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THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

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FINANCING ALE IN EUROPE

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EAEA Working Group
on Financing ALE



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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 120 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.

ABOUT US

The EAEA Financing Working Group was established in 2022 by EAEA members whose work focuses on and who have a particular interest in the financing and funding of adult learning and education (ALE) in Europe.

EAEA members active in the working group meet regularly and share information on the financing of ALE to inform policy and advocacy work for improved financing and funding systems in Europe, and to build capacity for joint actions.

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1 Introduction

As the European umbrella organisation for adult learning and education (ALE), it is very important to us to improve the financial situation of ALE in Europe through our work at the European level. But why exactly should public funding for ALE be increased? Couldn't the course participants simply finance more themselves? And shouldn't courses that are relevant to the labour market simply be funded (and organised) by companies?

The answer is that we want to ensure that as many adults as possible can participate in ALE. The EU aims for 60% of all adults to participate in learning by 2030 (see the New European Agenda for Adult Learning). Motivation to learn is one thing, but being able to participate is another – often linked to the question of one's financial possibilities as a learner. Public funding that enables very low course fees for learners creates greater participation. And, of course, we strive for ALE to be recognised as an integral part of public education systems and to be funded as such, i.e. that everyone can participate free of charge.

Quality assurance in ALE is another big issue, for which sufficient funding is needed. Through continuous training of educators and other ALE staff, learning programmes can be further developed and improved to meet the needs of learners. Quality certification of ALE providers – e.g. to be able to offer programmes funded by Individual Learning Accounts – often involves great administrative burden and high costs for the certification procedures themselves.

The sustainability of learning programmes and the retention of learners in these programmes is also determined by the infrastructure of learning providers; if learning spaces also become spaces of exchange, discussion, etc., motivation to learn can be increased. This requires investment in infrastructure, (virtual) learning spaces, etc.

Last, but not least, good working conditions and adequate salaries in the ALE sector are central to the retention of teachers and other ALE staff. The current energy crisis is forcing many ALE providers to make difficult decisions about maintaining (and increasing) salaries and service contracts as energy costs have skyrocketed. However, this crisis must not be at the expense of ALE providers – and thus also at the expense of learning. Good working conditions also have a positive impact on the quality and sustainability of programmes.

2 Current financing levels of ALE

2.1 What do EAEA members say?

A comparison of the data from the last EAEA country reports shows that EAEA members assess the funding situation of ALE in their countries in 2022 somewhat more positively than in previous years. About half of the members in 2022 said their financial situation was unchanged (from different starting points, depending on the country), while about a third said their situation had improved a little, and overall a little more than a fifth said their situation had deteriorated a little or substantially.

However, the answers of the EAEA members, when asked what concrete changes there have been regarding the financing of adult education, were surprising: whereas in the previous year

the answers were relatively evenly split between the different answer options (which included “new funding streams available in the country”; “changed funding policy of the local/regional/national education authorities”; “changed political situation”; and “changed priorities of the government(s)”), in 2022 there was a clear swing towards “changed political situation” and “changed priorities of the government(s)”.

Some members stated that new austerity programmes have been or are being introduced in their countries, and that post-Covid recovery also requires money that cannot (any longer) benefit the ALE sector as a result. Although the overall financial situation is assessed to be better than last year, more EAEA members now want to actively engage in advocacy at the national and regional levels to highlight the precarious financial situation of the sector.

2.2 Benchmarks for the financing of ALE

There are **currently no benchmarks for the financing of ALE at the European level**.

However, the recently adopted UNESCO Marrakech Framework for Action makes a very strong commitment to the funding of ALE¹, stating that the signatory parties are “determined to increase public spending on adult education in accordance with country contexts aimed at progressively meeting the international benchmarks of an allocation of at least 4-6% of GDP and/or at least 15-20% of total public expenditure to education.” (UNESCO 2022: 7) The Marrakech Framework for Action urges governments to establish governance and financing structures that strengthen ALE as a part of public education provision.

European strategies, including the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL), the EU’s key strategy for promoting participation in ALE until 2030, do not include any benchmarks for the financing of ALE; however, they emphasise the need for investment in quality learning provision. They highlight that funding for ALE should come from a variety of sources. The NEAAL says that “Financing approaches based on shared responsibility of public and private stakeholders can help increase and intensify resources.” (Council of the European Union 2021: 4) This approach of shared responsibility of financing is also stressed in the Marrakech Framework for Action: “ALE should be funded through the contribution of a wide diversity of stakeholders, various ministries, employers and other private actors, local governments and learners.” (UNESCO 2022: 7)

2.3 (The issue with) official data collection

Public expenditure on education and its share of GDP have remained constant in recent years at 10 per cent of public budgets and 4.7 per cent of GDP. While the share of GDP is also in line with UNESCO’s funding targets for education (4-6% of GDP) – albeit rather in the lower range – the share of education in total public expenditure is below UNESCO’s targets, which aim for at least 15% to 20%. As mentioned above, there are currently no targets for the funding of ALE itself.

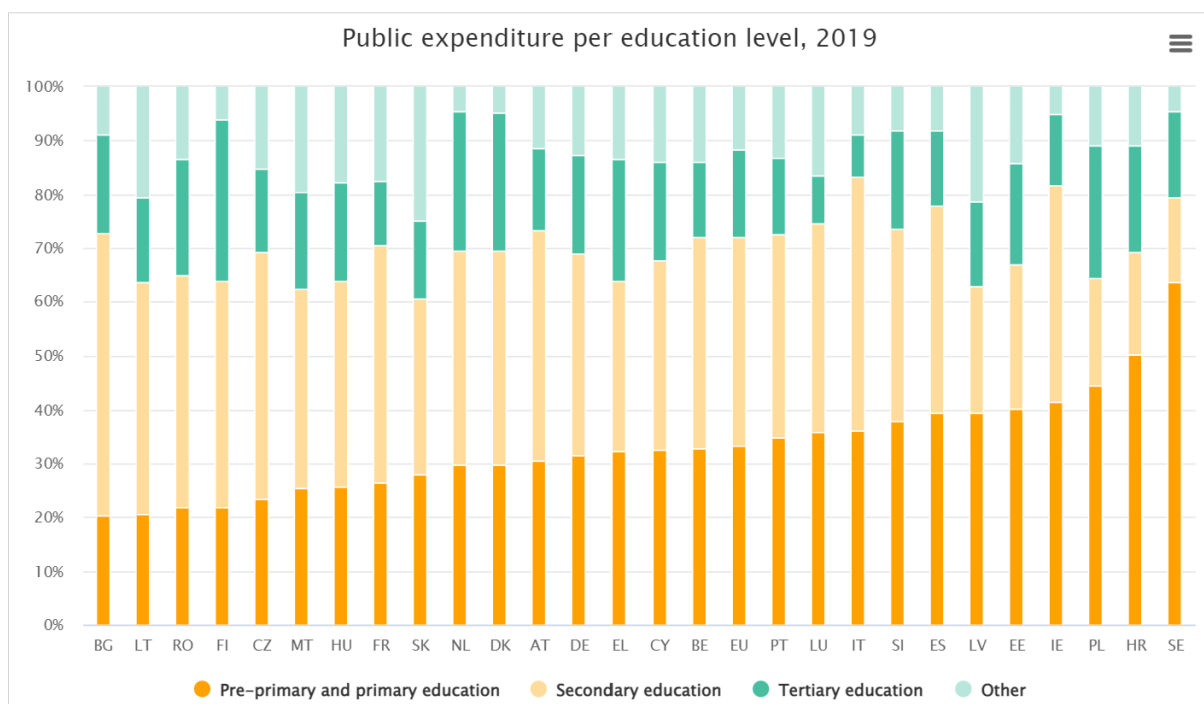
	Year-on-year real change (%)				Share of total public expenditure (%)				Share of GDP (%)			
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2016	2017	2018	2019	2016	2017	2018	2019
EU	0.5	-0.6	3.6	1.9	9.9	10.0	10.0	10.0	4.7	4.7	4.7	4.7

¹ in line with the commitments made at the World Education Forum in Incheon in 21 May 2015

Public expenditure on education in the European Union from 2016 to 2019 (Source: EU Education and Training Monitor 2021)

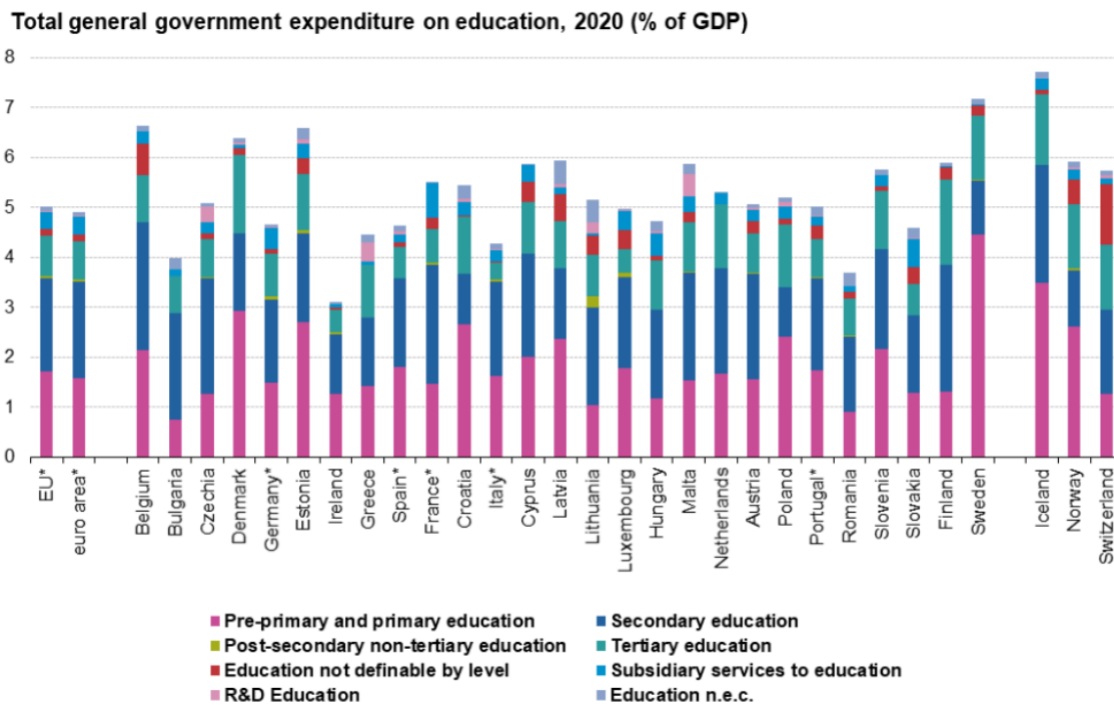
However, when looking at the costs of learning, a more nuanced picture emerges: while households in most EU countries find the costs of formal education affordable according to Eurostat, reports from EAEA members indicate that this is not the case for non-formal ALE which is much more volatile and sensitive to external influences, e.g. income declines as a result of Covid and/or other crises. Participation in non-formal ALE is not mandatory, even if changes in professional and social life, digitalisation etc. make it seem quasi-mandatory in many cases. It is, therefore, one of the first areas in which households make cost-cutting decisions when it requires participation fees from learners.

Considering the quasi-mandatory nature of ALE for many groups of adults and the need to increase participation levels (the EU aims at a participation of 60% by 2030), how much do EU countries spend on it, compared to other education sectors?



Public expenditure per education level: Non-formal ALE is assumed to be included mainly in "Other", however, specific ALE programmes such as literacy, basic education and second-chance education, but also non-formal further training for teachers and other professions, are included, to some extent, in all other categories (Source: EU Education and Training Monitor 2021)

Unfortunately, data on the financing of ALE are limited to estimates, as national statistical offices do not collect them. There are several reasons for this: there is no single ISCED code (International Standard Classification of Education) for ALE. Programmes in ALE can correspond to almost all ISCEDs, for example, basic education for adults could be at secondary level 1 or 2, or, in the area of literacy, even at primary level, but it could also be in "post-secondary non-tertiary" education.



Total general government expenditure on education (Source: Eurostat 2022)

Eurostat, OECD and UNESCO together collect data on the financing of education. The EU has data on all formal education sectors, and in addition there is also a “rest category” which includes all “education that cannot be defined by level”. We have to assume that ALE is included there, but not exclusively. All non-formal education and learning that is subsidised with public funds would be included in this category, and perhaps even some vocational education programmes. On the other hand, depending on how countries collect their data, adult literacy programmes, basic education, second-chance education and further professional training for teachers and other professions could be included in the data on primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Estimates by research institutes (e.g. FiBS/DIE 2013) suggest that 0.1 percent to 0.2 percent of GDP is public spending on ALE. While these estimates are almost ten years old, they still correspond to the latest available data (from 2019) on expenditure on education as a share of GDP for “education not definable by level” and expenditure on ALE that is included in one of the formal sectors according to ISCED. Total spending on ALE including other sources of funding such as employer funding, learners’ contributions, etc. ranges from 0.6 to 1.1 percent of GDP in these estimates. This means that compared to other education sectors, a majority of investment comes from non-public funding, or, in any case, not from direct funding to educational providers. Employers and learners are the largest “funders” of ALE.

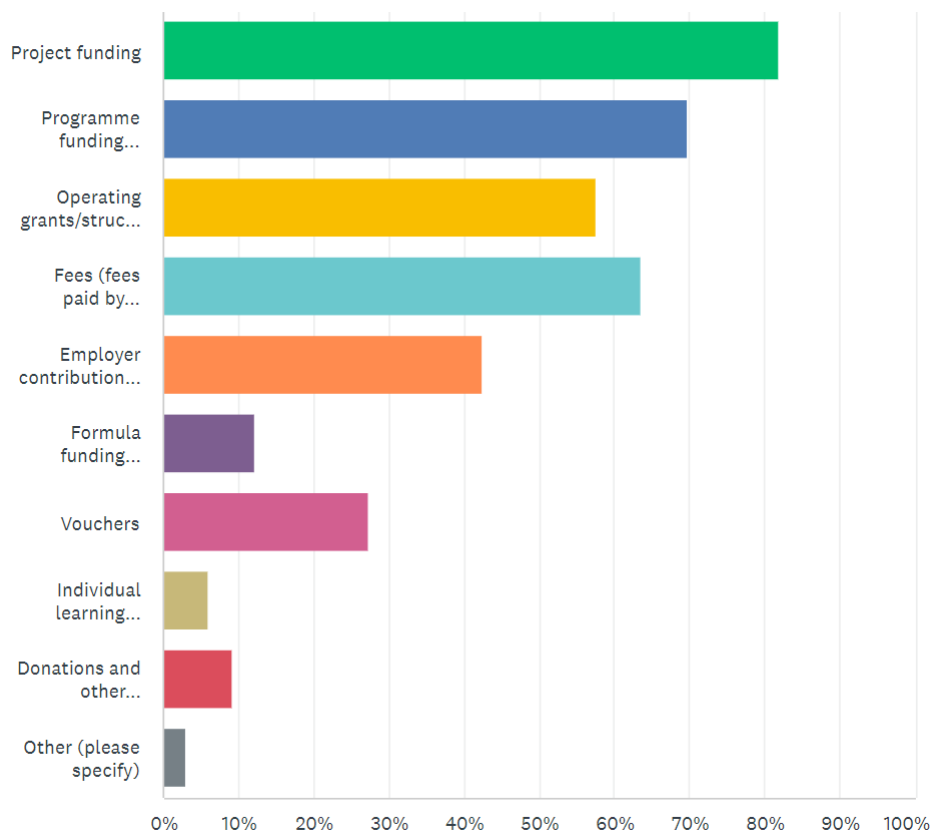
Table 1: Total general government expenditure on education, 2019 (% of GDP and % of total expenditure)										
		Education (total)	Pre-primary and primary education	Secondary education	Post-secondary non-tertiary education	Tertiary education	Education not definable by level	Subsidiary services to education	R&D Education	Education n.e.c.
percentage of GDP	EU-27	4,7	1,6	1,8	0,0	0,8	0,1	0,3	0,0	0,1
	euro area	4,6	1,4	1,8	0,0	0,7	0,1	0,3	0,0	0,1

Total government expenditure on education, reference year 2019 (Source: Eurostat; table prepared by EAEA)

Whichever calculation method is used; it is clear that the funding situation varies greatly from country to country in Europe. While in some countries funding is almost negligible (and appears in the statistics as 0.0% of GDP), in other countries it plays a more significant role, for example in Belgium, where most forms of adult education are part of the regional education systems. The non-EU country Switzerland is at the top of all statistics and seems to spend many times the EU average on ALE.

Instead of looking down from above, data could also be collected from below, i.e. by all municipalities, regions, countries etc. that subsidise ALE through different programmes, e.g. through funding from the municipalities or regions themselves, through Erasmus+, ESF+ and similar programmes. EAEA tried this a few years ago and quickly ran into the problem that it is not a given that this data - if it is collected anywhere at all - is centralised.

A fundamental difficulty here is that the different authorities - for example, when it comes to ESF+ and Erasmus+ - do not necessarily work together. ALE programmes are typically funded by a variety of funding sources: EAEA's members list project funding, programme funding from public authorities, employer contributions, participant contributions, public funding depending on group size and course length, vouchers, Individual Learning Accounts, donations, and more as their main sources of funding. In almost all of these funding sources, public subsidies play a role (even in the case of employer contributions, participant contributions, and donations, there are tax benefits for companies and individuals in some countries, i.e. indirect subsidies), but these are not recorded in one place.



Funding sources of EAEA members in 2021/2022 (Source: EAEA country reports 2022)

Another difficulty is that different stakeholders have different understandings of ALE and what it actually entails. It is evident that a substantial part of ALE is provided by public employment agencies, non-profit organisations, civil society organisations, trade union education institutes, etc. This makes it very difficult to capture the real situation of ALE provision, and where funding for it comes from.

For example, do soft skills programmes for the workplace count as non-formal ALE or are they considered as vocational education? Are literacy programmes for migrants considered ALE or are they counted as social inclusion measures? Different understandings of the role and objectives of programmes, as well as a lack of policy coherence and cooperation among actors, affect the way funding is categorised. A large number of ALE activities and actions may not be considered ALE by the providers themselves. This also affects how participants see themselves: do they see themselves as learners, or rather as “mere participants” in, for example, a reading group, a recycling workshop, a health course, etc.? All this has a direct impact on how funding is labelled.

3 Funding instruments

3.1 Supply and demand-side funding

In the FinALE project (Financing Adult Learning in Europe), EAEA analysed a range of funding instruments for ALE, using a taxonomy proposed by the OECD (2017) that divides funding instruments into supply-side measures, i.e. subsidies going directly to learning providers, and demand-side measures, i.e. subsidies for individuals and employers.

Supply-side measures	Demand-side measures	
<i>Institutions/Donors</i>	<i>Individuals</i>	<i>Employers</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme funding • Project funding • Formula funding • Philanthropic funding • Learners fees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vouchers and ILAs • Direct grants • Loans • Training leave • Tax incentives • Philanthropic funding • (learners fees) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct grants • Payback clauses • Tax incentives

Financial instruments for ALE divided into supply-side and demand-side measures (Source: FinALE project 2018)

All funding instruments have their advantages and disadvantages. In the FinALE project, the analysis of funding instruments suggested that demand-side measures favour learning directly related to the employment and disfavour non-formal ALE. Supply-side funding, on the other hand, seemed to be more effective than demand-side funding in improving access to learning, outreach, social inclusion, and a number of other benefits related to participation in learning. The efficiency of these funding instruments depends on how many people can be participate in learning who would otherwise not be able to do so.

4 Key trends and challenges in financing at the European level

4.1 Innovation in financing for ALE

4.1.1 Individual Learning Accounts

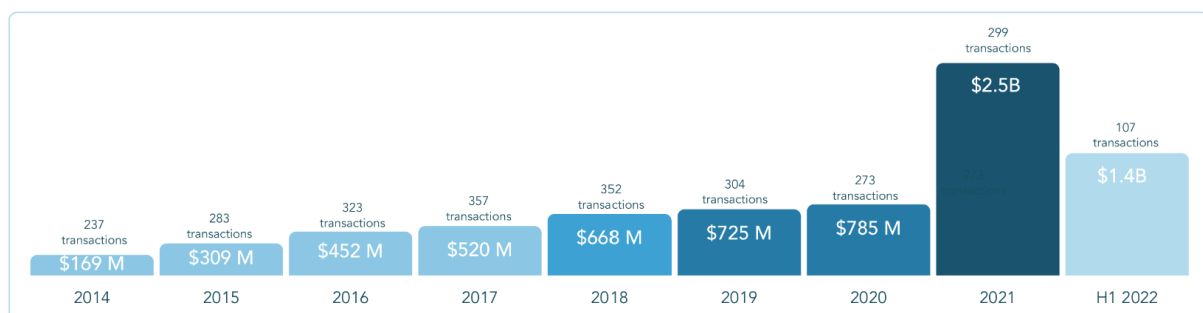
Individual Learning Accounts are not a new funding instrument for ALE. Currently, as also the results of the EAEA country reports 2022 show, they play a comparatively small role for the financing of ALE in Europe. However, since the European Commission's initiative in 2021 to encourage Member States to set up national ILA programmes, they have received renewed interest from EU Member States. In a statement from July 2021, EAEA outlined the main benefits of ILAs while pointing out potential issues: ILAs can be critical in countries where there is limited or no public funding for ALE. On the other hand, they are generally limited to programmes for people of working age and focus mainly on professional development, which could put non-formal programmes under pressure.

Several EU Member States are currently preparing ILA schemes and in 2023, national registers of learning opportunities eligible for ILAs will also be created, funded through the Erasmus+ programme. ILAs can be successful when they are linked to outreach and guidance programmes and when they are embedded into existing systems while also taking into account the needs of stakeholders, and most importantly the learners. The need for quality assurance is self-evident, but it must take the size and resources of the providers into account and adjust the criteria accordingly.

As ILAs only serve the demand side but do not consider the supply side, it is necessary to monitor how the implementation will affect ALE providers. If there is a sudden excess demand, fuelled by the ILAs, there is a risk that there will not be enough adequate supply and that this “empty” space will be taken by providers who give less importance to quality in order to be able to offer quantity. In our view, it is therefore crucial for the implementation that the supply side is also financially supported accordingly.

4.1.2 EdTech funding

The development of the EdTech (Educational Technologies) market in Europe went largely unnoticed by the education sectors for a while, but, while the European market is still considerably smaller than the US, Chinese and Indian markets, has gained significantly in importance over the last few years. Compared to the total government expenditure on education in the EU – that amounted to 671 billion Euro in 2020 (Eurostat 2022) - the amounts invested by private investors into EdTech companies and start-ups are still small. However, if the trend of the last years will continue over the next years, these balances might change, with an increasingly larger proportion of education being financed through private investments.



Number of investments and volume of EdTech funding in Europe (Source: Brighteye Ventures)

This, in turn, will have considerable repercussions on the understanding of education itself: will education increasingly be understood as a free market where investments lead to an interesting return on investment for the financiers, driving its commodification? EAEA's members, especially in Eastern European countries, have reported to EAEA that they observe an increase of ALE start-ups in their countries. These start-ups typically focus on online learning of a variety of skills. ALE organisations do not perceive them as a direct threat to their core businesses; however, some are cautiously expressing their concerns that EdTech companies might start to "compete" for learners, thereby distorting already precarious systems of ALE provision.

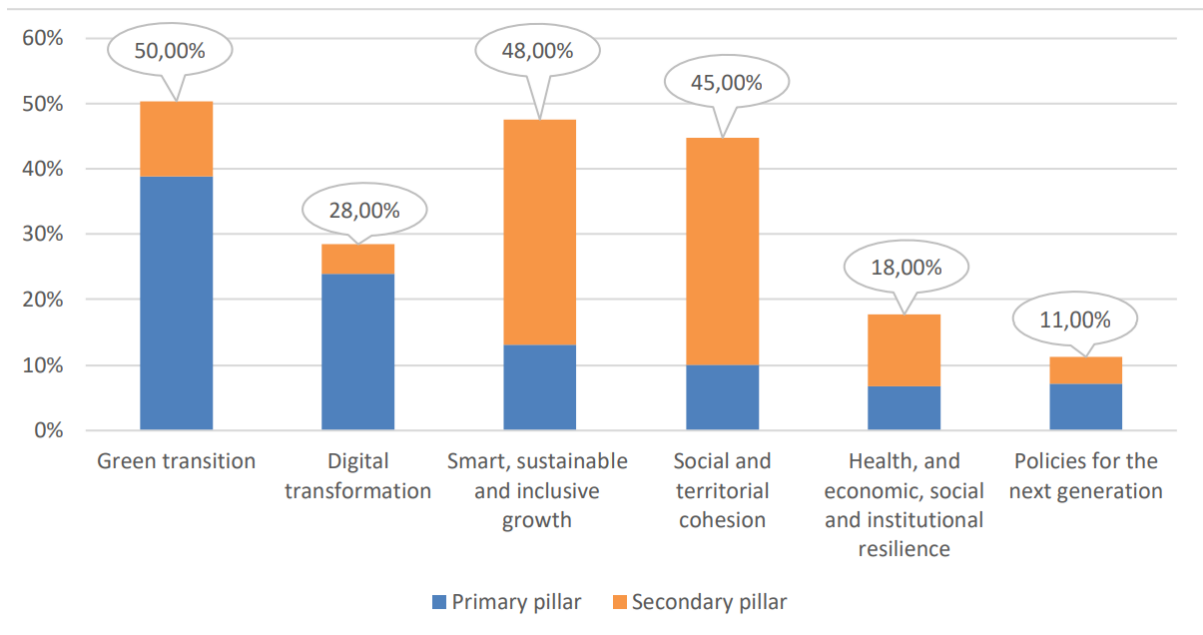
Investments in EdTech are generally made with the aim of generating a longer-term return on investment for the investors. Founders of EdTech companies and funders create joint stories - i.e. speculations - about the future of education, but also about general global developments to gauge profits. Those involved in EdTech markets will also typically act by assuming these stories correspond to reality, and thus help shape reality. Ben Williamson, Chancellor's Fellow at the Centre for Research in Digital Education and the Edinburgh Futures Institute, University of Edinburgh, says that "By doing so, venture capitalists also begin to play profoundly political roles in the education sector, because they make decisions about what kinds of products can and cannot exist. They try to materialize their imagined visions of education through the allocation of monetary resources." (Williamson 2022)

Nevertheless, educational technologies are welcomed by policy makers in many countries as they promise additional investments in education and, in particular, a boost for the digitalisation of learning. Evgeny Morozov, who was a member of the International Commission on the Futures of Education of the UNESCO, criticizes this "technology solutionism" (Morozov 2022). He argues that we - education stakeholders - need to work and advocate for both education and technology to be understood as public goods. This can contribute to a holistic vision of lifelong learning that is truly transformative for learners.

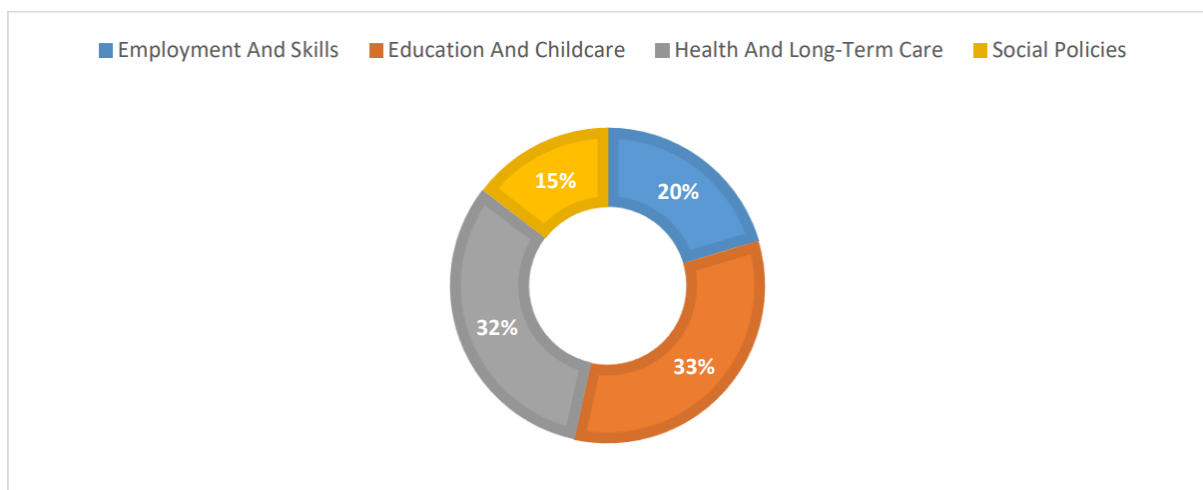
4.2 Post-Covid recovery

One of the six pillars of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans, the instrument of the Recovery and Resilience Facility to coordinate actions aimed to help European economies and society to recover from Covid-19 and build resilience for future challenges, is called "Policies for the next generation". This includes education and skills.

In terms of expenditure levels, "Policies for the next generation" remains the smallest pillar; however, it needs to be noted that ALE activities are also included in the other pillars, for instance as green skills in "Green transition", digital skills development in "Digital transformation", entrepreneurial skills in "Smart, sustainable and inclusive growth", and adult learning and VET in "Social and territorial cohesion".



Share of Recovery and Resilience Plans estimated expenditure per policy pillar (Source: European Commission 2022: Review report on the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility)



Share of RRF social expenditure by main social categories (Source: European Commission 2022: Review report on the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility)

When breaking down all social actions in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans into social categories, “Employment and Skills” – which includes upskilling and lifelong learning – comes out as the second-largest category. Social actions constitute about one third of the total amount of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which corresponds to 135 billion EUR.

If we look at the cost side instead of the investment side, it is striking that e.g. the World Bank, but also other large organisations, talk about the cost of lost school time due to school closures during Covid-19. These calculations – which the World Bank, for example, puts at a loss of income of around EUR 11,000 per person worldwide (World Bank 2020) – assume that the “lost” school time will be permanently lost and that there will be no more opportunities to

compensate for this. This is very likely to be the case in low- and middle-income countries and for social groups that have poor or no access to ALE. Nevertheless, these models seem one-sided and voluntarily shocking because they do not show alternatives to schooling.

Unfortunately, there are no calculations on what economic losses have been caused by closures of ALE centres and will probably still be caused during the energy crisis. While the costs to society as a whole cannot be precisely quantified, there are some attempts to examine the return on investment for ALE more closely, e.g. by assuming lower costs for the unemployment system, social systems and health systems when people participate in ALE. However, calculation models quickly reach their limits as there are no suitable tools to find out how many people really participate in ALE (including in basic skills, second-chance education etc.), what the outcomes are, i.e. which skills have been acquired, and what the effects are over time.

5 Recommendations for ensuring financial sustainability of ALE

For policy-makers

5.1 Developing and implementing benchmarks for the financing of ALE

We recommend to policy-makers at the national and regional levels (depending on the competences) to set and implement benchmarks for the financing of ALE. In accordance with the Marrakech Framework for Action that was adopted by all UNESCO member states, these benchmarks should ensure that ALE budgets increase proportionally to overall public education budgets.

We recommend to policy-makers at the EU level to implement coordination processes to work towards joint European benchmarks for the financing of ALE. These could promote the implementation process of the New European Agenda for Adult Learning and the Marrakech Framework for Action.

5.2 Creating incentives for the creation of financial frameworks for ALE

Legal frameworks for ALE – such as national or regional ALE strategies or policies – are central for increasing learning opportunities for adults and participation in ALE. We recommend to promote the creation of these legal frameworks across all European countries. ALE strategies or policies should include clear indications on where funding for ALE comes from and how the long-term financial sustainability of the sector can be ensured.

5.3 Promoting data collection on the financing of ALE

We recommend to develop mechanisms and tools for data collection on the financing of ALE at the national level, for instance through national statistical offices. These mechanisms and tools could be developed together with research institutes and ALE organisations to ensure that data collected is representative and capturing the full picture of ALE provision.

5.4 Promoting financial tools and instruments that are fostering collaboration and complementarity rather than competition

Both on the supply side of funding as on the demand side of funding, financial tools and instruments need to be accessible, easy to use and efficient. We recommend to promote financial tools and instruments that are fostering collaboration and complementarity between different ALE providers and stakeholders rather than competition, with the aim to increase learning offers and opportunities for all adults in Europe.

For ALE organisations

5.5 Collecting good practices from other sectors or countries

Other sectors that receive regular financial support and their financing models can be a role model for ALE. What is needed to create a sustainable financing model? How did these sectors get there? What is needed to create an understanding for the specific concerns of the ALE

sector? The same could also apply to financing models for ALE from other countries: what is working, and why²?

This requires defining criteria for good practice, i.e. innovative funding models and tools. These funding models should combine both supply side and demand side funding. They should be able to engage more adults in learning and should target different groups of adults. These funding models should ensure that every learner has an entitlement to funding and that target groups with particular learning needs are prioritised, and that learning providers receive sustainable funding for their core activities and management of learning programmes.

5.6 Collecting data in the organisation

ALE providers and organisations often receive funding from a variety of sources. We encourage them to collect data on the various funding sources, where the financing comes from (EU funding, national/regional/local funding, ministry or department in charge of the funding source etc.) to feed into national or European data collection processes. Collecting this data can also be beneficial for organisations themselves to get a better overview of the sustainability of funding and the groups of learners that can be engaged through specific types of funding.

5.7 Raising awareness of the impact of sustainable funding on learners

Community learning centres and other ALE providers work directly in communities and experience the positive impact of learning on the learners and the entire community at first hand. These visible results of ALE should be collected in a systematic way to create an evidence-base for the impact of ALE. These can facilitate the cooperation with local authorities and other community services to get local approval of ALE activities, and to raise funding for ALE long-term.

² EAEA member DVV International did a good practice collection in 2021: *Financing Adult Learning and Education. The way forward: what works, how and why?* https://www.dvv-international.de/fileadmin/files/Inhalte_Bilder_und_Dokumente/Materialien/Partnerpublikationen/Financing_Adult_Learning_and_Education.pdf

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