



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

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EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA: How more recognition and structural funding for ALE can make it a success

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The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) welcomes the European Commission's call for evidence for the interim evaluation of the European Education Area.

The need for Non-formal Adult Learning and Life Skills in the European Education Area

In response to the Commission's Communication,[1] EAEA noted in a statement from November 2020 that while the objectives of the European Education Area (EEA) were aligned with a lifelong learning approach, the Communication did not adequately cover non-formal adult learning and education (ALE). The strategic vision of the European Education Area must include ALE as a crucial contributor, especially in addressing 21st-century challenges.

Furthermore, the initial concepts of the European Education Area tended to focus on education and training for economic and social prosperity, side-lining a broader vision of lifelong learning focused on promoting citizenship, social inclusion, democracy and resilience. EAEA, therefore, recommended a stronger focus on life skills[2], linking it to the promotion of transversal skills. In addition, the EEA should be more aligned with the Skills Agenda to ensure policy coherence and to promote appropriate provision and policies for all target groups of education and learning.

EAEA welcomed the dimensions of the EEA that focused on the professional development of educators, green transition, digitalisation, and improving quality in education. EAEA stressed that this requires adequate funding and structural support for education systems to improve their sustainability and, above that, create innovation. EAEA also endorsed the benchmarks for education proposed in the European Education Area: 50% of adults should participate in education and learning by 2025.

EAEA emphasised the need to give much more importance to adults as target groups of learning: adults are the decision-makers and voters of today and, with their competences, they are responsible for the future development of Europe. ALE can make flexible learning pathways possible for all and help people to develop in their professional and personal lives, connect socially, build transcultural understanding, and engage with the community, beyond working age. The benchmarks for participation in ALE must reflect these goals but also consider adequate resourcing.

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The potential of the European Education Area at the European level

EAEA welcomes the fact that the **timeframe** within which the European Education Area must be implemented has been **extended by the European Council[3] to 10 years instead of the original 5 years**. This is conducive to a realistic achievement of the priorities and benchmarks, and prevents aspirations from being suspended in advance because they are perceived as unachievable.

We also welcome in particular that the loud call of European civil society in ALE – and one of EAEA's key demands – has been heard and that a New European Agenda for Adult Learning to 2030 has been created. This has the potential, with adequate support, to increase participation in ALE by 2030. In this context, EAEA also notes positively that the **benchmark for participation in adult learning has been increased to 60% by 2030**. This is a success for all adults in Europe who want to and require possibilities to participate in learning. However, **we demand that all adults be taken into account in European ALE strategies**, including those who are not (or no longer) in employment. There is no age limit on ALE, and numerous studies demonstrate the important role of ALE in active and healthy aging – a benefit for everyone.

We emphasise the essential role of ALE in **reaching out to new groups of learners and offering flexible learning pathways for all adults**, boosting skills for personal, professional, and community development. In this sense, we also **call for better recognition of non-formal ALE**: non-formal ALE is transformative by showing people that learning is for them in low-threshold learning offers and that they bring with them many more skills and abilities than they thought. Non-formal ALE demonstrates the joy of learning and gives adults the confidence to continue their learning pathways.

We, therefore, continue to **call for an increase in financial and structural resources to strengthen ALE everywhere in Europe and to build systems where they do not yet exist**. We demand a substantial increase in public funding for ALE as was also promised by UNESCO member states, including the European Union, in UNESCO's Marrakech Framework for Action[4]. We stress that public funding must be stable structural funding, particularly for non-formal ALE providers and smaller providers who do not have the administrative structures to compete for project or programme financing.

We support the **prioritisation of digital and green transition**, but point out that adult educators should not be left alone in this and need opportunities to develop their digital and green competences. Only with the right "equipment" in terms of skills and knowledge will educators be able to take learners through the green and digital transition. This concerns teaching methods on the one hand, but also learning content on the other.



Evidence[5] shows that despite efforts at the European level, there are still strong differences in digital access and skills among Europe's adult population between age groups, between urban and rural areas, and between different socio-economic groups. To meet the needs of all learners and to expand learning offers, a **substantial increase in funding for initial and continuing training opportunities for adult educators is crucial.**

We also **call for a stronger focus on science, citizenship, and democracy education for adults:** the hostility towards science in many European countries has been fuelled and made visible especially by the polarised public debates around the Covid-19 vaccination, but also the green transition. Moreover, Europe is facing major challenges with regard to the discourse on migration: the need for migration for the European labour market is countered by open xenophobia in the (social) media and in political debates. This is a direct threat to democracy and enlightened society. ALE programmes can equip people with the skills to understand complex issues and promote active citizenship and democratic engagement.

Furthermore, the European Education Area needs to take a closer look at the working conditions and career opportunities of adult educators: many of them work under precarious conditions, as only in very few countries and regions (e.g. Flanders) adult educators in the larger public provider-networks are on an equal footing with school teachers in terms of contracts, teaching hours and pay. We recognise that ALE falls under the principle of subsidiarity, but would welcome a **push on just working conditions from the European level, also considering the shortage of skilled workers which increasingly affects the ALE sector.** Stronger and more sustainable ALE structures are essential to give more adults the opportunity and access to inclusive, quality ALE opportunities. This leads back to the question of adequate resourcing of the sector.

Finally, we also call for a **more self-confident appearance of the European Education Area and a stronger dovetailing with other political agendas,** including the Sustainable Development Goals and the European Consensus for Development. We understand lifelong learning – and ALE as part of it – as a transversal agenda that should be taken into account and strengthened in all other agendas.



Governments still do not recognise the full potential of Adult Learning and Education

A majority of EAEA members find that national and regional policymakers do not attach enough importance to ALE, as emerged in the preliminary results of the 2023 [EAEA Country Reports Survey](#).^[6] Where ALE is publicly funded, in many countries and regions it is limited to labour market-oriented learning. In particular, EAEA's members see an urgent **need for the structural financial support of programmes that address global challenges, such as the green and digital transition, but also social cohesion, democratic participation and well-being**. An overwhelming majority of EAEA members report that funding from public sources at the national and regional levels is not sufficient to meet the needs of the learners.

EAEA's member from France reports a sharp decline in participation rates in ALE due to the COVID-19 crisis and the economic crisis that had a direct impact on ALE providers. The financing of the providers was not increased despite the urgent need for investments into digital learning infrastructures and the rising inflation levels, and especially the higher costs for heating and maintenance of ALE centres.

We have to constantly fight for money and keep explaining to the government how important ALE is.

EAEA MEMBER FROM AUSTRIA

At the European level, several initiatives and strategies, including the EEA, Skills Agenda and New European Agenda for Adult Learning, have provided important impetus at least in the field of the green and digital transition. Yet, from the perspective of EAEA's members, **these developments at the European level have not been translated into concrete policies and programmes in many countries and regions**.

EAEA's members **call for better support for ALE activities aimed at the promotion of sustainability, active citizenship, and democracy**. Across Europe, EAEA's members plan to focus on essential and life skills, social justice and inclusion, democracy, and environmental sustainability over the next years, identifying these areas as those with the strongest learning needs among the adult population.



For example, Sweden, a country traditionally among the best of class in terms of ALE financing and political support, reports worrying developments in the state of ALE since 2022: these concern government plans to completely restructure ALE. **Civil society in the sector, therefore, fears a cutback in the funding of initiatives that go beyond the promotion of education for the labour market**, e.g. inclusion programmes for migrants and programmes that foster sustainability and active citizenship.

EAEA's Finnish member reports that the new government has prepared a government programme for the next four years. The goal is to balance government finances and reduce debt. For this reason, savings proposals are aimed at several sectors. Investments in education and research focus on basic education, vocational training, and RDI. In non-formal ALE, the proposed savings are significant, around 10% and even up to about 40%. If implemented, these savings will entail significant changes in operations and a reduction in opportunities for lifelong learning among citizens, reduced accessibility to education in remote areas, and reduced learning opportunities, especially for vulnerable groups.

Some countries also report increased pressure to provide comprehensive data on the effectiveness of ALE programmes in order to continue receiving funding. However, this contrasts with the most commonly used (and publicly provided) form of funding for ALE, namely project funding and action grants with a limited scope. These belong to the more precarious forms of financial support because they typically only fund short-term programmes with objectives limited to a specific focus area and certain target groups. Typically, these types of **funding tools do not allow to finance data collection activities** as they do not directly impact the target groups. Moreover, EAEA members report that very strict interpretations of GDPR rules make it impossible to collect disaggregated data about participation and learning outcomes in a systematic way.

Despite these issues, there are some improvements in a number of countries: for example, Estonia reports that participation in ALE is increasing further. Estonia is one of the most ambitious countries in terms of promotion of ALE and is, according to the Labour Force Survey 2022, with 21.1% far above the EU average, which was 11.9% in 2022. The results of the Adult Education Survey, which is used to measure participation in ALE within the framework of the EEA, are expected in 2023 and are likely to show a similar picture, i.e. a general trend towards growing participation rates in Estonia.

The replies from EAEA members show – once again – that **countries with a long tradition of ALE tend to have more stable and sustainable ALE systems**, also in times of crises. An EAEA member from Denmark reports: “The general situation of ALE in Denmark is good. Denmark has a long tradition of recognising the importance of lifelong learning and has developed a comprehensive public framework to support ALE initiatives. [...] While challenges and opportunities for improvement remain, the ALE landscape in Denmark shows a strong commitment to promoting continuous education and nurturing a knowledgeable and skilled population.” Where ALE was already strong, it can be further strengthened through European initiatives such as the EEA and its direct outputs, including the New European Agenda for Adult Learning.



However, **European initiatives also have an impact in countries without long ALE traditions (or where they have been disrupted for a few decades)**: for example, a member from Poland reports that the availability of European funding has also increased the visibility of European initiatives. A member from Ukraine – a country which is in the process of joining the EU – says that European cooperation is having a positive impact on and strengthening the national ALE landscape. However, EAEA's member also calls for increased monitoring of the fulfilment of the conditions for candidacy, e.g. the implementation in Ukraine of the fundamental reforms envisaged in the Association Agreement: “Unfortunately, the process of promoting legislation in the ALE area in Ukraine has stalled again at the legislative level. There is much resistance to the systemic approach. A stronger influence from Brussels could get the political processes moving again and further deepen sectoral integration.”

In summary, **EAEA's members demand a stronger focus on and recognition of the contribution of ALE to meet today's challenges.** They express a pressing need for increased financial support for programmes addressing the green and digital transition, social cohesion, democratic participation, and well-being.

The picture of the development of ALE in Europe is mixed: while countries traditionally strong in ALE, such as Sweden and Finland, fear major financial cuts, other countries, such as Estonia, can report good success in participation rates in ALE. European initiatives, like the EEA, are seen as valuable in both strengthening established ALE systems and bolstering those in countries with less historical emphasis on ALE. However, more monitoring and encouragement from the European level is necessary to help translate European initiatives and strategies into national and regional policies and programmes.



Recommendations

- **Translate European Initiatives into Concrete Policies:** While European-level initiatives like the EEA, Skills Agenda, and New European Agenda for Adult Learning provide impetus, ensure that these initiatives translate into concrete policies and programmes at the national and regional levels. Support ALE activities that promote sustainability, active citizenship, and democracy.
- **Strengthen ALE Structures:** Acknowledge that countries with a long tradition of ALE generally have more stable and sustainable ALE systems. Preserve and strengthen these systems through continued investment and structural support. Support especially also countries who are building new ALE systems. Improve working conditions of adult educators through targeted initiatives.
- **Promote European Initiatives in ALE:** Encourage countries with less-established ALE traditions to leverage European initiatives, like the EEA and New European Agenda for Adult Learning, to strengthen their national and regional ALE landscapes. Make European funding opportunities more visible and accessible to these countries.
- **Support Resilience in the Face of Crises:** Acknowledge the impact of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession, on ALE participation rates. Develop strategies to support ALE providers and learners during crises and ensure continuity of education.
- **Increase Investment in non-formal Adult Learning and Education (ALE):** Recognise the importance of ALE and allocate more public funding at the national and regional levels to meet the diverse needs of adult learners. Encourage national and regional policymakers to broaden the scope of ALE funding beyond labour market-oriented learning. Provide structural financial support for programmes addressing global challenges such as the green and digital transition, social cohesion, democratic participation, and well-being.
- **Focus on Essential and Life Skills:** Recognise essential and life skills, including skills and competences for social justice, inclusion, democracy, and environmental sustainability as priority areas for ALE. Tailor policies and programmes to address these areas with the aim of meeting the strongest learning needs among the adult population.
- **Support research into ALE:** Research into ALE is crucial to better understand the needs of learners, develop new education methods, and get systematised data on the impact and effectiveness of ALE. Provide funding to research programmes and encourage governments to set up funding lines at the national and regional levels.
- **International Collaboration:** Foster international cooperation and collaboration, especially with countries aspiring to join the EU, to strengthen and share best practices in ALE.
- **Engage Civil Society:** Include the perspectives and input of civil society organisations involved in ALE in policy-making processes. Their insights can help shape more effective and inclusive ALE policies.



[1] EAEA (2020), "Where are the Adults? A European Education Area requires a holistic Vision of Lifelong Learning!". Available at: https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/A-European-Education-Area-requires-a-holistic-vision-of-Lifelong-Learning_EAEA-statement-November-2020.pdf

[2] We refer to EAEA's definition of Life Skills, which covers a very wide range of skills and abilities that people need to be able to participate actively and self-determinedly in society, to be healthier, to achieve better well-being, and to strengthen families and communities. More information is available at: <https://eaea.org/project/life-skills-for-europe-lse/>

[3] Council of the European Union (2021): Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) (2021/C 66/01). Online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2021.066.01.0001.01.ENG

[4] UNESCO (2022): CONFINTEA VII Marrakech Framework for Action: harnessing the transformational power of adult learning and education. Online: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382306>

[5] See, for instance, the DESI report 2022: See, for instance, the DESI report 2022: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi>

[6] Insights from previous years are available at: <https://countryreport.eaea.org/>. The 2023 Country Reports results will be published soon.

About us

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



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