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THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

For Information

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‘Upskilling Pathways’ need more visibility, funding, and continuous implementation efforts

EAEA’s Statement
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Key Recommendations

For successful implementation, we need:

- enhanced accessibility of Upskilling Pathways programmes,
- increased funding and support of measures to improve the quality, and
- facilitation of stakeholder engagement and collaborations.

In July 2023, the European Commission evaluated the actions taken in response to the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways (UP), first introduced in December 2016.

The UP initiative consists of three steps:

1. **Skills assessment** – identifying the existing skills of adults and any gaps in the skills set that need to be filled.
2. **Provision of a tailored and flexible learning offer** – providing a learning offer which fills the specific skills gaps identified through the skills assessment.
3. **Validation and recognition** – assessing and certifying the skills acquired and encouraging their certification towards a formal qualification

The results came at a very opportune time, as EAEA was working intensively on the initiative through two Erasmus+ Forward-Looking Partnerships, bringing together partners from ten different European countries and involving its members in activities such as webinars, events, and online learning courses.



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The results of the evaluation of the European Commission state that the initiative **has shown moderate effectiveness, with uneven implementation across Member States**. While the European Commission remarks that there have been some positive trends, challenges such as funding constraints and low awareness among providers and adult learners remain. The share of adults with lower qualifications has decreased, but external factors may have also contributed to this trend [1].

The **EAEA Country Reports [2] of the last years confirm these findings**: year after year, national and regional associations of adult learning and education providers across Europe have reported a lack of funding and difficulties in reaching adults, especially those belonging to already vulnerable groups.

Many of the programs prepared under the UP initiative were canceled due to Covid-19 restrictions. The Covid-19 pandemic put unprecedented pressure on the education and training sectors: it revealed the uneven preparation of Member States in terms of digitalisation and the stark differences in access to learning between different income groups and between urban and rural areas, while, at the same time, also highlighting the potential of education and training for building resilience and inclusive growth.

At the European level, several initiatives have since helped to boost awareness and participation in adult learning and education:

- **A European call for proposals under 'Erasmus+ Partnerships for Innovation'** supported several Member States and national coordinating organizations of ALE with funding for key projects. This helped reinforce the implementation of the principles and objectives of the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Skills Agenda, and the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults through Priority 6: Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults.
- In the context of upskilling and reskilling, **the initiative of the Year of Skills** was an important asset, especially for formal education. However, we emphasize that non-formal ALE should be given the same importance. Otherwise, there is a risk that the UP will build walls instead of breaking them, preventing learners from engaging in non-formal ALE and deterring them from finding a way from non-formal into formal learning.

Although the Year of Skills [3] gave a major boost to topics such as upskilling and reskilling and the European call for proposals funded several projects, EAEA would like to point out that **these initiatives alone are not enough**. At best, they can be a starting point and a stimulus for future discussions and initiatives, possibly using the platform of the Pact for Skills initiative [4]. Visibility campaigns and financial instruments must take into account non-formal ALE to achieve sustainable improvements in access to and participation in learning for all adults, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds and barriers to learning.

EAEA's members state that **better support for their financial resources and working structures** is needed to achieve greater visibility of the actions, along with a more effective implementation of UP at the national and regional levels. This includes the use of simpler language when translating EU strategy documents, such as those on UP, to ensure uptake at the local and regional levels. By adapting the language to the specific contexts of the stakeholders at the national and regional levels, the relevance of EU strategies and initiatives would be increased. Many EAEA members would also like to see clearer and more comprehensive guidelines for implementing UP, promoting cooperation across education sectors and policy-making levels.

Reaching out to marginalized groups through multilevel cooperation

The analysis conducted by EAEA in the framework of the project 'Partnerships and Stakeholder Engagement for Upskilling Pathways' (Partner-UP) [6] shows that a lack of cooperation between stakeholders is linked to difficulty in reaching marginalized communities that are most in need of support, with various consequences, including barriers to learning for migrants, people with disabilities, adults with low levels of formal education, and people living in rural areas (through people living in urban areas are not exempt from barriers to learning either; only the type of barrier may be different).

While engagement at the local level seems to be working well in many municipalities and regions, this engagement is limited or non-existent at higher levels, i.e. the national and European levels. This calls for a multilevel approach that aims to engage new and diverse stakeholders. This can broaden the skills panorama and offer new tools, knowledge and opportunities, both for educators working in upskilling and reskilling programmes, and learners wishing to develop professionally and personally.

A good example of multilevel engagement comes from **Latvia**: in 2023, the country established the Council for Human Capital Development, which includes ministers for the economy, education and science, and welfare. The aim was to coordinate national adult education initiatives through the inter-sectoral Joint Adult Education Coordination Commission which is in charge of defining training needs, aligning strategic goals for human capital development, and consolidating labor market forecasting.

Thanks to this type of initiative, Latvia was able to revitalize its culture of lifelong learning and, as a result, has seen significant development in the country in the six-year period from 2016 to 2023. Data from the Central Statistics Office confirmed the trend: in the age group from 25 to 64 years, the proportion of adults in education and learning has increased from 6.6% in 2020 to 10.7% in 2023.

These achievements are the result of efficient cooperation among multi-level stakeholders who aim to implement a bottom-up approach to policies that will have a positive and direct impact on communities.

ALE provision and participation in urban and rural areas benefit from bottom-up stakeholder engagement and targeted investments

The need for robust financing of the sector as well as multilevel stakeholder cooperation is also evident when comparing **urban and rural areas**. While the former tend to focus on compulsory education and adapt their agenda to the local labor market, the latter struggle with implementation difficulties due to their limited resources. A broad and diverse network is fundamental to achieving results that transcend barriers.

Partnerships and networks will help to address the gaps in upskilling and reskilling that arise from an uneven demographic context by sharing good practices and crucial know-how. Through EAEA's work on promising practices within the project 'Regional Capacity for Adult Learning and Education' (RegALE) [7] and their transfer, EAEA has identified how the financing of these upskilling and reskilling activities can contribute to local know-how. For example, the transfer of the Norwegian 'Sogn for All' [8] to 'Bergen for All' has achieved great results, bringing together key stakeholders and targeted investments for the social and labor market inclusion of migrants.

Romania's "Second Chance" program is a success story of an inspiring cooperation mechanism that brought together multiple actors from schools and local administrations to NGOs and media. The initiative intended to expand educational opportunities in disadvantaged communities and build partnerships in literacy and numeracy programs, aiming to enhance employment prospects for adults lacking basic skills. Collaborations in various EU-funded projects targeting rural populations and individuals with disabilities also helped achieve these objectives.

A similar project was implemented in Greece through "Second Chance Schools", catering to the needs of both locals and foreigners residing in the country. These schools provide programs that help early school leavers or other adults with a low level of formal education (i.e. elementary school) acquire the equivalent of a lower secondary school diploma. Although good results have been achieved in general, a stronger impact at the local level is needed. A bottom-up multilevel approach that builds on local learning needs and includes all relevant stakeholders could create broader benefits for the stakeholders and communities alike, helping adults progress in their learning pathways but also include them more strongly in the labor market.

Working across sectoral boundaries and multiple levels of decision-making and governance leads to promising results

The cases presented in this document provide confidence in the successful implementation of Upskilling Pathways and show the promising results that several countries have achieved already by working across sectoral boundaries and multiple levels of decision-making and governance. However, to achieve better uptake of learning offers within the UP scheme and increased participation rates as well as a high level of quality of UP in all countries and parts of Europe, we must ensure that each level of government is equipped with adequate resources to support programs that are available to all learners. The level and quality of inclusion of different population groups and communities with diverse learning needs, in urban and rural areas, younger and older age groups, with low or high levels of formal education, will be a key indicator of the successful implementation of UP.

As the examples above show, initiatives stand or fall with the opportunities for stakeholders to work together effectively and efficiently, and to have the appropriate financial resources available. Project funding, including from European programmes such as the ones mentioned above, can provide start-up support in the short term, but should not replace national or regional public funding. The sustainability and focus of the initiatives can only be ensured by sufficient long-term public funding and structural support. For some countries and regions, this also means creating the appropriate legal framework.

1. Upskilling Pathways Evaluation Package adopted, News article, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1223&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10637>
2. EAEA Country Reports, available at <https://eaea.org/our-work/influencing-policy/eaea-country-reports/>
3. European Year of Skills, available at https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/index_en
4. Pact for Skills, available at https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu/index_en
5. RALEXILA, available at <https://eaea.org/our-work/projects/ralexila-lifelong-and-adult-learning/>
6. Partner UP, available at <https://partnerup-project.eu/>
7. RegALE, available at <https://regalenetwork.eu/>
8. Sogn for All, available at [1] [Upskilling Pathways Evaluation Package adopted, News article, available at https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1223&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10637](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1223&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10637)

Proposed recommendations for policymakers

- Enhance accessibility of Upskilling Pathways to ensure that a diverse range of learners as well as institutions can benefit from them.
- Increase funding and support opportunities for learners to enhance the quality of education and support services, for example providing learners education leave without compromising their employment or financial stability.
- Facilitate stakeholder engagement and collaboration, including educators, ALE providers, employers, and community organizations, to create a platform for discussion and collaboration on a national level.
- Promote flexibility in learning pathways to accommodate the varying schedules and commitments of adult learners.
- Enhance recognition and validation of prior learning, thereby enabling learners to progress more efficiently through the upskilling or reskilling process.
- Support lifelong learning initiatives, especially the ones provided through non-formal adult education.

Proposed recommendations for adult learning and education (ALE) providers

- Reach out to your community and engage with marginalized groups.
- Support participants attending your programmes.
- Network and share your promising practices.
- Engage with international partners to support transnational mobility and dissemination of good practices.
- Build partnerships with non-traditional stakeholders, e.g. social services, social partners, SMEs.

Proposed recommendations for educators

- Adapt teaching methods to meet the needs of diverse learners.
- Make lifelong learning a priority as an educator to be able to meet the needs of learners.
- Take advantage of mutual learning possibilities offered not only to learners but also to educators to enrich your skills and knowledge.

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 120 member organisations in 44 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.



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