

EAEA POLICY PAPER

# LIFE SKILLS AND PARTICIPATION IN ADULT LEARNING

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*The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with more than 130 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide. EAEA promotes adult learning and access to and participation in non-formal adult education for all; particularly for groups that are currently underrepresented.*



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## 1 WHY FOCUS ON LIFE SKILLS?

Life skills are building blocks of independence and self-efficacy. They are combinations of different capabilities that enable adults to become lifelong learners and to solve problems in order to live an independent life and participate in society. EAEA strongly believes that a life skills approach in adult learning can benefit individuals, organisations and communities, increasing participation in adult learning and contributing to building inclusive societies and sustainable environments.

While every European citizen should have the right to essential capabilities needed for their life and work, this is far from reality. The number of adults with low basic skills remains alarmingly high across the European continent. According to the PIAAC study (OECD 2013), one fifth of the European adult population lacks basic literacy and numeracy skills, and three fifths have inadequate digital skills. Worryingly, the results also show that while much of the European population does have the necessary theoretical background, what is lacking is the ability to apply their knowledge and skills in daily life situations. These might range from completing an online tax return form, to dealing with the household budget or protecting one's privacy and data in an online environment.

Yet in spite of the clear need for equipping adults with the necessary life skills, participation levels are far from reaching even the modest 15% benchmark set in the ET 2020 framework; the EU average currently stands at 11.1% (European Commission, 2019). The newly released

Global Survey on Adult Education and Learning, published by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in December 2019, shows that globally, the so-called 'Matthew effect' continues to persist: adults from disadvantaged groups, such as migrants, older citizens, people with disabilities or minority groups remain furthest away from learning.

Recognizing the existing gaps and the potential of the Life Skills approach in addressing the societal and environmental



challenges, EAEA has dedicated its attention in 2019 to exploring how such an approach can be taken up at different levels. Throughout the year, EAEA has collected innovative practices that foster life skills and awarded the best initiatives with the Grundtvig Award, carried out desk research and conducted study visits with a thematic focus on life skills. The annual work was also rooted in the results of EAEA's flagship project Life Skills for Europe (2016-2018) funded by the Erasmus+ programme, whose

aim was to explain, further develop and upscale the life skills approach. The present paper summarizes EAEA's findings, with specific attention paid to the benefits of life skills for participation in adult learning, and offers a set of recommendations for

providers and policymakers alike, which were developed in cooperation with members during EAEA's Annual Conference on Life Skills and Participation in Copenhagen in June 2019.

## 2 DEFINING LIFE SKILLS

Reflecting the real-world interconnectedness of different skills, life skills promote learning that is locally based and contextualized. Previous research (Beer, 2013) of Learning and Work Institute (UK), one of the partners of the Life Skills for Europe project, has shown that "learning opportunities are more likely to engage and motivate adult learners if they are related to local needs, circumstances or a particular context" (Stevenson et al, 2016). These principles have been explored within the Citizens' Curriculum, piloted by Learning and Work Institute in the UK between 2014 and 2016, which served as a main inspiration for EAEA's initial work on the concept of life skills.

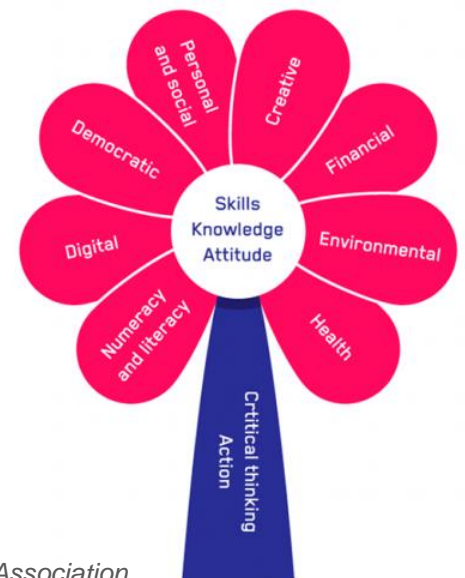
into more detail, with the Citizens' Curriculum serving as a starting point for EAEA's Life Skills for Europe (LSE) Erasmus+ project.

The LSE project partners, who alongside EAEA included adult learning organisations from Denmark, Slovenia, the UK and Greece, carried out extensive research into the existing tools and practices and defined eight key types of capabilities necessary to be an active participant in life and work: literacy, numeracy, financial, health, personal and interpersonal, digital, civic and environmental capabilities. The resulting Learning Framework acknowledges that each learner has a wealth of their own experience and knowledge; aiming to

The two pilots involved 20 providers of diverse profiles, both formal and non-formal, who were invited to develop a programme of learning that would focus on several life skills. Importantly, in non-formal settings the curricula were developed together with learners, allowing a focus on issues that were meaningful and relevant, such as access to healthcare or housing conditions. The wide range of benefits reported by learners, practitioners and providers encouraged EAEA to look into the topic of life skills

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### Life competence flower



<sup>7</sup> Source: Danish Adult Education Association

support learners in increasing their autonomy in a variety of contexts, the framework allows for a range of starting points and supports the recognition of learners' progression.

The Life Skills framework is not however intended to be used as a curriculum. Far from being prescriptive, it encourages the organisations that implement it to reflect on their own context and adapt the framework as they see fit. Such was the case with the Danish Adult Education Association (DAEA), who consulted its members before adapting the document accordingly. As a result, DAEA has created a "life competence flower", in which different capabilities constitute the petals, while critical thinking and action, perceived as the basis for all life skills, are positioned in the root. Interestingly, having reflected on the non-formal adult education practice in Denmark, DAEA added a capability that was not present in the original project framework: a creative competence.

Yet while some of the definitions or components of life skills might differ depending on the context, several elements remain common. The present paper focuses on three key principles that underpin life skills approaches, with a few case studies to illustrate each point.

## 2.1 Holistic perspective

Reflecting the complexity of real life situations, a successful life skills provision takes into account how the different capabilities interlink and depend on each other. The experiences of the Life Skills for Europe project partners and EAEA members show that a holistic approach to learning and combining basic skills with other capabilities supports learners in developing critical thinking and increasing their autonomy.

A course carried out by DOF Allerød Fritidsskole, which intended to bring together Danish and refugee women with an interest in needlework, is a good illustration of a holistic approach in life skills provision. By using recycled materials, the participants explored questions linked to sustainability; with time, other topics of interest started to emerge, such as healthcare or the governance system in Denmark (LSE, 2018). Eventually, the participating women took the initiative to organize a visit to the Danish parliament, raising their civic engagement.

Importantly, the participating women became more active socially and expanded their network. The personal and interpersonal capabilities of the Life Skills for Europe framework play a strong role in most courses, highlighting the importance of non-formal adult learning for communities and societies.

## 2.2 Learner-centred approaches

Learner-centeredness is an indispensable element in life skills provision. EAEA members across Europe have recognized the benefits of bringing learning close to learners' needs and work towards more participatory approaches. Designing, delivering and evaluating programmes with the active participation of learners increases their ownership of the learning process.

Such is the case at Lire et Ecrire, EAEA member in Belgium, whose new reference framework (2018) outlines the emancipatory principles of the popular adult literacy movement and a set of capabilities that it should foster among learners. These include, among others, the ability to reflect on one's own personal journey (which, as Lire et Ecrire underlines, is "never linear"), as well as to position oneself in a larger context;

to think critically; to advance one's community in solidarity with others. The framework is summarized in the form of a wheel, with learners' personal or collective projects in the centre, and the knowledge areas and competences needed on the outer circles. An ongoing dialogue between the learner and the educator is key in defining the objectives and planning the next steps, especially as verbalizing a personal



Course materials of Lire et Ecrire. Source: EAEA

project might not be easy for every new learner. The wheel is then used as a reference for the learner throughout the course.

Additionally, ongoing evaluation of the course is carried out both collectively and individually. While regular group discussions

among the learners foster reflection on their collective progress, several tools are also provided to help each learner follow, document and reflect on their own learning journey.

### 2.3 Flexibility

With adults facing a number of barriers to participation in adult learning, from busy schedules to problems with childcare, a life skills approach recognizes the need for flexibility at different levels. This means not only adapting the curriculum to the identified needs of learners, but also shifting course schedules or venues.

The EAEA winner of the Grundtvig Award (2019), the Italian project Street University, broke out of the classroom walls to reach out to learners in public places. A series of workshops was organized in informal meeting spaces, such as bookstores, parks and bars to make it easier for adults to participate. At the same time, the topics discussed stayed relevant to the participants' everyday lives, ranging from financial education to food and from conscious use of technology to sports and yoga. To be able to design and host such a flexible programme, the project coordinator partnered with 36 organisations, also proving the value of local cooperations for a comprehensive life skills provision.

#### Participatory approaches: leaving no one behind

Lire et Ecire has developed several tools that encourage self-reflection while remaining accessible to everyone, including those learners who cannot yet read or write. "My learning pathways", for example, is a portfolio that allows the learner to monitor their progress in achieving the goal they have set. Another tool, "Spider's net", is intended as a co-evaluation, helping learners to visualize how far they have advanced in their reading and writing practices. Importantly, all tools are very visual and can be easily adapted depending on the reading skills of the learner. This allows the learner to document their own learning journey without the need to write, for example through drawings or digital files such as MP3 recordings.

Similarly, a Danish day folk high school Kursutrappen has made several changes to their daily activities to accommodate the needs of the learners. Working predominantly with adults who are socially excluded and suffer from mental health problems, Kursutrappen adapted the methodology based on the feedback of the learners. Having launched a discussion group for adults suffering from chronic pain,

the educators realized that the participants found it difficult to express their feelings verbally; this led to the educators deciding to use pictures and drawings as a tool. To make it easier for the participants to open up, a common breakfast is organized on every Monday morning<sup>1</sup>.

### 3 BENEFITS OF A LIFE SKILLS APPROACH FOR PARTICIPATION

The participatory and contextualized approach to learning described above brings a wide array of benefits. The Life Skills for Europe project has found that life skills enable adults to become lifelong learners and to increase their social and civic engagement. By being more autonomous and developing their critical thinking or problem-solving skills, adults can not only manage their own lives better, but also contribute to their communities.

A life skills approach is also beneficial for providers and practitioners. The results of the implementation of the Citizens' Curriculum in particular has shown that while practitioners increased their confidence in adopting a learner-led approach and improved their morale, providers showed better understanding of their impact on learners and improved teamwork. For some practitioners, implementation of the new, multiple-capability programme was an

opportunity for different subject experts to exchange and learn from another.

#### 3.1 Life skills and participation

Looking at the adult learning sector itself, a successful implementation of a life skills approach has a considerable potential to increase participation levels. Current research (Boeren, 2017) shows that participation in adult learning is a multi-layered concept, dependent on a number of different elements. The interplay between the individual, the providers and the policy level is central in increasing participation levels. While the lack of motivation remains an important reason why adults do not take up learning, a range of other factors, such as infrastructure, learning offer or course pricing also play a role.

Implementing a life skills approach entails a certain degree of flexibility that is much needed for adults to be able to participate, be that in terms of the content, venue or

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eaea.org/2019/05/22/life-skills-approach-danish-context-building-community-spirit-creating-flexible-learning-pathways/>



schedule of the course. Recent research findings also demonstrate that flexibility of adult learning and education systems, one of the principles underpinning a life skills approach, is a common characteristic of countries with high participation rates (UIL, 2019). A learner-centred approach, in which the curriculum is designed with an active participation of the learner, increases the relevance of learning for the adult, thus increasing their motivation to enroll in the course. A personalized approach towards learners, and providing counselling and guidance, can also play a factor in increasing learners' retention rates.

Among the determinants of participation in learning, the (perceived) cost of learning

from a target-driven to a needs-based approach in adult learning also needs to happen at the policy level first, for example by providing funding tools that respond to the individual needs of adults and promote personalized learning pathways, such as individual learning accounts.

Several other principles of the life skills approach have also been found to positively affect participation. According to the findings of the newly released 4<sup>th</sup> Global Report on Adult Learning and Education, linking adult learning with other policy agendas, increasing stakeholder involvement and providing more training opportunities for adult learning staff can contribute to an increased participation rate (UIL, 2019).

### **A Life Skills approach empowers learners**

The evaluations of the Citizens' Curriculum, carried out by Learning and Work Institute, demonstrate that learners have significantly increased their social and civic engagement, with 73% making new friends and 59% reporting on improved social life. High numbers have also been recorded for self-efficacy: over 60% of learners improved their self-confidence and reported a greater satisfaction with their life. Significant improvements have also been noted in the attitudes towards learning and employment prospects: as many as 94% have declared more motivation to learn, and 49% improved their work-related skills.

remains an important one. The results of the Horizon 2020 ENLIVEN project, which analysed system characteristics and lifelong learning participation of adults at risk of exclusion, indicate a "negative association between the perceived costs of lifelong learning in a given country and the probability for participation for low-educated employees and low-educated young adults" (Cabus et al, to be published). A life skills approach, which encourages a needs-based based approach also to funding mechanisms, can increase the probability of participation among all adults. Moving on

Ultimately, the responsibility for adult participation, or lack thereof, cannot be borne by adult organisations alone; a whole ecosystem needs to adapt to learners' needs, including services and workplaces. A "local learning ecology" (Schuller and Watson, 2009) has to develop to make participation possible. The policy level has a crucial role to play, ensuring coherence between different policy agendas and making participation in adult learning a transversal priority.

## 4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Adult learning providers play a key role in equipping learners with a set of life skills. Yet they do not operate in a vacuum – they need consistent policy support at all levels to implement a life skills approach. The following section describes recommendations targeting both providers and policy-makers on how to introduce life skills provision or implement elements of a life skills approach in adult learning to the benefit of learners and societies.

### 4.1 Recommendations for providers

**Analyse the potential target groups of the course and plan an outreach strategy and the course accordingly.** Identifying the barriers that your learners might be facing, and working towards removing them, for example by ensuring more flexibility in delivering the course, is the first step in getting them through the door. A well-informed outreach strategy will help to involve learners who are at risk of social exclusion.

**Involve the learner at every stage of the learning process.** To ensure that the course stays relevant to the learner, they should be involved in course design, delivery and evaluation. The role of the educator is crucial in supporting the learner in the process of self-reflection. Different tools can be used to facilitate the process, focusing, among

others, on participatory methods or non-directive coaching (Learning and Work Institute 2017a & 2017b).

**Adopt a holistic perspective on life skills, and don't be afraid of experimenting with the curriculum.** While certain life skills capabilities might be regulated by a curriculum in your working context, you are invited to adapt it when possible, combining basic skills with the development of other capabilities. It might not be an easy win, but will bring positive results in the long run.

**Provide continuous professional development and foster exchange within the team.** A holistic approach to life skills requires the staff to constantly learn as well, also from each other. Some EAEA members have acknowledged that a shift to a life-skills based and learner-centred approach might not be easy for educators, who might be used to ready-made course plans and materials. Adult learning staff need time, resources and a space for experimentation to start using new methodologies.

**Reach out to other organisations, services and sectors, and establish partnerships when relevant.** Life skills incorporate a variety of capabilities that might best be explored by reaching out to a number of different stakeholders. These could be social services, cultural centres and the labour

#### Advocating for life skills in Denmark

“I took dance classes, and learned to stand on my two feet”. “I took coding classes, and learned to decode other people”. EAEA member the Danish Adult Education Association used powerful learners’ statements in their advocacy campaign for life skills. Several public figures, including policymakers and journalists, became ambassadors of the campaign on social media. Thanks to the increased attention to the topic, more providers secured meetings with policymakers to make their case for life skills.

market. Such partnerships can be beneficial when mapping the needs of potential learners, designing the course material or even delivering the course by taking it outside the classroom.

**Advocate for more attention to life skills at the local, regional or national level.** EAEA members' experiences demonstrate that even in countries where non-formal adult education is traditionally well recognized, such as Denmark, the term of life skills might not yet be generally understood. Advocacy campaigns including learners' stories or active involvement of learning ambassadors, targeting relevant policymakers, can raise awareness of the potential of life skills for increasing participation levels in adult learning and benefiting citizens and society as a whole.

#### 4.2 Recommendations for policy-makers

**Recognize non-formal adult education and its value for citizens and societies, and provide adequate funding.** In some countries, non-formal adult learning still remains on the fringe of the education sector, lacking policy recognition and consequently adequate funding. Recent findings of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning confirm that better financial support of adult learning and education is linked to rising participation rates (UIL, 2019). Non-formal adult education

opportunities need to be available to all adults to foster their active participation in society, and to allow the life skills approach to be implemented.

#### **Connect life skills with other policy agendas.**

By definition, life skills go beyond the education sector and reach to other policy agendas, such as social welfare, environment or health. Adult education strategies that prioritize the development of life skills among citizens need to reflect the trans-sectoral dimension of non-formal adult education, and require policy dialogue and support from other sectors.

#### **Allow adult education providers more flexibility of funding and curriculum, and move on from a target-driven to a needs-based approach in financing adult learning.**

Strict funding conditions and rigid curricula can limit the autonomy of adult learning providers, to the detriment of the adult learner, whose needs might not correspond to pre-existing formulas. Few countries enjoy the flexibility of Denmark, where non-formal adult education providers have complete freedom in the design of their courses. Operating with a curriculum that has been developed with the learners increases the relevance of the learning provision for the learner and ultimately also increases participation. EAEA strongly believes that adult learning providers are in the best position to know the local context and to consult the learners themselves, and should

#### **A life skills programme gets governmental support in Slovenia**

In Slovenia, a series of courses with an overarching theme of "Learning for a successful life" aims to empower vulnerable groups and change their attitudes to learning. While EAEA member the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education developed and piloted the programme, the costs of programme development, teacher training and programme delivery were covered by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports.

be allowed adequate flexibility to design the curricula accordingly. Moving on to a needs-based approach in financing adult learning, for example by implementing individual learning accounts, can support participation of all learners, and especially those with lower purchase power (FinALE, 2018).

**Provide support to programmes that are aimed at social outcomes and personal development as well as those related to the labour market.** The experience of EAEA members shows that different life skills are interlinked. Alongside improving hard skills, adults need a variety of capabilities to adapt to the changing life circumstances and the labour market. This needs to be reflected in the available education and training opportunities.

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