



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

Improving outreach and access to adult learning in times of COVID-19

EAEA Statement

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Whether it's improving wellbeing, wages, self-confidence or social inclusion, adult education can help to promote equality in European society; this however is dependent on participation, and especially participation from those who could benefit most from developing their skills. Those least likely to access adult education are often the ones that need it most. For many adults with low skills, education is characterised by stigma and discomfort, so outreach and access programmes can help not only in developing the confidence of these adults, but also in providing them with skills or qualifications to develop their employability and careers.

As the experiences of EAEA members clearly demonstrate, outreach and access has only become more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic. Self-isolation and social distancing, digital exclusion, precarious employment situations and a general feeling of uncertainty have mounted new barriers that keep adults from learning. Once again, those who lose out are adults most in need of better (basic) skills.

Challenges in outreach and access during COVID-19

While many adult learning providers have been quick to digitize their organisations and to move all of their teaching online, this has posed an enormous challenge for providers and teachers alike. EAEA members agree that online learning requires not only a set of digital skills from teachers, but also different pedagogical skills. Delivering courses in an online environment, especially if the shift happens overnight, has meant that teachers and educators have had to find ways of dealing with new issues, such as how to react to technical problems, organize interaction online or ensure equal participation and engagement while acknowledging feelings of anxiety. At the same time, adult learning providers have had to rapidly reorganize their work, invest in e-learning platforms if none were used before and in many cases face financial insecurity.

Outreach to learners, especially those from disadvantaged groups, has become both more urgent and difficult. The COVID-19 crisis has clearly shown that the digital divide is a reality, which has affected participation in a time when all non-formal learning has to take place online. Many households have inadequate internet connection, share one computer between several family members, or have to rely on pay-to-go phone services. Inadequate digital skills have also kept many adults from taking up learning during the pandemic, such as the elderly whose lives were arguably the ones most affected by the pandemic.

Over the past years, international surveys on participation have confirmed that three main barriers to participation include lack of time, lack of funding and lack of interest; in many cases, the COVID-19 crisis has only exacerbated each of these challenges. Many adults have had to juggle family responsibilities while working from home, leaving little to no time for learning. Funding has also

European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)

Mundo-J, Rue de l'Industrie 10, B-1000 Brussels / Tel: +32 2 893 25 22 / eaea-office@eaea.org



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become a problem, especially for those who have been, temporarily or permanently, put out of work because of the pandemic. That said, lack of interest in learning might, surprisingly, prove to be the main barrier: as uncertainty about the future dominates economic forecasts, adults are hesitant to re-skill or upskill for jobs that they might be unlikely to get in face of a crisis.

Opportunities for outreach and access during COVID-19

In some communities, the crisis has led to a feeling of solidarity and created new support networks. EAEA members report that new online groups have sprung up, for example among teachers and educators willing to share resources and ideas. Organised from the bottom up, these support networks clearly demonstrate that a learning community can be fostered even in the most difficult times.

The crisis has also forced adult learning providers to experiment with new formats and content, ultimately diversifying and innovating their practice, even if in challenging conditions. For some, this has meant opening doors to new audiences. An online course can ultimately be more accessible, for example to learners living in remote areas or with mobility issues.

The ongoing pandemic has also encouraged many adult learning providers to look beyond the 'usual suspects' and to start cooperating with new partners to improve outreach and access. Training schemes for employers of care homes to improve digital skills among the residents; partnerships with municipalities to offer support to self-isolating workers; not to mention partnerships with various health services: these have not only helped to respond to the most immediate needs, but also have the potential of lasting beyond the crisis.

Improving access and outreach during the pandemic and beyond: recommendations

Recommendations for adult learning providers

Make sure that your learners get the support they need. In many cases, adults do not participate in learning because they do not see it as a priority during the crisis; in others, they might lack the most basic necessities to take part. Checking in with learners and encouraging others to do the same can reassure them that they are not alone in the crisis. Some EAEA members have gone as far as to provide material support, sending care packages with basic supplies to their doors.

Find a way to build a safe environment, feelings of hope and resilience. The crisis has been hard on everyone; EAEA members report that many learners have been using online adult learning spaces to share their feelings of anxiety and to look for a community in times of self-isolation. Sharing positive stories can not only help learners become more hopeful about the future and encourage them to participate in learning, but also create a space to share ideas about what the post-pandemic world should be like.

Communication is key – is your communication reaching everyone? Those adults who have found out about your courses from posters and advertisements in public spaces, or from community centres, might no longer have the information. Some might not be able to access course materials. Some EAEA members have resorted to more traditional communication means in addition to the digital ones, sending postcards or course materials directly to the doors of their learners.



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Analyse the barriers that your learners are facing, and work towards removing them. While you might not be in the position to remove all of the barriers that your learners are facing, careful planning and in some cases even reflecting on your own bias as an organization can help you welcome everyone who needs it. Addressing schedules, priorities or family responsibilities of your learners is needed to make sure that your learners will feel welcomed.

Strengthen your partnerships and build new ones: in the adult learning sector and beyond. The ongoing crisis has clearly demonstrated that we cannot work in silos to reach learners, especially those who are the furthest from learning. Improving access and outreach means joining forces with diverse partners who might still be in touch with the community, even during enforced COVID-19 restrictions: social services, community centres, healthcare workers, employers.

Recommendations for policy-makers

Recognize the role of non-formal adult learning in building more resilient societies and economies.

Adult learning goes beyond providing a quick fix to unemployment; as the ongoing pandemic has shown, adults need a wide range of life skills to cope with daily challenges and extreme circumstances such as the global pandemic. Non-formal adult learning can support European citizens in building a greener economy, in improving social justice and in managing their own life transitions.

Provide support for adult learning providers in times of crisis. While many adult learning providers have done enormous work to digitize their organisations or to provide material support to their most disadvantaged learners, some have received little or no extra funding to do it. Adult learning providers need adequate funding to carry on, to train their staff and to reach out to their learners.

Link support to learning offers: Many member states are providing (financial) support for companies that have been forced to work shorter hours or close for the time being. This time could be used to learn and upskill (through online or blended learning), both in companies and by public employment services.

Ensure that funding schemes for adult learning foster collaboration, not competition. Many adult learning organisations have joined forces with other sectors to improve outreach and access during the pandemic; funding schemes should encourage collaboration both within the sector and outside of it.

Provide funding for research on benefits of adult learning. Adult learning providers are frequently asked about the return on investment in adult learning; yet little funding is provided to carry out comprehensive research into the different benefits that adult learning brings. More longitudinal research on the European level is needed to better understand how learning benefits adults throughout their lives and to plan future adult learning strategies.



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More information

Contact: Regina Ebner, Secretary-General, +32 2 893 25 24, gina.ebner@eaea.org.

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

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