



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

WHERE ARE THE ADULTS? A EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA REQUIRES A HOLISTIC VISION OF LIFELONG LEARNING!

EAEA Statement
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EAEA welcomes the Communication on the European Education Area, launched by the European Commission as a cornerstone of European education and lifelong learning policy for the period until 2025. The European Education Area draws on a lifelong learning approach. However, EAEA notes that adult learning and non-formal education receive little coverage throughout the communication. EAEA believes that the strategic vision set out in the European Education Area cannot stand without (non-formal) adult education as a key contributor to meet the challenges posed by the 21st century, including the Covid-19 crisis.

In its introduction, the European Education Area proclaims the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning of all EU citizens, referring to the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. However, the European Education Area does not comprehensively commit to its initially stated holistic vision of lifelong learning. Rather, the Education Area proposes education and training as a means for prosperity and growth, training the “effective use of skills to support Europe’s economic and social prosperity” (p.1). EAEA is aware that lifelong learning does play a key role for Europe’s prosperity, but also wants to **stress the importance of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) for promoting citizenship, social cohesion and resilience**. It has been showcased most notably during crisis situations, including terrorist attacks in Europe and, recently, the Covid-19 crisis.

The six dimensions of the European Education Area to bring about “a significant shift in equity, outcomes and resilience of education and training” are comprehensive and wide-ranging. However, they are not coherent in themselves and tend to cover specific aspects of lifelong learning rather than a comprehensive set of lifelong learning challenges and needs. Moreover, they do not cover all forms of lifelong learning, especially the ALE sector. At the same time, many of the dimensions are relevant for adult learning and education, such as the need for green and digital skills and the professionalisation and recognition of teachers and trainers. **EAEA wants to stress that it is adults who are the decision makers and voters sustaining or influencing change in Europe.** Their knowledge, capacity and learning builds the groundwork to address the urgency of recovery, to decrease the burden for next generations and to pave the way to the future that Europe anticipates.

Policy coherence across all areas of education and training is a central component to ensure lifelong learning. **While the Skills Agenda and the Education Area are two important overarching policy strategies, adult learning and education needs a framework that sets priorities for the coming years**, potentially bridges the gaps between the Skills Agenda and the European Education Area, and ensures a continuation of the work done through the European Agenda for Adult Learning, which expires in 2020. Such a policy initiative would aid to underline the plans outlined in the European Recovery and Resilience Facility, which



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proposes re- and upskilling as a flagship action. **EAEA urges the Commission to consider the importance of ALE and to manifest their commitment to lifelong learning by publishing a continuation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning.**

Life Skills are at the centre of non-formal ALE. Therefore, EAEA welcomes the European Education Area's approach to "mastering transversal skills" such as critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity and civic engagement and sees the ALE sector as a core provider of these skills. Additionally, ALE can serve as a platform to foster language learning, promote cultural diversity and the European way of life. On the road towards the European Green Deal, the ALE sector can be a catalyst for the twin transition, fostering the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values necessary to instigate digital and green readiness and resilience. EAEA is pleased about the initiative by the European Commission for a European Green Competences Framework and their pledge to establish a Climate Coalition and committed to contribute from the civil society perspective. **EAEA urges the European Commission to include Life Skills for all as a central component in the Area, as outlined in the Skills Agenda. Furthermore, EAEA suggests to base a continuation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning on "skills for life", as proposed in the Skills Agenda.**

Quality – one the six dimensions of the European Education Area – is at the heart of ALE. It relies, however, on adequate funding and training of the adult learning systems. The Covid-19 crisis and subsequent recovery require educators and providers to be prepared to changing learning needs and a further strengthening of digital learning environments. However, structural support and funding for adult education organisations and providers is, in many countries, not adequate. On the one hand, this leads to a precarious employment situation for staff in adult education and to limited opportunities for the professional development of educators and trainers. On the other hand, there are also very limited opportunities for providers to build new digital learning infrastructures and design new learning programmes. However, a resilient Europe, deeply rooted in the values of freedom, diversity, human rights and social justice, thrives on education and requires a base of well-equipped teachers and trainers in all sectors of lifelong learning. **The recognition of the value of adult education in the European Education Area could help to accelerate funding through the creation of new financing schemes at the national and regional levels as well as promote the professionalisation of the sector.**

Adult education, as an important sector in lifelong learning, requires ambitious targets. However, EAEA notes that the benchmarks in the Communication on a European Education Area are different from the targets proposed at the Gothenburg Summit in 2017. Then, the Commission proposed a benchmark of 25% adult participation in lifelong learning by 2025 (which was at 11% in 2017)¹. Now, the Education Area proposes a benchmark of 50% participation in adult learning by 2025 (which was at 44.4% in 2016). While this number looks even more ambitious than the initial 25% at the first glance, it is important to note that the measurements derive from different sources. While the target proposed in 2017 was based on data from the Labour Force Survey (participation in ALE in the last 4 weeks), the new benchmark will use the

¹ see, for instance https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/leaders-working-lunch-lifelong-learning_en.pdf



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Adult Education Survey for measuring (participation in ALE in an annual 12-month reference period). On the other hand, the new benchmark is more realistic to achieve with policy initiatives at national level as it looks at participation in ALE during a longer reference period. It could, therefore, be an incentive to bring movement into the adult learning sector. Supporting the target of the Commission, EAEA urges the commission to **provide financial and structural support to the ALE sector to ensure that the new benchmark of 50% participation in adult learning can be achieved.**

EAEA would like to raise awareness that **adult learning and non-formal education (ALE) can be a crucial entrance point to formal and accredited education.** ALE contributes to decoupling of educational attainment from socio-economic background by providing a “second chance” to those who could not finish formal education, by also providing a low-threshold, non-formal entrance to further education and learning. ALE can help to (re)introduce adults to the labour market and equip them with the necessary attitudes, skills and knowledge to master their professional and personal life. This includes, among many other skills and competences, basic and digital skills, which require flexible learning pathways. In this context, EAEA welcomes the initiative by the European Commission to introduce **micro-credentials, as they could - if implemented in a holistic way - help learners to validate their skills** in a way that is recognised by employers and educational institutions.

The European Education Area’s commitment to combat all forms of discrimination is important and timely. The pandemic exacerbated injustices and showcased how socially and geographically disadvantaged and vulnerable parts of the population have been hit hardest by the crisis. ALE encompasses diverse forms of non-formal learning that include the whole family and community. Thereby, it serves to connect generations, social groups and cultures for more equity, mutual understanding and social development. **A 21st century approach to inclusive lifelong learning, as proposed in the European Education Area, should be intersectional and equally committed to promote learning of all socially and structurally marginalised groups,** including girls and women in so-called STEM subjects, migrants, elderly people, persons with disabilities and so on.

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 130 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.