018).

Case study 2

An Cosán Virtual Community College (VCC) strives to bring higher education opportunities to adult learners across Ireland through blended learning. The courses are delivered in partnership with local community organisations, which help recruit learners, provide information about learners' needs and facilities where they can meet up in person. In the interest of ensuring best practice, methods and expertise are shared from local to national audiences; VCC also hosts an annual Community Partner Forum day where experiences are shared, challenges discussed and successes and achievements are celebrated (EAEA, 2018).

2.2. From exchanging best practices to driving innovation

Partnerships and cooperations are also key in bringing innovation, sharing best practices and supporting professionalization of adult educators. As will be discussed more extensively in the next section, EAEA members single out the Erasmus+ (and its predecessor Grundtvig) as the major programme allowing them to learn from the diversity of practice in Europe, and to work together with other European partners on tangible products, with the exchange and use of results frequently continuing beyond the project lifespan.

While in some cases the transferability of new practices is not immediate, or requires careful consideration of the national or local context, transnational cooperations can help organisations get a wider perspective, increase their confidence or discover that they are not alone in facing a particular problem. This was highlighted in one of the interviews EAEA conducted:

“What is very, very important for many people that work in the adult education sector, is that in those kind of projects you can see that the sector struggles with the same things in other countries (...). It’s a sector with such a low status, and this way, you get stronger in your work.”

2.3. Building and transforming structures

In times of crisis or transition, new cooperations can also provide support to the adult education system as a whole, to completely transform the existing structures or build new ones. A unique regional cooperation between Baltic and Nordic countries, which started in the early 1990s, is a case in point. A series of study visits and trainings of Baltic adult educators to Nordic folk high schools, supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers in the 1990s, helped them to “get to know the system in theory and practice, as well (...) find out how the system functions at all levels” (Carlsen and Maslo, 2018, p.510). Adult education professionals who were directly involved in the cooperation later established some of the first umbrella organisations for adult education in the Baltic region (Teresevičienė, 2018, p. 455).

While the early cooperation of the Baltic adult educators with Nordic folk high schools might at first sight seem to have supported only one side, operating more on a donorship than a partnership basis, it gradually evolved and was in the end mutually beneficial. In the early years, it encouraged the Nordic partners to reflect on their own theory and practice, but also later led to more focused exchanges, for example on validation of informal and non-formal learning (Carlsen and Maslo, 2018, p.513). Importantly, it also strengthened ties between Baltic organisations, which now cooperate to organize the annual Baltic Summer School in adult learning.

3. What encourages successful cooperations?

3.1. Emergence of a transnational community: from Grundtvig to Erasmus+ and EPALE

The first programmes that encouraged European cooperation in the field of lifelong learning were established in the 1990s, funding projects, mobilities and transnational networks. The main focus of the two early programmes, Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci, was on higher education and VET, respectively. A separate measure within the Socrates programme was dedicated to adult education. Though the measure remained marginal – initially, only 2.7% of the total budget was allocated to it (European Communities, 2006, p.179) – the interim report, released in 1997, highlights the diversity of topics and results:

*“Topics covered include the arts, media literacy, health education, and the fight against racism, xenophobia and social exclusion. The projects which emphasise the enhancement of adult education through European co-operation focus on the development of new teaching methods, new structures or programmes for adult education, the development of information networks and data banks and the preparation and dissemination of publications (guides, manuals, periodicals)”.
(Commission of the European Communities, 1997, p.23)*

The role of adult education was gradually expanded, with a separate action for adult education, Grundtvig, included in the succeeding programmes: Socrates II (2000-2006) and the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013). As highlighted in the evaluations of the two programmes, Grundtvig had a major influence on the establishment of the first transnational networks in adult education (one evaluation notes that network-building was particularly beneficial for Eastern European countries) and, ultimately, “the emergence of a European community (...) in the area of

adult education” (European Commission, 2010, p.101). In some cases, it contributed to strengthening networks at the national level and to the development of adult learning policies. The latter was also visible at the EU level: the 2006 report on Socrates II states that Grundtvig played a role in “giving rise to the first ever Commission policy pronouncement and Action Plan on adult education” (ECOTEC, 2008, p.33).

For the participants and their sending institutions, the Grundtvig programme – through networks, projects or in-service trainings – brought several benefits, ranging from putting new ideas into practice, to increased project management capacity and cooperation among the staff, as listed in some national evaluations of the programme (Milanović Litre et al, 2017) and expressed by EAEA members (EAEA, 2007). In some cases, Grundtvig was singled out as bringing more institutional progress than other programmes, which was explained by the fact that the participating organisations were frequently relatively small in size, more flexible and thus more likely to implement changes.

Tracing back the development of cooperation in adult learning in European programmes, it is interesting to note the rapid increase in the number of applications: already within Socrates, it doubled over the first two years (Commission of the European Communities, 1997). With time, the partnerships grew more diverse, including libraries, municipalities and museums (ECOTOC, 2008, p.62), also reflecting the diversity of the sector across Europe.

In 2014, all lifelong learning programmes were replaced by Erasmus+, in which adult education organisations can participate through two dedicated actions: KA1: Mobility of adult education staff and KA2: Strategic partnerships. A new European initiative, launched in 2015, targets specifically adult educators, aiming to build a transnational online community. EPALE, the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe, counts over 45,000 users, giving space for discussion around specific topics of interest and an opportunity to look for project partners, among other features.

3.2. Partnerships in European policy frameworks

Several policy initiatives launched in the early 2000s highlighted the importance of building partnerships and cooperations in lifelong learning and adult education, notably: the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000), the European Agenda for Adult Learning (2011) and the New Skills Agenda together with its Upskilling Pathways (2016). Noting the complexity of policy interventions in the area of adult learning, which cross over different policy fields – such as health, family and welfare or employment – the documents call for increased partnerships and coordination between them (*cf* European Commission, 2015). In some cases, this has already been taken up at the national level, for example in Slovenia, where the Master Plan for Adult Education for 2013-2020 involves seven ministries (DIMA project, 2016).

At the same time, EU policy documents emphasize the need to cooperate with a wide range of stakeholders to bring learning opportunities closer to the learner. The Memorandum highlights that working closely together is needed to ensure “a person-centred network of lifelong learning opportunity” (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, pp.9-10); the European Agenda calls for strengthened cooperation and partnership especially at regional and local level to foster “learning regions’ and local learning centres” (Council of the European Union, 2011). This aspect is key in strategies targeting specific groups of learners, such as Upskilling Pathways, which highlights the importance of partnerships with local authorities and community bodies and “already existing infrastructure such as public libraries” for outreach to low-skilled adults (European Commission, 2016, p.30).

3.3. Financing partnerships in adult learning: towards decentralization

Alongside the different European initiatives and funding programmes, what is also needed for cooperations to thrive are good conditions at the national, regional and local level. A few encouraging developments at the policy level were mentioned by the organisations we interviewed.

“More and more, in national projects you get added value to the proposal if you have a partnership with other organisations,” told us a representative of our member organization in Spain. In some countries, this is not yet the norm, but was mentioned by our interviewees as a potential enabling factor. One person we spoke to suggested earmarking part of the funding at the national or local level for delivering adult education programmes in cooperation.

Decentralization of funding is another emerging tendency in some countries that can foster successful and needs-based cooperations. With local areas getting more control over funding, there are more opportunities to join up different services that are relevant in adult learning – such as employment support, retraining or health.

A few EAEA members we have spoken to indicated sufficient basic funding as a key prerequisite to build new cooperations. It allows organizations to choose partnerships that are interesting strategically and content-wise, as opposed to looking for project-based funding only to keep the organisation afloat.

3.4. Building networks

Time is another key resource mentioned by EAEA members, necessary to build trust between the organisations that are cooperating, and to gain an in-depth understanding of the practices that are shared. The experiences of EAEA members show that long-term cooperations, with security over funding, bring the most sustainable results. In some cases, over time the dynamics of such a cooperation change and can bring unexpected benefits. The cooperation between Nordic folk high schools and Baltic adult educators is a case in point: it ultimately led to Baltic organisations training educators from North-West Russia, sharing the know-how they gained during their own trainings.

This is also closely linked to funding – as our interviewees told us, organisations need enough staff that would have the time to network and attend relevant events:

“We’re a very small organization, we do a lot of things, and we couldn’t participate in meetings with other organisations that require more time. Now we have volunteers that are working on the topic, so this way we can be there and bring information for us.”

Established networks are another facilitator of building cooperations. Several networks, working on different levels, are active in the field of lifelong learning and adult education in Europe: EAEA represents its members, working in adult education nationally or locally, at the European level; a single voice for lifelong learning at the European level is provided by the Lifelong Learning Platform, which itself was born out of a cooperation between six European associations active in the field of education.

There are also a number of networks or umbrella organisations active at the national or regional level that provide adult education providers with relevant information and bring their interests forward. Affiliation with such networks can help some organisations, especially those that are relatively new, or small, to build their first connections with like-minded partners. Thematic networks within a network can play a large role in facilitating such partnerships. “It could be a

powerful force to create partners, because we share common interests, the same vision and desire,” told us one of our interviewees.

Case study 3

The Community Education Network (CEN) of AONTAS brings together over 100 independently managed community education providers, who share a commitment to social change. Members of the network meet regularly at the national and regional level; they provide the grassroots perspective for the advocacy work of AONTAS and contribute to the academic field.

4. What hinders cooperations?

4.1. Working towards different objectives

At the policy level, EAEA members list several barriers that prevent them from establishing certain partnerships. In some cases, it is for legal reasons – for example a public adult education provider that cannot work with the for profit sector. In others, although a cooperation between two different sectors is technically possible, a conflict of interest makes it difficult in practice.

A case in point is a cooperation between adult learning providers and job centres that one of our interviewees described, where the two stakeholders tend to work towards two different objectives that are difficult to reconcile.

“For the job centre, they would do anything to get a person into a job and off the benefits as soon as possible, so they don’t care if somebody leaves the course in the middle of it. For the provider, that’s a disaster, because if somebody leaves the course before they complete it, then they lose the funding. And also the job centres have different expectations of how long it will take to learn something, they want the student to be able to start anytime, whereas the provider wants to put together a group, a group of people that have similar needs and interests, to be able to teach them more effectively. (...) There’s a lot of talk from ministers about bringing together learning skills and employment, but if you don’t actually change the drivers and the incentives in the system, then ultimately it’s not going to work.”

4.2. Funding and dynamics of cooperation

Different issues related to funding seem to be the main barrier to establishing and sustaining successful cooperations. At the organisational level, not only does the lack of sufficient basic funding limit the capacity to apply for projects and build partnerships, but it can also force organisations to join consortia that might be less credible or relevant. The desperation for any funding to help an organisation survive was a recurring theme in the interviews we conducted; our interviewees agreed that it can have far-reaching consequences on the quality of the results and the dynamics of cooperation itself.

One of our interviewees shared experiences from a cooperation with an organisation that, although it led the project, turned out to have little knowledge of the topic or the contacts necessary to do the required work at the grassroots level. They had, however, applied for the funding to be able to continue paying the staff costs. In such cases, producing satisfactory results is challenging. “Sometimes you have to hijack the project, as we have done. To change and to get where you want to,” told us our interviewee.

Another person we spoke to expressed concern over the power relations and the lack of transparency in some partnerships.

“We were coordinators but we didn’t write the proposal, we were part of the consortium. One of the members of the consortium was very powerful politically so in a way advocated the proposal to secure the money, and it happened. When we started working on the real project, we understood [there were] a lot of differences in understanding what it means to work with this target group. (...) And this has happened very often with a lot of projects as I’ve been informed by other peers, in other projects, and it seems that if you don’t have time and you need the money, you don’t pay attention to such details that finally affect the whole understanding of how to work with disadvantaged groups for instance.”

4.3. Competition: a disempowering place

Competition over the available funds is common across the board. Where working in a partnership is not facilitated at the policy level, bottom-up cooperations are frequently the only way to go around the system.

“The policy level is competitive. (...) There are organisations fighting for crumbs from the education table, we’re really competing for crumbs. So we can lie there and stay there, in this very disempowering place, and accept this, or we can try to create a collaborative context.”

In some cases, the adult education sector sees competition between organisations that are too similar. Sometimes the organisations themselves decide to move to a collaborative context – in the words of one of our interviewees who started a partnership with an organization they used to compete with: “In the end, everyone wins.” In other cases, cooperations happen top-down, through the establishment of an umbrella organization. Such “forced” cooperations, however, might cause internal tensions within the network, and do not necessarily resolve the problem.

An additional barrier was mentioned by EAEA members in the context of sustaining cooperations. As many connections are directly linked to a person, they might disappear when she or he retires, or changes jobs. Securing the knowledge and contacts is not easy: our member suggests conducting interviews and taking minutes to keep the network.

5. Recommendations for establishing and sustaining successful cooperations

5.1. What can support cooperations at the policy level?

Diverse partnerships should be part of adult education strategies and calls for proposals. Adult education has an impact on a number of policy fields, such as health, family and welfare, employment. Cooperations between a variety of stakeholders, working at different levels, should be an integral part of adult learning or skills strategies, be that for needs mapping, outreach to disadvantaged learners or delivery of the programmes.

Decentralisation of adult education policies or funding can encourage successful cooperations. Experiences of EAEA members show that deciding on the priorities and funding at the local level can lead to more needs-based and learner-centred provision and strong cooperations between local services.

Adult education stakeholders need sufficient basic funding to be able to build meaningful partnerships. More and more, adult education organisations turn to partnerships to be able to

continue their day-to-day work or keep the staff; project-based funding is sometimes the only funding they have. Successful partnerships that support providers and learners alike are possible when organisations can plan ahead, set their priorities and establish their cooperations accordingly.

5.2. Steps to good partnerships for adult education organisations

Define the objectives. Our members agree that a partnership cannot be an end in itself, and needs clear objectives. It might be established to get a broader perspective on existing – or emerging – issues, or to develop concrete methods in working with a specific target group, but going in just for the funding can turn out to be counterproductive.

“If you have a successful partnership, it will feed into that programme of work, and therefore you will find the outputs useful. Whereas if you just randomly say yes, we’ll do this or we’ll do that, maybe you’ll end up with a lot of work for not much money that you can’t use, so you have to be strategic, to choose what you work on.”

Start building a network. Joining an existing umbrella organisation, such as EAEA, or an informal network, might be a good idea when starting to look for potential partners. Attending events and conferences or being active on relevant online platforms, for example EPALE, can also be helpful.

Take one small step at a time. For inexperienced organisations, one EAEA member recommends starting with similar organisations, those that share your vision. Another EAEA member suggests a similar route: building up the partnership starting with organisations that you already trust, “to have a solid base for the project,” and then branching out to new partners that could offer the expertise needed in the specific call.

An intermediary might help. Establishing new contacts can be challenging. EAEA members suggest taking the time to explain your background as an organisation, and sometimes even the role of the adult education sector as such. Using the help of an “honest broker”, somebody who knows both organisations, might be useful in establishing the first connection and building trust. “A kind of familiarity is needed,” tells us one of our members.

Be clear on the idea, and on the benefits for each side. Coming with an idea for the cooperation, and how it can support each side, helps to set the right expectations. The potential benefits can range from new funding to concrete skills or shared facilities.

Agree on the terms of the cooperation, and be careful what you sign. A few EAEA members expressed their disappointment with partnerships where the task division was not clear, or where they were not consulted on the scope of their involvement beforehand. Our members stress that agreeing on and signing terms of cooperation is necessary to avoid misunderstandings at a later stage.

Be patient and flexible: the results might not come easily or immediately. One size does not fit all, and a successful exchange of best practices does not mean that they can be transplanted from one national context to another, or even from one local context to another. The members we consulted suggest that best practices can serve as a source of inspiration; it is frequently about changing the attitude more than using a specific method. “It’s not a quick win,” told us one of the interviewees.

Case study 4

A series of study visits of Baltic adult educators in Nordic countries in the 1990s led to two attempts to establish a folk high school in Estonia. While neither of them was successful, Estonian educators did start to use many of the non-formal methods in their work, and established institutions that also referred to their historical background.

6. Conclusions: the strength lies in cooperation

EAEA and its members strongly believe that the challenges faced by the adult education sector, and society at large, can only be solved in cooperation. Programmes such as Erasmus+ and its predecessor Grundtvig have supported adult education organisations in building transnational networks, learning from best practices across Europe and bringing innovation to the level they are working at. Also at the national and local policy level, there seems to be an increasing tendency to encourage partnerships. When the policy environment does not provide such incentives, cooperations happen bottom up, with organisations choosing to create a collaborative context as opposed to a competitive one.

Throughout our communication on the topic, EAEA members continuously emphasized the power of cooperation, also recalling the concept of solidarity between institutions in the face of ongoing challenges: low recognition of the sector, financial difficulties, as well as political changes. As we have heard, “the strength lies in cooperation – you can’t do anything on your own”.

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