



THE FUTURE OF ADULT LEARNING IN EUROPE

BACKGROUND PAPER

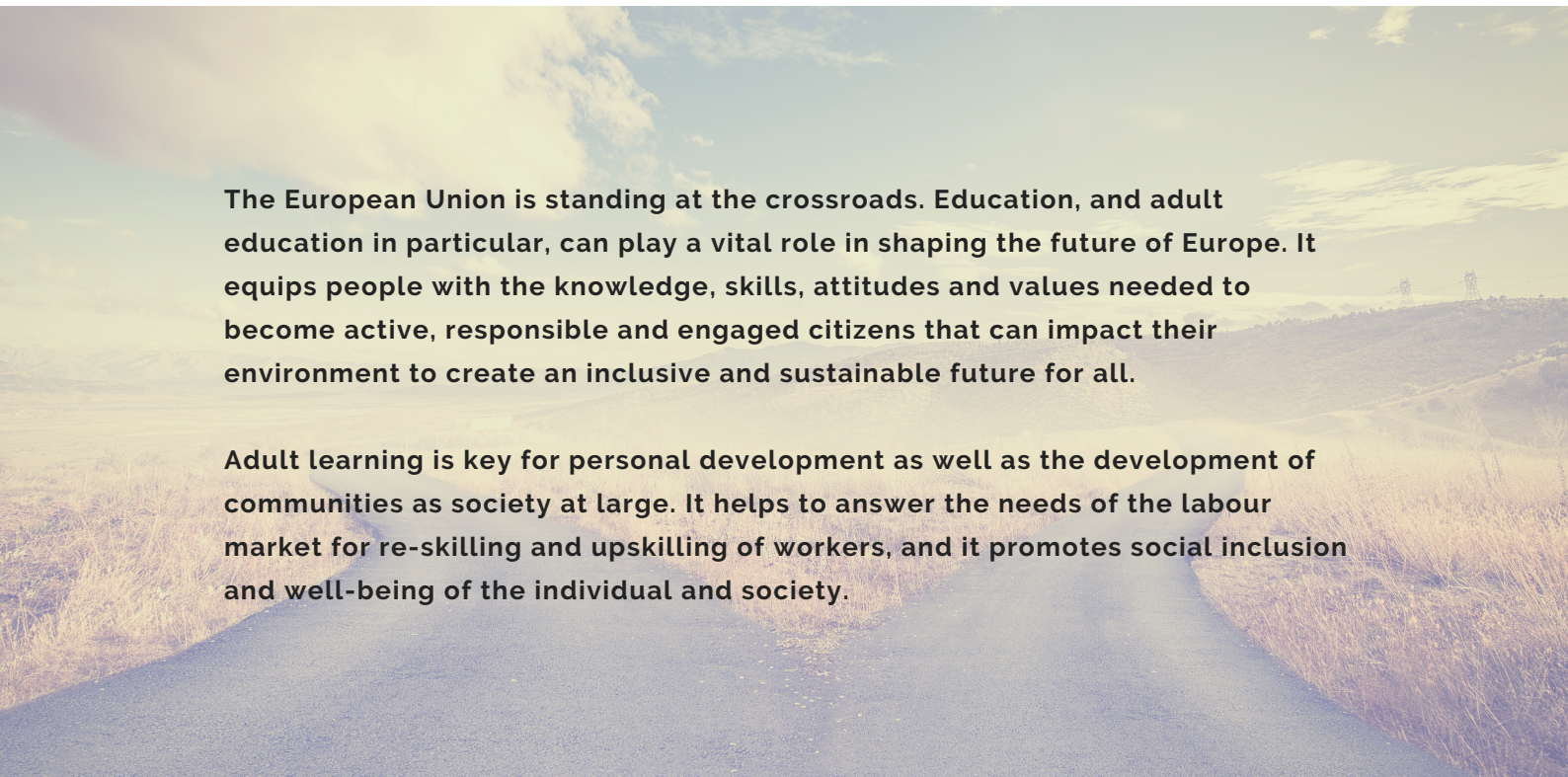
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EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

The development of the European Union has become an increasingly contested territory over the past years. Brexit, changing relations to other parts of the world, worrying trends in the electoral behaviour in several countries, the economic crisis and cutbacks in social welfare systems as well as wars at the margins of Europe have shaped the political discourse. Trends in some countries to limit freedom of press and media have fuelled debates on the meaning of democracy in the EU.

Security and irregular migration to Europe have been particularly hot topics that overshadowed other, more positive developments, such as the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights. While some Member States are in favour of expanding the competences of the EU, others are drawing back with the aim to strengthen national competences and give fewer possibilities to the EU to impact national legislation and policy-making.



The European Union is standing at the crossroads. Education, and adult education in particular, can play a vital role in shaping the future of Europe. It equips people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to become active, responsible and engaged citizens that can impact their environment to create an inclusive and sustainable future for all.

Adult learning is key for personal development as well as the development of communities as society at large. It helps to answer the needs of the labour market for re-skilling and upskilling of workers, and it promotes social inclusion and well-being of the individual and society.

WHERE ARE WE? AND: WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO?

The OECD [1] defines three key challenges: environmental, economic, and social.

While the main environmental challenges are climate change and the depletion of natural resources, the greatest economic challenge is keeping up with innovation in science and technology, including automation and digitisation, and its implications on the labour market as well as privacy protection.

Worldwide financial interdependence and global value chains contribute to economic growth and development in parts of the world. At the same time, they lead to increased economic uncertainty and a higher risk of crises at the economic, environmental and social level.

Finally, key social challenges are the growing social and cultural diversity due to migration, urbanisation and demographic change, as well as widening inequalities in living standards and life chances. These have repercussions on trust in governments and benefit populist politics, eroding the foundations of modern democracies.

Demographic changes, the future of work and social welfare systems

New approaches to migration, particularly labour immigration to the EU, and asylum, will be decisive for the further integration of the European Union and its Member States. Recently released data of Eurostat projects a decline of the working age population by 5% until 2030, falling from around 66% to just above 60% of the total population.[2]

While there is a general trend among the EU Member States to raise the age of retirement, this cannot compensate for changing demographic structures of society. The labour market shock could be partly absorbed through regulated labour immigration; however, this will require the improvement and adaptation of skills matching tools, training offers and language learning opportunities.[3]

While the idea of recruiting labour migrants for key professions falls on sympathetic ears among governments throughout Europe, the issue of asylum and forced migration to Europe divides the Member States.

Where populations of European countries experience a downsizing of social welfare systems happening at the same time, right-wing populist parties are more likely to be on the rise.

However, the discourse on unequal access to social welfare as well as approaches to find “alternative solutions” to asylum and the distribution of refugees across Europe – irrespective of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees[4] – has found entrance into mainstream politics. “Fortress Europe”, i.e. the idea to fortify the outer borders of the European Union and potentially start asylum procedures in camps in Southern neighbourhood countries, might be a divisive point for the future of Europe as well as questions of citizenship.[5]

The future Europe will have to deal with a changing labour market and its consequences on society. What impact will automation, artificial intelligence and other transformative technologies have on the labour force and skills that are needed?

According to estimates of the OECD, about 14% of workers are at a high risk of having most of their existing tasks automated over the next 15 years, and another 30% will face major changes in the tasks required in their jobs and, consequently, the skills required.[6]

The rate of uptake of new technologies by employers as well as the potential of educational and lifelong learning systems in providing adequate knowledge, skills and competencies will be a central issue in political decision-making.

The new legislative period of the European Parliament will be a critical period to determine the general future direction of the European Union, and whether it will achieve to bring its citizens closer to it.

Democracy and new cooperation within and beyond Europe

The next ten to fifteen years will determine what it means to be a citizen of the European Union, i.e. which space citizens will have in shaping political decision-making at the national as well as the European level.

At the same time, “alternative facts” and the flood of information that is increasingly difficult to navigate will challenge informed decision-making of citizens. Media literacy will therefore play a pivotal role in empowering citizens to make use of their voice as citizens and their opportunities to engage in decision-making.

E-citizenship (or digital citizenship) might exacerbate the effects of the digital divide on citizens and their access to trustworthy information and services. Inclusive growth therefore means bridging the digital divide and promoting digital and communication skills of adults.

What can be the role of the EU's citizens to shape policy-making in a democratic way? Which knowledge and skills will be required to meet the challenges of the future to create a more inclusive, resilient, stronger, fairer, more sustainable and climate-friendly EU[7]? What is the Europe we want[8]?

The White Paper on the Future of Europe, published by the European Commission in March 2017, suggests five scenarios, ranging from carrying on as hitherto, to sizing it down to the single market, giving groups of countries the possibility to “do more” if they wish, doing less more efficiently, and to doing much more together. The role of citizens would depend on the chosen scenario, from a very limited role and right to influence policy-making to a very strong role, similar to being a citizen of a national country.

Europe wants to pursue a strategy of growth, while, at the same time, trying to implement sustainability as a key principle in its policy-making. How will these two opposing approaches go together? According to the European Commission's programme, the future European Union would like to marry a strengthened industrial base with a forward-looking climate change policy.

With its 2018 Circular Economy Package, the European Union has proposed an ambitious plan to boost innovation in recycling technologies and sustainable use of resources. This plan, however, will have to be supported through education and awareness raising measures to promote sustainable consumption and a less resource-intensive lifestyle, giving citizens the tools to claim a healthy environment and secured future for generations to come.

NON-FORMAL ADULT EDUCATION RESPONDS TO EUROPE'S CHALLENGES

Non-formal adult education can be defined as all systematic communication and transfer of skills, knowledge, and competences provided outside the limits of the formal education system. Its main objectives are the promotion of social inclusion, active citizenship, personal development and well-being, alongside the transfer of knowledge, competences and skills.



Agency – the ability to make informed choices about one’s life and a sense of responsibility to participate in the world and to influence people, events and circumstances – is, according to the OECD, at the centre of learning, and consequently, of any change in society:

"Two factors, in particular, help learners enable agency. The first is a personalised learning environment that supports and motivates each student to nurture his or her passions, make connections between different learning experiences and opportunities, and design their own learning projects and processes in collaboration with others. The second is building a solid foundation: literacy and numeracy remain crucial. In the era of digital transformation and with the advent of big data, digital literacy and data literacy are becoming increasingly essential, as are physical health and mental well-being." [9]

The OECD Learning Framework 2030 illustrates the role of learning for the individual, the community and society. Despite the learning framework having been developed for younger learners, it can equally be applied to adult learners (in this context, “parents” could be replaced by “families”, and “teachers” could be replaced by “educators” or “trainers”).

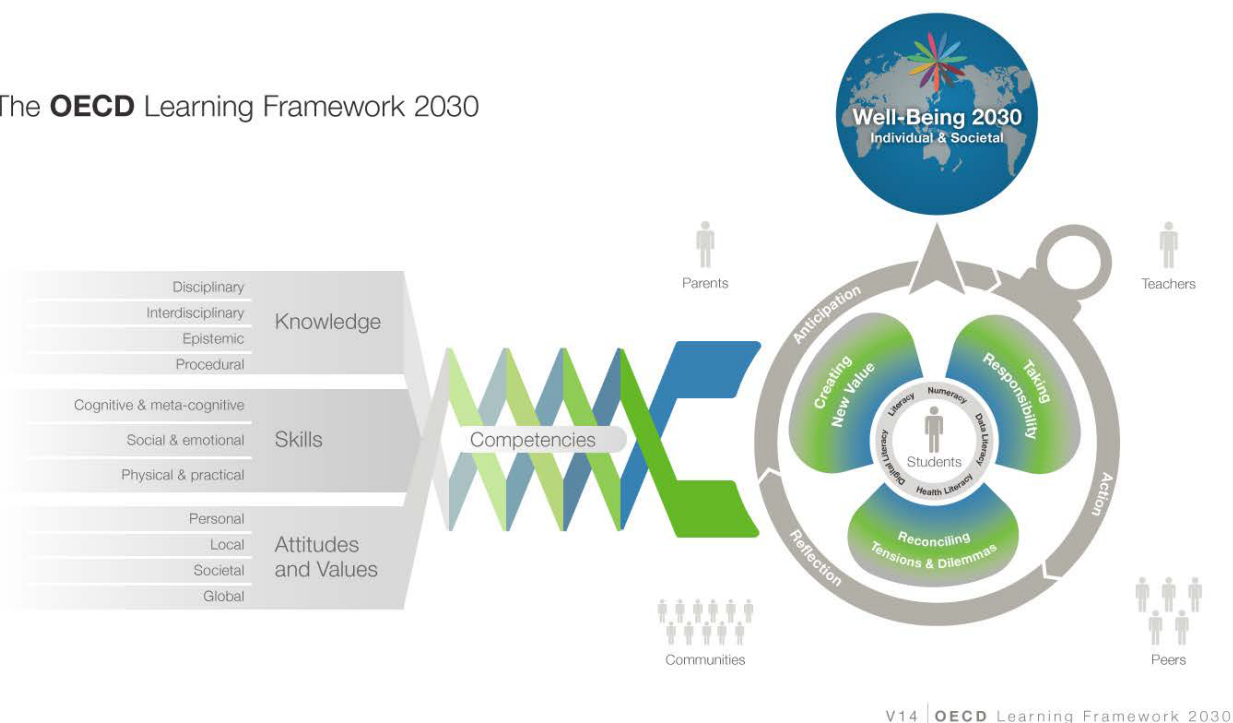
The **OECD** Learning Framework 2030

Figure: The OECD Learning Framework 2030: Work-in-progress. (OECD 2018: 4)

Adult education within the European policy framework

Education is a competence of the Member States of the European Union; this means that any policies or strategies adopted at the European level have recommending rather than directive power. This does not, however, mean that education is neglected at the European level.

Within the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the Commission called for a renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning where quality education and training, equity, and social cohesion become a widespread reality. National coordinators in each Member State of the European Union follow up on the implementation process of the agenda.

In recent years, the European Union has launched a number of additional initiatives and strategies that support education and training for the promotion of employability, social inclusion and active citizenship, notably “Upskilling Pathways” as part of the European Skills Agenda.

Key policy documents for adult education also include the European Pillar of Social Rights that lists the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning as its first principle, and the European Commission's initiative to build a European Education Area by 2025. Programmes such as the European Social Fund and Erasmus+ as well as mechanisms such as the European Semester with its Country Reports, help to fulfil the EU's objectives.

Promoting participation in learning

Education is considered a key priority area in the Europe 2020 strategy, and consequently, the Education and Training 2020 benchmarks include also a goal for adult education: at least 15% of all adults should participate in lifelong learning by 2020.

However, data about participation rates in adult education is lacking in many European countries as non-formal and informal learning is captured differently depending on the national statistics organisations and their way of measuring. Where data is available, it is often limited to certain age groups, such as the working population, or it focuses mainly on work-related education and training.

At the European level, there are two sets of adult learning statistics available: the labour force survey (LFS), and the adult education survey (AES). According to the most recent figures, currently only 11.1% of EU working age citizens participate in lifelong learning [10].

However, while there has been progress in the field of adult education and lifelong learning at the European level, this is not yet fully acknowledged in the topics that the European Union considers most relevant for this sector. The topics currently discussed at the European level include, for instance, workplace learning and basic skills; however, themes central to non-formal adult education such as active citizenship and democracy, life skills, community learning or global education are not very high on the political agenda at the moment.

The European Commission is currently working on the follow-up of the Education & Training 2020 (ET2020) strategic framework, the implementation of the Global Agenda 2030 and the European Education Area as well as the review of the European Agenda for Adult Learning as key document to outline European adult education policies.

The **ET2020 strategic framework** for education and training defines four, very wide and broad objectives:

1. Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
3. Promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship;
4. Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

Looking at the **Global Agenda 2030**, adult learning contributes to the achievement of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by building the foundations of change in the social, political, economic, ecological and cultural spheres. In each of the 17 goals at least one target involves learning, training, education or at the very least, awareness-raising for education. At the same time, adult education and lifelong learning are not only a transversal goal and method to achieving the SDGs, but also a specific goal. According to SDG4 inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities need to be ensured for all.

The **European Agenda for Adult Learning** highlights the need to increase participation in adult learning of all kinds (formal, non-formal and informal learning).

The target is set at 15% of adults aged 25–64 taking part in adult education by 2020. National coordinators in each Member State of the European Union follow up on the implementation process of the agenda.

The **European Education Area** proposes to raise the participation of adults in lifelong learning to 25% by in the 2025. It is absolutely necessary to increase participation in general, but particularly of those adults with low basic skills.

Yet, strategies, frameworks and measures proposed at the European level are not embedded in a holistic lifelong learning approach, as they often focus strongly on young people, workplace learning and basic skills. While these areas are, without any doubt, very important, adults cannot be left behind. Themes central to non-formal adult education such as active citizenship and democracy, life skills, community learning or global education are currently not very high on the political agenda.

Holistic and Broad Approaches to European Policy-Making needed

Political approaches to lifelong learning, including adult education, are still narrow and based on a formal understanding of education. Thereby, they miss the opportunity to link formal, non-formal and informal learning as well as creating more ambitious and holistic strategies that take learners of all ages into account. However, current changes of the labour market have led international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation and the World Economic Forum to demand more holistic approaches to lifelong learning.

A broad and holistic approach towards adult learning and education needs to be strengthened at the European level and within national education strategies, taking into account and giving equal importance to all sectors and all forms of learning - formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Furthermore, education policies and strategies need to move from a focus on restrictive and generalised curricula towards learner-centeredness. Anyone can learn, irrespective of age and background, provided that learning programmes take the learners' needs into account.

Empowering, non-formal learning methods and methodologies appeal to the creativity, existing knowledge and skills of learners and provide inspiring learning experiences.

21st century skills, or Why we need adult education

The European Association for the Education of Adults proposes to create a Learning Europe with its Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st century [11].

The EAEA Manifesto aims to respond to the most pressing challenges of Europe: active citizenship and democracy; health and well-being; life skills for individuals; social cohesion, equity and equality; employment work; digitisation; migration and demographic change; sustainability; and as a last, more transversal, topic, adult education and European policies.

Adult education can play a pivotal role in a vast number of policy fields. Not explicitly named among the themes of the manifesto but relevant nonetheless are also policy fields such as security and defence; housing; development aid; agriculture; energy and new technologies; and climate action.

However, adult education, in particular non-formal adult education, remains in the margins of the education sector in many European countries, not being part of formal and initial education. Consequently, the discourse in European policy initiatives and documents is still shaped by the term ‘education’ rather than ‘lifelong learning’.

New challenges for Europe and European society, however, demand a change of mindset and a rethinking of the education system in general. Doing more of the same thing – reforming formal education – will, in the long term, not contribute to meet these challenges. Future-oriented politics therefore must consider non-formal adult education as a crucial component of the education sector.

Access to and participation in adult education means empowerment and active citizenship, including the strengthening of values such as democracy – according to the European model – and intercultural dialogue. Research suggests that there is a direct correlation between the basic skills of an individual and the trust that this person lends to political institutions and the political system [12]; i.e. the higher the basic skills, the more trust in political institutions and the system.

Furthermore, learning contributes to the development of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem solving skills and creative thinking, as well as social and emotional skills such as empathy, self-efficacy and collaboration.

In its White Paper on ‘Accelerating Workforce Reskilling for the Fourth Industrial Revolution’ [13], the World Economic Forum names those skills as the ones that will be needed to thrive in the workplace and ensure sustainable growth of the economies. Adult learning outside and in the workplace will, even more than now, play a central role for innovation, productivity, competitiveness and entrepreneurship.

Additionally, adult learning will be central to promoting media literacy and strengthening democratic systems, but also tackling low basic skills of European citizens, particularly literacy, numeracy and digital skills, in order to leave no-one behind. Adult education can provide learning opportunities for those who might not have had adequate access or provision earlier in life. To ensure that everyone knows of and can enjoy these opportunities, outreach measures and guidance as well as recognition of prior learning are central.

Adult education is providing learners with skills relevant for all areas of life, from professional to private life, and ranging from basic skills to language learning, leisure courses, family learning and health education, to name just a few areas. The life skills acquired through adult education can be transformative for individuals and their communities by creating new work opportunities, enabling persons to continue their learning career, empower families, activate people's artistic and cultural passions, and lead to healthier lifestyles. Adult education contributes to upward social mobility as well as to more equality and equity in society.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE EUROPEAN POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

Broad and holistic approaches

Bring all relevant stakeholders together at one table: future-oriented politics need new approaches, and adult education can play a vital role in them. This means seeing the bigger picture and implementing a more long-term approach to policy-making. A broad and holistic approach towards adult learning and education should become a key strategy for Europe. Such an approach needs to consider all ages and all stages of learning. This means recognising the role, benefits and importance of non-formal of adult learning in all measures proposed by the European Union in order to improve their impact - for the individual but also for democracy, society, labour markets, climate and other areas.

Ensure policy coherence

Ensure policy coherence through embedding lifelong learning into other public policies and programmes (e.g. sustainability, health, employment, migration). This also requires linking and aligning existing policies and objectives in the area of lifelong learning, for example policies in support of flexible learning pathways and validation as well as in particular along the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Strengthened adult learning structures and policy-making

Strengthen (non-formal) adult learning structures, policies and initiatives at all levels – at the European level, but in particular also at the national and regional level. This means developing adequate governing structures for adult learning in European countries and promoting a common understanding of adult education.

Promotion of civil dialogue for adult learning

Establish and promote civil dialogue for adult learning. This includes strengthening and supporting civil society organisations in lifelong learning at all levels, including the European, national, regional and local level. Support of a structured dialogue between policy-makers and civil society organisations is central to strengthening civil society.

Structural and financial support

Ensure structural support for adult education in future frameworks, strategies and policies. Strengthen adult education provision through European programmes such as Erasmus+ and ESF+. Create an incentive for investment in adult learning at the national level through a benchmark on expenditure on adult education, for instance as a percentage of the gross domestic product. Investing in adult education is a long-term investment, not an expense. Develop and implement adequate funding systems in order to enable outreach, quality provision and increase participation in lifelong learning.

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[8] CONCORD, the European NGO confederation for relief and development, ran a campaign for the EP elections under the name “The Europe we want”

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[12] see for instance the PIAAC study (OECD)

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