



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

Contact

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FOR THE EDUCATION OF
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We need skills for the labour market – and beyond!

EAEA's own-initiative mid-term review of the European Year of Skills

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The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) welcomes the initiative of the European Year of Skills 2023 (EYS). In December 2022, following the announcement of the EYS, we conducted an initial analysis, putting an emphasis on the promotion of a holistic understanding of skills. Six months into the thematic year, it is time to take stock, shedding light on the connection between skills and work – and looking at how we can go beyond skills for the labour market.

EAEA underlines the **central role of adult learning and education (ALE) in promoting skills for the workforce**: It covers a wide range of learning content relevant to personal and professional development, such as basic skills, second chance education, languages, ICT, transversal and social skills.

Integrating non-formal ALE and formal adult education, such as (continuous) vocational education and training, can be beneficial, as long as this does not neglect the values and expertise that non-formal ALE brings. The learner and their needs must be at the centre of learning, regardless of the context.

In the first six months of the European Year of Skills, we have seen a significant increase in activities at the European level in the field of ALE, as well as stronger outreach from other education sectors, but also the sectors working on the labour market and social affairs, to ALE. EAEA has been involved in a number of activities within the framework of the thematic year, including a kick-off event of the EYS organised together with the Lifelong Learning Platform and the European Training Foundation on 23 May.

We welcome the great interest in skills and ALE very much, as we believe that this area is of enormous importance for the present and future of Europe.

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Non-formal adult learning and education versus education for the labour market - a false dichotomy?

We note that the discussions in and around the EYS are very much focused on skills for the labour market. **The EYS underlines EAEA's conclusions from a policy debate and a position paper on Employment and Adult Education in 2016, namely that non-formal ALE and education for the labour market are complementary.**

Acquiring skills for the labour market can be an empowering experience that can also spark interest in further learning. Vice versa, non-formal education can help individuals – especially those further away from the labour market – to gain confidence in their ability to learn and in their potential, equipping them with the right tools to embark on a new vocational training or occupation. The employment status of individuals also has an impact on participation in ALE: In most European countries, people in employment are more likely to participate in formal and non-formal ALE programmes than unemployed or non-active adults[1]. Last but not least, it should also be mentioned that career advancement is one of the most important reasons for adults to participate in ALE.

We need to look beyond the current skills debate to address current and future European and global challenges

While acknowledging the importance of aligning education with labour market needs, we emphasise that **ALE should not be reduced to a mere tool for the labour market and economic productivity. It must encompass a broader, critical perspective that upholds the values of personal growth, social inclusion, and democratic participation, for the development of individuals, but also communities and society.**

Looking beyond the current skills debate reveals the real richness that non-formal ALE brings[2].

ALE is not a mere tool for the labour market and economic productivity.

We are at a **moment in Europe's history when a holistic vision of ALE is more crucial than ever**: when we think of the wars in Europe and on the borders of Europe, the erosion of social fabric and social systems, the huge challenges posed by climate change, the increasing pace of working life, digitalisation, etc.



Solid ALE frameworks empower all adults

When Commission President Ursula von der Leyen proclaimed the European Year of Skills, she was referring to the many challenges facing Europe: these have not diminished since then but, on the contrary, have become even more urgent. In this thematic year, we must understand and recognise the breadth of competences that are needed now and will be needed in the future.

The **current approach to skills is inadequate to tackle the enormous and complex challenges facing Europe today. Not only do we need to build skills for the future, but we also need to act now to address the challenges of the present.** The wars in and on Europe's borders as well as complex challenges within Europe are jeopardising democracies and, on top of this, the world is on a "highway to climate hell", to quote António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

We do not only need to build skills for the future, but we also need to act now to address the challenges of the present. Non-formal adult education and learning offers a powerful force to meet these challenges.

Non-formal adult education and learning offers a powerful force to meet these challenges. Europe's geopolitical situation highlights the importance of **peace education, which plays a central role in non-formal ALE.** The upcoming EU elections also emphasise **active citizenship competences** (skills, knowledge and attitudes). ALE promotes several skills which are instrumental to active citizenship, including civic competences, media and information literacy, and understanding transcultural and global issues and interdependence.

A solid ALE framework goes beyond economic and labour market considerations and empowers all adults to actively participate in civic and critical-constructive processes, supporting a more vibrant, inclusive and resilient society. ALE reaches out to diverse groups, including those who are marginalised due to socio-economic status, age or background, to ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of progress.



Rethinking approaches to skills to embrace a holistic vision of lifelong learning for all

ALE embraces critical thinking, fostering creativity and innovation. It encourages individuals to question, evaluate, and generate new ideas in a collaborative manner. This is particularly important when we try to find solutions to the challenges imposed by climate change and the need for a socially just green transition. By continually innovating the sector itself, developing new methods and reaching out to new audiences, ALE looks to the future, drawing on rich traditions from the Enlightenment to workers' education and popular education, art, theatre, and even architecture.

ALE **promotes a culture of lifelong learning**, recognising that education and learning are not confined to formal institutions or a specific phase of life. It encourages continuous self-development, enabling individuals to remain adaptable and resilient in an ever-changing global economy.

In addition, participation in non-formal ALE promotes **general well-being** by fostering skills that are often neglected in working life (e.g. creative skills) and by bringing people from different backgrounds together for a common activity. Participation in ALE courses promotes a better work-life balance, inspires, and instils joy of learning.

For a powerful contribution of the European Year of Skills for skills development in Europe

We are convinced that **the EYS can provide an important impetus to raise awareness at the European, national, and regional levels about the importance of non-formal adult learning and education, and lifelong learning.**

However, we underscore the multifaceted nature of ALE, beyond its utilitarian function in, and for, the labour market. It is a transformative force for personal, community, and societal development. By recognising and supporting the broader potential of ALE, we enrich not only individual lives and their chances on the labour market, but also the fabric of our communities and societies at large.

[1] For more information and more statistics, see the reports of the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC): <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/>

[2] See also EAEA's Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st Century: The Power and Joy of Learning: <https://eaea.org/our-work/influencing-policy/manifesto-for-adult-learning-in-the-21st-century/>



We urge the European institutions and policy-makers to

- Use the remaining months of the EYS to promote and support a holistic understanding of skills that empowers all citizens, regardless of their status on the labour market;
- Put a spotlight on life and transversal competences promoted through non-formal adult learning and education, including citizenship, green, and digital competences, and to boost learning for transformation and innovation that promotes critical thinking, reflecting, understanding, creating, and acting, as well as emotional and values learning;
- Use this special occasion to promote better financial and structural support for ALE across Europe, and to contribute to resilient ALE systems that increase participation in ALE;
- Ensure that (adult) learners are given a voice in all activities in, and around, the EYS;
- Ensure that the voice of civil society is included in all activities of the EYS; and
- Continue these initiatives beyond the EYS.

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 121 member organisations in 42 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.



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